Leonardo Marcato, Felix Schniz (eds.)

FICTIONAL PRACTICES OF SPIRITUALITY I

Interactive Media

[transcript] Culture & Theory

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Fictional Practices of Spirituality I

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Contents

Part IIb – Practice: Research

Part IIIa –Videogames: Experience

Part IIIb – Videogames: Perspective

Part IIIc – Videogames: From the East

Part IIId – Videogames: The Case Study of *Dragon Age*

Part IV – Concluding thoughts

Introduction
When Faust Entered the Holodeck…

Felix Schniz and Leonardo Marcato

Narrative frameworks have served humankind across the globe and throughout all ages to express, share, and engage their spirituality. The epos of *Gilgameš*, perchance one of the earliest surviving narrative texts, already weaved central religious elements of Mesopotamic belief into a cardinal example of the hero's journey. It is the root of countless tales of Gods and spirits, parables of belief, or personal expressions of the joys and woes concerning the assumed existence of powers beyond human perception. A narrative framework is more than the recount of an actual or fictitious happening, however. It sets the pillars within which spirituality can also be enacted. Religions, as scholar of the field Stephen Prothero argues, are **story systems** (2020: 36). Through their tales, interwoven and building upon one another, believers express their experiences in faith and how they share and spread their understanding of believe. From such a perspective, writing fiction – producing a story to be experienced – can be seen as a moment where a spiritual point of view is presented to a community at large and helps to build that place and time of **sacred** that is fundamental for a spiritual experience.

What about contemporary narrative artefacts and the ways through which fiction is experienced in our day and age? One could say that the importance of sanctuary, fictional worlds has been a central revelation of this pandemic age post-2020. In times of social distancing and lives under lockdown, alternative realities became re-appreciated elemental tools of spirituality (in the sense of meditative exercises, cf. Jarrett 1947), and salvation for the reality-restricted human being. The individual sought peace, tranquillity, and meditation in media such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD 2020), a serene zen game of housekeeping and self-caring that became one of the 2020s most successful videogames (see, for instance, Yee and Sng 2022). Playful contemporary cultural productions in narration, entertainment, infotainment, and participative art can provide **wreaders** (the active reading protagonists of interactive fiction; cf. Mukherjee 2015) with the opportunity to experience spirituality in ever-changing ways. Whatever one may call the ulterior theme of this trend: it gives reason for a novel evaluation of spiritual modes and expressions that find a virtual space to unfold in fictional worlds.

Moreover, narrative media may encourage their audiences to think about their personal understanding of beliefs, spirituality, religion, or morals via explicitly made-up beliefs. These fictional spaces, of which popular culture is ripe, may encourage us to critically reflect on "what religion is and what 'holiness' and 'religiosity' look like" (Cusack/Kosnáč 2017: 3). This can happen within or even beyond a formal religious structure and create unexpected interplays between popular and sacral culture. George Lucas' *Star Wars* universe, for example, gave birth to Jediism. Based on the example of Luke Skywalker and other characters of the franchise, the organisation upholds the tenets of focus, knowledge, and wisdom (Temple of The Jedi Order 2007: n.p.), a life philosophy intended to nourish personal growth and spiritual seeking:

> Real Jedi do not worship George Lucas or Star Wars or anything of the sort. Jediism is not based in fiction, but we accept myth as a sometimes more practical means of conveying philosophies applicable to real life. (ibid.)

While Jediism understands itself as a spiritual and philosophical movement rather than an institutional religion, its members are serious in their practices and creeds, having structured their system around a fictional yet endearingly passionate world born from popular culture and the story it tells. In the constant quest to understand religion and spirituality, scholars have considered the element of narration in its aspect of mythology, meaning the study of which system of stories and narration builds the myth of a society, its foundation.

Fictional worlds provide us with relatable, alternative contexts in which all matters of humanity may be rethought – and thus, also may encourage us to rethink questions of transcendence, of one's own personal understanding of belonging and meaning in existence (Wendel 2007: 225). Goethe's *Faust* (1808)[1] is reputed to be one of the grand introductions to the negotiation of morale, wisdom, and believe. In Germany, its country of origin, *Faust* is a core literature for senior-year high school students, pedagogically applied as a gateway to these grand issues of humankind. The play of the ageing alchemist who turns away from all his worldly attempts to achieve wisdom strikes a deal with Mephistopheles, the devil, and – in a trope well-turned into a cliché by now – loses it all for putting his trust in dark powers. One of the key scenes of the play, which is typically discussed in classrooms, plays out as follows: Gretchen, the youthful daughter of a pious household, is courted by Faust, the old, crestfallen academic who sought out the devil to seal a pact, offering his soul in the afterlife for one moment of absolute satisfaction. Their encounters are presented as a tender tipping scale, a constant balancing act between the good of love and the blasphemy that originally allowed this meeting to take place – the cohesive: Gretchen's naivety. This is the so-called *Gretchenfrage*: a humble question which nevertheless brings up a precarious topic, which the one being asked wants to avoid or regards as uncomfortable. It intends to elicit a clear statement on one's moral ground or point of few that is bound to not appease everybody. In Faust, the often-recited *Gretchenfrage* is the following:

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1   This introduction relies on the English translation by Martin Greenberg (copyright 1992, published with an introduction by W. Daniel Wilson in 2014).

Well, tell me, you must
About your religion – how do you feel?
You're such a good man, kind and intelligent,
Yet I suspect you are indifferent.
(2014, 122)

With one single inquiry, Gretchen ensnares Faust in the role of a confessional. In the stage play's setup, Faust cannot avoid answering the question – for doing so would raise even more questions in Gretchen regarding his faith. She catches him in an exquisite personal, moral dilemma: neither can Faust wholeheartedly call himself a person of faith anymore, nor declare himself void of such thoughts. Both are a mere side battle to Faust's actual dilemma, namely that whatever he answers is going to reveal his reason (Liessmann 2007: 4). No matter how Faust reacts, his answer will speak about his creed, and one that, as is the thing with striking deals with the devil in 18th century Germany, is not as respected as going to church every Sunday. The play thereby mistakenly makes clear that faith is a sacred marker of identity to be displayed publicly and lived as an open moral display.

Faust's biggest confession here is that he draws an elementary distinction between faith, the communal practice, and spirituality, the personal notion of it. These broad terms hide questions and debates that have been part of the human discourse since the dawn of analytic thought in the Western cultural world, which is the main standpoint of the papers presented in this volume. To summarise the entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia (Bishop/McKaughan 2022: n.p.), a lighthouse in philosophical discourse, faith can be considered as knowledge acquired (be it by acquaintance or proposition) that is (1) immediately **evident** to a believer and (2) not necessarily inferable from other beliefs. In the personal life of a believer, it explicates itself into a worldview that inform personal, intrapersonal, and social practices and behaviour. In this sense, while it is mostly appliable to structured religions (generally of a theistic nature), it could be argued that it can extend to other frameworks through which humans relate and act in their environment. Spirituality tends to be considered as a *taxon* for more intimate practices driven by similarly held beliefs, but that not necessarily can become a structured practice. These concepts sit on the idea of belief, which is generally considered 'something that we held as true' without needing proper validation. They are also strictly tied to the idea of mysticism, which is the experience of said beliefs and has been widely debated and argued upon; however, even with these very quick and not at all exhaustive definitions in mind, Faust's dilemma may still remain one of sought avoidance but, at the same time, also receives a tint of insecurity.

It was Janet Murray's assessment of the Holodeck (cf. 1997) that first explored the idea of the intimate dialogue from a stage of audience to the floors of participation on a digital stage. By drawing connections to the technology of Star Trek – she envisions the drama as a virtual stage that invites us to join. The holodeck, an almighty engine of virtuality, can create any environment and fill it with *actores ex machina*, virtual actants created by the machine who one knows are not real. Nevertheless, they feel naturally real to us and grant us an interaction with human resemblances. Murray's vision of the virtual stage on which we mingle with computer-generated actants has long become an

accepted reality in video games. While the NPCs – the non-player characters of video games – are still decidedly non-human, their audio-visual *gestalt* becomes increasingly lifelike. What's more important, however, and bearing more relevance to the power of interactive media, is Murray's understanding of agency. The beings we meet in today's interactive media not only grant players experiences: their agency well surpasses our imagination of a mere intellectual feedback loop for the players to expect output from. Nowadays, NPCs possess the quality to say no to the player if they feel unwanted or deem the player unfitting to their taste, such as in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware 2014). NPCs independently go on their quest and follow their destiny far-off player doings, as does Knight Solaire in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2012). The role understanding may mingle in cases like Death Stranding (Kojima Productions 2019). While players never meet one another synchronously, the asynchronous presence of others, may it be through leftover items that can be retrieved, the existence of roads and ladders other players have left and that make one's journey easier, or motivational signs left on the side of a road are ever-present.

Back to Professor Faust, Gretchen, her innocently inquisitive question, and a thought experiment on the less fictitious, present-day power of play and the virtual. Equip your mixed-reality headset and boot up *Faust 2.0*. The walls are changing, starting to resemble the streets of 16th-century Germany. There is a holo-Gretchen in front of us, expecting an answer. We are now in the role of Faust. If we imagine embodying Faust as an avatar in a traditional role-playing game format, the *Gretchenfrage* may prompt us with a dialogue screen and the following options:

Say yes
Say no
Say nothing

Selecting **Yes, we are religious** equals a confession of morality or, rather, a commitment to an institutional moral framework. We as Faust would allocate us as belonging to the Christian system and the order it represents in this context. Answering **No, we are not religious** appears to be honest to our avatar Faust's character initially. Upon closer examination of Faust's pact with Mephistopheles and the consequential renunciation of Christianity, it is about embracing spirituality in its otherness to institutionalised religion. In the context of the fictitious *Faust 2.0* game, **saying nothing** has a distinct appeal. As actual agents of the story, we do bear powers that extend well beyond a binary yes or no – though what would we gain by withholding an answer other than more time to think about it, as it lingers in our heads. Even aiming to cheat for a **secret fourth answer** – as in some older role-playing games where one could walk away from an NPC in mid-dialogue, even as they were still talking to the player avatar – may bring us a moment of comedic relief, but will not do justice to the gravitas of asking how we feel about religion.

So why would we even be keen on playing Faust if the implied illusion of agency allows us to negotiate spirituality yet leaves us in an inner discord regardless of what we answer? Similar to the actual *Gretchenfrage*, the appeal of the scenario does not lie in the answer but in how the question is treated – or, as in the example of interactive fictional practices, how we are enabled to treat them. In Goethe's *Faust*, the scholar evades Gretchen's

question by asking a counter-question, inquiring about the need to stand up to one's belief (2014, 123). In an interactive adaptation of the moment, players would be enabled to follow his example or provide an answer and handle the consequences of doing so. However, one would decide to deal with this moment in *Faust 2.0* would mean uncovering a bond between belief, spirituality, and the agency granted by interactive media that allows users, players, and seekers to explore the entanglement of these terms in their own, personally meaningful fashion. Playful meditation in a narrative system may inspire us to question our beliefs, strengthen them, or reflect upon our understanding of spirituality. It is a state of mind that emerges out of performance – and thus, it reveals that an understanding of spirituality and its contemporary meaning reveals itself to us through fictional practices of spirituality, of playful engagement between players with, and within, analogue and digital systems.

At the time of writing this introduction, the discussion over generative AI has ramped up with astonishing velocity. A research group from Stanford and Google has been able, using the algorithm of ChatGPT, to create a series of pre-programmed generative agents, instruct them with weighted prompts, and let them 'free' into a sandbox game-like world.[2] Their interaction throughout the study has been incredibly similar to a 'normal' interaction between real people, and even if everything was subject to the probability generative model of the algorithm, their working remains a **black box,** a system that even those who developed the algorithm still need to crack properly (Weber et al. 2000; Zhang et al. 2021). Understanding and approaching this point with a critical attitude might well be a breakthrough in game design and machine-human relationships – especially given that it is now advancing so heavily into the story-building dimension of human creativity. This is something that Italo Calvino foresaw half a century ago in his lectures on what he christened a 'literature machine.' In his 1967 lecture Cybernetic and Ghosts (Calvino 1996), referencing Raymond Lully's *ars combinatoria* and Chomsky's work, the Italian novelist posited that language is a machine that can be dismantled and reassembled, and the writer's work consists in finding the right words to combine. He said:

> I am not thinking of a machine capable merely of "assembly-line" literary production, which would already be mechanical in itself. I am thinking of a writing machine that would bring to the page all those things that we are accustomed to consider as the most jealously guarded attributes of our psychological life, of our daily experience, our unpredictable changes of mood and inner elations, despairs and moments of illumination. What are these if not so many linguistic "fields", for which we might well succeed in establishing the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and properties of permutations? (Ibid: 16)

Back in the day, Calvino thought that building such a machine would be so complicated that it would not be worth the trouble; but contemporary advancements in generative AI show that those developing them thought that the trouble was not only worth working for, but a crucial element in the advancement of technology and society. At the time

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2   https://t.co/mdbGAJJABC. Accessed 27/08/2023.

of writing this introduction, both the academic and political worlds are looking into the ethical consequences and elements of generative AI. It is an interesting field, stimulating debate and theoretical production like few others in the contemporary world. For this book, however, the most interesting part is the 'inner elations' Calvino mentioned. If we accept that spirituality is part of our inner discourse, as humans, we also have to confront the fact that describing it can be difficult. Between human agents, these inner dimensions (named *qualia*, the qualitative states of the human mind) can be expressed and understood with both linguistic (words, music, art) and biological empathy (mirror neurons), but can the same be said about generative AI agents? We know how these 'black boxes' are programmed, what prompts we feed them with, and how we see the results. However, these final results are, again, linguistic and combinatory. As it has been argued (Asatiani et al. 2020), the inner workings of such algorithms are not completely clear to us, even if it is us humans who programmed them: we have a certain idea of how they work in a supervised environment, but when 'left alone' this suddenly changes. Unsupervised learning and generation are more leaning towards an output born from internal structures in the algorithm that are not evident from users or observers – even from programmers. Unfortunately, we humans tend to anthropomorphise any phenomenon we find: there is a serious risk, here, of giving human or superhuman intelligence and capabilities to simulated intelligences. It is a risk of misunderstanding the basic notion that, for all their awe-inspiring production, these algorithms are simply producing results according to what they have been trained to produce. They generate a combination of results that their calculation predicts to be the most appreciated, according to the prompts and training. As the episode where one of the most advanced Go intelligences first exacted a crushing victory against the world champion only to be then defeated by a novice player (Waters 2023: n.p.), shows how algorithms do not perceive reality like a human mind does. There is something that is missing here that could allow us to pierce this 'black box' of algorithmically simulated intelligence: we miss that kind of 'biological that can be enacted only between two living organisms. This is also a crucial topic that must be examined in future works, especially if and when generative agents start to show what might be misunderstood as 'spiritual' results.

For this reason, it is crucial to analyse spirituality in interactive narration. With this glance over how language works in role-playing games and digital games and how it is used to express spirituality, we can start to have the first tools to set up a *Gretchenfrage* to generative agents, should the need arise. And if this need will never come, we will still have furthered our knowledge on one crucial element of our life: telling a story together that can speak about belief and spirituality.

About this Book

Fictional Practices of Spirituality Vol. 1 explores the opportunities and meanings of spiritual expression in interactive fiction as it is present in our contemporary times in various fashions: playful or earnest, digital or analogue, but always personal and heartfelt by us humans. Fictional accounts of real-world religion have been subject to numerous analyses (cf. Johnston 2006; Lyden 2009), and the impact of new media on religious prac-

tice received much-deserved attention (Campbell 2013). Some even attempt to develop a structured systematic theology from videogames (Bosman 2019). However, the peculiar function and exercise of spirituality in interactive art practices and fiction has thus far rarely been in the spotlight. Notable exceptions (Campbell/Grieve 2014; Steffen 2017) provided insight by portraying a specific perspective on institutionalised clerical work with computers and consoles, which we intend to adapt through a transcultural, transreligious, and, most importantly, a transcendental lens.

The founding idea of this publication may be rooted in a philosophical pondering but is certainly not tied to philosophy exclusively: it provides angles from various research and working fields just as much as it unites contributions from scholars, designers, and practitioners of faith alike. Moreover, we have invited practitioners in game development or game-related fields to participate with texts about their experiences with implementing religion, belief, and spirituality in virtual worlds. This book is an example of how discussing forms of medial art, communication, learning, in which a freedom of act and navigation are defining factors, can show how human action is foregrounded and evaluated within an interactive narrative framework role-playing game or a computer-generated environment.

The book was written with a readership of established scholars and young academics who share an interest in the matters and meanings of belief and spirituality and often struggle to find expression in academic writing due to their personal fields. Beyond theology and healthcare services, spirituality is often ditched as a topic, not in synergy with 'proper' academic research (Shahjahan/Wagner/Wane 2009: 63). Hence, the book strives to open itself to a vast array of different approaches while maintaining academic integrity. The researcher fits in right next with the practitioner, the personal voice with the analytical one, and the volume structure wants to advance the idea that there are many ways to express spirituality and spiritual thinking while dealing with interactive fiction. In a sense, we can say that this volume is for and from pilgrims and wanderers, practitioners and researchers, all working together to find a way to express their own voice on the matter, from their own point of view and experience in their respective fields. It discusses the smallest acts and gestures that convey meaning and that can express one own look into the experience of spirituality. This book is organised in four parts, each of them focused on one central key concept of interactivity or interactive medium in the broadest sense, allowing its authors to question and go beyond the borders of said medium.

Part I of *Fictional Practices of Spirituality* looks at the intersection of analogue role-playing games and spirituality. The performative work of **Sarah Lynne Bowman** opens this book's main body by taking us along for "The Epiphany Experiment: Role-playing for Personal Transformation". Located at the crossroads of performance, play, and personal involvement, it offers a thorough overview of the opportunities of such cases but also of the necessary stipulations for its surroundings. After her, **Menachem Cohen** writes about "Chasing Dreams: the Design and Use of Roleplaying Games for Spiritual Direction". Both Rabbi and passionate tabletop role-playing gamer, Menachem Cohen has applied his gaming expertise to great success in the spiritual guidance of adolescence, showing the power of interactive narration into religious practice. Lastly, **Anna Milon's** contribution is titled "The Hunter Will Take You: Seeking Spiritual Experiences within Live Action Role Play" for this first part. By analysing LARP events, her field research presents with a

sociological take how players experience spirituality while collectively building the narration of the stories of their world, and what they bring with them after an event is over.

Part II gives a stage to the dedicated practitioners and is split into two subchapters. The first subchapter, which focuses on creating a game design framework for transformative play, opens with a contribution by **Doris C. Rusch** and **Andrew M. Phelps**: "Conjuring *The Witch's Way* – Game Design as Magic and Spiritual Practice." There, the authors present how designing a game about spirituality and magic meant, for them, to work on their own experience and spiritual drive to give and promote meaning even outside the boundaries of the game itself. The second paper, "Practicing Dying: How Role-playing Games Can Help Us Accept Death and Boost Our Quality of Life" sees **Kjell Hedgard Hugaas** take a personal and autobiographical approach to games as a mediation of one's own demise, presenting his own experience as both player and scholar for the attentive reader to take inspiration and reflect upon. The second subchapter details those practicing research and pushing the boundaries as to where we can encounter spiritual phenomena. **A. Rose Johnson** has taken the plunge into the wonderous realm of practiced spirituality among video game fan communities. In "Exploring Applications of Videogame Magic through Tumblr's Pop Culture Witchcraft", she looks into how Wiccan practitioners express their spirituality in the online field, and how the experience of playing *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015) prompted some of them to implement new elements into their practices. In a similar but different fashion, in "Where the magic is: Ceremonial magic as a design perspective for Mixed Reality immersive experiences" **Maria Saridaki** and **Mariza Dima** present their research on how cardinal concepts used by practitioners of ceremonial traditions can help guiding the design of interactive mixed realities.

Part III solely focuses on videogames, one of the most common and experienced examples of interactive fiction. The concept of videogame experiences from a spiritual perspective is foregrounded in its first subchapter. **Felix Schniz** opens the chapter with a confession: "I Believe in Videogames: A Medium's Potential for Spiritual Experiences." His paper talks about identifying a spiritual experience, how it can happen in videogames and, most importantly, how researchers can approach these utmost intimate sentiments. **Frank Bosman**, meanwhile, turns the other cheek: "Fittingly Violent: Narrative Properties of Violence in Digital Games" explores one of the most visited topics about videogames (that of violence) with a keen analytical eye on morality and the inner turmoil of a player faced with violent choices, showing how the discussion can be productive if taken from a proper angle. The second subchapter sticks to videogames but shifts the level of attention from experience to player perspective. In "Spes Ultracombinatoria", **Leonardo Marcato** tries to build a spiritual approach to videogames that can take into consideration also the possibility of considering them a work of art, under the right circumstances and what this spiritual approach can say about the nature of humanity in a rapidly changing technological world. In "Sacred Places and Spatial Design in Fantasy-themed Isometric cRPGs", **Mateusz Felczak** guides our views towards the perception of architecture and geographical design of divine symbolism. Focusing on the sacred places of the world of isometric Role-Playing games, he analyses how the design of these holy sites conveys a different feeling and help express a different narrative, with the relevant appeals to the player's own knowledge. In the final part of this subchapter, **Lars de Wildt** is guiding our attention towards the critical intersection of religion and market

practices in the videogame industry. "Franchised Esotericism: *Assassin's Creed*'s Religious Perennialism as a Marketing Strategy" shows how, by appealing to real-life religions, myths, and legends, videogames can build a narrative strong enough to captivate the player's attention as part of the marketing efforts, without by this taking away value from the videogames themselves. The third subchapter of part III offers a deep dive into how Asian countries and cultures contribute to videogames from a spiritual point of view. A proper selection of case studies exemplifies in how far these games not only discuss Asian mythology but, thereby, also enable specific experiences as derived from Asian spiritual traditions. In "Ex Anankes: Cultural syncretism and the experience of necessitation in Saint Seiya: Hades's gameplay" **Graziana Ciola** and **Francesca Samà** share their play experience of *Saint Seiya: The Hades* (Dimps 2006) by showing the cultural interpretation of a proper Western myth system from a Japanese point of view. By doing both a strict philological examination of the original Greek mythos and a study of the game itself, this paper shows how the analysed title can be considered a proper example of intercultural media artefact. From a more general perspective, "At the Same Time… Both Truth and Fiction: Interrelation(s) of Psychology, Faith, and the Esotericism of the JRPG" allows **David Stevenson** to discuss how role-playing games from a Japanese perspective implement and enrich spiritual elements into their narratives to guide players in their experience further. Concluding this excursion into the Asian gaming experience, **Marco Seregni** and **Francesco Toniolo** explore a dystopian fantasy world in "Religion And Spirituality in *Nier: Automata*", and how the work of Yoko Taro heavily interwoven deep spiritual themes to build a game world for the players to experience and reflect.

No other Western video game has provided that much attention to scholars with regards to spirituality as the *Dragon Age* (Bioware since 2009) series, and for this reason the fourth and final part of the volume wants to look at this series as a case study on how spirituality can be present even in high-budget productions. **Sarah Faber** asks "Is there a God? Negotiating Spiritual Uncertainty through the Lens of Video Games" and analyses the religious and metaphysical world building of *Dragon Age* to present the reader a different approach to the age-old question on the divine. **Leonid Moyzhes** meanwhile wrote "Religion according to Bioware: religious dimensions of Chantry in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*". He analyses the interpolative structure of the central religious institution in the game, further proposing an intriguing interpretation of how a narrative can evoke different approaches to different players. Concluding the third part of the book, **Christine Tomlinson** gives a thorough and orderly perspective on the balance of believe systems in *Dragon Age*, providing a clear analysis of the spiritual worldbuilding done by Bioware in "Light, Blood, Stone, and Order: The Religious Beliefs and Systems of *Dragon Age*".

In a final lookout, **Michele Fanelli** and **Magdalena M. Strobl** summarise the essence provided by the authors we assembled and draw their conclusions on studying spirituality via interactive, digital media.

We want to conclude this introduction with a heartfelt thanks to everybody who has contributed to this anthology. To our authors as listed, to our student assistants, to our friends and families, to which all this book hopefully brings some joy and profound insight. And to our readers, we have one last question:

How do you feel about spirituality in interactive fiction, then?
Oh tell us, *play*!

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Part I – Role-Play and Spirituality

The *Epiphany* Experiment
Role-Playing for Personal Transformation

Sarah Lynne Bowman

Introduction

Analog role-playing games hold the potential to explore a vast array of facets of consciousness, and the human experience and spirituality is no exception. This article discusses the live action role-playing game (larp[1]) *Epiphany* (2017), which was designed by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Russ Murdock, and Rebecca Roycroft as a tool for personal transformation (Bowman/Hugaas 2019; 2021). Held near Austin, Texas, from December 15–17, 2017, this live action role-playing game (larp) was loosely based on *Mage: the Ascension* by White Wolf Publishing (Wieck et al. 1993). *Mage* emphasizes the role of one's paradigm and willpower in performing magic, similar to the concept of *manifestation* in neo-spiritual communities (cf. Auryn 2020: 18–20; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 57–58). *Mage* characters challenge modern understandings of 'consensus reality,' enabling them to perform the miraculous or impossible.

 Epiphany was created as a vehicle for active imagination and individuation (Jung 1976; Bowman 2017b) through symbolic enactment, ritual, and play (Turner 1974: 62; Rusch/Phelps 2020). An extensive character design questionnaire asked players to include personal memories related to spirituality; belief systems; metaphysical or philosophical questions; and specific ritual practices that would activate the character's 'magic' in play. This design was intended to encourage **bleed** (Montola 2010), where the emotions, identities, belief systems, and other aspects of the personal or collective unconscious of player and character spillover to one another (Beltrán, 2012: 89; Bowman 2013: 4; 2015; Hugaas 2019; Kemper 2017; 2020. These contents are then available to participants postgame as insights, realizations, a felt sense of a self that feels authentic to them, and even potential action items for living a more authentic and aligned life moving forward.

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1 In larp academia, the preferred spelling of larp is lower-case. While it started as an acronym, it has become a commonplace word like radar, both in its noun form (a larp) and its verb form (to larp).

In order for such insights to be concretized, *Epiphany* employed built-in structures for reflection, debriefing, and other forms of processing.

The setting of *Epiphany* is a spiritual retreat within which Mentor characters lead Initiates through ritual activities drawn from the players' own paradigms and practices. Examples from this run included exercises in shadow work; channelling/aspecting; divination through tarot cards and runes; mindfulness; a death salon; ecstatic dance; etc. This design is intended to provide a space for players to explore their spiritualities and philosophical questions within a community dedicated to validation, growth, and reflection. Documentation (Kim/Wong/Nuncio 2018) and anecdotal testimonials suggest that *Epiphany* was successful in its goals for some players.

In addition to our design philosophy and implementation strategies, this chapter will explore my personal experience as a designer and player of the larp, as well as some of the motivations and influences that inspired its creation. This work continues to inform my own design and pedagogical practices at Uppsala University, where I am helping launch the Transformative Play Initiative with Doris Rusch, Josefin Westborg, Josephine Baird, and Kjell Hedgard Hugaas. This Initiative is designing event programming and a graduate program in the Department of Game Design on transformative play to help scholar-designer-practitioners from helping professions create games to guide others through change processes.

Ultimately, *Epiphany* might serve as a proof of concept for future explorations of selfhood, spirituality, and transformative community within role-playing games. Therefore, this chapter concludes with thoughts on applications of similar design principles in design-based research, arts-based therapy practices, and other forms of research related to using role-playing games as vehicles for personal and social development.

The Genesis of *Epiphany*

The genesis of *Epiphany* emerged from several converging threads in the discourse and practice around analog role-playing games in the mid-2010s, as well as my own personal need for meaningful, deep play experiences that inspire lasting transformation (cf. Rusch 2017: 1). By analog role-playing games (or RPGs), I refer to games that involve emergent, spontaneous, improvisational co-creation of reality and identity. While such games are now commonly played online through video conferencing software due to pandemic or geographically-related necessities (cf. D/Schiffer, 2020; Piancastelli 2020; Reininghaus 2021), they are often played in physical space shared by participants. Larp in particular emphasizes the embodiment of such play, which can enhance players' experiences of immersion into a shared fictional narrative, environment, character, activity, game, and community (Bowman 2018: 383–390).

I have played larps since 1997, when I played my first *Vampire: the Masquerade* larp with the Mind's Eye Theatre organization. While others were engaging intently with politics, combat, and game mechanics, I was off in the corner with other characters discussing whether Jesus was a vampire and nursing a decades-old broken heart. In retrospect, this combination of romantic and deep, metaphysical and philosophical play has been my default mode of engagement in many larps, even if the themes of the larp do not explicitly

centre upon these themes. My sense is that larp and other role-playing modalities have allowed me enough freedom of creativity to explore existential questions and emotional dynamics that are personally relevant to my own evolution as a person, not just as a player embodying a role to contribute to a temporary setting or experience. Thus, my current research and design interests centre upon questions related to transformation: How can we use role-playing as a vehicle for processes of change that can have effects in our personal lives, communities, and society as a whole?

When immersed, players experience several **paradoxes** that can lead to cognitive dissonance but also potential epiphanies: a-ha moments of powerful realization (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 52; Diakolambrianou et al. 2021). The first paradox is **fiction vs. reality**. Role-playing experiences evoke ritual-like spaces that are technically fictional and the mind recognizes this fact by carefully organizing in-game fictional experiences separately from off-game information (Harviainen 2012: 506). Thus, while alarmists have feared that players will lose touch with reality through immersion (Stark 2012: 91–106; Laycock 2015: 1–30), role-players may actually develop more complex meta-cognitive skills through repeated play experiences (Lukka 2014: 60–62). In fact, role-playing consumes a great deal of mental energy for participants as they actively pretend to believe (Pohjola 2004: 84–85), perform their fictional role, and interpret game experiences as both their character and their player identities (Lukka 2011: 164; Leonard/Thurman 2018: 11). In role-play theory, we refer to these in-game elements, mechanics, and setting constraints as aspects that make up the **magic circle of play** (Huizinga 1955: 10; Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 95; Stenros 2012: 1). The magic circle is cognitively delineated as a separate frame (Goffman 1986: 24; Fine 1983: 196; Vorobyeva 2015: 36) from daily life, in that players are mentally able to hold fiction, rules, and other ludic structures in their consciousness, while differentiating these factors from socially prescribed 'reality.' This delineation is further supported by the **social contract of play**, where the group engaged in the role-playing practice collectively agrees to treat behaviours and events as fictional.

At the time, the mind also interprets fictional stimuli as real on a more unconscious level. In larp, which is often a heavily embodied medium where somatic, emotional processes in the body are activated alongside cognitive ones, the mind and body experiences role-playing experiences as real stimuli and respond accordingly (Leonard/Thurman 2018: 9). For this reason, role-players may experience momentary moments of **bleed**, where the boundaries between fiction and reality blur or even briefly collapse, leading to a flood of sensations, emotions, memories, and other aspects of a participant's 'reality' into the fictional frame in a process known as **bleed-in**, or out of the fictional frame into reality through **bleed-out** (Montola 2010; Bowman 2013: 16).

Thus, the second related paradox of role-playing is **player vs. character**. Just as we understand and cognitively organize information based upon the difference between fiction and reality, we engage in a metacognitive process known as **dual consciousness** (Stenros 2013). Where participants experience themselves as both the player and the character at the same time (Sandberg 2004: 276). The level of immersion into character depends strongly on player preference and phenomenological orientation, as some players tend to immerse deeply into their roles, whereas others engage with more detached distance (Bowman 2018: 389). Regardless of the level of immersion, just as we

have implicit and explicit rules governing the social contract of play, role-players also have a degree of **alibi**, meaning they are able to obviate social responsibility for their in-game actions (Montola/Holopainen 2012; Deterding 2017). While alibi is an important component of the role-playing process as it allows players the ability to take risks and express their creativity, it can also become a constraint that makes it difficult for players to process their in-game experiences (Bowman 2013; Bowman/Hugaas 2021; Munier/JC, 2021).

Play cultures tend to have their own norms regarding the desirability of both bleed and alibi. Some play cultures strongly discourage bleed, consider it a liability, or even seek to deny it exists at all except in players who become overinvolved (Fine 1983: 217; Bowman 2013: 21). However, some role-playing communities have embraced bleed and even design in order to encourage it (Meriläinen 2011: 127), such as in Nordic larp (Stenros/Montola 2010: 291–297) and the jeepform collective (Jeepen n.d.). Some players even admit to being 'bleed-hunters,' seeking out larp experiences with ever-increasing levels of intensity to create the emotional flooding associated with bleed (Nilsen 2012: 10–11).

In addition, I consider role-playing an altered state of consciousness – one that can have profound implications on our ability to see outside of the bounds of our typical ways of viewing ourselves and our place in society. If we consider role-playing to be a ritual space within which even more rituals can take place (cf. Bowman 2015b), leading us into even deeper states of altered consciousness, the connection between role-playing and religion and spirituality becomes especially intriguing. Ritual anthropologist Victor Turner would likely label larp liminoid vs. liminal (Turner 1974: 68) meaning: a culturally significant activity that is not socially significant in the way that religious rituals might be. Alibi in particular can relegate role-playing experience more firmly into this liminoid category; we don't believe ourselves to literally get married in a church, even if we have a powerful scene in a larp of our characters getting married in a rented cathedral.

While considered not as socially significant, Turner believed that liminoid experiences can be evidence of an individual exercising their freedom, "growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence" (Turner 1974: 68). This description rings particularly true when we consider how intensely players can immerse into these roles, how much of their own sense of identity they often explore, and how much impact bleed can have on their experiences of daily life. I have played many characters who were healers in some capacity, often ones who hold an unshakable faith in the incorrupt nature of the soul and the power of love to mend wounds – convictions I still struggle to maintain in my daily experience. In this way, embodying the altered state of these characters has offered me a window into what being a person of unyielding faith might feel like, the peace that accompanies that faith, and the way that faith can then positively impact others around me as I give them support. In my own life, I struggle with debilitating anxiety, poor self-esteem, addiction, depression, trauma, and loss of faith in humanity. My characters have taught me I can be that person if I practice; role-playing in general is a known form of what psychologists call **behavioral rehearsal** (cf. Munday 2013). I have brought those lessons into my daily commitments to my own spirituality but would likely not have been aware that such mental states were even possible before role-playing them.

International Larp in the 2010s: A Convergence of Trends

It is from these personal experiments and revelations, as well the evolution of the discourse in international larp communities in the last decade, that *Epiphany* emerged. Key concepts in the discourse that have influenced larp design in the last decade have been:

(1) **Consent-based play:** An emphasis on calibration and implicit and explicit consent negotiations as alternatives to mechanics-based conflict resolution systems (cf. Brown 2016, Bowman 2017a).
(2) **Blockbuster larps:** An emphasis on attractive locations and high production values drawing a wide player base from around the world (Fatland/Montola 2015).
(3) **Designing for bleed:** An emphasis on game design that encourages spillover between the frames of fiction and daily life (Jeepen n.d.; Kemper 2017, 2020; Hugaas 2019).
(4) **Safety structures:** An emphasis on embedding emotional support and care into the structure of the larp through workshops and debriefing; safety mechanics; and play cultures in general (Stavropoulous n.d.; Brown 2016; Koljonen 2016).
(5) **Visceral, embodied play:** An emphasis on exploring personal edges in physical and emotional play regarding romance, sexuality, violence, and other taboo behaviours within a game framework that feels safe (Koljonen 2016; 2020: 5e; Bowman 2016).

Most relevant to *Epiphany* were two distinct strands of larps that emerged from these discourses and design practices that became popular: 1) Wizard colleges and 2) Nordic-style Vampire larps. Based loosely upon the Harry Potter universe, several blockbuster larps arose that drew participants from around the world interested in teaching or attending a college for wizards, including *College of Wizardry* (2014-) and *New World Magischola* (2016–2020). The design of these schools emphasized consent-based play where magic worked based upon agreement within the group rather than mechanics, as well as player-generated content, such as lesson plans, rituals, and other content. These larps often afforded an even greater degree of agency to players in a medium that already encourages proactive, creative participation.

At the same time, *Vampire: the Masquerade* (1992) larps from White Wolf's World of Darkness that were officially sponsored by the company became influential. These larps featured visceral, embodied play rather than abstracted mechanics. Thus, these experiences were often highly realistic, embodied, emotionally intense, and sometimes socially transgressive play exploring the monstrous within humanity (Stenros 2015: 75; Bowman/Stenros 2018: 411), including *End of the Line* (2016–2017), *Convention of Thorns* (2016-), and *Enlightenment in Blood* (2017). The goal of these larps was to create enough safety and alibi to allow players to take risks with their physical and emotional play (cf. Koljonen 2016).

I was heavily involved in co-developing these aspects of the design of *New World Magischola* and similarly helped create consent negotiation scripts and workshops for the New Orleans and Berlin runs of *End of the Line* (2016, 2017), as well as *Convention of Thorns* (2016). I also participated as a player in all of the games listed above, whether as a player-character (PC) or non-player character (NPC). Since my formative larp experiences were traditional *Vampire* and *Mage* games in the United States that were based upon the *Mind's Eye Theatre* system, I had the embodied experience of having played both

styles, enabling me to crystalize the elements I considered most useful when playing with the explicit goal of personal transformation. I had also witnessed how such tools could help transform the group around these larps as a form of memetic bleed (Hugaas 2019), foregrounding values of enthusiastic consent and inclusion within the community as a whole.

I was also part of the design team for *Immerton* (2017) by Learn Larp, a larp for people who identified as women, including women with queer gender identities. As a team, we explicitly designed characters based on player requests and encouraged participants to use any aspects of their own identities they felt comfortable incorporating (Brown et al. 2018: 45). *Immerton* focused explicitly on goddesses and incorporated altars and **mask work** (Johnstone 1987: 144; Holter/Boss 2012: 14; Bowman 2015a); characters not only dropped into deeper immersive and potentially spiritual states through in-game rituals devoted to each goddess but could also aspect these deities by donning the masks, experiencing a momentary and voluntary shift in consciousness where they would role-play personality aspects associated with the goddess in question. While these events were technically fictional, the embodiment of them within this all-woman space was powerful for me and also had a strong impact on some of the other players (cf. Jones 2017). As a player within *Immerton*, I was especially moved by the focus on spirituality, how deeply woven it was into these women's lives, how ritual deepened and infused the experience, and how the sacred existed seamlessly alongside the mundane due to the conceit of each character's devotion to their respective goddesses.

It was within the overall backdrop of these parallel design activities that I conceptualized and assembled a team for *Epiphany*. Experiences such as *Immerton* make it possible to conceive of a larp that focused upon spiritual, metaphysical, philosophical, and deeply personal content. Unlike other World of Darkness games, *Mage* emphasizes the potential present within humanity and human consciousness, as well as the responsibility needed to wield such power conscientiously. Taking this concept a bit further, *Epiphany* focused exclusively on integrating lived player experiences and beliefs into play as a means to explore and potentially transform their identities and life paths. Thus, the larp was designed to encourage bleed as a welcome and educational experience rather than an intrusion. If we consider the content of play as arising not just from fictional elements but also as a means to express and process aspects of our own unconscious, bleed becomes an understandable and possibly even inevitable phenomenon.

Through long-term immersive play, more concrete aspects of the conscious or unconscious mind may spillover between the frames of game and reality and substantiate themselves into the player's daily identity, a process Whitney "Strix" Beltrán (2012: 89) refers to as **ego bleed**. Furthermore, the ideologies that characters espouse can spill over into the player's psychology, a process known as **memetic bleed** (Hugaas 2019). Players can also steer toward liberatory experiences through a process known as **emancipatory bleed**, which is particularly potent for players who come from marginalized backgrounds (Kemper 2017; 2020). Finally, the larp fiction and mechanics themselves can be influenced by one's play experiences as well as the personal ideology of the designer, a process known as **design bleed** (Toft/Harrer 2020: 2). *Epiphany* was designed as a means to consciously push the boundaries of bleed in these various ways in order to explore the edges of not only what is possible within role-playing environments but also within players' spiritual-

ity, consciousness, paradigm. Although we did not have words for it at the time, we were attempting to build a **transformational container** (Bion 1959: 297–98; Winnicott 1960: 589–90; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 67) within which more authentic forms of exploration were possible and supported by the community.

Spiritual Yearning and *Epiphany*

I had previously co-facilitated a *Mage: the Ascension* game with Russ Murdock, which took place online via forum play and in-person, which to date remains my favourite published role-playing game in terms of its themes and metaphoric language. Russell and I not only played human NPCs within the Mage cabal with the other characters, but we each embodied the Avatars of the characters, which we defined as a spiritual being working in a symbiotic relationship with each character to fuel their magic. Avatar play and lucid dream sequences in particular led to deeply metaphysical, symbolic, and personal play, as we had alibi to inhabit deep forms of ritual, symbolic enactment in the game. While magic in the case of *Mage* can be viewed as metaphoric, role-playing and other forms of deep play are also comprehensible as psychomagic, as the fictional frame allows for psychological exploration and embodiment that might otherwise feel impossible (Rusch/ Phelps 2020: n.d.; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 66; Diakolambrianou 2021: 95).

While *Mage* games can certainly become showcases of acts of flashy magic and dire consequences arising from egocentric and megalomaniacal power trips, we focused on initiates who were just awakening into their nascent power. Our version of the game focused explicitly on the development of one's paradigm: the way in which they view reality that permits them to feel empowered enough to change aspects of the world around them through magic. Canonically, these paradigms are often based upon real world spiritual beliefs and practices. To name a few examples, the Verbena are similar to pagan witches, the Cult of Ecstasy are similar to neo-tantra and other embodied mystical traditions, Hermetics are similar to occult esoteric communities, etc. While these paradigms were modeled directly on the authors' understanding of specific traditions and practices, the degree that people perceive these representations to be accurate varies from player to player. What I most appreciate about *Mage* is that it opens space to explore these broader spiritual philosophies and to potentially include aspects of one's own spiritual journey and practice into the role-playing experience.

Perhaps the most intellectually challenging of the World of Darkness games, *Mage* asks players to inhabit the headspace of someone who is capable of perceiving themselves as empowered to make concrete change in the world while also acknowledging that external forces may arise to try to disempower them. These forces may arise from the neutral physical world, such as gravity or the inevitability of death, or the ideology-driven social world, such as Technocratic government agencies aiming to enforce normative behaviours and discourage people from behaving as 'consensus reality deviants.' Therefore, the game provides useful terminology and symbolic frameworks for understanding the struggle of people attempting to claim their empowerment in a world that systemically and sometimes violently disempowers them. Thus, it is useful as a language for considering methods to dive deeper into the felt sense of embodied empowerment

and thus steer toward liberation and emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017; 2020), especially for players who have experienced bullying and/or discrimination.

In addition to my lifelong interest in spirituality and mystical experiences, this game resonates strongly with me as someone who has often experienced social shame due to my gender and sexual behaviour. I grew up experiencing serious consequences for behaviours that others deemed deviant but felt liberating for me. For this reason, the Cult of Ecstasy as a concept has always resonated most strongly with my view of my life path. Similarly, as an academic, I often dabble in topics that are controversial or stigmatized, such as writing about role-playing games themselves, discussing emotional impacts of role-playing (2013: 4), and exploring the spiritual and/or unconscious elements of these experiences (2012: 31; 2017b; 2021: 160). Thus, the Order of Hermes also strongly appeals to me as an alternative academic environment focused on understanding magic as part of natural law, and thus validating spiritual experiences as powerful and meaningful. I played long-term NPCs over the year of game play we had for this particular *Mage* Chronicle.

By the time I started co-designing *Immerton*, I had already taken part in helping design the safety and calibration systems for *End of the Line* and *Convention of Thorns*. I also wrote some of the characters for *Enlightenment in Blood*, specifically characters who were interested in the occult or who were otherwise spiritually seeking in spite of their damned vampiric condition. I had co-organized a *Vampire* larp years before and was also playing in a local *Vampire* held at an AirBnB in Del Valle, Texas, called Tiny T Ranch. While I enjoy some of the themes in *Vampire* – particularly regarding the struggle to retain humanity, the inner struggle with the Beast/Shadow, and the search for enlightenment through Golconda – on some level, I think I always wished I was playing *Mage*, as themes of Ascension and personal empowerment are more resonant with me.

I considered options for running *Mage* in an immersive, collaborative style similar to these recent, embodied *Vampire* experiences. One idea was to start a theme camp at a Burning Man event where we played *Mage* pervasively (Montola/Stenros/Waern 2009: 12) throughout the festival; Burners tend to have similar flexibility in terms of costuming, identity fluidity, and spontaneous creativity that we see in larpers and would likely tolerate or even embrace playful activities such as pretending to believe (Pohjola 2004: 84–85) one can affect reality with one's mind. Such an idea would be cost-effective in some ways as well, since the setting would already be created atmospherically by other devoted campers. However, the logistics around trying to obtain tickets for several potential participants felt too daunting.

In addition, I deeply craved the opportunity to attend some sort of spiritual retreat, as I was deepening into meditation practices at the time. I had played Joani, a neo-tantra expert at the Nordic larp *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-) twice by that point, and through Joani, had found within myself a calm and faith that I wanted to continue to cultivate. I had also played a tantrika at *Enlightenment in Blood* and an artist in *Convention of Thorns* who were deeply invested in helping vampires live in the present moment and find faith even while being damned. I realized in retrospect that so many of my best role-playing experiences involved me exploring the intersection between romance, metaphysics, philosophy, and faith, such that even in larps such as the Nordic Vampire games, which were highly visceral, I preferred softer, more subtle zones of play for myself and others. And while these

zones of play were highly intense and emotionally moving at times, focusing on heart-break and trauma and any number of other challenging themes, they also featured a degree of focus on intellectual engagement with existential and ethical questions. Thus, it became clear to me through these experiences that part of me yearned to immerse deeply into profoundly transformative experiences with a group devoted to such play.

Despite this craving, at the time, I felt that I could not take time and money away from the larp community in order to indulge in a weekend workshop for my own personal development. Instead, I reflected upon the other players who gravitated toward the type of play I enjoyed and who may feel called toward similar sorts of spiritual and emotional seeking through characters, ritual, narrative, symbolism, and metaphor. I recalled the depth of play our small *Mage* group had reached with one another, within which the most potent scenes were often subtle, relaxed conversations about paradigm and attempts to meditate or explore the inner terrain of the unconscious through imagery. I had been writing about how such practices were reminiscent of Carl Jung's process of **active imagination**, and how the insights gleaned from them had become important to my own **individuation** (Bowman 2017b: 160); over time, it became clear how aspects of the archetypal, fictional reality we role-played blended with my own sense of identity, my understanding of self, and my relationships with others over time through our shared mythos (Page 2014: 61). I considered how to extend the space of a larp into an intentionally-designed transformational container (Bion 1959: 297–98; Winnicott 1960: 589–90; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 67), where players set goals for aspects of self they wanted to explore within the game and we collaboratively supported one another in feeling safe enough to touch upon such material with the group. I felt that such a space needed to be transparently designed from the outset with the goals explicit in the description. So, I contacted Russ and another designer, Rebecca Roycroft, with the suggestion that we run a *Mage* larp under the conceit of a spiritual retreat. They graciously took a leap of faith in joining me for the *Epiphany* experiment.

Setting the Ritual Stage

I sent a message to the AirBnB hosts of Tiny T Ranch and put down a deposit. The site was run by Spike Gillespie, a self-described 'Rock n' Roll grandma' covered in tattoos, who regularly rented it out to a local *Vampire* troupe, as well as to meditation retreat groups and wedding parties. It consisted of a three-bedroom house, an updated barn space, a field with horses, and a tiny chapel with stained glass. Spike's one tongue-in-cheek rule was, "You can do animal sacrifice and I don't care as long as you clean up after yourself." While she was kidding, finding a site that not only tolerates but welcomes with open arms larpers was a welcome change, as many non-larpers are suspicious of strange costumes and loud role-playing. Spike made one additional request: that her dear friend who was in his '90s and lived in the house, Bob, could use the front door to let his dog out while we were role-playing, to which we enthusiastically agreed. Apparently, Bob loved all the larping and was highly stimulated by the younger people in his space. (Sadly, Bob was in the hospital on the weekend of *Epiphany*, but we did our best to care for his home while he was gone).

Spike and I determined that the ranch could sleep 55 people if we converted the barn to sleeping space as well. Ultimately, we ended up having 43 players sign up and 33 play the larp. One of our players, Lee Foxworthy, volunteered to organize the kitchen team and made sure we had plenty of coffee and food throughout the weekend. Thus, we were able to run the larp for around $79 per person, while still finding an authentic, relaxed location with interesting spaces. This price point was substantially lower than higher-production value blockbuster larps that averaged $300-$500 for a weekend game, although still an investment, especially for our volunteers and players from out of town who made the pilgrimage to the game.

With the site established, we set to work creating the design document (Bowman/Murdock/Roycroft 2017: 1–28). Design documents had a common practice for **bespoke** larps in the Nordic tradition, meaning larps that established the setting, the rules, the meta-techniques, and safety structures for each larp according to the themes that specific larp aimed to explore. In my experience, thorough design documents spoke less about lore and mechanics like traditional RPG books and instead focused on the overall tone, themes, play expectations, and safety norms. Design documents not only help players determine if a larp is right for them, but they help set the container for the whole group with explicit aesthetic agreements about what sort of play is encouraged versus discouraged. For example, players would know ahead of time that all characters in *End of the Line* were horrible people in some way and that the larp would explore what it means to be both predator and prey as one devolved into one's baser instincts (2016). The same company, Participation Design Agency, produced *Inside Hamlet*, a larp based on the Shakespeare play and featuring larpers enacting scenes within it. Played at the real Castle Elsinore, the characters in *Inside Hamlet* are members of the court surrounding the tragedy, whose play focused on similar themes of excess, sexuality, violence, and eventual degradation of morality and death. Based on an earlier version in 2003 (Bergström 2010: 137), the updated 2010s version featured extensive promotional materials, communications with players before the larp, and mandatory onsite workshops and debriefs. These processes helped ease players into this setting and allowed them to calibrate play with one another toward the desired shared aesthetic experience.

Larps featuring such themes had become more commonplace, but would players be drawn to a more reflective, subtle, philosophical experience? If so, how could the design document be written to adequately prepare players for this unusual role-playing experience, where the majority of what 'happened' was in the quieter moments between characters? How could we avoid the plot taking on a life of its own through the **larp domino effect** (Bowman 2017c: 161), where players introduce content that inadvertently shapes play and can even hijack the narrative for many other characters over the course of the game? How could we encourage players to be brave enough to play with **thin alibi** – that is, to use their daily self and their life experiences as the primary basis for their character concepts – while still feeling immersed in a fictional environment? In the design document and subsequent character creation processes, we detailed several key decisions that attempted to set the stage for such play.

Design Pillars of *Epiphany*

The design document outlined the following features of the larp:

1) The setting was based loosely upon Mage: the Ascension 1st Edition (1994)

In truth, the *Mage* elements ended up being more of a shared vocabulary for play and a conceit rather than essential components of the larp.

Drawing upon information in the White Wolf Wiki, we focused upon the basic Traditions, changing the language to be more gender-neutral in some cases:

- **Akashics:** "Masters of mind, body, and spirit pursuing the arts of personal discipline" ("Akashic": n.p.).
- **Celestial Chorus:** "A Tradition united by their efforts to touch the Divine, as well as their belief in the One and Prime, from which all things originate" ("Celestial": n.p.).
- **Cult of Ecstasy:** "Mages and visionary seers who transcend boundaries and limitations through sacred experience" ("Cult": n.p.).
- **Dreamspeakers:** "Individuals who [commune] with spirits as part of their magic, and [exist] as intermediaries between the Mortal World and the Spirit World" ("Dreamspeakers": n.p.).
- **Euthanatos:** "A Tradition of mages intimately devoted to the forces of death, destiny, and karma in the world" ("Euthanatoi": n.p.).
- **Order of Hermes:** Developed in secret during the Middle Ages, a tradition drawing upon a potent foundation "of magical knowledge and has shaped occult history" ("Order of Hermes": n.p.).
- **Society of Ether:** "A group of technomancers who use scientifically-oriented magic" ("Sons": n.p.).
- **Verbena:** "Mages dedicated to preserving the ancient crafts and wisdom passed down over the ages by witches, warlocks, druids, druidesses […] mystics, priests, and priestesses of the Old Gods" ("Verbena": n.p.).
- **Virtual Adepts:** "Focused on the Digital Web, the Adepts search for a way to reach the singularity: the point where mankind can transcend into something post-human" ("Virtual": n.p.).
- We also had players choose 3–4 of the Spheres that their characters have explored in some way:
- **Correspondence:** The relationship in space between separate objects ("Correspondence").
- **Entropy:** The principles of chance, fate, and mortality ("Entropy").
- **Forces:** The understanding of elemental energies: air, fire, water, earth. Additional forces include gravity and others ("Forces").
- **Life:** The mysteries of life and death ("Life").
- **Matter:** The principles behind chemistry, atomic, and subatomic particles ("Matter").
- **Mind:** Consciousness and unconsciousness on a personal and collective level ("Mind").

- **Prime:** The essence of magic within all things. Sometimes Prime is condensed as quintessence in an object, or in a Node: a location of great magical potential ("Prime"). The *Epiphany* Retreat is a Node.
- **Spirit:** Comprehension of otherworldly forces and interaction with its inhabitants in the Spirit Realm. The Spirit Realm is called the Umbra and contains entities, dreams, and other realms of existence, including outer space ("Spirit").
- **Time:** "Linear and nonlinear chronologies, including causes, effects, expansion, contraction, and potentialities" ("Time": n.p.).
- The vast majority of other *Mage-*related content was removed from the larp, other than concepts that added flavor to the setting, such as the *Epiphany* Retreat being located on a Node.

(2) The larp featured consent-based mechanics; a player-driven plot; and collaborative storytelling

As with the other larps described above, players had a strong say in the direction of their larp experience. We attempted to avoid the larp domino effect trap by asking players to **steer** away (Montola/Stenros/Saitta 2015) from play regarding the Technocracy, which are the scientifically-minded 'enemies' of the Ascension mages who attempt to keep everyone asleep and police 'reality deviants.' While we felt it was important to have the Technocracy as part of the backdrop, as it serves as a useful metaphor for understanding how society can systematically disempower people, we did not want the game to devolve into paranoia or planning to hide from or fight this shared enemy.

Instead, the play was focused upon player-generated content throughout the structure. While Russ, Rebecca, and I were facilitators, we played relatively inexperienced Initiates in the larp itself, as did around two-thirds of the other players. The rest of the characters were Mentors from specific Traditions: characters with expertise in a particular paradigm and ritual work that they then shared with the Initiates to help them Awaken. Similar to the *College of Wizardry*/*New World Magischola* model, the majority of play focused upon structured workshop classes during the day designed by the Mentor characters, and unstructured play at night, where characters could run their own rituals, classes, or private scenes. Ultimately, characters had structured ritualized experiences during Friday evening and Saturday during the day with opportunities for free play on Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon before the ending ritual, Reflection hour, and debrief.

(3) The larp featured black box play and player-run avatars

We converted the small chapel into a black box – sometimes called a meta-room – which is a space in larps such as *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-) and *End of the Line* (2016–2018) that is set aside from the main play of the game. The black box allows characters to create short freeform scenes within the larp (Holter/Boss 2012: 1; Westerling 2014), either on their own or with a facilitator, that take place in other spaces, times, or even realities. Black box play involves player negotiation to create short experiences that enhance play within the larger experience of the larp. The chapel itself was tiny, with stained glass windows

and pew-like seats on the side and large candleholders. Adding lights and sound to the space created an ambience that helped players to feel magically transported.

In *Epiphany*, we used the black box for scenes involving more dramatic magical effects like astral travel, interaction with one's Avatar, and any scenes depicting harassment, violence, sexuality as agreed upon by all players in the scene. Players could invite others to participate in black box scenes by handing them a stone or crystal. Due to the magical setting, these scenes could take place in the past, future, or an alternate timeline, or even plane of existence. Black box scenes allow players to deepen into important aspects of their characters' stories, as well as interact with the more obviously magical content of *Mage*. Black box play essentially creates a temporary mini container with explicit bespoke rules and a social contract within the larger play space with specific goals in mind.

When Russ and I had run *Mage* in the past, we noticed that the intimacy of play provided by our facilitator-run Avatars inadvertently incentivized player-characters to seek role-playing interactions with us as game masters more readily than with each other as a Cabal. Furthermore, we found that such interactions not only generated expectations of performance on our part, especially in long-term Chronicle play, but also led to feelings of favouritism when players would perceive that someone else was receiving game master attention or special plots. To solve this problem, I was inspired by the Nordic larp *Knappnålshuvudet* (Gräslund/Krauklis 2010: 77), which features actors portraying angels following the characters, which in turn was inspired by White Wolf's *Wraith: the Oblivion* (1994), where other players enact each wraith's 'Shadow.' In *Knappnålshuvudet*, each character had an angel that only they could see assigned to them and who would occasionally interact with them privately. Instead of portraying these entities ourselves, we took inspiration from Story Games, where responsibility for creating the story is not generated exclusively by the game masters, but is rather distributed among the player base.

Thus, players were asked not only to play their character, but also to serve as another player's spiritual Avatar if they so chose to do so. That way, players could have negotiated, personal, intimate scenes with each other, rather than relying on the bottleneck that can be created when the story is delivered through a few key people. Avatars could interact with characters pervasively throughout the larp using the meta-technique **Bird-in-ear** (Jeepen n.d.; Holter/Boss 2012: 15), where the character hears 'inner voices' that other players may overhear, but their characters do not witness. These voices can help players steer scenes in response to this external stimuli or players can choose to ignore them. If players wanted to have more extensive scenes with these metaphysical beings, we asked them to use the imagination space afforded by the black box, as such scenes tended to be more fantastical and could feature rich symbolism through narration and symbolic embodiment typical of deep games (Rusch/Phelps 2020).

(4) The larp emphasized What You See is What You Get (WYSIWYG)
     and What You Know is What You Know (WYKIWYK)

Historically, *Mage* has been notoriously difficult to larp. Once *Mage* characters get to a certain level of power, they can essentially rip holes in consensus reality that dramatically affect the narrative for others. Some examples of fairly moderate levels of *Mage* powers include opening portals to the Astral Plane, shooting fireballs out of their hands, instantly

killing biological creatures with their minds, etc. Such effects are not only difficult to physically represent, but they tend to take over the game and make more subtle, nuanced play less possible.

We also noticed such outcomes occurring in the more recent consent-based larps like *New World Magischola:* whatever personal narrative players wanted to pursue was often overtaken by any number of epic plotlines or rituals that other players would generate. Characters were capable of any feat of magic they could imagine with the only exceptions that a) other players chose what effects that magic would have on them, and b) Teachers at the school were always better at magic than students and could thus negate effects if necessary. Thus, players could generate any scene imaginable, which tended to create imbalances throughout the larp in tone and intensity from scene to scene. I served as a safety team member at several of these larps. Players often told us how they felt pressure to abandon personal play – such as dancing with their date at the Ball – in order to show loyalty to their House members and showing up for mass rituals. Failure to attend such rituals or finding out that big scenes occurred without their presence often produced 'Fear of Missing Out' (sometimes pronounced FOMO) for larpers who wanted to feel connected to the story and other characters. While these scenes were mostly player-generated, staff would run special plots on request, which could lead to the same feelings of favoritism mentioned above when limited organizer resources are given to specific players over others. Such feelings often led to intense anxiety and even emotional breakdowns off-game, especially when coupled with lack of sleep, food, physical exhaustion, and other common experiences larpers have when immersed for many days at a time.

To avoid these pitfalls, we emphasized *Epiphany* as a space for introspection, shared ritual experience, small personal revelations, and deeply embodied realistic play. We wanted to keep the same empowerment offered to players in games like *Magischola* (see Clapper 2016), but to make the tone of the game more realistic to larper's daily lives and less epic and supernatural. Thus, although our game did have magical elements, we emphasized the design principle of 'What You See is What You Get' (sometimes pronounced WYSIWYG) common in the Nordic larp tradition (Koljonen 2010: 176), which focuses on a **360 degree immersive ideal** where everything in the scenography and costuming should be realistic to the setting. While Mentors were capable of magical effects that were hugely powerful, their play emphasized how to safely use magic and to focus on the paradigmatic basis behind magic. Thus, for the most part, magic in the larp was more of a backdrop than an explicit focus in most of the scenes. If players wanted to pursue more intensive magical scenes, those events could take place in the bounded container of the black box and hopefully not dramatically affect or hijack play for others.

An additional pitfall of both traditional *Mage* Chronicles and syncretic neo-spiritual practices is cultural appropriation. *Mage* is based on real-world spiritual practices, communities, and philosophies. While immersing oneself in a subjectivity different from one's own can often help create empathy (Meriläinen 2012: 52), it can also inadvertently offend people from that racial, ethnic, or religious background, especially when characters don culturally specific articles of clothing as costumes or sacred objects as props in play (Hodes 2020). Similar problems emerge in neo-spiritual traditions and cultural anthropological scholarship, particularly when people from White, Western backgrounds attempt to name, claim, or embody practices that originate from marginalized groups

such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. Whether in life or in larp, when people have a limited understanding of a practice, belief system, or culture, they tend to rely on stereotypes to fill in these gaps, which can be harmful, whether intentional or not. These problems can lead players from marginalized backgrounds to feel alienated and misrepresented in role-playing spaces that might otherwise feel liberatory (Holkar 2016: 95–96; Kemper 2018: 209–10; Kemper/Saitta/Koljonen).

We knew that we could not avoid the problem of cultural appropriation completely, as we acknowledged that as larpers, we all live within a colonized world, and thus carry with us stereotypes, implicit biases, and potentially harmful practices. Nonetheless, we wanted to acknowledge that participation in spiritual rituals or communities of all sorts can also be profoundly meaningful for players. We wanted to create a space where players could use the alibi of the fiction to share experiences and thoughts they had on metaphysics, spirituality, and philosophy that they might not otherwise share.

Thus, we added another immersive ideal of 'What You Know is What You Know,' meaning that players would bring their own spiritual beliefs, memories, and activities into play. Initiates could use their own background knowledge plus slight narrative divergences (1–5 years more of devoted study), whereas Mentors could base their backstories on the premise of devoting 5+ more years of study to a tradition or practice with which they are familiar off-game. The design document states:

> Let's say you are interested in playing an Akashic. Maybe you have read a bunch of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. Maybe you have done years of karate since you were a kid. Maybe you have watched every Hong Kong action film that comes out. Maybe you regularly visit the Tibetan Buddhist shrine in your town and know people there. Maybe you took classes in Eastern Religion at your university. But you were not raised in a monastery in [Asia], so you do not play that particular background. (Bowman/Murdock/Roycroft 2017: 15)

Thus, players would rely on their own knowledge base rather than extrapolating about what another person's experience was like. To bolster this knowledge base, players were encouraged to engage in research before the larp and the design document featured an extensive bibliography sourced from members of the role-playing community, including players who took part in the larp.

Some of our players brought years of their own study and investment into particular spiritual traditions into their character concepts. If such practices were derived from cultural backgrounds different from the player's – for example, using sacred ceremonies associated with Indigenous Americans within a White, Western context – we asked that players discuss in character the privilege involved with enacting such practices. While we could not avoid the issue of cultural appropriation through this knowledge-based approach, we could at least seek to ameliorate some of its impacts by asking characters to openly discuss these impacts and treat such practices with the reverence they deserve. Additionally, we requested that characters openly acknowledge their own identities with regard to historical issues of appropriation. For example, if they studied sacred practices of interacting with the spirit realm in groups that were mostly White, participants were asked to have discussions of potential privilege and appropriation in-game. In the

above example about playing Akashic characters, players could, for example, discuss how their knowledge about Asian spiritual traditions is limited by their Western perspective and may in fact fall into stereotypes, such as the Ineffable Asian Mystic (Hodes 2019). We felt it was important for players to be able to express beliefs and practices that have been meaningful to them while also acknowledging that such experiences are situated in post-colonial Westernized societies with the pitfalls and tensions that entails.

Along these lines, we also asked that players not enact characters from a culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or race different than their own. The players could interpret this guideline as they chose, explaining their particular positionalities in the character creation questionnaire or to the designers. The design document states:

> While we know such experiences can help people develop empathy and self-aware-ness, this larp is about playing closer to home […] However, if you would like to express aspects of your own identity that you do not normally show society, such as alternate gender presentations or spiritual beliefs, we highly encourage you to do so. We want *Epiphany* to be a space where people can feel safe exploring aspects of themselves outside of social norms, rather than a space where people imagine inhabiting the headspace of another hypothetical person's perspective. (Bowman/Murdock/Roycroft 2017: 15)

Although we acknowledged that such enactment be beneficial when mindful, intentional participants engage in it, the risk of these practices causing harm to people from marginalized backgrounds was too great. Additionally, as we were focused on personal transformation as a goal, it made more sense to focus as closely to home on the player's identities. None of these practices can make sure every participant feels safe, but open discussion, attention, and intentionality might mitigate potential harm.

On the other hand, we strongly encouraged players from marginalized genders or who fostered alternative spiritual beliefs to foreground these aspects in the larp, as we intended to create a space where participants felt safe enough to reveal aspects of themselves that might otherwise be socially discouraged in other contexts. We knew that players often explore gender identity and sometimes eventually transition as a result of being able to experiment through role-playing (see Moriarity 2019; Stenros/Sihvonen 2019; Diakolambrianou et al. 2021). We also knew that players sometimes felt safer exploring unorthodox or radical religious or spiritual beliefs through the alibi of character, particularly players who have received social shame or who have been strongly discouraged from expressing such beliefs and experiences. In this way, we wanted to create a transformational container (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 67) where the explicit focus was to openly share aspects of self, beliefs, experiences, and practices that normally would be unlikely to arise even within open-minded larp communities.

Finally, we anticipated tension between the 'fantasy' and 'reality' elements of play, as some people would be engaging in more 'pretending to believe' in the fictional world (Pohjola 2004: 84–85), whereas others would be sharing beliefs or experiences that feel more real to them. I wrote a series of design blog posts that explained key themes in the larp, one of which was to respect all levels of engagement and sharing. For some of the players, the magic of the game was more of a metaphor for their lived experience,

whereas for others, the practices and beliefs they were sharing were deeply grounded in their reality. Thus, while it was fine and even encouraged to have paradigmatic debates in-game, we emphasized the need for respectful engagement with these themes in- and off-game regardless of one's background.

(5) The character sheets and game activities were collaboratively co-created between players and game masters with a focus on personal beliefs, experiences, and ritual practices

Because we wanted to emphasize this close-to-home play, we required participants to reply to an extensive character creation questionnaire on Google Forms. This question-naire asked *Mage*-related questions, such as preferred Traditions and Spheres, but also asked questions related to player's personal beliefs, metaphysical experiences, and ex-istential dilemmas. Players were asked to list 3 close-to-home characteristics, with the option to also list 3 far-from-home aspects for players who needed more alibi. Players could also describe key moments in their character's life, including their first moment of Awakening when they realized they had magical abilities, as well as describing their Avatars. Thus, players were able to be creative if they wanted more distance, or were able to play with their own identities, as well as actual memories from their lives, such as near-death experiences, spiritual epiphanies, visitations from entities, entheogenic journeys, trance work, etc. Murdock and I took these questionnaires and designed 3–4 page char-acter sheets based upon a particular core theme, i.e. The Paradox of Intimacy, The Am-bivalence of Corporeality, etc. and collaborated with the players to tweak any necessary details.

Because we also wanted to encourage players to bring embodied practices into the game, we also asked them to detail preferred rituals for their characters that help them feel connected to their magic. Common responses included dance, singing, tarot card reading, meditation, martial arts, etc. We asked players to arrive prepared to take part in such activities and encouraged them to approach others to engage in group rituals. Players could also bring personal items of importance to them that could be used in ritual work and could set up altars throughout the space.

As a key element of the larp's structure, the mentors were asked to take ritual work a step further. Before the larp, we guided each mentor to create lessons for the rest of the characters at *Epiphany* retreat, which were scheduled to take place Friday evening and throughout the day on Saturday. In this way, players could share practices and philoso-phies that were meaningful to them and guide others through experiential processes. During free times, such as Saturday evening and Sunday morning, any character could create ritual activities and invite others to join in the main space or the black box.

Finally, we created 3–4 brief relations for each character so that they had multiple so-cial connections within the game in addition to their Avatars. Each of these relations were focused upon moments of Awakening, when the two characters shared an experience of discussion or embodied experience together that helped them explore their paradigm in some way. While such relations can sometimes feel contrived or unbelievable in larps, we used the uncanniness of this interconnected web of people as evidence of synchronicity (Jung 1976), as each of the participants were drawn to *Epiphany* Ranch either intuitively or by explicit invitation by another character such as a Mentor. We did not emphasize

any romantic connections with these relations, but allowed players to negotiate intimate connections between characters during pre-game planning and workshopping.

(6) Our safety structures emphasized check-ins, consent negotiations, and debriefing.

Players all took part in pre-game workshops where we explained various safety mechanics, content boundaries, consent negotiation scripts, character relation development, etc. In terms of safety mechanics, players could Cut the scene, requesting that all action stops, or put the Brakes, requesting that actions decrease in intensity. We also included the Okay Check-In, a nonverbal hand gesture system where players could ask other players if they were okay and players could respond with a yes, a no, or a 'so-so,' which we treat as a no (Brown 2016; Brown/Koljonen 2017). Players then engage in a brief off-game conversation to see if the affected participant needs care or wants to **steer** play (Montola/Stenros/Saitta 2015) in another direction when they resume.

In the design document and workshop, we emphasized that no physical or magical violence, torture, or sexual assault was permitted in the main in-game spaces. Similarly, mental effects through magic were only allowed with off-game consent negotiations. We also reinforced that the Technocracy exists but should not be a subject of conversation at this relaxing retreat. Based on past experience, we found that such themes can not only lead to players feeling their boundaries have been crossed but can also derail the game away from the intended emotional and philosophical tone. However, since such themes are important for some players to explore regarding their life experiences and identities, such as racism or religious oppression, we allowed discussion or enactment of these themes in black box with scene negotiation between all players, a form of **zoning** (Bowman 2017c: 167–168). Zoning allows participants greater agency in opting-in and out of particular scenes and topics. If players wanted to opt-out, they could also use the Lookdown, where they place a hand shielding their eyes to indicate they do not wish to interact and to ignore their character as if they were not there with no questions asked. During play, participants could also use the X-arms, a version of the X-card (Stavropoulos n.d.), where they could request to remove specific content with no questions asked. Finally, players were guided through the afore-mentioned consent negotiation script as a means to normalize and proceduralize off-game calibration.

We required the mentors to hold debriefs in-character after each lesson as part of the structure, as in-game rituals can often feel like a larp within a larp (cf. Bowman 2015b) that require their own level of processing. These ritual activities were particularly potent as they often involved altered state practices from the players' lived experience that might be unfamiliar terrain for other participants. Players could always step off-game to request support from our 3 volunteer safety staff at the larp, including myself and a player who practices as a licensed counselor, who were committed to stopping play and providing assistance if needed. One of the bedrooms served as an off-game Sanctuary space for this purpose during the larp. Also for safety, we specified that sleeping should occur off-game, so if players wanted to continue playing or off-game processing during sleeping hours, they could do so elsewhere, such as the black box.

Finally, we held a reflection hour and structured debrief after the larp. The reflection hour asked players to engage in some sort of silent reflection activity within the house or

talk quietly with others about the experience outside. We offered art supplies for players to draw and create artefacts, which many players chose to do. Alternatively, some players wrote journal entries during this time, took walks alone or in groups. The important aspect of the Reflection Hour was to serve as a bridge between in-game experience and off-game debriefing for integration (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). This hour gave players dedicated time to symbolically, physically, or verbally concretize and distil takeaways from their experience, similar to other arts-based post-larp practices (cf. Cox 2016; Seregina 2018; Kemper 2020).

The structured debrief was based on the standard script that I have used at several larps, including *New World Magischola* (2016–2020) and *End of the Line* (2016–2018) and is freely available (Bowman 2021). It is best led with one main facilitator guiding small groups of 4–6, where one group leader volunteers to guide that cluster through the exercises. In this way, we preserve the intimacy of small-group processing while making sure that the required components and time limits are observed as guided by the main facilitator.

Players are asked to take turns de-roling, placing a literal costume piece or an imaginary aspect of their character in the circle, then briefly describe what aspects of the character they would like to take with them and which aspects they would prefer to leave behind. De-roling is especially interesting in a context where players are enacting characters almost identical to themselves because this process can help them identify any key features of the game experience they might want to integrate moving forward. Further questions ask players to detail their most intense moment and their most exciting or intriguing moment. For this group, we were small enough that we could then enter the big circle and ask everyone to share how the experience felt as a group, which they could define how they wished: the larp group as a whole, their Tradition members, their character relations, etc. Players were encouraged to continue debriefing with each other on Facebook or other forms of communication after the larp.

Each of these post-game processes took place before we packed and cleaned up the space to ensure that proper time and attention was given, as processing, reflection, and integration are key practices that are central to transformative play experiences (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). In these ways, we not only designed for bleed, but included processes to both manage and encourage it.

Personal Gnosis: The *Epiphany* Experiment in Action

As the experiences of participants at such a larp are deeply personal and potentially revealing, I will primarily share my own account as a player-facilitator. Although I did need to step off-game throughout much of the larp to run logistics and help players in the Sanctuary room, I was able to have several powerful moments as Psyche Emerson, the Cult of Ecstasy Initiative. Through this account, I hope the reader can glean some of the themes and activities that took place at *Epiphany* without emphasizing any one player's journey. (For a detailed play account from three other players, see Kim/Nuncio/Wong 2018).

Psyche's core theme was the Paradox of Intimacy. She had spent her whole life seeking to find her **syzygy** – the Twin Flame or 'other half' of her soul – through ecstatic experiences and intellectual connections with other people. Her avatar was her **animus**, a Jungian term that refers to the unconscious masculine energy suppressed within a feminine-identifying person (Jung 1976). Implied in this relationship was a romantic attachment, as her animus served the purpose of companioning her when relationships ended up in neglect, abuse, or abandonment in Psyche's life. The Paradox of Intimacy refers to a lifelong question I have had regarding Separateness and Oneness, the way two people can seem to merge to become one through intimate experiences, but ultimately return back to their individuated selves. Thus, Psyche was exploring if the 'other half' she sought could ever be truly met by an external person, or whether relationships with others merely gave people glimpses into their own creative potential. I had prepared for this character by taking classes featuring a series of guided meditations on reclaiming one's personal power in the wake of painful relationship dynamics.

The game started with a silent ritual where each of us in turn walked up to the main altar in the house and placed an object that represented our character upon it. My object was a small sculpture based on an Alphonse Mucha painting of a woman resting her chin atop a dragon. This object represented for me my own struggle with my relationship with desire – whether to express it, contain it, control it, or come into balance with it. The main theme of my journey ended up being about my own personal power, gnosis (spiritual revelation), and commitment. Would I try to continue to pursue the search for the syzygy in other people, which led to me sometimes giving my power away to others? Or would I embrace my own path as a priestess and commit to further cultivation of the vital essence within myself?

Throughout the larp, Psyche engaged in a variety of fascinating experiences through structured rituals led by both Mentors and Initiates. After the ritual of the altar, and a brief introduction to the *Epiphany* retreat, we broke into groups where a Mentor led us through a ritual designed to help Awaken us further into our magical power. Many of these groups were still in the same larger spaces of the house and the barn, so we had the surreal experience of bubbles of vulnerability within the wider group field of the literal and figurative magic circle of the game. The design intention here was to immerse characters immediately into this 'ritual within a ritual' space of deep engagement with one another so they had a shared experience that would foster connections and lead to interesting play.

My character took part in a guided meditation where the group spiritually journeyed through the Umbra, or astral plane. This shared journey awakened in Psyche a powerful surge of ecstatic energy. In another ritual, she channelled the essence of a divine maternal entity similar to Mother Mary, speaking about Psyche from the perspective of this compassionate entity. She also took part in a Shadow work exercise, where groups of three allowed a part within themselves to emerge that are usually repressed or unconscious. Psyche allowed her sad, scared little girl to emerge, who received care from the other two people in her group. She was then able to hold space for them to reveal their own shadow parts, which led to deep sharing.

Another profound ritual called a **death salon** took place in the evening and was led by a Euthanatos Initiate. In this ritual, participants sit in a circle and share their experiences

with their own mortality, caring for others during their transitions, and their personal fears regarding death. The death salon ended up lasting a full three hours, with participants joining and leaving as they felt comfortable. For Psyche, it was powerful to hold space for the stories of others, as well as to share old grief related to caring for others with life-threatening diseases. Another Initiate ran an ecstatic dance, but Psyche decided to just watch and feel the energy of others energetically as she engaged in tarot readings. After the dance, many members of the group were led through a tarot speed dating exercise, where they would rotate between tarot readers and receive spontaneous divinations based on limited information.

Two rituals were the most potent for Psyche and affected her (and my) trajectory. The first was a workshop in which we were led to either discover our true name or a word of power. We were shown runes and tarot cards and guided to intuitively pick phrases that were meaningful to us. Psyche opened up her tarot deck and the first card she saw was the High Priestess, which made her laugh ruefully. To Psyche, this card indicated that the most important path was to further cultivate her relationship with her own power. Since we were basing our character on our own knowledge base, I chose a word from the only other language I know fairly well: the French word **prêtresse**. As the word **prête** also means 'ready,' Psyche interpreted the double meaning of this word to be 'ready woman,' as I became ready to step into this role. During the reflection hour, I painted this word with watercolours to further solidify this commitment.

The second ritual that helped set this course was an impromptu journey through an Umbral labyrinth that took place in the final hours of the larp on Sunday. A mentor placed dozens of cards from multiple tarot decks on the ground in a winding fashion. Some participants served the role as readers, helping to translate the cards for others, whereas the vast majority of other retreat members walked the labyrinth and chose a card. The fictional conceit was that within this Umbral realm, we were able to tap into various timelines for ourselves; whichever card we picked would set our course and choose a specific timeline. The card Psyche picked was Two of Cups from the Shadowscapes deck, which featured two lovers entwined. She briefly conferred with her animus – her Avatar played by another participant – about the meaning of this path. At first, she thought it meant that she would obviously find her other half and should continue to pursue relationships externally, but her Avatar asked, "Are you so sure that's what it means?" This indicated that perhaps on this Priestess path, her primary focus should be becoming whole within herself. Thus, the Paradox of Intimacy returned as a central theme at the close of the larp. We ended with each player walking up to the altar, taking their item, and narrating a brief epilogue for their character, in which Psyche verbalized her choice to pursue the path of the Priestess.

In my personal life, I was trying to reconcile this clash between the scholar and the priestess within me as well. Not long after *Immerton* and a week before we ran *Epiphany*, I committed to joining an online deep feminine mystery school, which invites weekly practice and participation in group discussion among people who either identify as women or who seek to pursue the deep feminine path. I also committed to weekly sessions with a trauma therapist who specializes in Inner Child and parts work. I still continue my work with both of these paths to healing and spiritual growth. I have also attended online and in-person spiritual retreats, as well as other women's spirituality circles local to me at

the time. Thus, I used my design and play experiences in *Immerton* and *Epiphany* to gain access to a deeper understanding of my own spirituality, which allowed me to have an experience of spiritual community that later translated into daily practice. I 'came out' to my other academics as pursuing the spiritual path, vowing to integrate spirituality more explicitly in my scholarly work. I would later learn that me choosing **prêtresse** as a word of power was a form of Claiming, meaning that was harvesting the **gnosis** – the personal, numinous understanding – from this play experience and set an intention accordingly.

Through other play experiences, I have continued to explore this concept of my 'other half.' The deep connection I have explored with my now-husband Kjell Hedgard Hugaas unfolded through other play experiences; he chose to engrave on my wedding ring: "To Sarah: my syzygy." We write articles on transformative play together and co-design games. (cf. Hugaas' article in this volume). *Epiphany* helped me Awaken into the understanding that I needed to strengthen my relationship with myself before I could fully be available to receive the love of a worthy partner. Each of these design and play practices were forms of integration that helped me streamline these experiences into my life path with intentionality. (For similar work, see Rusch/Phelps in this volume).

Caveats and Conclusion

In retrospect, no larp is perfect and *Epiphany* was no exception. Regardless of how we frame our play or do due diligence, it is impossible to ensure that no one from a marginalized background experiences harm from representations of culture or perceives the use of sacred objects and practices as appropriation. Thus, this tension will always be present when integrating religious and spiritual cultures into games; design and play choices should be handled with great care and an emphasis on harm mitigation (Hodes 2019). Some designers and players may consider the risk of harm too high to engage in this kind of project.

Another complication with using existing IP is copyright issues. Because we charged money for the event to cover the site and food for *Epiphany*, White Wolf ordered us not to run the event again without purchasing a license. In retrospect, *Mage* played such a small role in the design of the larp that it served as little more than a conceit and an organizing framework, although certainly, some players did attend explicitly because they enjoyed *Mage*. The players that had the most trouble connecting with the game were the more science-oriented characters who played in the Society of Ether and Virtual Adepts, which is something to address in future iterations.

Epiphany also requires a strong commitment from both participants and designers to move through the character creation process. Because the design focused on low alibi, close-to-home characters that are exploring some of the player's most personal beliefs and existential questions, the process involves a strong degree of emotional load, as players need to fill out the questionnaire and designers need to co-create custom-tailored characters that players find resonant. Some players did drop out of this process for various reasons, although many others shared with us that while the process was difficult, receiving the completed character sheets felt validating.

Finally, the replayability of *Epiphany* is in question. Although run as a one-shot, it could be extended to long-term Chronicle play, although I wonder if such a practice would dilute its potency. During quarantine, a small group of us ran a version over Zoom that was more tabletop-esque, which, while powerful, fizzled after a few sessions. My hunch is that players would need to commit to using role-playing explicitly as a tool for spiritual direction for such a group to continue in a long-term fashion. I also wonder if a more specific plot would be necessary for long-term play.

Ultimately, I offer my own experience here as an example of what intentionally designed, facilitated, and played role-playing games can do in terms of helping players find spiritual direction (see Cohen in this volume). *Epiphany* was an experiment that allowed us to play with personal content that might be difficult or even taboo in other settings. I have heard anecdotes from several players that the larp was life-changing, which is not unusual; many players decide to make major life changes or make empowering choices as a result of insights gleaned from role-playing games. Games allow us to experiment with our personal identities, our relationships, and ways in which we organize social structures, which can lead to profound insights about how to move forward in life. What made *Epiphany* unique were the deeply personal characters and the emphasis on spiritual, metaphysical, and philosophical exploration.

Acknowledgements

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Play to Find Yourself[1]

Using Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Spiritual Direction

Menachem Cohen

Keywords: *alibi; magic circle; role-playing game; spiritual direction; sprituality; transformational*

> "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive."
> —*Howard Thurman (n.d.: n.p.)*

In January 2020, I returned to the youth centre where I had worked for thirteen years—an incredible one-stop shop for youth who are LGBTQIA+ and/or experiencing homelessness—to run a group called Spiritual Discovery Dungeons & Dragons, wherein we would play *Dungeons & Dragons 5e* ([referred to as *DnD*] Mearls/Crawford 2014), while exploring our spiritual and emotional selves.

The power of games to help us open our sense of possibility was evident from the start. Jerry was one of the players who showed up that day for Session Zero[2]. He looked like what people whose fear dominates them would label a thug: black, sagging jeans and a tough walk. Jerry listened carefully as I explained the different kinds of characters players could choose to be, which included tough warriors and spell-slinging wizards.

> "I want to be a healer," Jerry said.
> His friend next to him jumped in, "Nah man, you can be a kick-ass fighter with a giant battle-axe!"
> Jerry slowly shook his head and repeated, "I want to be a healer." (Jerry, *DnD* session with author January, 2020)

We made Jerry a healer.

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1   Please note: all client/participant names have been changed.
2   Session Zero is a meeting before actual play begins where you often create characters and discuss what the game will be like.

Nearly a whole pandemic later, I still cry whenever I relive that moment, and I give thanks that my training as a spiritual director helped me to respond simply and with affirmation. Unfortunately, the pandemic ended our ability to gather and play before Jerry was able to dig into what playing a healer meant to him, but that moment alone, where Jerry could see himself being anything, was a profound healing moment. One of many moments that fuels my desire and drive to develop the design and use of RPGs for spiritual growth, exploration, and healing.

By the time you finish reading the following pages, I want you to see that by playing RPGs, people can grow, explore themselves, and heal emotionally and spiritually in ways they do not usually in the rest of their lives. Surveys of the field show there is not much research at all into the spiritual uses of RPGs, so I draw upon the growing field of therapeutic gaming alongside my experience using games for spiritual growth, exploration, and healing.

In the early 1990s, I had psionic powers and caught my first glimpse of how games could be used for more than just fun. I was in my twenties and working as a friend and advocate for isolated and lonely senior citizens at Little Brothers/Friends of the Elderly. I was also playing *2nd edition Dungeons & Dragons* (Cook/et al. 1989). One of my characters was Kerrin Woodwalker, a Wood Elf Psionicist. He used his mental powers to change his physical form. He could turn his arms into swords, become the size of a giant or a mouse, and even become anything I could imagine: a chair, a small tree, anything. In *DnD*, Psionicists are expected to align with a perspective called Lawful, as it supports the ordered mindset they need to be able to use their powers.

This put me in a conundrum because I wanted to play both a Psionicist, a Lawful character, and a Good character. In *DnD*, however, Lawful Good characters usually believe in rules, systems, and institutions. As a young radical and activist, I was not interested in playing that way. In order to get around this conundrum, I decided Kerrin believed that there was really no such thing as Chaos, a viewpoint in opposition to Law in *DnD*. He believed that Chaos was just order that we haven't perceived yet. In order to prove this, Kerrin would act in chaotic, unpredictable ways in order to find the order in his actions. It was a nice workaround, and it gave me the satisfaction of thumbing my nose at Law and Order while also giving me the chance to reflect on Law, Order, and Chaos. Having an outlet to flaunt social convention was fun, but it wasn't the best, deepest, or most transformational thing about playing Kerrin Woodwalker.

First, though, let me say more about what RPGs, such as *DnD*, are. In RPGs, players create a character and give them attributes, personalities, backstories, abilities, equipment, and even superpowers or spells, and then they send them on adventures. (Imagine if you could pretend to be a character from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954a; 1954b; 1955) or Gene Roddenbarry's *Star Trek* (1966–1969) or your favourite comic book or novel. RPGs give you that chance.) These adventures unfold using dice, paper, pencils, and other materials while sitting around a table or virtual tabletops (i.e., online platforms like Foundry VTT and Roll 20). Usually, one player is called the Dungeon Master (DM) or Game Master (GM). This player sets up the world in which the adventures take place and presents the other players, often called Player Characters (PCs), with situations to which to react. For example, PCs may have to scale a wall, negotiate with a captain for passage on their ship, or repel an invading force of a nearby warlord. Players respond by saying

what actions their characters will take. To follow our example: perhaps take out a rope and grappling hook, flash some gold coins, or organize the villagers to resist the assault. Finally, in most games, dice, or another form of chance mechanics, are used to determine if each character succeeds and how well they succeed. As play proceeds, characters usually become more powerful: they become better fighters, learn more spells, acquire items with magical powers, etc. It is important to note that while players may repel the invading forces or stop the attacks on travelers along the road between towns tabletop RPGs are not about winning and losing. Ask a dozen players why they play and you will get 25 answers. Some want to build powerful characters while others just want to experience what it might be like to be a mage. One player may want to gather fantastic magic items such as enchanted swords and magic boots, while the player next to them wants to become a beloved hero. Some games, called one-shots, lasting one play session, usually have an end goal such as solving the mystery which feels like winning. However, many game groups play together in weekly games for months, years, or even decades. They will defeat many adversaries, find great amounts of treasure, or build kingdoms, but there is no winning in which the game is declared over. Play may proceed like long term dramas such as the Star Trek shows where sometimes each week is a self-contained story and sometimes stories unfold over a whole season. Character death is not even losing the game. Players may be upset but they can roll up (create) a new character and keep playing. A character of mine died recently and it was quite poignant and satisfying.

It was half a lifetime and hundreds of game sessions ago, so many of the details are lost to life's minutiae, but time and time again, we found ourselves in trouble after one of Kerrin's experiments,' and somehow, Kerrin was able to talk us out of it without any blows exchanged. On my character sheet (I still have most of my character sheets) is this note: "Believes he will survive and save the world. Goes into much combat, dark caves, somewhat lackadaisical, believing whatever it is, he will survive." (n.d.) Kerrin had a confidence and ability to smooth talk that I did not feel I had. I would say, 'It's not me, it's my character. I'm quiet and reserved.' Then one day it hit me: 'It **is** me. **I'm** the one saying the words that get us out of trouble.' Sometimes the DM didn't even roll to see how charismatic Kerrin had been; she let us go based on my eloquent words alone.

I was getting better at extemporaneous speech and building confidence in myself. This is how I discovered that games can be transformational, and it's when my understanding and quest to know more about the healing powers of RPGs began.

A decade after Kerrin Woodwalker, I answered the long-standing call to study towards ordination as a rabbi. I was ordained in 2003 and started working on the streets of Chicago and the aforementioned youth centre with LGBTQ+ and/or homeless youth at an agency called The Night Ministry. I had many deep conversations with the young people we served about life and its struggles and joys during that time.

While working at The Night Ministry, my team, the Youth Outreach Team, was called on to present to volunteers, other agencies, and the general public on topics such as harm reduction, LGBTQIA+ competency, trauma-informed care, and youth homelessness. My team believed that getting people out of their seats was better than giving lectures, so working both with my team and independently, I created a number of experiential education trainings, including what we called The Bag Game.

Each participant was given a bio cobbled together from the lives of the young people we served. Scattered around the room were 15–20 paper bags labelled 'ID,' 'Job,' 'Shelter,' 'Food,' etc. The participants then moved about the room pulling slips of paper from bags that had resources they felt they would want. Sometimes they got a job or their state ID. Sometimes they were arrested for having condoms, got bedbugs, or had all their stuff stolen, thus having to go get everything all over again. Every time the participants' frustration was palpable, sometimes even tinged with disbelief, which we would counter with facts and anecdotes about youth homelessness. Every time, the participants left with more understanding of the challenges of homelessness and with more empathy for the people we saw daily. Repeatedly I saw that story and a game to play brought home the realities of what it was like to be homeless better than a lecture would.

One of my colleagues at the Night Ministry was Rev. Davi Weasley, also a geek[3]. We chatted as often as possible about games, comic books, movies, etc. After Davi went back to school for a graduate certificate in spiritual direction, our talk often turned to the use of our geek-doms for spiritual work. In 2014, Davi researched how the tools and methods of spiritual direction could be imported to the gaming table, then ran a *DnD* campaign. I was one of the players. The short answer is yes, they can. More on this later.

I was also learning more about the growing field of work and research into the use of games in education, for developing social skills, and in therapeutic environments. This along, with my talks with Davi and others, led me to enrol in Loyola University's Institute for Pastoral Studies in the fall of 2017.

When I boil my rabbinate to its core, I am here to be with people on their spiritual journeys. I am here to walk alongside people of all faiths or no faith as they ask the big questions of life: 'Who am I? Why am I here? How do I manifest who I am? Is there a God and, if so, how do I relate to it? How do I know right and wrong?'

My experience is that the spiritual impulse among humans—the desire to know who we are and to connect to that which is bigger than us and connects us all—came first, and then religion came in to say, 'Here are some ways to examine and answer those questions.' Religion is a tool of spirituality, but just like you can hammer in a nail with the side of your wrench, sometimes religion is not the best tool for our spiritual questions. Unfortunately, religion often gets in the way of our spiritual quests. As such, spiritual direction spoke to me deeply. I saw it as a great way to not only enhance my skills as a rabbi but also as the perfect means by which to lead and help bring forth, non-religiously and nondenominationally, healing and personal growth work through RPGs.

At Loyola I had the great fortune to meet Professor Jean-Pierre Fortin[4], who'd grown up on Tolkien and *DnD*. Prof. Fortin encouraged and advised me as I combined my spiritual direction training with using RPGs. For my contextual education internship, I ran Spiritual Discovery *DnD* (which I now offer to the general public) with youth from my

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3   There is much debate in the community as to whether we are geeks or nerds, but it is almost exclusively used as a term of pride, having been reclaimed for use in the community like many other derogatory terms that communities have reclaimed from a place of pride and power.

4   Currently Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Field Education and Pastoral Formation at University of St. Michael's College in Toronto.

outreach days at The Night Ministry; and with Prof. Fortin advising, I undertook an independent study on the design and use of RPGs for spiritual direction.

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction "involves providing guidance and support for those seeking healing and spiritual development." (Milgram/Wiener 2014: 13). It is a "relationship between a spiritual guide and a seeker that is focused on the growth of the seeker." (Ochs/Olitzky 1997: 11). In their final paper about the spiritual direction *DnD* group, Davi defined spiritual direction as

the practice of accompanying an individual or group as they explore their spirit. For some individuals, this will be in the context of exploring and growing in their relationship with God; for other folks, language about connecting with and learning from one's own heart will be more helpful. (Weasley 2014: 1) Davi continues, "The spiritual director is not a therapist, nor is she a pastor; her job is exclusively to hold the space and to invite attention to what's happening in the 'directee(s)'s' inner life." (ibid.) much like a GM/DM holds space for the unfolding lives of the characters. It may look like therapy on the outside, but therapy tends to be more about solving problems and has clients meet with their therapists more often than does spiritual direction. While talking is part of a typical spiritual direction session, there can also be meditation, prayer, and talk about God and other words for that which is bigger than us—the Divine, the Infinite Eternal, Nature, the Tao, the Force.

Spiritual directors do not have to be experts in anything but being present. Prof. Fortin taught us that we are not even there to say the 'right thing.' "Don't try to say the right thing," (n.d.) he told us. "Just be present." (ibid.) I do not have a seven-step plan to enlightenment. My main technique is to go in empty, ready to be what the seeker needs at that moment. As Carol Ochs and Kerry M. Olitzky, leaders in Jewish spiritual direction, wrote, "Spiritual guides do not help by virtue of their expertise. Rather, they help through their capacity to get out of the way and enable seekers to strengthen their relationship with God." (Ochs/Olitzky 1997: 1).

The name **spiritual direction** is, admittedly, misleading and a bit problematic. Even our professional organization, Spiritual Directors International (SDI), uses the term **spiritual companion** concurrently with **spiritual director**. Perhaps the biggest dissonance with the word **direction** is that spiritual direction is not very directive: spiritual directors follow the lead of the seeker, asking questions based on what they say. I do not make many suggestions or give much homework in session. When I do make a suggestion or tell a story, it is completely based on intuition and what the seeker has said. For example, if someone says they gain spiritual sustenance from nature, I will ask how often they get out for a walk and when the last time was. If it's been weeks, I will suggest getting out soon, directly after the session or maybe even right then. The main thing I do, though, is 'get out of the way.'

Furthermore, while almost all spiritual directors and books on the subject speak about spiritual direction being about the seeker's relationships with God first and foremost (Milgram/Weiner 2014; Ochs/Olitsky 1997; Ruffing 2011), a belief in God does not

have to be part of spiritual direction. It can focus on the big questions mentioned earlier without ever mentioning a deity or theology.

My biggest guiding principle in life and spiritual direction comes from the quote at the beginning of this article, attributed to Howard Thurman, a minister and spiritual guide for Martin Luther King Jr. and many other members of the Civil Rights Era. He is reported to have said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive." (Bailie 1995: xv) In my work I do ask people about the Divine and what their prayer life is like, but mostly I ask them, 'What makes you come alive?' and once we identify it or if they already know, we work on how they can manifest this coming alive. This more than anything is my work as a spiritual director.

Incorporating RPGs into Spiritual Direction

During my studies, I found explanations for my intuitive sense that combining RPGs and spiritual direction would be fruitful. Yes, playing games and spiritual direction independently provide insight, but putting them together makes for a unique tableau for self-discovery and growth. As such, the nature of role-playing games is fertile land for spiritual direction. The games, because they provide role-playing within the context of story, allow for a depth and intensity of introspection, discovery, and transformation that sidesteps much of the resistance we often encounter in ourselves when working through our challenges and questions. Spiritual direction provides a safe, reflective, and constructive space for/in which that work to take place. The next section of this article will explore and expose how this works.

In II Samuel 11–12, we find King David, standing on the roof of his residence gazing over his domain when he spots Batsheva bathing a few roofs away, and he decides he wants her. Long story short, David has her husband, Uriah, sent to the front lines of the current battle with instructions that he is left alone when the enemy advances: Uriah is killed. David then takes Batsheva into his home and after a period of mourning, marries her.

It falls upon Nathan the Prophet to tell David what a horrible person he has been. Nathan is smart. He doesn't waltz in and tell the king he's been despicable. That could literally cost him his head. Instead, he approaches David and asks if he can tell the king a story. David is happy to hear a story and grants permission. Nathan tells of a rich man who had lots of goats and sheep (wealth was often measured and indicated by the size of one's flocks) and a poor man who had one goat. The poor man loved his goat so much he treated it like his child. One day, a wayfarer stops by the rich man's home. Tradition ordained you feed weary travelers, but not wanting to sacrifice any of his flock, he orders the poor man's goat slaughtered and prepared. David is incensed at this. "That man should be punished!" (II Samuel 12:5–7) he shouts. Nathan (I always imagine him trying not to smile), replies calmly, "Atah ha'ish/You are the man," (ibid.). David understands. Nathan keeps his head. Nathan's story circumvented David's ego and defenses because it was 'just' a story. Nathan provided David with fictional distance, which allowed David to see the truth without his ego and defences getting in the way.

This same fictional distance allows RPG players to have their characters say and do things they themselves wouldn't, including process emotions. In RPG studies, this fictional distance of 'It's not me, it's my character,' just like I experienced with Kerrin Woodwalker, is called **alibi**. Sarah Lynne Bowman explains alibi as "the social contract by which players accept the premise that any actions in the games are taken by the character, not the player," which "allows players to distance themselves from the actions of their characters." (Bowman/Schrier 2018: 319). While players say, 'It's not me, it's my character,' their "unconscious desires are allowed to become manifest in the role taken, since the persona of the character allows the player a disguise behind which to hide." (Nephew 2006: 122). Kerrin Woodwalker was able to stroll into a meeting with a local baron and simultaneously gather intel on their defenses and ask for a donation to the 'A is for Apple' literacy program we started because I had alibi. I would've been tongue-tied, fearing getting caught.

In order for players to experience transformation and spiritual growth via playing a character in an RPG, though, there must be blood. More accurately, there must be **bleed**—a transference of thoughts and feelings between player and character (Bowman/Lieberoth 2018: 254; Stenros/Bowman 2018: 420). When the actions of a character make a player have an emotional response, it is called **bleed-out**, and when the out-of-game feelings and desires of the player influence the character's actions, it is called **bleed-in**. (ibid.; Eladhari 2018). For example, two siblings may be playing unrelated characters in a game, and when the first sibling's character gets a magic flying robe, feelings may arise within the second sibling around how their parents favoured the first sibling (bleed-out), and even though the characters are best friends, the second sibling may decide to have their character steal the robe (bleed-in). Bleed happens all the time in games and sometimes players use alibi in a negative way to justify the actions of their character, like stabbing another PC in the back, figuratively or by declaring, 'I stab so-and-so in the back.' ('It's what my character would do.')

Bleed is unconscious. We are not trying to do it. When we want to explore questions or challenges through our characters we can **play to bleed** or engage in **steering**. Playing to bleed is to intentionally weaken the barriers between the player and the character. Steering happens when a player directs or influences the actions and behaviour of a character for non-diegetic, or out-of-game, purposes, such as processing real-life challenges. Playing for bleed involves setting up a character through such aspects as backstory and personality, while steering involves using the actions of the character to engage in exploration, etc. (Montola/Stenros/Siatta 2015; Bowman/Lieberoth 2018). Had we been able to continue the game at the youth centre, I suspect that Jerry would have experienced bleed-out as his healer saved party members on the edge of death, which, based on my experiences with other players, would very likely bring Jerry feelings of confidence and increased agency in the world.

When we watch a movie or read a story where a character goes through a breakup or discovers their parents were Nazis, say, we often feel sad along with the character in the fiction. To our brains, that sadness is real. The same is true for and in RPGs. In *Blessed are the Legend-Makers*, Aaron T. Hollander says,

The memories of heroic choices and transcendental encounters may be memories of imagined acts, yet they are real memories; the neural pathways engaged in the course of lateral thinking and moral choice-making are strengthened without being cordoned off as applicable only to imagined situations. (2021: 9)

Speaking of the videogame *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), Steph Aupers says, "While playing, gamers often *experience* their environment as being real, including its supernatural entities and propositions." (Aupers 2015: 85, original emphasis) And Jonathan Gottschall speaks about how under an FMRI (a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine), a brain responding to fiction looks the same as a brain responding to real occurrences. When we feel sad from something we encounter in fiction, it looks the same to our best medical technology as sadness from an event in our 'real' lives. (Gottschall 2014: 12:36–13:46)

Fact and fiction are the same to our folds of grey matter. This can allow for emotional processing and spiritual growth, in the safe, spiritually directed environment of a game. Using alibi, a player can have a character go through feelings such as grief and loss and thus process some of what they are feeling in their day-to-day life. Here's a great example: A player in one of my Spiritual Discovery *DnD* groups created a near-immortal character who is on a 1000-year alcoholic bender. The character had almost no memories of their life, including their own name. The player told us he was playing the character to process the depression he was going through. This example points at two key factors. The player could do this safely because firstly we worked to make the game a safe space for everyone, and secondly because of alibi and steering. His brain processed the emotions and understandings his character came to as if they were real.

But two more things have to happen beyond what has been discussed so far to allow the player to process his depression through his character. As much as the brain doesn't know the difference between fact and fiction, it simultaneously does know the difference. Or, at least, it can tell the difference between the sources of the emotion(s). It knows that this sadness is from/that of a fictional character, not themselves. As well, the healthy brain is aware of both the character and the player at the same time. "When we role-play, we inhabit a dual-consciousness in which we simultaneously experience both our own subjectivity and our character's." (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 2) Aharon Varady, in his paper on the mythopoeic power of RPGs and his experience adapting *DnD* into a Jewish setting, says of his experience playing *DnD*,

I had in that one game experienced something profound, a pronounced altered state of awareness. I had found myself both in the tower maze, with its secret rooms, traps, and basilisk, as well as in my parents' dining room surrounded by players who accepted and cared for my imaginary well-being, something that was also translating into my emotional well-being. (2013: 5)

This dual-consciousness is essential for emotional and spiritual growth to happen.

The second thing we need to do is move from 'It's not me' to 'It **is** me.' "We can use alibi as a tool to permit greater experimentation, **while decreasing its strength** [emphasis mine] when we wish to transfer skills, insights, and personality traits." (Bowman/Hugass

2021: 3). When I joined a *Mage, 20th Anniversary edition* (Brucato 2015) game in January 2020, I wasn't consciously trying to explore anything when I created the character Oz. Oz, I decided, was a mage of a specific mixed descent—the product of generations of magical eugenics. He was raised and trained by his grandparents—themselves mages of 'pure' pedigree—to be a mage who unified the Traditions. At his ascension ceremony at age thirteen, he did not awaken and his grandparents were taken away. He spent the next 30+ years trying to awaken. I was very much in the 'It's not me' space, thinking I had made a cool story. Later, I realized I was processing some of my own thoughts and feelings about coming to this work with games and spirituality at around age 50, as well as my wanderer approach to my professional life through Oz. Without trying to, I had put some of myself into my character. Once I started to be able to say to myself, 'Oz **is** me,' I gained clarity about my life path and work. Achieving this perspective and clarity took dual-consciousness and a timely decrease of alibi.

How can we do all this? Through imagination. There is no such thing as 'just in my imagination.' I teach meditation and Jewish mystical healing prayer and participants often ask me, 'What if it's just in my imagination?' My response is, 'Great! Imagination is where it happens.' Rabbi Joyce Reinitz, also a therapist, says:

> The imagination is not meant to be understood as "the unreal" or as fantasy. The imagination is the faculty of perception that stimulates a real experience and response through the creation of a mental image. The imagination is the uniquely human quality that allows us to transcend the physical limitations of time and space, permitting us to have a true sensory experience regardless of the presence of an external stimulus. This sensory experience is not only real but is extremely potent. It brings a shift in our perception which essentially changes us from the inside out. In this regard, imagery is a powerfully instrument for promoting self-growth and personal transformation and can be an important tool to use in *hashpa-ah* (spiritual direction). (2014: 133)

A point of view I accept is that everything we see and experience is a story we tell ourselves about the world: everything we think, see, and feel is processed as a story to help us understand and navigate the world (Ruffing 2011: 2). Imagining that we can engage in spiritual growth, exploration, and healing through our character makes it so: imagining it manifests it. We heal because we imagine healing. We are both ourselves and our characters because we imagine it. Reinitz says, "Imagery and the imagination provide a way to access the deepest parts of ourselves. They transport us beyond the day to day 'knowing' which awakens our spiritual selves and allows us to connect to the greater Whole." (Reinitz 2014: 133) Imagination is the way, the path, the means.

The Magic Circle

All this alibi-ing, bleeding, and imagining at the game table also happens because of magic. That is, **the magic circle**. The magic circle is the space in which gameplay happens: a game table, a soccer field, a video screen, an ice rink, etc. Johann Huizinga first used

the term, saying that when we play, we make a space in which the normal rules of life do not apply, a space that is inviolable to the mundane world of everyday existence and the rules of the game replace the rules of the world. (Huizinga 1955: 10; Salen/Zimmerman 2004: 94–96). However, others point out that the magic circle doesn't fully hold—that the so-called real world permeates the inviolability of the magic circle. (Consalvo 2009; Aupers 2015: 76).

What's clear, though, is that when we play games, three things always happen: we play by rules which (almost always) differ from the day-to-day, we have an experience, we change. For example, most of us don't walk down the street kicking a soccer ball around. We go to an open space with demarcated boundaries and goals and try to get the ball into the appropriate goal. While playing, we may think about our taxes and grocery list, but we are not paying taxes or buying groceries while playing, and hopefully, we are able to block out the activities of daily life. When the game is over, and we have won or lost, we are somehow transformed. It may be as simple as feeling happy or sad about the outcome, but it often includes some sort of reflection on how we played and what the results mean for us. In an RPG, the magic circle is the game table and all the mechanics, character sheets, social contracts of play, dice, and appropriate snacks (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 5). During play, the characters may track down the thieves stealing their Pixie magic, build a flying boat, or negotiate a peace treaty. When the game is over, and the players pack up and go, something about the experience usually stays with them, and they reflect on it, even if it's just the joy they felt spending time with friends. When we leave the field or the game table, we usually don't continue to kick a ball around (until practice time) or roll dice to see if we can climb a wall. The play, boring or exciting, is the magic, and the table, rules, mechanics, and time playing comprise the circle.

However, as pointed out, the real world does pierce the circle. For example, if players on the field hold grudges against other players, one may well hit another a little harder than they should. And while playing *DnD*, I will likely think about my taxes or about having to get up early the next morning. Real-world feelings and attitudes affect gameplay, and gameplay sparks changes in the real world. For example, people build real-world friendships, players bully other players, a bad day for a player can ruin the game for all, or the game can elevate the spirits of a player who is feeling down (Aupers: 2015: 76). In fact, it is this permeability between in-game and out-of-game that allows for growth and exploration to happen. It is part of the dual consciousness. We don't forget we are both a character in an RPG, or a member of a team, and a human. We can hold both truths in our brains and think about the relationship between the two. And the magic circle remains.

The magic circle is also present when we pray, encounter sacred text, ritually use plant medicines, dance, drum, and meditate. We enter a space where the rules of daily life are altered, something happens within that time and in that space, and we leave transformed. Rabbi Marcia Prager teaches that after every prayer service, we leave a little more elevated than when we started (Prager: iii). That transformation/elevation may be as simple as bringing the calm or insight you found with you into the rest of your day, week, or month. When we pray or meditate, we are playing a role. We imagine ourselves as a person who can be calm or commune with the Divine. We create a magic circle with song, candles, incense, plant medicines, movement, etc. Then, we play to bleed: we want the effects of our spiritual activity to bleed out to our daily lives. We may use alibi in a sort of

suspension of disbelief way: 'It's not me it's my character' becomes 'I'm not sure I believe this, but I'll try this weird spiritual practice.' Then we release the suspension so that we can be transformed. When I pray for physical healing or give the 3300-year-old Birkat Kohanim/Priestly Blessing to someone, I use what I call the 'as if' principle, which functions like alibi. I pray as if my prayer works. I bless as if the light I visualize is the true light of the Divine.

The role-playing we do in ritual spaces allows us to "summon the 'powers within' and align oneself with an imagined 'higher' or 'magical' self." (Aupers 2015: 86). Just like we can access these 'powers within' in ritual and prayer, Aupers continues, gamers can "paradoxically gain access to dimensions of self and experiences that are not surfacing in real life." (ibid.)

Growth happens when we go beyond the self, beyond our sense of limits and capabilities. Immersion in role-playing and ritual call and bring us beyond ourselves. In both cases, we can go beyond where we are to a place of potential healing and growth, whether by being in the presence of the Divine or around a table rolling dice. (Fortin, personal discussion n.d.). Doris C. Rusch and Andrew M. Phelps say essentially the same thing in different words, asserting that psychomagic games are ritual spaces where players engage myth and symbolic enactment to partake in transformative activities (Rusch/Phelps 2020: n.p.). Imagine, then, what's possible when we bring the spiritual into the game circle with intention.

What happens next is integration, our hoped-for bleed out. The transformation may happen spontaneously during play or prayer, but often it takes some sort of integration practice. The 'Threefold Path' of walking the labyrinth by Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress offers closely resembles the stages associated with the magic circle. Labyrinths, unlike mazes, have only one path and no dead ends. There is no wrong way and you cannot get lost. There are three steps to walking a labyrinth: (1) Purgation (the walk in)—the letting go of the outside world while focusing on a question or challenge, (2) Illumination (the middle point)—where one stays a while, ready to receive whatever insights or intuition come, and (3) Integration (the walk out)—where one starts to process what was received in the middle and imagines applying it to their lives. (Artress 1995: 69–104) The walk in and out are slow and methodical. Skipping out or off the path will likely result in a lack of conscious integration of the experience. Going into the magic circle of play we leave the 'real' world behind (purgation), have a play experience (illumination), and leave the circle transformed by the play (integration).

After we leave the magic circle of play, we can choose to reflect on the experience and integrate it. "Integration is the process by which players take the experiences from the frame of a game, process them, and integrate their new awareness into their self-concept or the frames of their daily lives." (Bowman/Hugaas 2019: 10) This happens casually in most games as players recall, often to each other, how cool it was when they found that magic sword, say. Here are two examples of what I mean: In one of my games at the youth centre, a player had a character who transformed into a humanoid wolf and into a full wolf. When zombies attacked, she had a critical success on her die roll, the highest number possible, and tore through several zombies with her claws. High fives went around and the player had a look that telegraphed her feelings of power and agency. And the player with the near-immortal character on a 1000-year alcoholic bender, with

whom they were processing their depression, reported feeling more comfortable about their process of reemerging into the (hopefully) post-pandemic environment of the US midwest. "I built Wino to resist social interactions," the player said, "but he doesn't, and I'm happy to see this because it shows me I still have the desire to interact with people." (player in *DnD* session with author, n.d.)

Integration and reflection look different for everyone—journaling, taking a walk, making art, talking things over, etc. Some groups hold briefing and debriefing sessions right before and after the game. In Spiritual Discovery *DnD* we do some briefing/debriefing at the table together, but most of the deep work takes place in separate, one-to-one sessions every couple of games. The goal of integration is for the gameplay to inform and inspire our daily lives. And it happens. "We have abundant testimonies of people's real lives being rectified or made whole in these game settings: of suicides prevented, of varieties of self-discovery and enlightenment, of communities of whole-hearted interpersonal care." (Hollander 2021: 2) Players report asking themselves how would their character respond to this or that situation, then acting like their character might in their personal relationships, moral quandaries, and business meetings. (Bowman 2014: 170, 177; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 12, 15)

The question that became obvious to me is: if the processes of gameplay and spiritual practice are so similar and provide close to the same benefits for us, how can we merge the power of playing games and spiritual practice for a synergistic effect?

Working with *Dreamchaser*

In 2017, I found a game that was almost perfectly set up to let me demonstrate what I knew to be true in my gut. That game was *Dreamchaser* (Petrusha, 2017) (For other games with applications in spiritual discovery, see Appendix B). As soon as I read the description, I saw that *Dreamchaser*'s rules and mechanics could be used to work on personal questions, challenges, and goals. I wrote Pete Petrusha, creator of the game, and started beta-testing the game, helping with editing, and eventually running the game at conventions. Other people saw the therapeutic potential in it, too: therapists and social workers would ask Pete how the game could be used in one-to-one sessions with their clients. Pete brought me on to lead the effort to adapt the game for therapy and spiritual direction.

What did I and the others see? Before the game, the GM knows nothing about what will happen (unless they've chosen to use a pre-generated setting). As the game begins, each player is given a bunch of note cards. First, they write a goal or dream on a couple of cards. Perhaps they suggest 'overthrow the empire,' 'befriend a dragon,' and 'live in the woods.' Then the group votes on one of these to be the central Dream of the game. Let's say they choose 'befriend a dragon'. That card is placed in the middle of the Dream Map. Then each player picks their role for the game. These are like classes or playbooks in other games. For the 'befriend a dragon' game, let's say, they pick 'hunter/tracker,' 'linguist,' and 'astronaut.' Now the GM knows there's somehow a dragon and an astronaut in the game. Next, the players write Milestones: things that will happen during the game that make it exciting for them to play. No one gets to veto your choice, but the group does put them in

order around the central Dream. For example, imagine they pick 'make a magic sword,' 'learn an new language,' and 'find my long-lost sister.' Once in order, the game proceeds moving through each player's Milestone to the central Dream.

What I and others saw was that players in a one-to-one game could easily make the central Dream a personal goal or question and that Milestones could be reimagined as steps to gaining insight to the central Dream. The work has been about how to adapt/use the game with one client in the standard 55-minute session of therapy or spiritual direction. One decision has been that players can either play their literal selves or make a fantastic character, such as a wizard, warrior, astronaut, etc., through whom to explore their questions. For example, say a player is agoraphobic and wants to overcome this. They can choose the Dream of 'Go outside' and then the Milestones 'Journal about it,' 'Sit near the door,' 'Sit on the stoop,' and 'Go outside.' If the same person chooses to make a fantastic character, they may make themselves a wizard with the Dream of 'Slay the demon.' Milestones may be 'Learn a banishing ritual,' 'Make a magic sword,' 'Observe the beast in its natural habitat,' and finally, 'Face the Demon.'

Along the way, players may find that their central Dream is not the real goal or that one of the Milestones itself needs a separate Dream Map to work through. Unlike in the base game for *Dreamchaser*, in a therapy or spiritual direction session, pivoting and reworking the Dream Map is not only permitted but expected because sometimes, clients (with our help) discover that their techniques, or even goals, are actually coping mechanisms or not their real goals. Once they realize this, we can help them discover and choose new goals.

I have play-tested the application of *Dreamchaser* with a couple dozen people to varying extents. Some example Dreams clients have made are: 'Make art that connects with people,' 'Give my children the tools they need to be their best selves,' 'I'd like to forge a deeper connection with my Inner Witch,' 'To focus on the things that matter to me,' and 'Integrate spirituality into my daily life.'

The player who chose that last Dream was Sandra, a seminary student working towards ordination. We worked together for six sessions. Her Milestones were: 'Spend time in/with/toward spirit,' 'Bring others into the task,' 'Find/practice Christian practices that nurture,' and 'Find/practice non-Christian practices that nurture.' At each Milestone, the players do Vision Rolls, which "Encourage players to share foreseeable problems and likely character responses to the journey ahead. The questions help the player get into the headspace of their character while influencing the story at the table." (Petrusha 2017: 52–55). The questions are: "Why can't we achieve the next Milestone?" and "How would your character try to solve the problem?" (ibid.) For Sandra's first Milestone, 'Spend time in/with/toward spirit,' the barriers were time and stress. Her chosen ways to overcome the barriers were 'Just do it' and 'Use a timer to define and limit the time.'

One concern I had about doing spiritual direction with RPGs was how directive and structured it is compared to my usual practice of following where the seeker goes.

As stated above, spiritual direction is not very directive. The spiritual director follows the lead of the seeker without a firm structure. One concern I had about incorporating RPGs in spiritual direction was that games would make it more structured and directive, taking away from the seeker's ability to engage in self-discovery. But Sandra reported finding the check-ins and goals helpful; the external accountability along with

the goals helped her develop her internal accountability. She also reported that bringing others into the task, her 2nd Milestone, became a spiritual practice as she wanted to talk with them about spirituality. Many times during the six sessions I found myself saying things like, 'It sounds like you're already doing that' (making time, inviting others into your spiritual life, etc.) (Author in session with player n.d.) By the time we reached the third Milestone, 'Find/practice Christian practices that nurture,' she realized that before starting spiritual direction sessions with me using *Dreamchaser*, she had not really been doing her work in an authentic way. It was more like checking boxes. Now she felt she authentically made time for journaling and being with spirit. When we reached the end of our six sessions, Sandra expanded her last Milestone to include authenticity to building specific practices. She reported attending to her spiritual life in a more organic way and wasn't compartmentalizing spirituality from the rest of her life. It doesn't matter how I feel about a person's progress, unless I sense something off, as my work is to help people find responses that are meaningful to them, but I was very pleased to hear this from a future spiritual leader.

Casey and I worked together for 12 sessions. She was a 30-year-old seminary employee who had not been expected to live past her 20s due to several medical conditions she was born with, including limited hearing and vision. We made her as a character first, and her Dream was 'Learn to love myself' and her Milestones were 'positive self-dialogue,' 'stop second-guessing myself,' 'be my own companion—not a stranger or enemy,' and 'let others come and go without judgement.' Already an experienced RPG player, she appreciated the assessment nature of making a literal character, but was excited to make a fantastic character.

Casey created Chauntal, a blind oracle who had been living on her own since she was a little girl. Her memory was that a creature attacked and destroyed her village, blinding her in the process. Now at age 15, she lived in a simple house outside a small village, where people would occasionally come to her for blessings or divination.

Chauntal's Dream was 'Discover the source of her powers (find the creature, find the answers)' to which we later added 'To deal with what she was born with.' Her Milestones ended up as 'look for signs this is special, now is the time,' 'identity development,' 'accept others without attachment,' and 'accept that she may never know, and embrace the results of the quest.'

Our 55-minute sessions were an organic flow of play and talk. (unedited session notes are in Appendix A.) It is worthy of note that things went as hoped and better. Casey used bleed-in, bleed-out, and steering throughout the sessions. She also used alibi and the release of alibi as we played and talked. She actively practiced integration outside of game time. She said things like "Chauntal is teaching me through her confidence," and "Outside of game, I sometimes think 'How would Chauntal act now?'" (player in session with author n.d.) Casey felt she learned about herself and grew as a result of using *Dreamchaser* in spiritual direction.

As I said before, players can choose to either play their literal selves or make a fantastic character, such as a wizard, warrior, astronaut, etc., through whom to explore their questions. To my surprise, all but one of the people who joined me as play-testers decided to play themselves instead of making a fantastic character. This surprised me because all were experienced gamers, used to making fantastic characters, and 12 of them

I met at a play-testing convention. When I realized the trend, I asked each subsequent player why they chose like they did. They reported feeling that playing a fantastic character was too far away if they wanted to work on an actual goal. One player noted that since they wanted to solve a personal problem, starting with themselves as a character was the most straightforward approach. I adopted this practice and now have everyone start with making themselves as their character. It works as a good assessment of where they are at emotionally, physically, and spirituality, as well of their sense of self and how their important relationships are going. Then in each session, even if they later choose to make a fantastic character, the literal character can be used as a 'check-in for how the person is doing at the time. Here's an example of what this looks like: Each character has three health stats—Body, Mind, and Spirit—for which they get 12 points to divide among the three. It is useful to ask the person what the three numbers are for them at each session.

Working with Fantastic Characters

My original thought was to have players put a lot of intention into creating a fantastic character that reflected the questions and challenges they wanted to address. Then through play we would address them, and the GM would steer the game so that opportunities to explore the issues selected would happen, as occurred in the examples with *Dreamchaser* described earlier. Then I played some *Troika!* (Sell 2015) and *Exquisite Polycule* (Bats 2020), both games that use randomness in character creation. My personal and professional opinion was that random character generation and pre-generated characters that come with some adventures and games would not allow players to address personal issues and challenges. I love creating characters with deep backstories, interesting quirks, and complex values and felt it would benefit players to do the same because then they could choose what to work on.

Having played these two games, however, I found myself thinking about the possibility that taking choice away, such as happens with randomly generated characters and pre-generated characters, ends up serving to increase alibi. *Mage: 20th Anniversary* edition does not use randomness in character creation, but when I was making my character Oz, I thought I was just creating a cool back story, without putting any of my real-life questions into him. As I said earlier, I realized that I was working through feelings about coming to this work at the relatively late age of 50. You could say that my sub-or unconscious was at work here, but I believe that we humans are really good at finding patterns and meaning, even where they don't exist. To speak to this point: Once in grad school, for a class called The Ethics and Esthetics of Failure taught by Matthew Goulish, I gave a presentation where I handed people texts and asked them to take turns reading randomly selected passages while I passed random objects around the room. When we discussed what the lecture was about, the class came up with some beautiful and deep conclusions. Then I told them I was using the failure method of Incorrect Method (Goulish, in class lecture), and so I had intentionally not planned the presentation, gathering the objects that morning and deciding what to do with them during the presentation. We humans are good at making connections and a-fixing meanings. As such, even with randomly generated characters, players can and will find ways to explore themselves and

their questions. Perhaps it is because with such characters, the fictional distance of 'It's not me, it's my character' that comes with alibi is even stronger because they can more easily say 'This character was formed randomly, so it can't possibly be me,' but given the human brain's propensity to find meaning, I have observed they can manage to identify with the character. (Perhaps this is the topic of another bit of research.)

This is also true in games where players are given 'pick lists' to choose from during character creation, such as many Belonging Outside Belonging game like *Wanderhome* (Dragon 2021) and *Dream Askew/Dream Apart* (Alder/Rosenbaum 2018). For example, in *Wanderhome* when creating the Caretaker character, players pick from a list of characteristics that includes, "Alert, Reflective, Patient, Friendly, Expressive, Organized, Gentle, Masculine, and Feminine" players are instructed to "Pick 2 you value being and 2 that feel exhausting to be." (Dragon 2021: 48) Given the limited choices, players may pick qualities that sound merely interesting, which then later through play they realize have an application to their lives. They are able to increase alibi because the limited choices may seem to not be all that relevant to them.

The Importance of Enhancing the Magic Circle

Just before sundown on Friday night, Jews around the world light Sabbath candles to mark the beginning of the holy day. People stop and maybe reflect on the week, release the pressures and tensions they've felt, and try to let themselves slip in the sabbath space for the next 25 hours. Many times, I've watched this happen, people using the ritual of the candles to distinguish between one time and another. The candles prepare us to experience Sabbath. Many gamers have rituals for starting and ending games, even if they don't think of them as rituals. The GM screen goes up, dice get poured onto the table, character sheets come out. 'Ok, who remembers what happened last time?' If your group is lucky, you have a prodigious note-taker amongst you, and the notes get read or summarized. When combining games and spiritual direction, it is helpful to ramp up the ritual so as to clearly establish the magic circle and demarcate the time and space between play and not play. In Davi's game we had a set ritual, which, with some variation, I use to this day. After the dice and character sheets came out, we had a few minutes of silence. Then each person had a few minutes to share their hopes for the game, thoughts about the game, questions they wanted to address during the session, etc. The last thing was each person would say their player name and the group would repeat it. Then, each person would say their character name and the group would repeat it. This brought us in to the magic circle of the game. This step aligns with the Purgation step when walking a labyrinth: we let go of our day-to-day lives and inhabit our character and the world of the game. After play ended, there were again a few minutes of silence, then each player responded to three questions: 'What did I appreciate about my participation today? What did I appreciate about someone else's participation? What will I take with me from today's session?' Finally, we spoke our names aloud again, but reversed the order—going from character name to player name. This helped players consciously leave the magic circle. This aligns with the integration step of walking a labyrinth. I stream tabletop RPGs with the CASTT Gamers (the Community of Applied, Spiritual, and Tabletop Gamers)

and we have adopted a modified version of the name and question ritual in our streams. It not only helps us transition into the magic circle but also helps us model how games can be used in applied ways.

Mechanics Matter

In discussions of this work, I am fond of saying even *DnD* can be used, as it is what we do with the games that allow for the work. Alibi and bleed happen in any game, whatever the system, but certain mechanics direct the game in particular directions. In classic *DnD* players advance by killing monsters and collecting treasure. This encourages players to have their characters kill as much as possible and hoard treasure. Other games include rules and mechanics that support self-discovery better.

The Norwegian game *Itras By* (Giaever/Gudmunsen 2012) takes place in a vaguely European city in the interwar period, with healthy doses of the weird and surreal added in. Players don't have numbered stats like Strength and Wisdom, nor must they choose character classes. Players can be and do anything that is allowed by the other players and GM. The game can be played with a GM or without.

I have played this game with the same group since early 2020. Two things make *Itras By* wonderful for inner work: the fact that characters can do anything and its surrealism. The game's authors write:

> "By using free whims without demands for logic, they [the Surrealists] created distortions of reality, placed things where they didn't belong. They created something incomprehensible, yet strangely compelling; they lifted the veil of reality a fraction of an inch." (Giaever/Gudmundson 2012: 7)

Jewish mystics call this veil the *pargawd*, the veil of illusion, that seems to separate the physical world form the spiritual world. Pulling aside or traversing the *pargawd*, brings us from a state of small or finite mind, *mochin d'katnut*, to *mochin d'galdlut*, or big or infinite mind. Being in m*ochin d'gadlut*, we experience the spiritual realm, seeing that the separation between the worlds is an illusion perpetuated by our minds, souls, and cultures (Winkler 2003: 93).

The game's surrealism encourages players to lift the veil and see though the elements of the physical world into the spiritual. And that players can have their characters do anything and be anything is liberating. Make yourself the image of your dreams. Give yourself powers beyond mortal ken. See how your idealized self plays out. In addition, players can make supporting casts for their character, including adversaries. Players have the opportunity to design colleagues and adversaries reflecting their challenges and questions, be it imposter syndrome, depression, feeling adrift, etc.

Another game that invokes the veil between worlds is *Imp of the Perverse* by Nathan Paoletta (2019) which takes place in a Jacksonian America (1830s to 1840s) gone Gothic. Each character has an Imp of the Perverse on their shoulders, "birthed from their particular untamable urges and compelling them to commit terrible deeds." (Paoletta 2019: 9) Players fight monsters who are people that gave in to their perversity. This is how charac-

ters fight their own call to perversity. The game asks, "Can you resist the seductive draw of your own perversity long enough to gain your humanity—or will you embrace your Imp and become damned?" (ibid.) I have not yet played the game, but a player could put their own challenges into the Imp and see how it plays out, or playing a character who struggles with 'made up' perversity can be of value to a player.

Thirsty Sword Lesbians (Walsh 2021) is a "game of queer action romance that celebrates queer love and power." (Walsh 2021: Handouts p1) The game uses the Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) approach to game design, derived from the game *Apocalypse World* by Vincent and Meguey Baker (2010). Actions in PbtA games are called Moves and players roll 2d6 and add any modifiers to see what happens when they try to, for example, Entice someone, try to Figure out a Person, or offer Emotional Support. A 10 or higher, called an Up Beat, is a success. A 7–9, a Mixed Beat, is a success with a catch. 6 or lower, a Down Beat, is a complication. The action may succeed but something big goes wrong, or entirely unintended things happen. They often result in something funny happening or even the revelation of important information along with the failed action. When a player roles a Down Beat they gain experience, which allows them to advance, gaining new powers or skills or improving what they already have. Failure is the way you advance in *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* and has high potential spiritual and therapeutic value.

While swords may cross often they are as likely to end in a kiss as blood. Instead of hit points or health, characters take conditions such as Angry, Guilty, and Insecure when wounded. (Walsh 2021: 17) The game is about relationships, with mechanics for tracking and flirting. In fact, the book includes tips for how to flirt. There is a sizable focus on the safety mechanics that make the table safe for players, and the game has a 'no fascist or bigots allowed' rule. With such a focus on relationships, the game can be good for people who stumble through relationships and don't feel comfortable saying how they feel.

Which brings us back to *Exquisite Polycule*, by Georgie Bats (2019). In *Exquisite Polycule* players tell "a love story, or multiple intersecting love stories, between 3 or more characters." (ibid 1) Here again, characters can be anything, and as mentioned above, the random character generation can allow for stronger alibi at the start of the game. *Exquisite Polycule* is liberating because the whole idea of the game is for players to declare their feelings for each other. Safety mechanics are emphasized in the game to help players separate their character's feelings from their own. In between rounds, there is a check-in about the relationships between the characters, which also serves as a time for players to check in about how they're doing with the play. I found it liberating to run around declaring my affection for the other characters and was quite good at flirting. This game can be a good means for practice and confidence building.

Dream Askew/Dream Apart, by Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum, respectively, are two gems in one book. The games are the first in the Belonging Outside Belonging system (BoB). The games are inspired by PbtA, and also use the moves and playbooks PbtA games use. The biggest difference is that the games have no GM. Players create the story together, taking turns speaking for the narrative and setting elements of the game. This can allow players to take more agency in how the story unfolds. Players can challenge their character, and everyone else's in poignant and profound ways. It gives them space to open their imagination in new ways.

The other big difference is that these games are based on tokens, not dice. If players want to make a Strong Move, like 'Get out of harm's way' or 'Move unseen,' the players spend a token. Players gain tokens when they make a Weak Move, which is when an action fails or a character is left vulnerable. Weak Moves include 'Promise something you can't possibly deliver' and 'Take apart something crucial to repurpose its parts.' You start the game with no tokens, so players must make their characters vulnerable to gain tokens and be able to succeed in their actions. This can be good practice for life.

One Child's Heart by Camdon Wright (2020), which I contributed to, has players play professionals (social workers, therapists, clergy, law enforcement) who go into a traumatized child's memories—not to change their past, but to help them develop tools to better navigate their lives in the present. Playing a character helping someone work through their trauma in this way can be a valuable experience for players.

The Doctor Who RPG (Chapman et al. 2015) downplays violence as a solution. Its mechanics make actual fighting the last option in a conflict. During a conflict, play progresses in the sequence of Talkers, Movers, Doers, and last, Fighters (ibid: 81). Players are encouraged to find non-violent solutions to problems.

The rules, mechanics, and settings of all these games, and all games, give players a scaffold, a structure around which to navigate the world and their challenges. They can be designed to facilitate the work of spiritual discovery.

When I rolled up my first character in 1979 (a human thief named Grack—I still have the piece of loose-leaf paper we used as a character sheet), I had no idea the journey of self-discovery I would go on the next 42+ years. I have done a deep exploration of my gender, playing non-binary characters, characters whose gender was unclear to others, a boy who used he/him pronouns and wore a corset and makeup, and so on. I played characters who served their deity without question and I played characters who did not believe any of it but still served. I've explored polyamorous relationships and celibacy. The fictional distance afforded by playing a character in an interactive game has allowed this exploration.

This work makes me come alive. And there is more I am excited to investigate. I want to go deeper into the work described above. I read *Dungeons and Dilemmas* by Jesse Burneko (2020), about how dungeon design can be used to further narratives and I want to delve into how dungeon design can spur self-discovery. Most of the work I talk about now involves a professional—therapists, pastoral counselors, spiritual directors. I want to create guides to help players do this work on their own, at their home tables, without them vomiting their personal issues all over the rest of the players. I want to bring more indie games to the tables I run for spiritual discovery.

And I don't want to do this alone. This is a rather nascent field—spiritual direction and RPGs. I am building a community of collaboration that is in its infant stage now. If you are a spiritual director or otherwise related professional who uses or wants to use RPGs in your practice, please reach out to me. I want to talk to you.

Appendix A

S1 Literal
Dream: Learn to love myself

Steps: (1) Positive self-dialogue. (2) Stop second-guessing myself. (3) Be my own companion—not a stranger or an enemy. (4) Let others come or go without judgement.

Player has played a number of RPGs (*DnD*, *Pathfinder*) for many years, especially loving character creation and development. First time for spiritual direction. They have a good critical eye and champion accessibility in games. The player has vision and hearing impairment and other as yet undisclosed physical issues. We opened the session with my past/future road mediation, which was difficult but not detrimental or distracting, given their medical history and questions of longevity because of their illnesses.

The player declared a desire to transform their Literal character into a fantastic one, 'warning' they would return w/at least a page of back story. Next session we will create a Fantastic character who's Dream and Milestones reflect those of the Literal character. This player mostly worked out the steps themselves, with little discussion.

S2
Player came with ideas for making character Fantastic. *Initial Dream* was "accept myself for who I am" with the same or nearly same Steps. The backstory was that as an infant a creature came and destroyed her village, except for her. When she made eye contact with the creature she went blind. She developed heightened senses and oracular abilities and came to be known as a person to go to for help and information. She was both feared and respected. The character had recently been having visions telling her it was time to seek out the creature to ask it questions, to get answers. We redefined the Dream to be something around talking to the creature.

We also redefined the first Step/Milestone as 'leave'. I asked the Vision Roll questions. What's stopping you from going, what's blocking you? The answer was "I don't wanna!" and fear she would lose her oracular abilities. While redefining the Dream and the Vision Roll the player said this Dream was essentially her experience being born with physical challenges and that she had never really examined them. She didn't say so, but I'm thinking she has a lot of emotions around her state that she has not dug into.

We played out a scene where she woke from a dream about mold and rot creeping up on her. She went outside to her shrine and discovered her supplies were fetid and disintegrated. She felt a presence in the nothing of her blindness and a beckoning to the left. She felt danger, but nothing was there. It was time to answer the call of her dreams and visions, and find the creature.

Notes: Player always referred to her character in 3rd person. I tried using 2nd person, but she held her stance so I switched. Character's name is Chauntal.

S3

This session we worked on the first Milestone, 'looking for signs she is special.' We were still on the idea that she had to leave home to find the source of her power, to find the creature the attacked her village. She went inside to divine. We discussed how she would do that, being blind. She came up with drinking tea and feeling the leaves. I played it as the aroma sent her into a trance. She then discussed with a spirit guide what to do. She was very resistant to leaving home. I established that she was familiar with the village, knowing people there and being known by people. This alone was a teaching moment for the player; that she was known and could do more than expected. 'I know and see more than I give myself credit for.'

She decided to go and packed. We discussed whether she would over or under pack, deciding Chauntal would under prepare. Walking the road to town a child approached, "Ms. Chauntal, tell me the good word." Chauntal said something about it being a good day to be outside, patted the child's head and sent them off. We determined there was a grange where retired farmers formed a council of earth- based elders, guiding the village in planting and what not. Chauntal approached the grange where she encountered an elder who invited her to sit on the ground and gave her mint to chew on.

This may be the end of the first milestone as player originally wrote, "positive self-talk".

S4

We started this online session with discussion of the previous session and how they went. Player said Chauntal was "teaching me through her confidence. She's more comfortable in the world than I am." Also that, the character is "a manifestation of who I want to be in the world." We spoke about how the player is infantilized by people because of her serious medical condition and despite Chauntal being quite capable, she found herself doing the same thing to her. She described Chauntal as being capable of caring for herself and comfortable with other people. At the same time she doesn't realize that everything she needs is already in her and she needs to find a balance between being present in the world and in her mind.

A chunk of this conversation was around how she depends on the spirits to guide her for eventing she does and she wants to not depend on them so much. The Milestone was 'Identity development' and player saw this as Chauntal having confidence to not depend on the spirits so much. Her answer to the 1st VR question was that Chauntal doesn't trust herself and relies onto spirits for everything. Player knew Chauntal has what it takes, but Chauntal hasn't figured that out yet. Player's answer to question 2 was Chauntal needs to realize the spirits are not always right, they have their own lives/agendas, and they're not as divine as Chauntal thinks they are.

I started pivoting my sense of the story that was coming. I had thought here would be an encounter with a spirit, complete with revelation and understanding. But now I was thinking maybe the spirits are just part of Chauntal, manifested to help her until she doesn't need them. Maybe they are real, but they don't know more than they do, helping Chauntal because they do. They don't have some fated insight or knowledge, they just pay

attention, like a spiritual director. I also was thinking about how the player is like a guide for the character, shepherding the character though life and decisions.

We played the scene meeting the elder at the grange. Given our talk before, I had the elder not give much advice, rather asking Chauntal to listen to their heart to know the truth. This played out well. She decided her heart wanted to go west, to find the source. Regarding the spirits not being so divine, maybe we will come to "the journey is the answer." Chauntal had asked the elder "have you ever been afraid." The elder laughed gently, saying yes, many times. They discussed this, Chauntal asking did you ever run away, to which the answer again was "yes, but other times I stood up, sometimes getting help." It was kinda amazing doing SD thought the elder, through a character. The elder was giving guidance, which was me giving guidance to the player—exactly a goal of this whole endeavor.

Chauntal asked how she could repay the elder, to which the elder said, you could bless the crops. Chauntal did and went west. She accepted a ride with a farmer going to the mill in the next town. The talked jovially, Chauntal happy to chat when someone was not there to ask anything of her. Player described Chauntal as trusting of others in this way at the same time not familiar with it.

In both sessions it came home to me strongly that I need to be even more open to pivoting than in regular game sessions. I have to pay attention to where the players lead the sessions. Have to be completely willing to let go of any idea I have of where the story will go. We are dealing with complex lives and experiences that are revealed to me slowly over sessions. My understanding of the player deepens as we go.

S5

Chauntal set out for the next town. After a while a traveller in a wagon offered a ride. Chauntal accepted. She enjoyed the ride, socializing and listening to the man talk about his life and the world of wheat and flour. Player said Chauntal was surprised at how much she liked small talk/just talking. She got to the inn and went to eat. Friendly older barkeep. Chauntal decide to cast some runes for herself. Given how she is feeling about the spirits I decided to make their response vague and very open. I gave the answer to her questions about what is happening and what will happen as: "Present-upcoming challenges, what will happen as a result of change is, and the challenge is you, you will still be you." All in prep for Chauntal to discover agency in her role as oracle. I asked player to say what the meaning of the answer was. This led to discussion about not wanting to depend on spirits.

I have an idea to have the spirits explain that it's really about her, that she is right about them not being all that special. However, I also am thinking to ask the player to narrate the meeting between the spirit(s) and her.

A bard performed, which Chauntal enjoyed. She realized she had forgotten her notebook so decided to buy a new one. Learning there was a scribe in town she asked the bard to allow her to ask for help getting there from the stage. A gruff man offered to take her there. The barkeep interjected saying he would get her there. The gruff man's name is Nalt. Chauntal stopped to talk with Nalt, while the barkeep gently tugged her away.

Player said that Chauntal felt for Nalt as someone who is also not trusted. She made it to the scribe and got a new journal and a delightful encounter.

At the beginning of the session player said her hope for the session was to stay present and not let her anxieties seep into Chauntal's experience. She said her initial response was to have Chauntal be suspicious of others, but she realized that was the player and that C was more naive and trusting than the player, who is more careful. C could keep calm in the face of things with which she wasn't familiar. You don't know till you try. She was letting C be who she is, which is good practice for herself.

S6

C headed back to the inn, intending to talk with Nalt. But first we talked about if player thought we had accomplished the second milestone, identity development. Player spoke about learning from C example to live her own life. For so long people have made decisions for player, thinking that in light of her medical situation, they were taking care of her. She reported she using C as a vehicle to ask herself, "what do I want." She spoke about for so long her biggest concern was just to stay alive, with all the surgeries and all, that now she is almost 30, she is somewhat surprised to be alive. She has to, gets to, make all these decisions and is not used to it. Her dad still tries to tell her what to do. She feels fear and then looks to C who is also making these decisions but without the fear. "What if I was more _____, didn't care what people thought." Right on with what I hope will happen for players. Character experiences and attitude are bleeding back to player life. Player is learning from their character and spurring personal growth. Player can try things through their character. So, identity development for character and player!

Thus, we moved on to the next milestone: Accept others without attachment. The situation with Nalt seems perfect for this. Player said how attachment is not quite the right word. In response to VR1 player said that C doesn't always see herself as a person. I'd think she meant she sees herself more as a role, the oracle. She also is coming to a realization that not all conversations are about something bigger, that C almost always looks to the subtext. She hadn't previously got that sometimes conversations about the weather are just about the weather and connecting, not some other thing. She wants to be able to accept that people are sometimes just connecting. Along the lines of her realizing she enjoys small talk, chatting, like with the wagon guy. In response to VR2 she said she would realize she doesn't need to be fixing things, people all the time. She could learn to take people at face value more often.

She found out Nalt was at the jail, so she went to see him. He wasn't very receptive, but she told him he has a purpose and that she would be back. He's pretty fully accepted himself as a ruffian criminal of no value.

Player is in a phase of life of making adult decisions for herself for the first time in her life. She can now see a future and knows she has to plan for it. She's understandably afraid and also determined to make the decisions that are best for her. Her dad has said how now that she has a job she should stay there for 40 years and have security. Player isn't sure, knowing just that she wants to make decisions for herself, even if it is staying at job for a long time. Her character is helping her make these decisions. As she guides

her character through her life, her character is guiding her, helping the player be able to make decisions and manifest.

S6+

C encounters a farmer while traveling, approaches and offers to bless the crops. Farmer doesn't trust C at first. Why should I trust you? C sticks up for herself. Farmer accepts blessing. C accepted farmer without attachment.

We discussed how C doesn't know how to live in agency, always having to be the healer or seer. She doesn't understand idea of living for self or that she has power in her own life. Player said this is also her. Player said how she usually hesitates and thinks about things, while C just does things. "I'm using her to practice how I could react."

S +1

We moved on to Milestone 4, rewriting it as "Accept that she may never know and prepare to embrace the results of the quest." We'd been discussing that C was too dependent on the spirits to guide her and that she needs/wants to not depend on them and make decision in her life, much as the player was dealing with similar issues. VR1 about obstacles brought responses like C needs meaning/reason, accepting 'just because' as why she is the way she is would be too difficult. VR2 brought the suggestion that C could meet someone who has walked the path before and shares their experience. Player asked if they and C really need to know the source of her power, why she is the way she is, but that both really want to know. Both could work to accept what is as what is and take back power from there. The player wants to have meaning and cause for her medical issues. She also realizes that no one is going to tell her, she needs to decide for herself.

In town she goes to an inn for the night, where she meets a young waitress who has dreamt of going to the city, 2 days journey. The waitress, Kilah, says you're lucky, which C defers. Kilah says, "we're all lucky in some way."

In discussion the player made 2 suggestions. Nice taking of agency. 1. Maybe next time C asks the spirits don't help. 2. C meet someone who accepts no reason (?), is happy, doesn't play the game.

Penultimate Session

Chauntal and Kilah approached the city. As I described it C and player had reactions. Player reported a feeling like they would when they dissociated. We slowed down. The question was do we stop and discuss our do we stick with the fiction. We have a habit of discussing the connections between C and player, so we did a little of that, then I switched over to asking how C was doing and what she was doing, as well as describing what she sensed. Player did ok, able to stay in the game and not dissociate.

We discussed possibilities for the monster and C's history. All the above was started by Kilah asking C if she knew the name of her town that was destroyed. C had no idea, and Kilah suggested it's possible it's in her memory somewhere. As we discussed more player started thinking maybe C was already going blind and it was not the fault of the "monster" and in fact maybe the monster actually helped C. I asked, maybe there wasn't

actually a monster. Player wasn't sure about this, but did offer that maybe the monster did not cause the destruction.

Many possible ends played in my head, when player said she would spend the week writing the end. Awesome. She took agency, in the decision that she would write how C's story resolves, what the source of her powers is, how she came to be how she is. Next session we will discuss the ending she writes. I will ask how it relates to the player, this is is of course if she somehow doesn't go to such questions herself. Which she likely will.

Final Session

Player did not write an ending. She tried but nothing felt true and she started dissociating as she worked on it. She reported how she and C were merging more and that made resolving difficult and dissociating easier.

We discussed multiple outcomes and how she felt about them. What if the town was still there and they gave C as an offering to the sprits to stop the damage, what if C disappeared and they had looked for her, what if the spirits had hid her from the people. None of these were satisfying, some made C and the player angry. She did not believe the family looked hard enough. She reported that as a child she went through a phase trying to prove she was adopted. In a possibility where the spirits said they had been preparing her because the dark was coming she rebuffed them, saying she wasn't going to work with them.

We discussed what if the village was indeed wiped out. Ending up on it was and I introduced a woman in a hut on the edge of the village, with children running around. Children who were infants when the village was destroyed, The woman had been away from the town when it was destroyed, returning in time to save the kids, and staying. C decided to stay and rebuild. We talked through the epilogue and C helped grow the town, making it a place for orphans and people separated from their families, they were drawn there. Many reunions happened. Many didn't and people some of them stayed. She used her oracular abilities and became known as a water witch. She took on apprentices and students. Kilah and her family stayed connected. Her mother spent lots of time there using her mason skills to build the town. They were her lifelong surrogate family.

C continued working with the spirits, but it was more a partnership. She didn't depend on them and did much on her own. Some adventures, even big ones, happened and C lived to a ripe old age.

Appendix B: One Page Game Summaries

These 'One- pager' summaries were created for the Discord community CASTT Gamers – Community of Applied, Spiritual, and Therapeutic Tabletop Gamers as a shared resource of the potential value and use of RPGS we played.

Each game has something about their settings, rules, character creations and advancement, and mechanics that makes them useful for plumbing the depths of our souls and discovering who we are. A game where advancement happens as a result of gaining experience points from killing monsters and gathering treasure, like *DnD* (especially early editions), lead players to a hack and slash style of play. A game that rewards players

for milestones achieved, like *Dreamchaser* and a variant rule in fifth edition *DnD*, is more easily used for self-examination. But it is not only the mechanics that make games suitable. Yes, mechanics matter, they give us a structure, scaffolding, around which to work, but, as I like to say, even *DnD* can be used for spiritual work. You just have to let rules and mechanics fall to the wayside at appropriate times. My friend Allen Turner, a game design professor and designer (Ehdrigohr), said to me that even murder hobos, players that want to run through dungeons killing everything and collecting treasure, are doing it for a reason.

Game and creator: *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* by April Kit Walsh
Submitted by: Menachem Cohen
Available at: https://www.evilhat.com/home/thirsty-sword-lesbians/

Genre: fluid, open, decided by players and GM
Format: GMed (GMfull/less version available), PbtA
Players and Age Range: 3–7, PG-13 and higher
Themes and Keywords: lesbians, relationships, flirting,

Description: TSL is a "game of queer action romance that celebrates queer love and power." (handouts: 1) "The game invites you to feel the deep emotional conflict of your PC and care about the other characters in the game. This is game about feeling things and forgin relationships." (book: 4) Play starts with players and GM world building, including the size and values of their community and the toxic powers in the world. Genre and tone are decided by the group, though many settings are provided. Players pick from a number of playbooks, like The Chosen, The Scoundrel, and the Nature Witch. Actions are taken through Moves, some called Basic Moves which all players have and some specific to each playbook. Success or failure is determined with 2d6 and can also be narratively determined. While swords, or energy sabers, may cross, much of the 'combat' does not involve physical injury, and may end in a kiss rather than blood. Damage is recorded in Conditions, like Angry, Frightened, and Hopeless and are mitigated through Moves by the player or others. There are not hit points or health stats. There are 5 stats, which start at -1 to +2 to the 2d6 rolled for actions.

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: This game is all about relationships and flirting and can be very liberating. Moves such as Figure Out a Person and Emotional Support can be used to increase player skills and confidence. Safety mechanics are built into the games and the group decides on such things as Lines and Veils together. How much sex and romance and violence is also determined by the group. Included in the game is the rule "No fascists or bigots allowed" followed by details/examples of what this includes (book: 11). Finally, like many PbtA games, failure is part of how characters advance, so players are encouraged to try new things and take risks. Additionally, use of safety mechanics and check-ins during the game are rewarded with advancement.

Game and creator: *Exquisite Polycule* by Georgie Batts
Submitted by: Menachem Cohen
Available at: https://georgiebats.itch.io/exquisite-polycule

Genre: fluid, determined by group
Format: GM-full/GM-less
Players and Age Range: 3–6 adults
Themes and Keywords: sex positive, polyamory, stigma, healthy relationships, boundaries, consent.

Description: In *Exquisite Polycule* players tell "a love story, or multiple intersecting love stories, between 3 or more characters." Character creation is collaborative and largely random. Play moves through 4 rounds—Meeting-Cute, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action—during which players take turns framing scenes. Relationships develop over these rounds and are diagrammed in a Relationship Web after each round.

The game includes variant rules for 2 players.

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: *Exquisite Polycule* can be used to explore and process stigmatized ideals and behaviors an individual has. By playing a character trying to unabashedly establish a polyamorous group players can explore how it feels to act on beliefs and/or behaviors that bring shame or are prohibited. Players can learn and practice such concepts as consent, sex-positivity, and boundaries. The Relationship Web used to track romantic entanglements, which resembles sociograms, can also be useful to chart relationships in others games as well as default life.

Finally, the use of the somewhat random character generation might facilitate the fictional distance and alibi–it's not me, it's my character– that keep our egos and defenses out of the way, allowing for delving into personal issues in RPGs.

Game and creator: *Itras By*. Ole Peder Giaever & Martin Bull Gudmunsen
Submitted by: Menachem Cohen
Available at: https://itrasby.com/

Genre: Surreal early 20th c. European Urban
Format: GMed or GMfull/less
Players and Age Range: ~3-6, Game book contains adult themes and images.
Themes and Keywords: Surreal(ism), urban, imagination, the absurd, chance/resolution cards

Description: *Itras By* is a "journey away from reality as you perceive it with your everyday senses…the means are elements from surrealism; an art movement from the 2's which tries to portray the life of the subconscious." (4–5). The game takes place in a vaguely European city of the 1920–3s. City residents fly around with jetpacks and dance in a club on a street where it's always Friday, and rumor has it that if the dancing stops there the world will end. The only game mechanics are the Resolution and Chance cards, which say things like 'yes, but' or make everyone play their shadow twin. Characters don't have

such things as stats and skills, having in their stead 'dramatic qualities', 'intrigue magnets', and 'supporting characters.' Characters can be and do anything, limited only by their imaginations and consensus at the table: a bipedal bison who erased his own memories; a cyborg spider who rides on the shoulder of his human intern; a hotel employee who is only seen when he wants you to see him who manipulates the physical elements of the hotel to fit guests needs, who transforms to the life of the party when he puts on his Zoot Suit, and turns out to be one of the secret primal forces of the city.

Play is largely improvisational and twists and turns based on the imagination of the players and the whimsy of the cards. Much of the book and the supplement, The Menagerie, are fiction like descriptions, all of which you do not need to read. In fact, it has been fun to every so often discover a new piece of the city and do something with it.

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: You can be and do anything. There is no limit. *Itras By* therefore provides a canvas and template for exploration of self to the fullest extent. This may be true of many RPGs, but *Itras By* begs and cajoles, laying out the red carpet and an all you can eat buffet. The lack of crunch may prove difficult for some. The surrealism foundation of the game facilitates this exploration. About surrealism the creators write, "the subconscious contains knowledge of a reality behind that which we can normally perceive." They say, "the Surrealists lifted the veil of reality a fraction of an inch." (7). The game aims to give us access to that not perceived reality, throwing open wide the doors of perception and discovery. Gamemasters and players can mine the game for the benefit of clients and self.

Game and creator: *Imp of Perverse* by Nathan Paoletta
Submitted by: Menachem Cohen
Available at: https://ndpdesign.com/imp

Genre: Psychological Horror in a Jacksonian Gothic setting.
Format: GMed
Players and Age Range: Gm + 1–4 players, Game contains adult themes and images.
Themes and Keywords: Gothic, Horror, perversity, anxiety, monster

Description: *Imp of the Perverse* takes place in a Jacksonian America (1830s to 40s) gone Gothic, where "dark passions pierce the all-too-thin Shroud over the land of the dead." (Paoletta 2019: 9) Each character has an Imp of the Perverse on their shoulders, "birthed from their particular untamable urges and compelling them to commit terrible deeds." (ibid.) Players fight monsters who are people who have given in to their perversity. This is how characters fight their own call to perversity, but it is quite likely that one will fall, becoming the next monster in the game, with the player switching to the GM role (if players choose an ongoing campaign). The game asks, "can you resist the seductive draw of your own perversity long enough to gain your humanity—or will you embrace your Imp and become damned?" (ibid.)

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: I have not yet played the game, but a player could put their own challenges into the Imp and see how it plays out, or play-

ing a character who struggles with "made up" perversity can be of value to a player. The game has a system for tracking characters' slide towards or movement away from perversity that could be useful for professionals and clients. The mechanic where a character who gives in to their Imp becomes the next monster and the player of said character becomes the next GM could lend agency to a player in working through their issues. Having the control of the GM and a community fo players fighting their monster may end up being very supportive.

Game and creator: *Dream Askew/Dream Apart* by Avery Alder & Benjamin Rosenbaum
Submitted by: Menachem Cohen
Available at: https://store.buriedwithoutceremony.com/products/dream-askew-dream-apart

Genre: Belonging Outside Belonging. No dice, no masters.
Format: GMfull/less
Players and Age Range: 3–6 players, Game contains adult themes.
Themes and Keywords: Queer, community, shtetl, collapse,

Description: *Dream Askew/Dream Apart* are two gems in one book. The games are the first in the belonging outside belonging system (BoB), also called no dice, no masters. The games are inspired by PbtA, using the moves and playbooks PbtA games use. The biggest difference is that the games have no GM. Players create the story together, taking turns speaking for the narrative and setting elements of the game. *Dream Askew* is subtitled "Queer strife amid the collapse," and *Dream Apart* is subtitled, "Jewish fantasy of the shtetl."

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: Since there is no GM this can allow players to take more agency in how the story unfolds. Players can challenge their character and everyone else's in poignant and profound ways. It gives them space to open the imagination in new ways.

The other big difference is that these games don't use dice. The games are based on tokens. If players want to make a strong move, which is when something goes right, like, 'Get out of harm's way' or 'Move unseen', the players spend a token. They gain tokens when they make a Weak Move, which is means an action fails or a character is left vulnerable. Weak Moves include 'Promise something you can't possibly deliver' and 'Take apart something crucial to repurpose its parts.' You start the game with no tokens, so players must make their characters vulnerable to gain tokens and be able to succeed in their actions. This can be good practice for life.

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The Hunter Will Take You
Seeking Spiritual Experiences within Live Action Role-Play

Anna Milon

Keywords: *gender; neopaganism; online cultures; pop culture paganism; spirituality; Tumblr; videogames*

> There are four seasons.
> Learn their rhythm, hear their story.
> The Hunter will take you.
> Fight him for every moment.
> Go to him full of joy.
> Show respect.
> For your prey, for those you feed, and for yourself.
> The strong survive, and the weak perish.
> The Pack is the strongest.
> *Tenets of the Hunter, Curious Pastimes LARP (n.d.: n.p.).*

> The greatest threat to the world is unchecked religious fundamentalism. The greatest threat to the world is unchecked scientific fundamentalism.
> *Christopher Potter, How to Make a Human Being (2015: 206).*

The sun has set and it is growing dark under the trees. In the ritual circle flanked by tall standing stones a small group is gathered. They have come to bid farewell to Oak, a well-loved priestly character. He has served the Goddess faithfully and now it is time for him to join her. Suddenly, the ritual circle erupts in coloured smoke and through it strides a barefoot woman in flowing robes – the Goddess has arrived. Recollecting his experience from the ritual, one of the participants reflects that it was "like a genuine… proxy for a real-life spiritual experience":

> And then at this ritual, someone playing the Goddess came out of the portal with loads of smoke, and it was just the most incredible… Completely unbeknownst to me that this was going to be happening, and I saw this person come out and I thought, "oh my God, it's the Goddess." And I had this sort of faux spiritual experience, where I started openly crying. (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021)

The scene is part of a Live Action Role-Playing game, where players embody characters who interact in a co-created fictional world. Unlike other types of Role-Playing Games (RPGs), where characters' actions may be represented on a computer screen or described verbally, in Live Action Role Play (LARP), players actually perform their characters' actions as the game unfolds in real time and space. LARP games are typically played in instalments of uninterrupted play, called events, which may range from several hours to several days in length. A series of events that takes place in the same fictional universe and comprises a continuous story belongs to one system. A system is, simultaneously, the fictional universe of a particular LARP game, the rules that govern that universe, and the logistical underpinnings that facilitate the game.

The system that the above ritual is taken from is *Curious Pastimes*, a UK-based fantasy LARP system that is the focus of this paper. Like many role-playing game settings, *Curious Pastimes* is a world full of magic and mystery, where gods are indisputably real. By that logic, the appearance of the Goddess in the ritual circle to accept her faithful follower is not remarkable in itself. What is, however, remarkable is that some participants recognised the event as approaching a real-life spiritual experience and felt emotions that transcended the boundary between their characters and themselves. This paper uses the players' response to this particular ritual as an example to comment more broadly on the role of spirituality and religion in LARP. It argues that the suspension of disbelief necessary in role-play primes players for spiritual experiences, and that a magical, religious outlook that can be achieved in the game offers a valuable way to reflect on our lived experience. While LARPers readily acknowledge the distinction between their primary reality and the fictional world of the game, there are moments during the game when the magic **feels real**, when it is easy to believe that the woman coming through the smoke is actually the Goddess. Once we get past the kneejerk reaction of 'oh dear, is this a cult? it looks like a cult,' the experience raises several interesting questions. How do fictional spiritualities operate in Live Action Role Play? How can LARP itself be compared to a religious movement? With players physically representing their characters, how is the boundary between 'reality' and 'fantasy' negotiated? And, crucially, why do players, who do not make religion a part of their daily lives, pursue spiritual experiences in LARP?

To discuss these questions the paper looks at the relationship between one of the fictional religions of *Curious Pastimes* and modern paganism. Fantasy media and modern earth-centric spiritualities have long been interpellated, with works of fantasy fiction influencing religious practices and vice versa.[1] But it is only recently that scholars noticed that the two fields appear to be converging, with increased likelihood that members of one community will also show interest in the other (Cowan 2019; Ramstedt 2007: 1–15). One of the reasons for this convergence, proposed by Stef Aupers and Julian Schaap, is

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1   For instance, before publishing *Witchcraft Today* (1954), the cornerstone text of Wicca, Gerald Gardner explored many of the same ideas in his fiction novels *A Goddess Arrives* (1940) and *High Magic's Aid* (1949). In the preface to *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963) Alan Garner admits being inspired by the work of Margaret Murray, an anthropologist whose writing was long considered foundational for the pagan community. More nebulously, many modern pagans cite works of fantasy fiction, like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* (1983), Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* (1973) or the 1984–1986 HTV television series *Robin of Sherwood*, as catalysts of their spiritual journeys.

that "the activity of game play provides the opportunity for gamers to experience enchantment without 'converting' to a particular set of beliefs" (2015: 191). Exploring the use of pagan spirituality in the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)[2] *World of Warcraft*, Aupers and Schaap note that many of the players they interviewed expressed a sense of purposelessness and disillusionment with social institutions. When it came to the question:

> Why do so many virtual worlds feature magic? [...] The answers ranged from explanations that magic is a functional trope enhancing the boundaries between the real and the game world, [...] to speculations about the intrinsic value of magic, myth and mystery, and its importance in the modern world, [to the viewpoints that] magic is [...] a very compelling way to view the world and can provide more meaning and agency than a viewpoint that is strictly materialist. (Aupers/Schaap 2015: 196)

In other words, the supernatural elements of role-playing games 1) reinforce the distinction between real and game space, 2) possess intrinsic value and pleasure that players seek out, and 3) allow players to experience enchantment that is, somehow, absent from their daily lives. My interviews in *Curious Pastimes* certainly corroborate the last point, most evocatively in the words of a longstanding player:

> that's mostly why I role-play – to immerse myself and experience things I can't really experience in real life. So, for example, I am an atheist, but I really enjoy immersing myself in the idea of a faith. Because I don't really get access to it in my real life. But I used to… when I was a massive hippie when I was younger… (Bartos, interview by author, online, March 31, 2020)

Time and again, fictional religions inspired by modern paganism, which include ideas of magic and immanent divinity, are cited as providing RPG players with a sense of enchantment.

What is, then, this enchantment that is linked to spiritual experiences in LARP? The term arises out of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's claim that "Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge" (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 1). According to this view, we live in a profoundly unmagical world where rationality and materiality deconstruct the very wonder of life:

> The world that people had thought themselves living in – a world rich with colour and sound, redolent with fragrance, filled with gladness, love and beauty … – was crowded now into minute corners of the brains of scattered organic beings. The really important world outside was a world hard, cold, colourless, silent and dead; a world of quantity, a world of mathematically computable motions in mechanical regularity. (Burtt 1924: 238–39)

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2   As the acronym suggests, the fictional universe of the game exists in cyberspace and allows a large number of players accessing it simultaneously.

As Aupers and Schaap have expressed, there is a need to rediscover the enchantment that has been lost. And role-playing games seem an especially powerful locus for doing that (Laycock 2015: 174; Cowan 2019: 56). However, the premise that an enchanted world ended with the Enlightenment, when science replaced religion as the dominant mode of interpreting the world in the West, establishes magical and rational thinking as an either/or dichotomy. This stance is criticised by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, who argue that the creative arts can offer many benefits of enchantment previously offered by religion, without the need to subscribe to a specific creed (2009:1–2). Furthermore, *Curious Pastimes* players interviewed here, none of whom are religious in their everyday life, demonstrate that it is possible to subscribe to a dominant rational model of interpreting the world and still have evocative spiritual experiences under certain conditions. Religion, therefore, is not the only source of enchantment, but neither is it fully dismissible from the human experience with the advent of science. Rather than seeing rational and magical thinking in opposition, this paper explores them as complementary perspectives for interpreting our lived experience.

Nevertheless, in the case of *Curious Pastimes*, the rational outlook of the players and the magical thinking of the players/characters exist in different space. They are separated by the Magic Circle, a concept first proposed by game theorist Johan Huizinga to denote a boundary between the mundane world and the play space, but also between the profane and the sacred space of the ritual (Huizinga 2013 [1938]: 30). Within the Magic Circle, disbelief is temporarily suspended and players are able to immerse themselves in the game world. The overlap between play space and sacred space helps this paper examine how LARP is similar to religious movements. This is done by taking a broad view of similarities between faith and fantasy, proposed in Bainbridge and Stark's New Paradigm (Bainbridge 1997). The New Paradigm is a sociological approach for studying religion that uses cognitive science to argue that faith in the supernatural is an inextricable by-product of human cognition. Thus, spiritual experiences are, in some way, inevitable. Bainbridge further proposes a **curvilinear model of religion**, which holds that

> faith was fluid and inseparable from fantasy early in human history, and it will be the same late in human history, but near the middle of human history the social conditions associated with agricultural empires favoured the emergence of religious bureaucracies that demanded faith. (Bainbridge 2013: 4)

As in the case of both fantasy and religion being linked to enchantment by Landy and Saler, for Bainbridge, faith and fantasy exist in the same niche and fulfil similar functions. Thus, when discussing the similarities between religious movements and Live Action Role Play, this paper holds that the two are underpinned by the same cognitive process.

The primary remit of this paper is to examine how players engage with their spirituality in the LARP game space, and why LARP seems especially conducive for exploring one's spirituality and regaining enchantment. The ethnographic material used for the discussion is taken from semi-structured interviews with players of the *Curious Pastimes* LARP

system and draws on participant observation of the system's events by the researcher.[3] The paper is informed by in-depth interviews from a limited number of players, who have been identified, through the researcher's participant observation, as actively seeking a spiritual element of LARP, and directly engages with information provided by four interviewees who have been directly involved with the ritual invoking the Goddess summarised in the introduction. All four informants have, at various times, been both players and contributors to the world- and story-building of *Curious Pastimes*. Given the insular and introspective nature of Live Action Role-Playing games, which lack an audience, they are almost impossible to appreciate or critique without participant observation.[4] This informs the method of gathering data, alongside *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (2013) by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, and the inclusion of a functional and a critical definition of Live Action Role Play in this paper.

The World of *Curious Pastimes*: A Functional Definition of LARP

As mentioned above, Live Action Role Play is a creative hobby where players represent characters who act in an imaginary world. These worlds, called systems, are defined by genre, duration, and the presence or absence of play combat. *Curious Pastimes* is a fantasy, fest, contact system – it is set in a faux-medieval world with magical elements, its events run over several days like a festival, and it includes play combat in the form of battles with specially designed foam weapons. A single event is likely to include active gameplay during the day from Friday to Sunday, interrupted by the gameplay stopping overnight on Friday and Saturday, although there are also events with uninterrupted 24-hour gameplay. LARP events can take place anywhere, but for larger systems like *Curious Pastimes* an outdoor setting is usually chosen. A common outdoor setting for LARP in the UK is a network of sites owned by the Scouts, a youth organisation focused on hands-on learning.[5] *Curious Pastimes* itself has four major events a year, with two Scout sites running two events each. These are complemented by smaller events where only a part of the player base is present. Overall, *Curious Pastimes* numbers around 800 players at the time of writing. These players are separated into factions: groups that are defined by their culture and religion in the game world. In the fictional universe, the player base constitutes the Warhost, an army of allied nations that travels the known world ridding it of evil, with each faction representing a specific fictional nation. This paper focuses on the religion of the Algaia faction, which is described later.

The running of the game is administered by the game team, a group of designated volunteers who oversee the logistics of set dressing the Scout camps (crew), create conflict storylines for players to engage with (plot-writers), and ensure that rules are being

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3   To preserve their anonymity, interviewees are referred to by their character names.

4   Joseph Laycock holds this to be true for all types of RPGs, see Laycock 2015: ix.

5   The Scouts organisation manages a network of sites across the UK that are equipped with sanitary facilities, administrative buildings, and spaces of camping and bushcraft. LARP systems may make use of a whole or part of a Scout site to run their events.

observed (referees/refs). In addition to player characters, the fictional world is also populated by NPCs, non-player characters who facilitate the players' engagement with the world, and monsters[6], who provide an opposing force for players to fight.

Curious Pastimes events typically run between Friday evening and Sunday afternoon, with gameplay stopping between 2am and 10am. This amounts to approximately 28 hours of gameplay over the course of one event. A single player will not necessarily be actively playing for all of that time, taking time out to visit out-of-character areas or even sit quietly in the in-character space without getting involved.

In-character (IC) and out-of-character (OC/OOC) are terms used to distinguish areas where the fictional game world is assumed to be the dominant **modus operandi** from those taken up by logistical structures and camping fields for the participants. Thus, the faction camps and the battlefield are IC areas and everyone in those areas is assumed to be present in the fictional world of the game. Additionally, in-character and out-of-character designates the state of the players themselves. Regardless of their physical location, a player can be actively portraying their character or can break immersion to put that character aside. For example, players can exchange paper letters as their characters between events, and some of my interviewees have noted that they actively embody their characters in their own homes as they write the letters. Similarly, if something has happened during gameplay that requires out-of-character attention, such as a medical emergency, players can 'drop OOC' to resolve the situation. The transition from being in-character to being out-of-character is assumed to be an act of will on behalf of the players and a clearly delineated process. However, the reality of negotiating IC and OOC states is more complex.

While, despite their detractors, role-players do not actually confuse their everyday reality with the shared fantasy of the play world, it is necessary for that world to be sometimes accepted as 'real' for the game to go ahead. Gary Alan Fine writes that "the acceptance of the fantasy world as a (temporarily) real world gives meaning to the game, and the creation of a fantasy scenario and culture must take into account those things that players find engrossing" (Fine 1983: 4). By being in-character players suspend disbelief and accept the fictional world as real for the duration of the game; they immerse themselves in that world. And immersion can be achieved more easily if the fictional world engages with or comments on the players' out-of-game interests. An engrossing plot-line or setting will lead players to maintaining their immersion for longer. Conversely, while I corresponded with a fellow player between March and September of 2020, during the period of various restrictions in the UK connected to the Covid-19 pandemic, they told me that if a plot-line about a pandemic was introduced into the game in the near future, they would not get involved. Thus, a plot-line that they did not find engrossing would lead them to actively break character, going from IC to OOC. Engrossment is not the only way to conceptualise immersion. Mike Pohjola situates immersion within a participant's belief: pretending to believe their character constitutes their identity leads to them believing that their character constitutes their identity (Pohjola 2004: 84–85; cf. Hall 1996).

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6   Despite the title, the monsters are not always monstrous and can range from an enemy army to a disgruntled bevy of supernatural creatures.

For Pohjola, immersion occurs on a character rather than an environment level. Engrossment follows immersion and is termed inter-immersion, "a state achieved when one or more immersed players interact with each other and their surroundings" (ibid: 89).

Not only is being in-character dependant on factors like physical location and the player's interest, it also varies in intensity. Immersion is achieved when the player is invested in their character's beliefs and actions in the game world. This often results in physical, emotional and cognitive overlap between the player and the character, known within the community as 'bleed'. Sarah Lynne Bowman defines bleed as a phenomenon where "role-players sometimes experience moments where their real-life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters' and vice versa" (2015: n.p.). The powerful emotional response of players to the Goddess appearing in the ritual circle can be seen as an instance of bleed. According to Bowman, the phenomenon is not inherently positive or negative, and is often an unconscious process; however, the term remains heavily contentious. Even in the nascent field of role-play studies, discussions of bleed have evolved significantly in a small number of years. One of the earliest discussions of bleed, undertaken by Fine in 1983, terms it 'overinvolvement' and suggests that it hampers effective role-play as the player is too focused on protecting their character to respond fully to in-game scenarios (222). In 2015, with the term 'bleed' firmly entrenched in the community, Bowman highlights that there can be positive outcomes of the phenomenon:

> At its most positive, bleed experiences can produce moments of catharsis: when the player and character emotions are synced in a powerful moment of emotional expression. Most often, these experiences manifest in great displays of joy, love, anger, or grief; in-game crying is often associated with bleed. (ibid: n.p.)

Unlike Fine, Bowman suggests that bleed can improve the LARPing experience, even though it remains a bit of a wild card that players cannot control fully. Control seems to be the lynchpin for defining bleed within the community as well, as is apparent from this interview:

> You have to experience those [your character's] emotions. You have to understand how to react to them properly. I think, and here's where I think the bleed is, I think bleed is about losing control of your emotions. So, you can feel your emotions... When I'm playing as Alejandro, for example, and someone says something bad about the Dauphin, Alejandro is angry, he is not happy... [I am] not angry, because it's made up, but I have to... I can only express that anger in a way I understand, so my brain has to go, "Here's what angry is like. Here's how you do your anger." So, you go and do your anger, but it's controlled. You're in control of that anger. Where the bleed comes in, is when that anger slips into real life. So, if someone says something bad about the Dauphin in the game and that makes [me] angry, rather than [me] understanding what anger is and expressing it. (Alejandro Sforza, interview by author, online, May 16, 2021)

The underlying leitmotif of the understanding of bleed is that it is inevitable and that the majority of LARPers experience it at some point. The question of control comes up again in Ane Marie Anderson and Karete Jacobsen Meland's article "Bleed as a Skill" (2020). In

it, the authors offer a toolkit for proactively responding to bleed, arguing that it can be a "controlled form of engagement with the game" (Anderson/Meland 2020: n.p.). Furthermore, the opening questions of the article – "Why would we want to reinforce bleed? Well, why do we larp [sic]? To explore things that we might not be able to explore in our everyday life, for liberation, playing around, for personal growth?" – imply that bleed is both a fundamental part of LARP and a desirable effect (ibid).

The idea of bleed as an extension of immersion, a player's emotional involvement with their character brought to boiling point, places the 'faux-religious experience' of encountering the Goddess into the wider context of player experiences, and it transports the ideas of IC and OOC from physical locations into the players' psyche. This is the stance taken by Pohjola in "Larpers Do It Ekstatikoi" (2001) and "Autonomous Identities" (2004), where he argues that gaming reality provides the player with a set of guidelines that the player then seeks to apply to other scenarios. For instance:

> Shamanistic ritual is LARP applied to religion. We have characters inside our heads. New ones join when we read a good character description and play the character for a while. They are not physical people, nor are they spirits. They are individuals inside our heads. (Pohjola 2001: n.p.)

Rather than representing discrete spaces, in-character and out-of-character denote a set of interpenetrating states which can apply to a physical place, a player or an aspect of that player's involvement in the game. These states are irreducible to a distinction between 'reality' and 'fantasy', but always contain both. To look closer at how this overlap functions in LARP, it is necessary to give a critical definition of what Live Action Role Play is.

Live Action Role Play as Ritual: A Critical Definition of LARP

When defining LARP, two approaches are usually taken: (1) it is positioned as a more involved version of tabletop role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gigax/Arneson 1974); or (2) it is compared to improvised theatre performance. These approaches are employed by both researchers and members of the community, as evidenced by this example from the *Empire* LARP official web page:

> **What is live roleplaying?**
> Roleplaying [sic] literally means assuming or acting out a particular role. In live roleplaying we take on a character for the enjoyment that can be had by acting out the role alongside other people. One way to understand live roleplaying is to look at the similarities and differences with related hobbies.
>
> **Roleplaying games**
> In online roleplaying games and tabletop roleplaying games players create a character who can explore a fantastic setting and talk with other characters in the world. The world is filled with challenges and dangers for the characters to overcome.
> Live roleplaying is similar but it is **all done for real**. You dress, speak and act as the character you have created once the game begins.

Games like Empire have more in common with popular [Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games]. The foundation of the game lies in the activities and relationships between the characters rather than in a single overarching story spun by a game master.

Acting
In the theatre, actors embody the character that they're playing for the entertainment of an audience. When on stage, they stay in-character, following the script, but sometimes improvising their lines if needed.

When live roleplaying you are both actor and audience, improvising lines for your own character and witnessing the improvised words and actions of the other players in the game. There's no script – rather there's a shared understanding of the kind of things that might happen in the game, and a detailed setting that provides framework and prompts to your characterisation. ("Live Roleplaying", Empire Wiki, n/d, emphases added)

While both comparisons are useful in explaining LARP to people outside the hobby, they also raise issues, highlighted by the emphases in the above quotation. Firstly, LARP is positioned as 'more real' than role-playing games in other media (Livingstone 1986: 254; Zagal/Deterding 2018: 21). By embodying their characters and by physically performing actions as those characters, LARPers are, indeed, more immediately present within the game space. However, the use of the term 'real' is problematised by the accusations levelled against early role players in the 1970s and 80s by moral entrepreneurs – namely, that players gradually become unable to distinguish between the game and their everyday, real, lives, leading to catastrophic outcomes. The cult panic surrounding early RPGs in the USA originated in the New Christian Right, and was governed by a sensationalised narrative that Dungeon Masters (storytellers in *Dungeons and Dragons* games) seduced impressionable teenagers to engage in anti-social behaviour and even take their own lives if their characters died in the game. Joseph Laycock, who explores the phenomenon in detail in his monograph *Dangerous Games* (2015), argues that "the panic over role-playing games was an extreme example of a larger pattern in which moral entrepreneurs ignore the frame of fiction and treat imaginary symbols and narratives as reality" (213). Laycock further asserts that, as with the vast majority of imaginative play starting in early childhood, RPG players themselves do not run the risk of confusing their game experience and their daily lives. What is it, then, that makes Live Action Role Play feel more 'real'?

In order for a role-playing game to be meaningful, the fantasy world must temporarily be accepted as real. And in order to suspend their disbelief, players need to be emotionally invested in the game and their characters. This, in turn, prompts an overlap between the players and the characters emotional and mental states, reinforced by the fact that the two share one physical body. Recent writing on Theory of Mind suggest that it is impossible for that overlap not to occur. It comes down to our ability to mind read, that is, to model thought processes of other beings based on what we know our own thought process to be like. This allows us to predict potential behaviours in others based on the smallest contextual clues (McCauley 2011: 13; Boyer 2001; Barret 2004). This adaptation

is believed to be so advantageous for human survival as to be hyperactive, leading us to extend our ability to model thought processes onto things and phenomena that are not independently conscious. As Lisa Zunshine writes in relation to the process of reading fiction, "on some level, our mind-reading adaptations do not distinguish between the mental states of real people and those of fictional characters" (Zunshine 2012: 24). In other words, it is not the aim of LARP or any other role-playing games to achieve realism, but the possibility of LARP itself relies on our ability to accept the fictional world and its characters as real. Immersion is then heightened by physical effects that players experience at LARP events, notably sleep deprivation, fatigue and intoxication, which leads to Live Action Role Play feeling **more** real than other RPGs.

Secondly, the comparison of Live Action Role Play with improvisation theatre establishes a dichotomy of actors and audience, where the first role implies activity and the second – passive reception. Even when there is no conventional audience, that dichotomy is not collapsed; instead, as is the case in the quotation from *Empire*, the players are made both actors and audience. The language of observation is insidious in academic literature as well, where players are said to "become simultaneously both the artists who create the story and the audience who watches the story unfold" (Zagal/Deterding 2018: 5). Comparing a LARP game to a stage play suggests the existence of a fixed 'story' that LARPers both create and consume. Like a play, even an improvised one, unfolds in accordance with a finite structure, so the 'story' of LARP needs to have a measurable beginning and end for the players to be able to watch it and reflect on it. Theatre is seen as involving passive consumers by the creators of *Chaos League*, an Italian LARP group, who write, "Larp [sic] is not cinema, neither is it theatre. It is not a show you can watch sitting comfortably on your chair. No one will entertain you, there's no passive audience, only co-authors" (Chaos League 2016: n.p.) and in *The Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 1999: n.p.). Thus, when equated to theatre, the experience of LARPing is somehow converted into a product that the audience consumes, instead of a shared fantasy that the players continuously co-create. This goes against the notion that LARP is a game without a measurable end goal, as suggested by Zagal and Deterding.

Rather than trying to distinguish between the player-as-actor and the player-as-observer, I argue that it is more advantageous to view LARP as an instance of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which erases the passive audience altogether. In describing the carnival, an early modern type of subversive folk festivity, Mikhail Bakhtin writes

> Carnival does not know foot-lights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (Bakhtin 1984: 7)

Carnival, the humorous subversion of the mystical and the profound, created a second world, a distorted mirror of the normative, which the Medieval and Renaissance populace could inhabit for an allotted time of the year. Through it, authority could be challenged and satirised (ibid: 6–7). Like in the carnival, there are no external observers in LARP, and, I argue, like the carnival, LARP is a radical pastime through which the normative order is scrutinized. As mentioned above, role-play narratives are a bricolage of

familiar elements, which help players be invested in the game, defamiliarized through play. In Laycock's words, "because fantasy worlds are ultimately derivative of the world of daily life, they are reflections *of* this world and enable a reflection *on* this world" (Laycock 2015: 186). Interpreted in this way, LARP is a non-teleological communal pastime that resists commodification.[7] The objective is not to 'win' the game, nor to have a specific type of experience; arguably, there is no objective at all, beyond having fun.

Curiously, when I explained my comparison between LARP and carnival as depending on complete immersion of participants in their environment, one of my interviewees compared the experience to being in a cult:

> I think the way you said it, about being totally immersed in something and you're a community that's totally immersed, it has quite cult-like connotations. [...] I'd be interested to look at the similarities between cult indoctrination and LARP. And I think you do see those same structures. You do see cults of personality in LARP, you do have very structured things, like the factions themselves. They are... here is your belief set, here are the people who are in charge of looking after the belief set. The more you play to the belief set, the more your rewards in the game will be. It's very cult-like. (Alejandro Sforza, interview by author, online, May 16, 2021)

The comparison presents several challenges. Firstly, it harks back to the cult-panic surrounding role-playing games in the last decades of the 20th century and to role-play being seen as a tool for indoctrination. Secondly, the term 'cult' itself is not a stable definition, and it is unclear what definition of cult LARP is being compared to. But the statement also offers insight into the covalence of fantasy and faith, as posited by the New Paradigm.

Over the course of the last several decades the definition of 'cult' has migrated from sociological-technical to popular-negative. The popular definition of a cult, which one is most likely to encounter in media and conversation, holds:

> Certain manipulative and authoritarian groups which allegedly employ mind control and pose a threat to mental health are universally labelled cults. These groups are usually: 1) authoritarian in their leadership; 2) communal and totalistic in their organization; 3) aggressive in their proselytizing; 4) systematic in their programs of indoctrination; 5) relatively new and unfamiliar in [Western societies]; and 6) middle class in their clientele. (Robbins/Anthony, 1982: 283)

This definition has replaced, in popular imaginary, a more neutral one, proposed by James T. Richardson:

> A cult is usually defined as a small informal group lacking a definite authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development (although often possessing a some-

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7   While the present author focuses on LARP's resistance against commodification, that resistance is not always successful. For-profit LARP systems, such as the Italian HUP, and theatre companies that offer a LARP-like experience to their audiences, such as Les Enfants Terribles, Shotgun Carousel, and Secret Cinema, blur the line between carnivalesque LARP and codified theatre.

what charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture. (1993: 349)

Curious Pastimes, like many other UK-based LARP systems, does not align with the popular-negative definition of a cult. It lacks a clearly defined and enforced hierarchy, relying instead on a number of frequently changing charismatic local leaders. It promotes player choice and the individuation of characters through role play. It has no doctrine or creed that the players need to subscribe to in order to participate. It attracts participants from a range of social and economic backgrounds. The second, sociological-technical, definition fits better, in that *Curious Pastimes* has an element of spontaneity in its development, is individualistically oriented, and can be considered a counter-cultural movement. But even this definition is not a perfect match. What the interviewee's comparison makes plain is the similarity between LARP as a product of fantasy, and a cult, an organisation assumed to be a product of faith. The belief set the interviewee mentions is the fantasy setting that the players find compelling enough to suspend their disbelief while they inhabit it. And while the referees are 'in charge of looking after' the rules and the narrative of the game, the players have control over how they as individuals respond to the stories presented to them. Crucially, both Live Action Role Play, as a radical carnivalesque pastime, and a cult as defined by Richardson stand outside the predominant beliefs of society, whether those beliefs are religious or based in rationality and materialism. They allow people immersed in them to reflect on the dominant social models and envision new ones.

How is LARP Similar to Religion?

It is at this point that LARP can be most productively compared to religion. Joseph Laycock argues that role-playing games generally can be compared to religion:

> First, there are many elements of *D&D* that are substantively religious – that is, they concern morality, gods, rituals, and the supernatural. …
> Second, the most significant function that *D&D* shares with religion is the possibility of experiencing a more idealized time and place. …
> Finally, by inhabiting another world we are able to look back at our own from a new perspective. … Religion provides models of humanity's place in the cosmos and enables us to think in ways that were previously impossible. The imaginary worlds of fantasy role-playing games provide similar models and can, in some cases, provide a similar form of agency. (Laycock 2015: 52–53)

Laycock's stance corroborates the New Paradigm notion that faith and fantasy are, at their core, indivisible and serve the same function. While Laycock posits that function is modelling potential realities, Landy and Saler suggest they both provide people with mystery, wonder, order and purpose – qualities necessary for enchantment. A fifth quality that can be added to that list is comfort. The New Paradigm's key principle holds that

the human mind evolved to solve practical problems following cognitive explanations, and when it proves impossible to achieve a strongly desired goal, people are open to religious explanations that promise to satisfy desires by some supernatural means. Religion thus serves as a socially supported compensator that compensates people psychologically for the lack of desired rewards. (Bainbridge 2013: 15)

The rational model of thought, overthrowing faith with knowledge, denies the comfort of this compensation. Positioning the world as knowable, it also implies it is controllable. Burtt's "world of mathematically computable motions" must obey its universal laws. And humanity, as the most sophisticated model of the Great Machine, must have mastery over these motions. However, the human lived experience, full of unpredictability and failure, is markedly different from this model. Our failure to live up to our projected role as rulers of the universe leads to feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment, perhaps the same that Aupers and Schaap cited when interviewing *World of Warcraft* gamers who showed interest in the game's religion. With no religion to compensate these feelings, new spaces emerge where we can temporarily abandon our rational outlook and reflect on our lived experience with a more compassionate eye.

When speaking about their engagement with religious themes at *Curious Pastimes*, my interviewees specifically highlighted the value of those engagements being temporary. One of the players, who embodied Alexander, a zealous priest of the Algaian religion, remarked that Alexander used the religion's tenets to justify any choices he made in the game as divinely sanctioned. It gave him a confidence that his in-game choices were correct. When asked whether he ever wanted to carry the same certainty into his daily life, the player noted:

Yeah… yeah. I think I was quite that way when I was a bit younger, so I was. But, I'm more cautious of that sort of thinking now, because I'm more aware of things like privilege and pitfalls you can fall into. So, yes, I would love to just be certain and do stuff, but I think life is actually more complicated than that. […] So, like, I think definitive statements like that are always bad. It's often troublesome. And I think it's really challenging, actually. As I got older and more aware of things… I don't think you can do that. But would I like to, just to be certain you're doing the right thing every time? Yes, if you *were* always doing the right thing. But I think there's too much chance that you won't do the right thing. (Alexander, interview by author, online, May 11, 2020)

This player acknowledged the psychological comfort he experienced in the game-space from his character being certain that he was doing the right thing, but conceded that such a totalistic outlook would be out of place in his daily life.

As briefly mentioned before, the structure that allows players to both subscribe to a rational-materialist outlook in their daily lives and experience enchantment in the game-space is called the Magic Circle. The term, introduced by Johan Huizinga, draws upon the similarities of ritual and play space:

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis-court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e.

> [...] All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga 2013 [1938]: 10)

The Magic Circle is a space that facilitates the experience of enchantment and provides a boundary between the temporary magical reality and the mundane rational world. Thus, within the Magic Circle of a LARP game, players are able to experience both the enchantment of fantasy and the enchantment of faith, that they feel restricted from in their daily lives. It would be misleading to say that the Magic Circle is populated by characters, while the players reside solely in the mundane world. The players do have access into the Magic Circle (by virtue of their mental states becoming indistinguishable from those of their characters as they suspend disbelief), but change the lens through which they see the world from rational to magical. This provides them both with the emotional benefits of enchantment and the ability to reflect on the mundane world from a profoundly altered position.

The Religion of the Algaians

Live Action Role Play designers can approach the topic of religion in two different ways: by making the game itself about religion, or by including religion into the fantasy world so that it impacts the characters' behaviour and outlooks. In both these cases, religion plays a diegetic role within the narrative – it is actively present in the fantasy world. Games about religion are likely to directly call into question the players' assumptions regarding the topic. For instance, Lizzie Stark and Nick Fortugno's system *This Miracle* invites two groups of players to each 'build a set of religious myths, ceremonies and artefacts', and then to interact with them, one group acting as 'pilgrims' and the other as keepers of the 'home temple' (Stark 2015: n.p.). In another example, the horror LARP game *Pan* combines aspects of esotericism and psychotherapy to explore themes of identity and nature. In both cases, religious elements are implicit in the game from the outset. Conversely, *Curious Pastimes* falls into the second category as a system where fictional religions are present, but do not form the thematic core of the game. This allows for these fictional religions to develop on the side-lines and come to influence the fantasy world in much the same way as real religions influence ours. In order to be involved with religious plotlines at *Curious Pastimes*, players need to make a conscious choice to do so. And this is the choice made by the participants of the Goddess ritual, one of whom admitted, that "we don't really think that we'd be able to play non-religious characters at LARP, because that's fundamentally what we're doing it for. I want to do LARP to get that false religious aspect" (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021). However, while not compulsory, religious aspects of *Curious Pastimes* are also not exclusive of any players.

The player base at *Curious Pastimes* represents a Warhost of allied factions. These factions are distinguished by their culture and religion. While all factions in *Curious Pastimes* have some form of religious structure, Algaia is the only faction whose identity is actively built around a religion. This attracts players who are interested in exploring themes of spirituality and faith, and informs the plotlines that are written for the faction as a whole. The official *Curious Pastimes* website describes Algaia as

the Children of the Goddess: spiritual, respectful of the land and driven with a passion to rid the world of evils that plague the good people of the factions. Many among the Warhost are seen as zealots; filled with the strength of The Goddess they oppose the unnatural in whatever guise it takes, be it demon, undead or other manner of strange creature. Some take this to the extreme and dedicate every waking moment to the path of the Goddess. Known as her Swords, these powerful warrior-priests are beacons of light against the darkness who rally the faithful around them. Some are people of the forests or seas, scouts, sailors and rangers who venerate The Hunter, the noble protector that is son, father and husband to The Goddess. ('Factions', *Curious Pastimes*, n/d, n.p.)

In terms of metatextual inspiration, the Algaian religion is modelled on modern paganism, especially Wicca, with its worship of an Earth Goddess and a Hunter God. The name 'Algaia', derived from Gaia, the Ancient Greek personification of the Earth later used by Lovelock and Margulis as a concept of the animate planet, also attests to the religion's similarity with real world earth-centric spiritualities for a discussion of the Gaia hypothesis.

The Goddess and Hunter are largely absent from the fictional world, but communicate with characters through revelations (information covertly imparted by the referees). Their will is loosely codified in the religion's tenets, which are kept purposefully vague to encourage players to find their own meanings and ways of worshipping the divine. They are:

Tenets of the Goddess	Tenets of the Hunter
The goddess is within you; Do what you know to be right.	There are four seasons. Learn their rhythm, hear their story.
The goddess is the land; Protect her.	The Hunter will take you. Fight him for every moment.
The goddess is balance; Strive to keep her sacred cycles.	Go to him full of joy.
The goddess embraces freedom; All souls are free.	Show respect. For your prey, for those you feed, and for yourself.
The goddess is giving; Give freely all you can offer.	The strong survive, and the weak perish. The Pack is the strongest.

In addition to the tenets, the religion reifies the Cycle, the continuous emergence of death from life and life from death. Agriculture and hunting are seen as quasi-devotional activities and creatures that defy the Cycle (e.g. revenants, who do not die fully but exist in a half-life state) are persecuted. In addition to ordinary worshippers, there are also 'paths', specific modes of character progression associated with devotion. There are three

paths: the Swords of the Goddess, the Spears of the Hunter, and the Voices, who are able to interact with both. Characters who are on a path are zealots, seen by others as both exemplary and dangerous in their devotion.

The development of this fictional religion loosely follows the trends in the modern pagan community. Notably, the change from a chiefly Goddess-focused religion to the introduction of a balancing male aspect. In the 1990s, pagan authors such as Michael Howard and Alan Richardson lamented the excision of the male divine out of modern pagan movements:

> During the last thirty years the spiritual emphasis of the neo-pagan revival has been focused on the feminine principle or Goddess. This is an understandable reaction to the negative images of the male aspect of the Deity and male energy that have manifested in the patriarchal religions over the last 2000 years.
> Unfortunately, … [m]any pagans in rejecting patriarchal views and authority have also rejected the masculine principle in their spirituality and denigrated male energy as something which is intrinsically evil and tainted. (Howard in Jackson 1996: 5)

And

> In recent times, the inevitable backlash to thousands of years of repressive patriarchy and de-valuation of the feminine has led to the re-emergence of women's spirituality and a new respect for the ancient Goddess. Yet now the balance seeks equilibrium – not a denial of men and everything male, but a new equality between the sexes. (Richardson 1992: n.p.)

This signalled a change of attitudes within parts of the community, that started championing the Horned God and other male deities throughout the 90s and 00s.[8] Similarly, upon the foundation of *Curious Pastimes* in 1996, Algaia was monotheistic and only worshipped the Goddess. That changed around a decade later, with the introduction of the Hunter, a god representing the male aspect of nature, worshipped by a small group of players within the faction. Over the years, the players' interest in the Hunter grew and, though the original group that worshipped him is no longer extant, he is accepted as a part of the Algaian pantheon. However, his equality to the Goddess is still precarious, with some parts of the faction arguing that he is the Goddess' champion, but not a deity in his own right.

Modern pagan influences extend beyond Algaia and inform parts of the wider game world of *Curious Pastimes*. Most notably, the structure of in-game rituals is closely derived from Wiccan ritual practices. Most Live Action Role Play systems, *Curious Pastimes* included, contain two main types of magic: spellcasting and ritual. Spellcasting involves vocal commands with immediate effect, and is most often used in combat. For example, a player may say "By the spirits at my command I call forth power and strike thee with a mighty blow to thy spirit. Spirit bolt!" while indicating a target with 30 feet. The target

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8   For examples, see above and also *Horns of Power: Manifestations of the Horned God*, ed. by Sorita d'Este, (London: BM Avalonia, 2008) and *Call of the God: an anthology exploring the divine masculine within modern paganism*, ed. by Frances Billinghurst (Salisbury Downs: TDM Publishing, 2015).

must then fall to the ground to indicate that they have been knocked off their feet by a bolt of energy. Rituals, on the other hand, are used to solicit favours from the supernatural forces of the fictional world. For instance, a ritual might be used to create a magically imbued weapon against a particularly powerful adversary. Rituals are often complex, dramatic affairs, performed by a group of players, called a ritual team. A designated referee observes the ritual and decides on its outcome (ranging from complete success to catastrophic failure) based on clarity, theme, performance, and the feasibility of what is being asked. Despite the *Curious Pastimes* rulebook not outlining a prescribed ritual structure, in-game rituals follow a structure that is widespread across multiple UK-based LARP systems, the oldest among which and the likely point of origin in *Lorien Trust*, founded in 1992. This structure closely resembles Wiccan ritual, with both Wicca and LARP rituals drawing on 'ceremonial' magic of the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century (Curious Pastimes 2016: 59).

A Wiccan ritual, as described by Janet and Stewart Farrar, takes place in a circle, marked out in chalk or string. It proceeds, with some variation, through the following steps: consecrate the space; draw the circle, marking magical space away from the mundane; call the entities that are being solicited for aid; perform the rite; offer recompense; dismiss the summoned entities and erase the circle (Farrar 1984: 16). Similarly, a *Curious Pastimes* ritual takes place in a ritual circle, a specially marked location in the game space. In the logic of the game, the circle is protected by wards, an impenetrable field that prevents rituals from being casually interrupted by other characters. In order to step into the circle, the ritual team must first lower the wards. Then, they proceed to cleanse the ritual space of any previous energies, raise the wards, and invoke the powers they intend to work with. Following that, they state their intent and offer recompense, usually in a form of a sacrifice. The Algaian ritual team specifically, with whom I have played during my participant observation, tends to act out a little scene to prove that they are worthy of the boon they are asking for or to demonstrate what effect is desired. After this has been done, the invoked entities are thanked and dismissed, the ritual space is cleansed and the wards are lowered. Within the ritual circle, members of the ritual team can take on the roles of the supernatural figures they invoke; in the case of Algaia, these are usually the Goddess and the Hunter. This, too, bears a close similarity with the modern pagan practice of adopting an aspect of a deity during a ritual.

In-Game Religion as a Way of Reflecting on the World

Considering the similarities discussed above: the ditheistic worship of a Goddess and God, the focus on nature, the gradual development to acknowledge both female and male divinity, and the ritual structure, it may be tempting to argue that the Algaian religion is Wicca. This argument may even be bolstered by the visible presence of practitioners of modern paganism among Live Action Role Players. However, in my research, I am yet to encounter a respondent who would conflate in-game ritual and devotional activity with out-of-character religious observances. When describing strong emotional, arguably transcendental, responses to encountering the divine in the game-space, players do not attempt to map that divinity onto a deity worshipped in the real world. Thus, one

of my respondents, whose character is a fervent adherent of the Hunter, and who is aware that the Hunter is inspired by the god Cernunnos, never refers to the Hunter **as** Cernunnos. The same player called his in-game spiritual experiences 'faux' and, when asked what makes them 'faux' for him, elaborated:

> ultimately, I know that it's make-believe. We are playing a game. That is where the falseness comes from for me. The knowledge that... My rational sense being able to go, 'you are having a really nice time, and I'm suspending disbelief, but ultimately we know that this is not real.' (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021)

However, he actively pursues and values the experiences without requiring them to be 'real.' In another instance, when asked whether an in-game ritual structured like a pagan rite is equivalent to a pagan rite, a player responded:

> So, they're not real... No, I guess is what you're asking is 'are they... are they the same as somebody doing a ritual with a religious purpose'? Well, I guess, again, if I were a person who did real-life rituals around Stonehenge, then I might make that connection and not really see any difference. [...] I'd like to make a distinction... But, that wall gets very, very thin, the more you're immersed in it. And ultimately it would be grand if it could just collapse, but maybe that's why it's called role-play and not real-play. (Bartos, interview by author, online, March 31, 2020)

Both role-play and pagan practice are placed against the 'real', rational-materialist experience of the everyday world, but there still remains a wall (albeit a very thin one) between in-game ritual and ritual conducted for religious purposes. The mention of immersion in the last quotation supports Laycock's argument that "for a subset of 'magical gamers', role-playing games do play an important role in making magical ideas seem plausible", and that "realistic models of magic [within the game] make it possible to interpret events outside the game through a magical worldview" (Laycock 2015: 202–03). Not only does LARP itself help players reflect on and re-envision their lived experience, religious elements within LARP games aid magical thinking, a form of natural cognition described by Robert N. McCauley in *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (2015), and a way of seeing the world that is radically alternative to the rational-materialist norm.

The use of real-world religious elements to increase immersion in the game is further championed by *Authentic Thaumaturgy* (1998), a book by a modern pagan practitioner and role-player Isaac Bonewits. The author's self-proclaimed purpose is

> to get people thinking about subtlety and creativity in game magic. By understanding the nature of psychic powers and magical techniques as they appear to operate in this universe ... you will be ready to play any of the current popular fantasy games with far more realism than before. (ibid: 6)

Bonewits writes that an understanding of how magic and religion function in real life allows the players to create more consistent magic systems in their games, which makes them feel more real, that is, more engrossing. But magic in the everyday world and game magic are not conflated, as he reinforces by writing that the book "is *not* a full introduc-

tion to magic and readers should *not* attempt to do real world magic based only upon these pages and the rules of whatever game you regularly play" (ibid: 7). The goal here is not to reproduce a version of a real-world religion in the game space, but to tell a compelling narrative. Even though the Algaian religion is obviously based on Wicca, a significant portion of its devotional practices is derived from Catholicism. When asked about the reason for this syncretism, a former plot-writer explained that, in his eyes, Christian ritual would be more familiar to the players and would be received with more solemnity:

> I think it also adds a weight to it. Like, immediately it does something that you haven't got to explain. You haven't got to explain what a Christian ritual is, you know it's a religious ritual, you know it's a hugely important thing. So, you don't need to explain it in character, because there's already this out of character cultural knowledge. That symbology and all the pomp and ceremony translates over. And you can see it's massively important to these people and you understand how they feel about it because of your real-world knowledge. (Alejandro Sforza, interview by author, online, May 16, 2021)

While the suspension of disbelief in the game's Magic Circle helps players in accessing religious experiences, the use of religion in the game also aids the creation of an immersive, enchanted atmosphere for the game. The two work in tandem and reinforce each other.

Just as the fantasy world of the LARP system and its mundane counterpart are complexly interpellated states, so the religious experiences in LARP are not finite or self-contained. In addition to being pleasurable for the players going through them, they prompt reflection on the roles of faith, fantasy and various extant religious movements in the mundane world. Reflecting on his encounter with the Goddess, one of the interviewees commented:

> There was like a moment, this is just real, this isn't fake, I'm not at LARP currently, I'm just experiencing something. And sort of afterwards, you go, 'I can see why people during religious ceremonies are just convinced that their gods are with them.' Because if you believed in gods anyway, and then had an experience like that, it's just confirming your belief. Or, I felt like it would confirm your belief. (Alexander, interview by author, online, May 11, 2020)

In addition to a general understanding of other people's experience, exploring religion in LARP can aid in the understanding of real-world religious and political issues, as stated by a player whose character formerly followed the spiritual path of the Spears of the Hunter:

> I always have this image of what the Spears were, and it's basically [the Islamic State]. They were militants who were extremely violent and fundamentalist. I guess that was influenced by that going on in the world at the time. I do remember thinking a lot of the time, 'religion is so intoxicating. You can make people do whatever you want if they believe in this.' And that was a really powerful realisation for me. (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021)

Indisputably, quasi‑religious experiences in Live Action Role Play prompt questions about the role of religion in our society. The enduring interest in spiritual exploration shows that the rational, materialistic interpretation of the world in unable to expunge a magical worldview. Following the New Paradigm, a religious outlook not only seems necessary as a psychological compensator, but also inevitable as a by‑product of our ability to model conscious thought in other beings. Fantasy, while imbued with many of the same qualities of enchantment previously provided by religion, appears unable to fully fulfil religion's function. However, due to both fantasy and religion requiring a suspension of disbelief achieved within the Magic Circle, the two can share a space apart. An example of such a space in *Curious Pastimes* LARP system affords the players an opportunity to experience enchantment they feel restricted from in their daily lives, and to reflect upon issues of the mundane world by modelling them in the game‑space. Enjoying the benefits of both a rational and a magical outlook, each given its proper space, the players are able to appreciate the value of both.

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Part IIa – Practice: Game Design

Conjuring *The Witch's Way*
Game Design as Magic and Spiritual Practice

Doris C. Rush and Andrew M. Phelps

Introduction

> As first nights go, this wasn't the worst. You just woke up in Auntie's cottage and actually feel rested. You haven't gotten a good night's sleep in a while and usually new places make you nervous. But the moment your ear touched the pillow in the small but friendly upstairs bedroom, with the window overlooking the garden, you were out. It was like catching up on a year of sleepless nights. Everything around you exuded an air of calm order and protection. Your otherwise voracious thoughts, found no fodder to chew on the moment you slipped between the cool, clean, white cotton linens. You noticed a faint scent of lavender. (Rusch/Phelps 2021b: n.p.)

So begins the transformative adventure game *The Witch's Way*, in which you play a middle-aged woman named Lou, who decides to take a time out from her busy and outwardly successful but inwardly unfulfilled life and move to the cottage in the woods her aunt has left her. There, she establishes contact with nature, the Unknown Forest behind the cottage, and the mysterious beings that dwell within it. Guided by animal spirits, a wise and quirky bookshelf, and her aunt's magical clues, Lou learns about the Witch's Way and how to live in greater alignment with herself and the world around her. Conceptualised in four seasons, the first part, "Spring", is ready for release and is the basis for this paper. It focuses on the re-awakening of creativity through three technologies of magic: wordlessness, oneness, and imagination (Beck 2012). It is founded on several years of research on existential, transformational game design, which addresses the bigger question of how we can design games that contribute to a meaningful life. The existential, transformational game design framework draws on existential psychotherapy as well as myth and ritual studies (particularly from a psychotherapeutic perspective) and in conjunction with experiential notions of play and design. Rusch has published about this more theoretical work elsewhere together with Phelps, (Rusch 2018; 2020; Rusch/Phelps

2020; 2021a), who is also a collaborator on *The Witch's Way*, responsible for its technical and aesthetic implementation and art illustration. As the primary reader, his feedback has been essential for shaping the story.

Numerous scholars and designers have approached game design from various perspectives, including those based on game mechanics (Adams/Domans, 2012), those focused on rulesets (Tekinbas/Zimmerman, 2004), those exploring emotion (Freeman 2004; Isbister 2016), and those exploring psychological approaches to character design (Isbister 2006). Some scholars have also approached design through a broader context and multi-disciplinary approach (Shell 2008; Fullerton 2013). The design of *The Witch's Way* takes the leap of faith from theory into creative practice, aiming to apply salient aspects and strategies presented in the existential, transformative game design framework to actual game design. The design process leveraged Jungian psycho-technologies (e.g. active imagination and dream work) to surface unconscious, psychologically resonant content (Goodwyn 2012; 2016). By investigating the leap – the subtle, invisible, liminal space of creative work where theory takes form in new and unanticipated ways – this paper aims to inspire fellow creatives. It also aims to share the journey of how diving deep into the soul to examine and engage personal themes through symbolism and imagery that aim to ignite transformation in others can also transform designers and developers of such work themselves. The dialogue between *The Witch's Way's* main author, Doris, and her collaborator Andy, was instrumental to the entire design process. Hence, the following text gives voice to both perspectives and experiences. As Andy and Doris discuss the personal aspects of the game's themes and imagery, they speak in first person, with clear demarcations of whose turn it is. This process corresponds to their collaboration in a bigger sense, which is an ongoing dialogue about games, design, academia, and life. This continuous exchange of ideas feeds into the existential themes of identity, meaning, purpose and connection and provides the encompassing framework within which a fictional (and academic) practice of spirituality can flourish.

What Magic Is This?

Before we begin, a warning: we will speak of witches, witchcraft, and magic: what you read might change you. It might change your perception of yourself, of others, and of the natural world. This is how we understand what it means to be a witch: the ability to transcend perceptual boundaries of culture and social environments and to really, fully pay attention to the natural world and to see ourselves as an inherent part of it. It is about shifting the emphasis of our consciousness at will towards attending to the world with our right brain hemisphere. Magic is inherent in our consciousness, because what we pay attention to (and **how** we pay attention) changes whatever it meets. It changes what we are in relation with and how we can access the energy web of the natural world with which we are entangled. As McGilchrist writes, the right brain relates to the Other:

> to whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation. It is deeply attracted to, and given life by, the relationship, the betweenness, that exists with the Other. By contrast, the left hemisphere pays attention to the vir-

tual world that it has created, which is self-consistent but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other, making it powerful – but also curiously impotent, because it is ultimately only able to operate on, and to know itself. (2019: 23)

There is not one definition we can draw on to pinpoint what we mean when we speak of 'witches'. Our understanding is informed by several sources from anthropology, ecology, neuroscience, and consciousness studies. Also Terry Pratchett. Always also Terry Pratchett. The closest to a working definition of our interpretations of 'witch' and 'magic' is from David Abram's (2017) wonderful book *The Spell of the Sensuous.* Taking an ecological perspective, he starts by explaining what characterizes a sorcerer:

> The ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture – boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language – in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations – songs, cries, gestures – of the larger, more-than-human field. (ibid: 9)

Abram goes on to unpack the idea of magic:

> Magic, then, in its perhaps most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives – from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself – is an *experiencing* form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own. (ibid: 11–10)

We will come back to our understanding of witches and magic later on, but this should have set the tone. No hocus-pocus. Just a good dose of right-brained attending to the natural world.

The Witch's Way is about the becoming of a witch: Lou. Lou doesn't necessarily want to become a witch. In fact, she is not quite sure she believes in magic and all that. Well, at least the part of her that doubts really doesn't. The part that knows, though, has a different view and, as usual, the two parts bicker and disagree about this. She moves into the cottage she inherited from her aunt to take a break from her life and figure out what she should do with it, unaware of its secrets. Since (at least initially) the part that doubts has the upper hand in Lou's active and restless mind, it is a bit of a surprise to Lou that the cottage is fueled by a Thaum Pump: a powerful device that taps into environmental magic to protect and care for the house and its inhabitants. It is also a surprise that her aunt was the powerful witch who kept that pump Up and running and – most importantly, in check – and ensured the balance and healthy exchange between all living things in the surroundings while she lived. Surprise is maybe a bit of an understatement: downright shock might be more accurate. The thing about Thaum Pumps is that, if there is no competent witch around that manages the powerful flow of energy it catalyses, they tend to go berserk. Lou has an opportunity here: to learn about magic, turn her life around and become the witch she was always meant to be. The only question is whether she can do it before the Thaum Pump goes kablooey and unleashes all sorts of nastiness?

Andy: The Thaum Pump was what instantly drew me into this world, because I've always been fascinated with magic not just as a thematic element, but as a system. *The Witch's Way* engages in a fairly common form of magical realism (Hart/Ouyang 2005: 3) wherein the main character, Lou, learns about magic being real while those around her, for the most part, have no such knowledge. I've always been fascinated in not just what magic did in narratives, but in how it worked, and who knows what about that process. When I first read (or had read to me as a child) *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis 1980) I was fascinated with how Narnia existed in a way that intertwined and interconnected with the real world, how it served allegorical purposes and grounded and shaped its characters. And yet how one had to believe in it for it to exist: that it was powerful but fragile, even fickle. When I read *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 1999), I was far more interested in how Gandalf knew things, and when he knew them, and how spells worked, and what the runes meant, than anything else. This interest in magic as a system, as a coherent and logical thing that is at once both incoherent and illogical but, importantly, consistent, occurs again and again in my imagination that has been informed by countless stories, books, texts, movies, games and more. From early *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax/Arneson 1974) to Hogwarts's wizards and muggles (Rowling 1998), this focus on the relationship between the mystical and the mundane has captured my interest. And this interplay, the idea of a magical furnace that must be maintained, this force that must be wielded a la Thomas Covenant (Donaldson 1991), but that requires personal balance instantly resonated with me. It was the first illustration I planned because it is the first moment I connected with both halves of Lou: the part that knows, and the part that doubts, in equal measure. I could see it in my mind exactly, fully formed, throbbing (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The Thaum Pump from The Witch's Way (Rusch/Phelps 2021b)
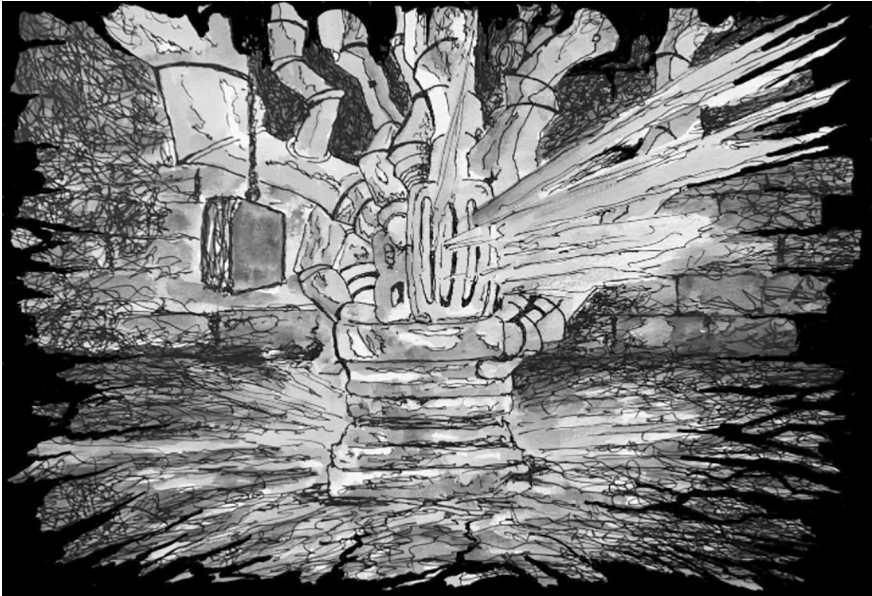
Doris: Lou's journey parallels my own. I didn't move to a cottage in the forest, at least not right away –I now live in a place very much like the one described in *The Witch's Way*, complete with two cats, Ghost and Spunk, and surrounded by nature and the Baltic Sea. Like Lou, I also found myself good and stuck a few years back: my career had gone pretty well so far, but despite academic success, I felt adrift, purposeless and alone. From 2007–2010, I was struggling through the tail end of a 12-year long relationship and had no clue who I was if not a researcher, who I would become once I left MIT (where I held a temporary postdoctoral position), how my work even mattered in the greater scheme of things, and what I was supposed to do with my life. It seemed like everything I had believed in and took strength from was challenged at the same time. When you find yourself in a hole, the best strategy is to stop digging. I therefore decided to stop chasing the next publication, grant, award, and to focus my considerable energy and resourcefulness to rediscover what actually brought me joy!

This was much harder than it might sound. If you've lived most of your life for external approval and pats on the back for some kind of achievement or other, letting go of that as a goal is hard. Yet, what was at stake was my feeling of aliveness, and I decided that was worth some discomfort. So began the most intense and scary research phase of my entire career thus far, because I dedicated my efforts not to yet another publication but to 'project Doris'. How frivolous! And I decided – much to the chagrin of the part that doubts – to put my scepticism about anything 'unscientific' on hold and just explore **everything** that held the promise of an answer about how to navigate out of this mess I found myself in, and into something that felt...well...better! Granted, being a game design researcher provided an excellent starting point. Much better than, let's say, if I had been a lawyer! One of the most life-changing books I could read at that moment was right in front of my nose: Stuart Brown's (2009) *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul.* The other book that opened the door towards a much happier, healthier life was Julia Cameron's (2002) *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity.* From there, I spent the next decade diving into the study (both through books and embodied experience) of improvisational theater (e.g. Johnstone 1992; Wiener 1994; Madson 2005), psychodrama (e.g. Moreno/Moreno 2011; Dayton 1994), the mind and mind-body connection (e.g. Siegel 2010; 2016; Lakoff/Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987; Lawley/Tompkins 2000; Halprin 2003; Varela et al. 1993), mythology (e.g. Cameron 2002; Campbell 2004; May 1991; Larson 1996), and ritual as psychomagic (Jodorowsky 2010; 2015). What fueled and informed all of these approaches to some degree or another were play, creativity, imagery, and experiential, embodied, symbolic action. They used different terms for similar concepts and were all directed in one way or another towards getting out of one's head, towards a deeper, more unself-conscious layer, from which one could explore new ways of acting and being, discover and act from a more authentic core self – one informed by playfulness and spontaneity – and, harnessing the mind-body connection, move towards a greater sense of joy and harmony. Since then, play and creativity have become very intentional key concepts that govern my life. I honor and trust them to get the job done. They replaced a puritan work ethic with a healthier and – alas! – more productive way of doing things. They are also, I argue, at the center of the kind of magic that informs *The Witch's Way.*

Andy: In similar fashion, I had just left the university I had been at for over twenty years, left behind the programs, school, and research centre that I had founded there over a multi-faceted history as an academic and administrator, and set out on a year of sabbatical to reclaim both a new career focused on design based research and a new life with different places, people, and experiences (Phelps 2019). It's easy to type that now, and it almost even seems logical, but of course none of it was either: I remember feeling completely unmoored, adrift, and largely alone. I moved to a new city (Washington, DC) and a new country (New Zealand) and created a strange, multi-faceted life that while it is inefficient and makes very little sense, has at times during the last year finally fed my soul again. Reclamation of self is a very difficult thing. And so, as I read early drafts of *The Witch's Way*, I would suggest specific turns of phrase, little bits of language or idioms that had personal resonance to me during this period, as I was Lou and she was me. I could see in her the insecurity, the self-doubt, the frustration and the hurt I felt when I left RIT, but also the drive, the will, and the stoic force to succeed. And thus, the game for me very quickly became a mirror, and I started putting little bits of myself into it around the edges, offering feedback to Doris with our long messenger discussions.

Magic is Being in Harmony with (One's True) Nature

And what magic is this, exactly? Magic, as understood in *The Witch's Way*, is not supernatural: it is extremely natural. Nature is magic. It strives towards the fulfilment of its inherent purpose – from seed to plant to flower to releasing seeds to becoming part of the earth again. For humans, the answer to the question of purpose tends to be a bit more complex. Sure, one way to look at it from a biologist perspective may also just be reproduction. Many of us, however, do not find the idea of producing offspring to be the only answer to all our existential questions, our longing for meaning and purpose in life! In that regard, we may be slightly more complicated than the common dandelion. It assumes, however, that we all have a true nature, an authentic self, an inherent purpose or calling that is unique to us, and that living in alignment with this true nature is the key to the **feeling of aliveness** and fulfilling that which we feel we absolutely must do. To be sure, the true or authentic self is a tricky concept that has been subject of debate in the social sciences. Can there be an authentic self, when we occupy different roles depending on different social contexts? Is our 'true self' inborn or socially constructed? Postmodernist social science has thus made a point of seeing authenticity as relative. An in-depth discussion of the different conceptualisations of the authentic self goes beyond the scope of this paper, but Vannini and Franzese (2008) offer a good overview and references for further reading. In this paper, authentic/true/core self/nature are used interchangeably and are understood as psychological as well as poetic ideas, grounded in the inner feeling of aliveness and full engagement without inhibitions through external oppression.

As existential psychotherapist James Bugental (1990) notes: "viewed from an existential perspective, the good life is an authentic life, a life in which we are as fully in harmony as we can be. Inauthenticity is illness, is our living life in distorted relationship with our true being." (246). This experience of deep, inner harmony is what Joseph Campbell (2004)

has called bliss, "that deep sense of being present, of doing what you absolutely must do to be yourself." (xxiii). He continues:

> Your bliss can guide you to the transcendent mystery, because bliss is the welling up of the transcendent wisdom within you. So when the bliss cuts off, you know you've cut off the welling up; try to find it again. And that will be your Hermes guide, the dog that can follow the invisible trail for you. And that's the way it is. One works out one's own myth that way. (xxiv)

In *The Witch's Way*, Lou encounters a dog (named Dog) in the forest. Dog becomes the guide towards her bliss; he puts her on the trail to her truth. The design of Dog was not making a conscious reference to Campbell. It just happened. The wounded and beaten dog in the forest was just the image that presented itself when trying to connect to the energy of joy. The dog became an emblem for the instinctual part that knows the way to the feeling of unencumbered bliss and inner freedom.

James Hillman (1996) also famously expands on the idea of true nature – only that he calls it 'soul' – in *The Soul's Code*, where he presents the acorn theory, "which holds that each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived" (6). It is a mythological approach to understanding psychological development, personal meaning and our very biographies. Just like the acorn carries a fully formed image of the oak tree inside itself and will inevitably strive towards the realisation of this image, humans – according to this theory – are born with a destiny written into their souls that wants to be expressed, realised, and lived. It is important to note that destiny does not refer to anything external and it should not be confused with religious notions of fate. Destiny is an inner urge that springs from one's unique personality blueprint. Taking a stance against an overly scientific and thus constraining view on the mystery of existence, Hillman (1996) writes:

> There is more in human life than our theories of it allow. Sooner or later something seems to call us onto a particular path. You may remember this "something" as a signal moment in childhood when an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is what I've got to have. This is who I am. (3)

Sounds great, so what's the problem? The problem is that there are many external forces that work against our true nature, that cannot accept it, might even feel threatened by it, and hence aim to – more or less consciously and deliberately – destroy it. As a sociologist by training, Beck has a systemic perspective on transformation. Social expectations and structures are what push us from our authentic path. She writes "At your deepest level, you know what makes you happy and how to create your best life possible. But your nature is forever colliding with a force that can tear it apart: culture" (Beck 2021: xiv). She goes on to explain that by culture she means "the set of social standards that shapes the way people think and act" (ibid: xvi). In our desire to belong, we conform to these cultures and thus sacrifice our own genuine feelings. "At that point, we are divided in ourselves.

We aren't in integrity (one thing) but in duplicity (two things). Or we may try to fit in with a number of different groups, living in multiplicity (many things)" (ibid: xv).

Holding with James Hillman (1996), Stuart Brown (2009), Julia Cameron (2002), Keith Johnstone (1992) and oh so many luminaries who have practiced, researched and written about calling, meaning, play, and creativity, Beck also observes that we know who we are and what genuinely speaks to us when we are children; we know how to **be** and **create** in a unique, genuine, and unself- conscious way. Later in life (by the time we reach the ripe old age of five or even earlier), this blissful feeling of true 'aliveness' often gets educated and raised out of us and – if we want to live an authentic life that is filled with unique meaning and purpose – we have to recover it, find our way back to it. This is all the more difficult and even at times dangerous, if what is authentic to us goes against socially accepted norms.

The witch as an archetype (and the way it is understood in *The Witch's Way*) represents this unapologetic authenticity that survives and thrives outside the norm. The witch is the sovereign over their true nature. The witch stands firm and unmoved in the eye of the hurricane of social and cultural pressures and expectations. Maya Deren (1947) writes in her notebook, which she kept while doing field studies in Bali:

> A witch is, actually, a successful (in the sense of surviving) deviant. You have a cultural, ideological, social, what-not pattern which is, for that society in question, normal (and, importantly, that is understood as a synonym for *natural*.) Most people survive because they conform to these patterns – because they behave normally. Then suddenly you have someone not behaving 'normally,' and usually they cannot survive, since having rejected the system and its support they go under, so to speak, and are referred to as 'subnormal,' 'maladjusted,' and other such terms which have a negative relation to the standard norm. But then suddenly you get a deviant which survives, and since it does not draw its support from the normal pattern – and since the normal people only consider themselves as natural – that deviant is understood as drawing its support from 'unknown,' 'supernatural' sources. This 'independence' of the accepted, natural pattern upon which the normals are dependent jibes, of course, with the universal attributes of witches as being 'solitary,' owning cats (since cats share this independence), etc. (33)

This is what Lou must learn in *The Witch' Way*: the struggle that characterises her becoming. Her creativity and true self are locked up in perceived expectations and norms and recovering them comes at a risk, as being different tends to be constructed as being dangerous. Deren continues:

> For the survival of the witch independent of the accepted pattern means that she is simultaneously a manifestation of a non 'normal' order which is apparently integrated and strong enough to sustain life. But it is characteristic of the 'normal' that he cannot conceive of the simultaneous existence of dualities – that his way is the only possible way – and consequently the sheer existence of another order capable of sustaining life is a threat and a source, potentially, of destruction. They are afraid, for they think: If we cannot survive without our order, how can she survive in solitude? Hers must be indeed a very powerful order to exist so independently, without all the intercooper-

ation and individual compromise which we have to go through to survive. And if it is so powerful, then it could destroy us. We must try to destroy it first. (ibid: 33–34)

Witches wield great power due to their authenticity and integrity. Their magic lies in being themselves. It is a magic that comes at a high risk, requires a great deal of courage, insight, and passion, as well as lifelong practice. It should be noted, though, that while a strong, personal sovereignty is key to the notion of the witch here, witches are not condemned to a solitary existence. We can be individually strong together! We created *The Witch's Way* and this paper as a team. Our work is embedded in a larger social context along with a few fellow creatives and researchers, whom we playfully refer to as our 'coven': Sarah Lynne Bowman, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, Josefin Westborg and Josephine Baird. We are a research group at Uppsala University, dedicated to the exploration of 'transformative play' through role playing games and symbolic enactment. One of our big aims is to contribute to a 'Soulful and Sustainable Academia' aka 'Operation SASSY'. We cultivate and celebrate our individual so-called 'deviance' and support each other in staying in our integrity so we can keep our lamps lit and help others do the same despite the manifold pressures and expectations that are inherent in academia as a system.

Doris: *The Witch's Way* – born from my own, deep desire to recover my bliss and fascination and let it guide me again on the way to my calling – is about the magic inherent in living an authentic life, in accordance with my play personality and against perceived pressures and norms of society in general and academia in particular. This magic manifests not only in the exquisite feeling of aliveness but also in extraordinary synchronicities. Jung discusses the concept of synchronicity as an 'acausal connecting principle': encounters, events and opportunities that lack an obvious causal connection, yet to the mind appear meaningfully related (Jung 1973). Greenwood and Goodwyn (2015) speak of a 'magical consciousness' that is at work when ascribing meaning to these causally unrelated events. Julia Cameron (2002) gives examples for these kinds of occurrences in her book *The Artist's Way*: e.g. "A woman admits to a buried dream of acting. At dinner the next night, she sits beside a man who teaches beginning actors" (62). Cameron elaborates on the role of synchronicity in recovering one's creativity and leading an authentic life:

> In my experience, the universe falls in with worthy plans and most especially with festive and expansive ones. I have seldom conceived a delicious plan without being given the means to accomplish it. Understand that the *what* must come before the *how*. First choose *what* you would do. The *how* usually falls into place. (ibid: 65–66)

Synchronicity is the phenomenon that facilitates the realisation of what Hillman calls destiny. When we go through life fully tuned into our true nature, our authentic, aligned self, our abilities to perceive the things that will come to our aid increases tremendously. We meet the right people/mentors/friends/partners, happen to walk into the right stores, grab the perfect book that seems to have been written only for us, see exactly the advertisement for the art class we have been looking for, etc. Why? Because our inner GPS towards our True North is up and running full steam. What we are dealing with then are not supernatural forces that intervene with our destiny. The kind of magic that is at work here – and that is no less astonishing and powerful – is **perceptual**. It is based

on the interplay between inner alignment and outer opportunity, a syncing up of our energies humming on a harmonious frequency with the energies of our environment. It is about the discovery of being part of an 'energy web' of all living things as Martha Beck (2012) calls it, or, as David Abram (2017) writes,

> the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives – from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself – is an *experiencing* form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own. (10)

To become proficient at magic then, one has to learn how to access this energy web.

The Four Technologies of Magic to Transform Ourselves and Our Environment

Martha Beck (2012) calls accessing the energy web 'Wayfinder Magic'. She takes inspiration from Anthropologist Wade Davis' (2009) research on the ancient cultures, e.g. the Polynesian navigators, who discovered the Pacific Islands. With very small boats and without modern navigation tools, they found tiny patches of land in the vast, open water because these Wayfinders – some of them are still around today – have the ability to "'read' the ocean so sensitively that they recognise the refractive wave patterns of island chains hundreds of miles away by watching ocean swells break against the hull of their canoe. They use empirical observation and a dash of intuition that looks damn close to magic" (Beck 2012: xxi). Beck understands this kind of wayfinding as a metaphor, one suitable to describe the task we all face today: to chart our course in a world as fluid and ever-changing as open water, and to do so "in such a way that we not only stop the destruction of our own true nature, but reverse it. As we do that – and only as we do that – we will naturally begin healing the earth" (ibid: xxi-xxii). This interconnectedness of personal transformation and the wider, more encompassing impact on our environment this transformation can have, is key to the understanding of spirituality as it has infused my own life and the creation of *The Witch's Way.*

   Interconnectedness is also key to current approaches towards sustainability. To save the earth and effectively lead the change towards a more sustainable, equitable, and just world, we need to see ourselves as part of a big system, an interconnected web of life. Monica Sharma (2017), the author of *Radical Transformational Leadership* who designed and implemented numerous wildly impactful sustainability programs worldwide during her two-decades-long career at the United Nations, speaks of bridging our "dual and non-dual worlds" (74). Based on systems thinking, Sharma also draws on explicitly spiritual frameworks to inform her ideas about what needs to be done for lasting, impactful social change and environmental sustainability:

> The non dual universe is where you and I are one – as Rumi says '*where there is no each or other.*' The dual world is the outer world we live in, where there are differences, where our experiences are named, defined and measurable. When the dual world is

informed by our oneness – the non dual self and universe – a different set of realities and entities emerges, creating a thriving interdependent world among humans and between humans and our planet. Phenomena in the dual world are interdependent and related through cause and effect. The world operates largely in a dualistic manner with many polarities. The complex problems we currently deal with, such as the inequities of the financial system or the unending conflicts, are based upon exclusionary cultural human behaviors. They cannot be resolved by the linear reductionist thinking that created them in the first place. (ibid: 74)

Creating social change and working towards sustainability are a form of manifesting (i.e. to visualise a desire and harness the power of inner capacities and imagination to make the desire real) that taps into the same kind of magic that is at the core of *The Witch's Way.* Magic, in that sense, is not some self-absorbed mumbo jumbo. It is not just about finding individual happiness or bending something to one's will. It is about seeing oneself as part of a whole that can provide awesome things to us, but to whom we have to give back to as well. Here are the (metaphorical) Cliff's Notes from Martha Beck on the four technologies of magic that facilitate access to one's own, true nature and the wider energy web:

> **Wordlessness** shifts consciousness out of the verbal part of the brain and into the more creative, intuitive, and sensory brain regions. Which is more powerful? Well, the verbal region processes about forty bits of information per second. The nonverbal processes about eleven million bits per second. You do the math.
> **Oneness** allows you to sense the interconnection between your consciousness and that of beings apparently unconnected to you. Science now confirms that we are highly interconnected. We are basically energy vibrating at different frequencies, unbounded and overlapping.
> Once the technologies of Wordlessness and Oneness are active, **Imagination** becomes their supportive servant. Used in a state of nonverbal connection with the world around you, it will help you achieve a level of problem-solving that feels like pure fun and looks like pure genius.
> Finally, **Forming** creates in physical reality the situations, objects, and events you've had imagined. (…) There are two ways to make things happen at the stage of Forming: by moving things around with physical processes alone, or by adding physical action to the other three skills. Forming in this second way is so much more effective than simply slogging through various physical processes that it makes a wayfinder appear to be doing magic. (the following list entries in Beck 2021: xxiv).

It is striking how Sharma (2017) uses the same vocabulary in relation to her sustainability work. In the context of describing the importance of knowing who one is and what one stands for in order to bring about transformation, she states:

> Each one of us has inner power. Because of our socialization process and perhaps traumatic childhood, we are often unable to tap into this robust space. Different people and scholars refer to this space with varying expressions, such as self-awareness, inner capacity, inner power, **oneness**, wisdom, full potential. Essentially, this space is ***wordless***. It is a *way of being*. (Sharma 2017: 45–46)

These ideas of an energy web one taps into through wordlessness and oneness are also present in David Abram's (2017) work, who has studied the function (and particularly the healing powers) of traditional sorcerers of the Indonesian archipelago and the traditional shamans of Nepal. He states that the key ingredient to magical manifestation of desired outcomes (e.g. restoring health to the villagers and the surrounding environment) seems to be a certain kind of perception beyond intellectual understanding (i.e. 'wordlessness') and a focus on the interrelatedness of humans and nature ('oneness'), which emphasises harmony and balance of the whole ecosystems, rather than putting the well-being of one type of creature (e.g. humans) over others.

Cultivating wordlessness and oneness to tune into the energy web in this unself-conscious way allows for our own true nature to come to the fore, uninhibited and unencumbered by social norms or expectations and cultural constraints. The core of 'feeling alive' and personal authenticity is bigger than the self; it is inherently spiritual and it is directed towards healing, balance, and sustainability. By recognising, honoring, and healing all authentic parts within and around ourselves, we create a deeper existential connection to the planet and its critters and extend our healing efforts to the earth.

Wordlessness and oneness in particular have found their way into the first part of *The Witch's Way*. Seen this way, magic is a powerful antidote to two of these core existential concerns: death and isolation. They become illusions in the face of the eternal life-death-life cycle of nature and the idea of its interconnectedness. This idea is captured in *The Witch's Way* through the image of the aforementioned Thaum Pump – a magical device that taps into the natural power all around, its purple veins reaching deep into the earth and the Unknown Forest. It feeds the cottage, takes care of household chores, and protects the home from intruders. How well the Thaum Pump performs depends on the competence of the witch it serves. The power is always there, but how much of it can you use, and how well can you control it? It takes a lot of practice – practice of the technologies of magic, e.g. wordlessness and oneness, but also imagination and forming – to harness the Thaum Pump's potential. Throughout the game, there are barriers: the door to the Thaum Pump is initially closed, the Unknown Forest cannot be accessed etc. To cross the threshold and enter the realm of the magical, the player has to perform rituals. Rituals play a big role in the existential transformative game design framework. Their power to communicate with and influence the unconscious mind by way of symbolic action is referred to as 'psychomagic', to borrow a term from Alejandro Jodorowsky (2010; 2015). Jodorowsky has used these kinds of symbolic, 'poetic acts' in his theater counseling method to help his clients transform. The access rituals in the first part of *The Witch's Way* are all based on play and creativity. Play is how we learn, grow and transform: we cannot force any of these things. We can't will or think them into existence either – we must play. Hence, these rituals are intended to remind the player on an experiential level that they need to put their intellect, their critical self, their 'part that doubts' as it is called in the game, on pause for the sake of letting the magic work through them in play. It is what opens the door to the Thaum Pump as well as the mysteries of the Unknown Forest, a symbol for the unconscious mind in general, including the individual psyche as well as the collective unconscious.

Andy: To me, this focus on the interplay between magic and nature is a key component in the game, and again it mirrors so much of my own experience. When I was a

child, I was fascinated by the Arthurian legend (Malory 1485), not by Arthur but, of course, by Merlin, and the idea that the magic they wielded was not his own but that of Britain itself, and the connection to druidism, nature, land, death, and rebirth. The idea of a magic web fits perfectly with these very old ideas (that are, of course, based on much older ideas, simply reformulated and reworked in the tradition of the bard/storyteller for generations), but again it resonates. Also, as an only child, we moved around a lot (I mean a **lot**) and I remember much of the time being very lonely: I had several imaginary friends, and at one point an imaginary brother I would tell my secrets to and wish with all my heart was real. And the place where I would go to play, to be free, to be wild, was the forest. Learning paths so well I could run them blindfolded, swinging across creeks on grapevines, carving sticks, building forts, sitting in the grass in the shade just listening to everything around me. The forest was to be alive, away from school, away from home, away from everything, but to also feel as connected as possible.

And this led me, instantly, to Dog (see Fig. 2). I knew that dog like my best friend before I even played the whole game, indeed before the game was even half-finished. And it was a very careful, very constructed thing because that dog was tired, it was weary. It had taken on the slings and arrows I had felt over 46 years, and particularly over the last few as I slowly, inexorably came to a sort of divorce with my working world and prior appointments. That dog wanted to remind me of those forest paths, to remind me both of stillness and of listening, and, importantly, of play. It was part wolf, part wild, part magic, and yet tempered by age, and even by regret. I again saw myself in the game. Again, the game was a mirror. And I knew I had to draw Dog, because it was so very clear in my mind.

Fig. 2: An illustration of Dog from The Witch's Way

The Witch's Way as Structured Game Design

It is important to note that the design of *The Witch's Way*, while organic and fluid, is not actually unstructured. Instead, it is designed directly in reference to and as an example of the authors' transformational game design framework. The elements discussed thus far in this paper work together to create games that directly seek to create a form of psychological resonance and position players for transformation. While this framework has been extensively documented in other articles (Rusch/Phelps 2020, 2021a), it essentially maps a triangular space (See Figure 3) with three design axes: (1) employing existential themes to engage players in the consideration of life in a reflective, evaluative state, (2) using myth and ritual elements to engage the player in actions of consequence that have cultural relevance and operate through symbolic enactment (Rusch/Phelps 2020), and (3) creating game experiences that are deeply experiential in the sense described by Phelps, Wagner, and Moger (2020), meaning that they engage the player directly in the core action of the transformation. A game about teaching line and form and gestural abstraction will engage the player in creating a painting (Phelps et al. 2019), a game about learning to find peace in death and dying will engage the player in a narrative wherein they assist in this process and must make peace with it (Thunder Lotus Games 2020). This is all to say that the core of the game experience is the potential transformation in action, learning by feeling, doing, and reflecting rather than consciously analysing. It is a very different form of active learning (Kiili 2005) than is typically discussed in educational circles.

Fig. 3: Mapping a design space for existential, transformative games (Phelps/Rush 2020)
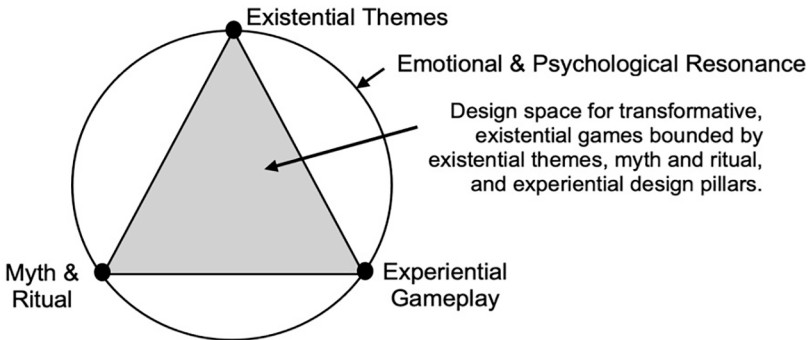
The authors have explored this structure in consideration and comparison to numerous other games including the works cited in the previous paragraph, such as *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), *Fragile Equilibrium* (Phelps 2018), *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2020), *Walden, a Game* (USC Game Innovation Lab 2017), and more. As a tool for analysing the transformational potential of games, it is useful in considering design characteristics and centering an approach. Each design element, character, narrative, scene, visual, etc., can be evaluated as to whether it brings the player in alignment with one or more of these pillars, with ideally the strongest potential in work that deeply en-

gages in all three. But analysing and critiquing is not making, and *The Witch's Way* is intended as our effort towards actionable design using this framework. As an application of the existential, transformative framework, we knew the game had to revolve around existential themes – e.g. the question of purpose or meaning in life, identity, connection and choice. We also knew we wanted to harness the power of myth and ritual with their imagery and symbolism to ignite transformation through personal resonance. And we explored countless methods to engage the player in the doing of the things – not just actions in the game world but in debating with oneself about choices, recognising the parts of one's own mind and their voices, listening to inner dialogues directly. As such, many of the design decisions, while they were arrived at through the process described throughout this manuscript, were carefully considered and informed by this framework in a logical and structural way, but with (hopefully) an artistic sensibility to both the process and the design.

Game Design as Spiritual Practice

Doris: The design of *The Witch's Way* was also a spiritual experience in itself. Rather than being deliberately created to address a particular problem that needs rectifying – as tends to be the dominant approach for games following other transformational game design frameworks – this game's design was allowed to emerge through a dialogic process with my unconscious, facilitated through dreaming, active imagination, long walks, and writing morning pages while staring out into nature from my favourite place on the rocking chair in the winter garden (often with a cat on my lap as well as a laptop). Andy followed a very similar process, while ruminating on the initial text and his own internal visual imagination. The themes and images of the unconscious are skittish – they shy away from harsh light and force. They have to be sought and met in the twilight, before they willingly part from the shadows and allow a good look. Mat Auryn (2020), author of *The Psychic Witch*, writes about a possible connection between the pineal gland, melatonin, dreaming, relaxation, and – consequently – psychic ways of perception that are different from wide-awake states. The pineal gland sits in the middle of the head, looks like a tiny eyeball and is often referred to as the Witch's eye or the Third Eye. It sends neural signals for melatonin output. Darkness coaxes the body into producing melatonin, which promotes sleep. People who report to have taken melatonin supplements report more vivid dreams.

> Since both relaxation and brainwave states associated with daydreaming and light dreaming are important for psychic perception, you may start to realize that this is one of the many reasons that witches and psychics tend to prefer to work in dimly lit spaces with candlelight in lieu of bright atmospheres. That's because there is more melatonin being produced, which may activate a more naturally relaxed state conducive to alpha, and the pineal gland is actively working (…) When we're in alpha, there's a direct conversation going on between the conscious mind and the pineal gland. (Auryn 2020: 17)

In other words: the Third Eye flutters open when we are in the meditative alpha brain-wave state. It perceives by way of dream images and symbolism and is closely connected to wordlessness and oneness. It is 'the part that knows' with wordless, deeply intuitive clarity.

The Witch's Way was written mainly in this state. It takes, however, a certain kind of discipline, commitment, and practice to trade the harsh light of the scientific operating room for the diffuse and soft candlelight conducive to spiritual work, creativity, and magic. As scholars engaged in creating a design framework, we set out to apply this theory in a stringent, rigorous way, following a rigorous, stringent process. As the lead narrative designer, I (Doris) knew I wanted to make a game about a personal, transformational journey and so I looked for clues and guidelines on how that worked in psychotherapy as well as in fiction. I longed for structure, because the freedom of choice that is in keeping with existential themes, can be terrifying in the creative process. Hence, I toyed with the Jungian concept of integration (which deals with unearthing unconscious material and integrating it into a conscious understanding of the self) and asked psychiatrist and scholar Erik Goodwyn, whose work I had devoured in the theory writing process, what themes came up in his work with clients and how they could inform the game. This was largely ineffectual as a design strategy: the most universal appeal is in the personal. I couldn't write this game without connecting to it on a deep, personal level, and if I couldn't connect, how should others? I had to find my own transformational journey and let that speak to me. I thus decided – as part of my creative method – to forget everything I knew about the theory and to get out of the way, which is now (after iteration) actually a part of the more formal design framework.

As a design method, I started exploring my own psyche for potent material through writing little symbolic vignettes for about two weeks. Every morning, right after waking, and before my inner critic showed up to work, I took my place on a rocking chair, still dreamy (perfect Third Eye conditions!), and let a question form in my mind to prompt an active imagination process. These questions – geared towards surfacing a relevant theme for the game overall – went something like this: 'What have I struggled with? What did this feel like? How have I overcome it?' These questions, however, were just held in the mind lightly, gently – a suggestion more than a problem to be pondered and solved. This call to the unconscious was answered with emotionally charged images that slowly evolved into little mythical narratives. They were not interactive at this point and often did not make a lot of obvious sense. Staring into the garden that was awakening outside, a cat purring in my lap (cats are veritable alpha brainwave machines, which is maybe why many witches are depicted with them!), the initial images tended to have nature themes: dark soil ready for planting but suddenly equipped with sharp vampire teeth... the earth feeding off the blood of the gardening witch, leading to deeper explorations of the source of these teeth in the Unknown Forest to discover a very hungry vampire baby in a cave. What to do with the vampire baby? As a designer, I focused my attention on the emotional quality of the images and to keep my critical, analytical, interpreting brain turned off as much as possible. What did the characters do? What did they want Lou – the witch in the story – to do? How did I feel compelled to act or respond to the symbols that floated to the surface and manifested in these little vignettes? Every one of these active imagination explorations followed a similar arc: it started with a feeling of tension or conflict, then the

images danced and rearranged themselves and suggested ritualistic, symbolic actions to be performed by the protagonist – e.g. the witch dragging the vampire baby outside the cave and into the open to writhe in the sunlight and feel all the pain she tried to numb through the blood she took from others. The witch witnesses the struggle, holding the baby close but letting her experience the terror until she is transformed into a regular baby, peaceful and ready to start fresh.

After engaging in this material collection process for about two weeks, without rereading or editing of the vignettes, I shared the outcome with two trusted colleagues. Without offering any interpretation or explanation for what any of it was supposed to mean, the colleagues were asked to comment on what came up for them when they read the texts. What (if anything) were they moved by? What images did the vignettes spark for them? This was meant to indicate potential for psychological resonance, to discern whether a vignette was a purely personal indulgence, too idiosyncratic for others to relate to, or whether it carried a more broadly relatable, mythical core. Obviously, a sample size of two is hardly comparable with the century-long process of cultural transmission that determines psychological resonance in an empirical sense with regards to myths and folk tales but it is at least a beginning (Goodwyn 2016). It was also surprisingly obvious which vignettes sparked responses and which ones fell flat. In the end, none of these initial narratives made it into the game. Their purpose, apparently, was to get me into a process of creation that emphasised symbolical/magical thinking and connecting with my unconscious, to practice exploring my innermost self and letting it speak to me in a revealing manner that carries the key to transformation within its ritualistic, symbolic structures and actions. It strengthened the connection to my feeling core, which is so often silenced and pushed back in academic work for the sake of objectivity, and encouraged it to come to the fore.

I realised that this tension between my critical, analytical side and my intuitive, feeling side had been a key theme of my own transformational journey for many years. Suddenly, the overall theme for the first part of *The Witch's Way* revealed itself: creative recovery! The image that bubbled up from the depths the following morning during active imagination exercises was a symbol for this theme: a garden stuck in Winter, frozen over and unable to give way to Spring. I immediately knew I could work with that; that this core metaphor was potent and rich enough to carry the story and guide me through the steps from conflict (stuck in the rigidity of other people's expectations and outlived belief systems) to resolution (breaking out of the inner dungeon, allowing the creative juices to flow freely and to fill the soul with life force once more). The writing process, now transferred directly to the Twine game engine and considering player's choice, was guided by successive questions along the lines of who/what froze the garden? Was there ever a spring/summer time? What was that like? What needs to happen to melt the ice/break the rigid structures that prohibit thriving in an authentic, joyful way? Again, these questions were held lightly in my mind during writing sessions, subtly setting a course towards a goal without dictating the path.

Finding the Mythical in the Personal

The Witch's Way is semi-autobiographical. I picked certain details from my own life to anchor the story in the personal and help me tap into the strong emotional experiences associated with the various stages of the transformational journey, but I certainly took a lot of fictional liberties as well. Emotion was the gateway for me to conjure up resonating imagery. Whether and how much it will resonate with others remains to be seen. It certainly carried a lot of psychological potency for me, and since that's the only thing I could control at the time or rely on in the creative process as a navigation tool towards impactful imagery and content, that is what I focused on. Most importantly, I trusted the somatic experiences I had when writing: how did the images that popped up feel in my body? This, too, is an aspect of the technologies of magic – increasing one's perceptual abilities from intellectual reflection to what Gendlin (1996) refers to as a 'felt sense.' He writes in *Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy* that a 'felt sense' occurs at the border between conscious and unconscious mind: "A direct, at first unclear bodily sense at the border zone is not quite the usual bodily sensation; it is not an emotion, not a thought, not a definable content" (Gendlin 1996: 19).

Felt sense is experienced inside the body (rather than as an external physical sensation, e.g. a tickling nose). Many people cannot sense their body from the inside, e.g. they can only feel their toes when they wiggle them. A felt sense can be practiced and requires tuning into the body, becoming aware of its inner sensations. According to Gendlin (1996), Freud and Jung both somewhat navigated around this 'felt sense' in their techniques of free association (Freud) or active imagination (Jung), only referring to it implicitly as a 'block' that might suddenly come up. When the block was correctly interpreted, it resolved. To me, paying attention to these blocks or the free flow of energy in the body was and is an important instrument to feel out psychologically resonant, meaningful content. It indicates to me whether a creative decision feels true to me. A felt sense is an experience that moves us towards wholeness. Our thoughts, emotions, memories are distinct and divisive. The felt sense unifies. Gendlin (1996) continues: "A characteristic of this felt sense is that it is experienced as an intricate whole. One can sense that it includes many intricacies and strands. (...) it is a whole complexity, a multiplicity implicit in a single sense" (20).

I have long learnt to trust my body to have a clarity that my mind often lacks. There is no way to cheat the body. It knows whether you are telling the truth (your truth) or bullshitting. Gendlin notes that while emotions are less reliable than reason,

> a felt sense is more reliable than reason. When we act in anger, we often feel sorry later because we reacted only to a part of the situation. When we are calmer, we recall the whole of the situation. (...) In contrast, a felt sense is more reliable than reason because more factors can be sensed in it than reason can manage. This does not mean one can discard reason and responsible choice in regard to the felt sense. (ibid: 58)

The holistic characteristic of the felt sense deserves particular attention here because it directly relates to the aforementioned technologies of magic: it is wordless (as sensations tend to be) and it fosters oneness – first within the body, then between the body and its

entire context. Thus, tuning into the felt sense is part of wayfinder technology! So, if an image presented itself from the depths of my unconscious and brought a deep sense of peace and flowing energy, even if it represented emotionally difficult content, I knew it carried truth. When something feels really, really right (authentic) the alignment of mind and body becomes physically tangible and some of the constant tension we carry with us eases. In *Steering by Starlight*, Martha Beck (2008) speaks of the experience of 'shackles on' vs. 'shackles off' when tuning into the body to tap its wisdom. When confronted with a choice, rather than listening to lizard- brain fears (remember, emotions are less reliable than reason!), ask your body (whose felt sense, because holistic, is more reliable than reason) whether it has an experience of 'shackles on' – feeling constrained, bound, trapped – or 'shackles off', liberated, expansive, free. Beck (2008): "the way you can tell you're following fear away from your North Star is that while this course may feel safe, it will also feel imprisoning. The way you can tell that something lies true north, even though inner-lizard fear says to run from it, is that it feels liberating" (42).

When there is alignment – the shackles are off – it's like the body lets out a sigh of relief: "Ahhhh, now you get it, thank **goodness!**" I was following the signs of inner sighs of relief as my navigation tool towards impactful and psychologically resonant content and symbolism when writing *The Witch's Way.*

The story interweaves personal experiences derived from the stations of my own transformational journey with Beck's technologies of magic, which are of much wider relevance. Also, I aimed to render the personal in such a way that it was not overly idiosyncratic – that individual events became symbolic. I only used the emotional charge of my personal experiences to access potent imagery, but not to tell my story. While I have my own concrete memories of the wrapping up and constraint of my own authentic, instinctual, joyful self in the perceived expectations of other people, it is a much more general, human concern that others probably recognise. In the game, this stage of the journey the realisation of one's inhibitions to creativity, play, joy – are represented through childhood art bundled up in a man's shirt bound by a belt. Sure, this image guides the interpretation towards a specific kind of social constraint, suggesting a reading along the lines of 'daddy issues,' to ideas around patriarchy in general. That's because my own dad has played a very big role in my life, particularly when it comes to the question of my identity, calling, and purpose. He has always been incredibly loving and supportive of me, but also had his own ideas of who I was supposed to be or become and what I was supposed to do with my life. Like probably many daughters with strong father figures, I struggled with this, because while I wanted to please him, I also wanted very much to be seen and accepted for who I was or wanted to be. Writing the game provided an opportunity to explore my personal feelings and transformational journey – to use the technologies of magic myself to transcend surface concerns and superficial conflicts to probe into what rang true and what would feel reconciliatory and liberating. There might be many players whose particular flavor of social/external constraint looks very different from mine. Maybe they are more conflicted around their mothers or other influential figures, or have experienced traumatic marginalisation due to their race or gender expression or otherness. The man's shirt and belt may not bring up memories of their dad for them – in fact, it may not resonate at all! It can, or so is the hope anyways, act as a jumping- off point for them to identify their own conflict bundle. What is tied up

inside them? By what? To support a broader reading of the freezing force that is behind the inner winter, the whispers the player can choose to listen to when examining the shirt bundle are fragments rather than fully articulated, oppressive statements. They just carry the general gist of 'something about you isn't up to snuff'. This allows players to fill in the blanks and lend language to their own internal whispers of self-doubt. More clues towards a broader reading are given through the magical bookshelf consultations. For instance, looking for an answer to the question 'what is freezing the garden?', the player is presented with the myth of Persephone who had been abducted by Hades. This caused her grieving mother, Demeter, responsible for bringing Spring and promoting the crops to grow, to neglect her duties. Persephone represents creativity. She is not dead, just in the underworld. Go search for her to bring her back. This tie-in of a well-known, existing myth is another strategy to transcend the more personal aspects of the story and connect it to the much broader realm of a more universal, human experience, and to reinforce the psychological resonance of the game's theme.

Regardless of the starting point – the specific source of an inner winter that keeps people from thriving – the next step on the transformative journey in *The Witch's Way*, part I, is to make contact again with the part of the self that represents the instinctual, playful, unself-conscious self. For me, the picture that bubbled up to represent this was Dog. Dog is a symbol for unbounded energy, curiosity, enthusiasm and joy. Dog sniffs out what feels right and goes for it full force. He is a True North Navigation Expert! When we first meet Dog in the clearing in the Unknown Forest, however, he is sad, tired, mistrustful, wounded, and very, very pissed at you. (Andy: See the prior section and illustration – I tried very hard to capture all of these things together!) Healing him happens through a liberation ritual the player gets to enact themselves: first, empathise with Dog, by becoming him. Remember what it was like to just be. Then: burn the shirt, reject the imposed expectations and create new affirmations to counter the whispers of self-doubt! Then: let your newly recovered, instinctual self lead the way to the next step on your transformative journey. Tapping into wordlessness and oneness, you mind-meld with Dog, following him deep into the Unknown Forest (i.e. your unconscious) towards the place where you keep your very own Persephone – a shapeshifting trickster character who just goes by the letter D – trapped in the Dungeon you created for her a long time ago by following an inauthentic path. How do you get her out? Or better, yet: how do you get yourself out? Because D was never truly trapped; it was only your belief of them being trapped that froze your inner landscape. By sinking deep into wordlessness, you dissolve the dungeon walls that kept you stuck and constrained. The artificial prison does not stand a chance when not upheld through the constant chatter of shoulds and musts and doubts and concerns.

Having reconnected with your instincts and taken a first, big step towards trusting your intuitive, feeling self – the part that knows – you have regained access to your source of joy and creativity. The garden thaws, Spring can come. This ends part I of *The Witch's Way*.

Guided by Animals

In many stories that feature witches and magic, animals act as familiars and guides; *The Witch's Way* is no exception. Animals are tapped into the magic much more than we are, due to their fully embodied perceptual abilities. Navigating by magnetic fields? Magic. Hearing sounds at frequencies way beyond what the human ear is capable of? Magic. Sensing predators from afar? Magic. We can expand our own magical abilities when we aim to connect with animals, because communicating deeply with other living beings forces us to drop into wordlessness, to get out of our heads where we create the problems that keep us from authenticity. In a wordless state, we are at play and we can play along with others, including animals. For adults, it is often quite difficult to remember what being at play even feels like. For many of us, it's been so long since we have been truly, utterly engaged in an unself-conscious activity, lost ourselves in the pure joy of doing something without any consideration for how we looked while doing it or how much time might have passed. Slipping into the mind of Ghost, the cat, in *The Witch's Way* is meant to remind the player of what that feels like. Lou gets a glimpse of the perceptual alternative that becomes possible when she gets out of her own head and experiences wordlessness and oneness with a wordless creature. There is another instance of oneness with an animal when Lou realises that she is Dog, that Dog is a part of her and how that part used to be fully alive.

The Witch's Way aims to communicate that practising these perceptual shifts through dropping into wordlessness and cultivating oneness are essential for the transformational journey to become a witch and recover one's inherent creativity, playfulness, and magical potential. They are the antidote to how most of us have been socialised and enculturated through various school or academic systems, which have led us further and further away from what is authentic to us and confused our inner compass. As Beck (2012) writes:

> It's a pretty safe bet that your education, dear reader, consisted of sitting in airless rooms listening to lectures, reading books, and taking tests in which you interpreted verbal or numeric questions and tried to give exactly the answers your teachers already knew. If you couldn't do this, you were shamed and punished, or perhaps diagnosed with a learning disability and medicated to the point where you could focus exclusively on words and numbers. If you did this well, you were praised and rewarded. If you spent too much time outside playing, you experienced punishment and failure. Screening out everything but words, you were taught, is the way to create a good life, to find your way in the world." (5)

It is no coincidence that Keith Johnstone (1992), a key figure of improvisational theatre, writes that the first important step on his journey to recover his spontaneity and ability to play was to forget everything he had learned in school. He started by trying to conjure up and investigate hypnagogic images – the images that surface from the unconscious at the threshold of sleep. He notes that "[i]t's not easy to observe hypnagogic images, because once you see one and think 'There!' you wake up a little and the image disappears. You have to **attend** to the images without verbalising about them, so I learned to 'hold the

mind still' like a hunter waiting in a forest" (Johnstone 1992: 13). Again, the connection between wordlessness, oneness, magic, creativity, and play is made.

Borrowing Ghost – being invited by the cat to slip into his mind for a little bit – gives Lou a first taste of the long-forgotten art of 'just being', or being fully present with all senses, fully awake yet utterly relaxed.

The Importance of Humor

The terseness of the language is a survival strategy for me. There is humour in it, but also rebelliousness, and of course the conflict of various inner voices – primarily the part that knows and the part that doubts – which I believe should be quite familiar to a lot of people. We are often meaner to ourselves than to others, more critical, more demanding. I (Doris) wanted to capture that in the writing. It's quite pathetic to be human, but also wonderful. We are strange creatures. So resourceful and resilient on the one hand, but also so doubting and fragile, self-sabotaging, and silly on the other. We constantly have second and third thoughts, hold on to beliefs we know do not serve us, have inexplicable loyalties to people or jobs that are not good for us, and are master creators of our own dungeons. It is absolutely absurd, the lengths we go to get into our own way! Making this explicit by being a bit rude helped me get an ironic distance to it and I think it helps others, too. What is the alternative? I certainly hate to preach. There is nothing worse, I think, when trying to get a message across, than preachiness. I abhor it. And I can't deal with a more soothing, wholesome, and vulnerable way of describing our humanity – it gives me hives. My love for humanity comes out through making fun of it. I also think that a bit of rudeness and irreverence is better suited to help us get over ourselves. You can't pamper yourself into change. A bit of a kick in the butt is needed to get the momentum necessary to break out of cognitive dissonance. There is also positive power in humour and a certain provocative cockiness. When I was very little, I watched a fairy tale on TV. I don't remember what it was, but it went something along the well-known lines of 'poor farmer's boy finds himself in an awful situation, having to face the devil with nothing but his wits and a butter knife'. The poor farmer's boy thinks to himself (and this has stuck with me ever since as some of the greatest wisdom TV has ever bestowed upon me), "with courage and cockiness, you can slay the devil!" I am translating from German. Courage and cockiness! **Mut und Übermut**! Don't give in to the fear. Don't let your flaws get you down, either! As an adult, I have been very much inspired by a wonderful little book called *The Comedy of Survival* by Joseph Meeker (1997). Meeker speaks about the comic way and the tragic way: the hero has very high standards, and what characterises a tragedy is that the hero fails at their own ideals. Since the hero only accepts meeting their standards as success, they have nothing left to go to but utter despair when they fail. But the comic character is an opportunist – they just want to survive. When shit happens to them, they just want to get back to normal. And they do, because they don't have these super high ideals. They are not bad; they are just not obsessed with living by a certain moral code or a fixed idea of how the world is supposed to be. They take it as it comes and they get by. This is part of the human condition: we are not perfect, we mess up constantly. We have to live with this or despair. The irreverence of the language is a nod to the comedy of

survival. First, you've got to survive the messiness of being human, then you can get on with the business of thriving. You can't thrive when you're constantly down on yourself for only having a butter knife to defend yourself from the devil. The devil here, of course, being understood as a metaphor for our own weaknesses. If we can all change our inner monologue into something a bit more cocky and irreverent, we are all better off, I believe.

Enacting the Transformative Spiral

The Witch's Way is fairly linear. While it starts more open-ended and explorative, allowing the player to look around the cottage and investigate the garden, it becomes more and more linear as the story kicks into gear. It does play around with the order of things, though, to play on the notion that time or linear progression are artificial constructs and transformation does not happen as a neat journey from A to B. Instead, time functions in the form of a spiral: who hasn't stopped and wondered, finding themselves in an all-too-familiar feeling pickle, 'haven't I been here before? I thought I was done with this? And yet, here we go. **again**.' And we continue to do so, over and over again, until we finally get the hint! Fortunately, this is not only true for lessons we need to learn, but also for opportunities: the things that speak to our true self have a way of stubbornly coming back to us. 'Oh, you're ignoring me again this time? All right, I'll give you a year, or five, but I'll try again. Still, not listening, are we? Well, I'll be back, you just wait.' And they do come back, in different guises, unfailingly so, until we either die unfulfilled and frustrated, or we finally wake up. You can do this first, or that, it doesn't matter. It just informs what you already know when you get to the point where you need to be, but it also doesn't really matter so much what you already know. This structure is another play on perception. Replaying the game allows players to explore this – how their interpretation of certain sections changes depending on which route they took to get there. Yet, it is never too late: no road is ever closed off completely, it can just be more or less fully investigated.

In terms of the transformational arc of the game overall, it is also more like a roundtrip. You do not end up exactly where you started, but a bit further along on the spiral pathway. Yet you definitely will not have leveled up to an endpoint of ultimate 'witchiness'. You just got a taste of some of the important bits and pieces throughout the year and its life-death-life cycle. Will the game help you to from now on navigate unfailingly towards your True North, always embodying authenticity and integrity? Unlikely. Hopefully, though, players will remember the tools and principles introduced in the game through the imagery and symbolism that stirred something inside them on a deep, unconscious level. Then, when they feel the twinges of their inner alignment going out of whack, they will remember what to do to get things more centered again.

Andy: The spiral approach to linearity was something we talked about a lot and that I pressed on in early iterations of the game. Very early drafts had few choices, and they were linear to the point where it was difficult to feel like you could go back or switch between the paths. Yet we also knew where we wanted it to end, and that wasn't in a series of wildly different, disparate potentials. So the general erosion of pathways as you progress towards the end is very much by design – you can see it actually in the Twine map of the game in the development environment, and it was readily apparently to me since I

was staring at that map a lot as I was designing early tech for the custom navigation and autosave functionality. Hopefully the game strikes the right balance between affording the player a sense of agency and individuality while also guiding them through the story we wanted to tell inside the world we wanted to tell it in.

The Witch's Way is structured in four seasons, with spring dealing with creative recovery through introducing the technologies of magic, wordlessness, and oneness. The other seasons have different core themes revolving around the balance between rest and productivity, dealing with anger, and letting go. They reveal more aspects of Lou's self in the forms of archetypal sisters – fellow witches that appear on her path and take on different psychological functions that guide Lou further in her quest to personal transformation, authenticity, and wholeness. The principles introduced in part one, though, are not over and done with. They come back in different guises, applied to new scenarios and challenges, supported by the other two technologies: imagination and forming. By the end of it, Lou/the player will have hopefully gained many new (or be reminded of already known) perspectives on themselves, life, and nature, an appreciation for the resourcefulness of their own psychological aspects, the bandwidth of different ways of acting and being, the importance of cultivating equanimity and playfulness, and a sense of connection to something bigger than themselves.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the interweaving of auto-biography and fiction in part 1 of the transformative adventure game *The Witch's Way*. As an illustration of how the existential, transformative game design framework developed by Rusch and Phelps can be applied to creative practice, it deals with existential themes such as identity, meaning, purpose, and connection through sourcing mythical imagery and symbolism as well as ritual enactment. It approaches spirituality through magic as metaphor, represented by the protagonist's journey of becoming a witch. Conceptualised in four parts, this first part of *The Witch's Way* deals with creative recovery, represented through the imagery of igniting spring in an unnaturally frozen garden. Magic is seen as supremely natural (rather than supernatural), being in balance and harmony with all living things, connected to an encompassing energy web. Developing one's magical abilities is synonymous with living in accordance with one's True Nature and authenticity. It requires – so the game proposes – to get out of one's head, drop into wordlessness, and access oneness. To demonstrate how this is done, *The Witch's Way* introduces animal guides such as the cat, Ghost, and the dog, Dog. It further incorporates rituals that revolve around play and creativity to cross the barriers imposed by an intellectually dominated way of perception that leads to experiencing oneself as separate from others for the sake of a more holistic, intuitive, connecting approach. *The Witch's Way* is not just about personal development, though: as a spiritual work of fiction, it ties up to much bigger ideas related to sustainability and a way of manifesting a reality that does not spring from ego desires, but from balance and harmony with the energy web.

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Practicing Dying

How Role-Playing Games Can Help Us Accept Death and Boost Our Quality of Life

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas

Keywords: *acceptance; anxiety; bleed; death; game design; grief; integration; ritual*

Introduction

In 2018, a life-threatening health scare that resulted in major surgery gave me the opportunity to directly experience how it feels to face one's own possible end. Among other things, I spent some time reflecting on how my play experience had prepared me for this real life one. In doing so, I was somewhat surprised to find that I had to a degree been playing out both the act of dying itself and a vast variety of situations and themes concerning death through play for years, in larps[1] such as among other, *Just A Little Lovin'* (2011), *Legion* (2015), and *Conscience* (2018). I will go into further detail about how these larps include themes of death and dying, and how the experience of playing them affected me later in this article. In the years following this experience I have gone on to create games such as *Hello in There* (2019) about old age, loneliness, and death, *Summer's End* (2022) about drug abuse and the death of a loved one, and *If I Could See Your Face Again* (2021) about the fear of losing a family member. I believe it is safe to say that death has influenced my design choices, and which themes I find it purposeful to explore through games.

In this article, I will seek to identify some connections between spirituality, game design, concepts of player/character interactions such as **immersion** (Bowman 2012), **alibi** and **bleed** (Bowman 2015; Hugaas 2019; Kemper 2017; 2020), and existing research and theory on how we deal with death. With regard to the latter, I will touch on concepts such as: the Death Anxiety Scale (Templer 1970), Death Acceptance (Ray/Najman 1974), the Death Attitude Profile (Gesser/Reker/Wong 1987–88), Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development (Erikson 1950), the Death Drive or **Todestrieb** (Spielrein 1912; 1995; Freud

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1   In larp academia, the preferred spelling of larp is lower-case. While it started as an acronym, it has become a commonplace word like radar, both in its noun form (a larp) and its verb form (to larp).

1922), and Jung's thoughts on different stages of life (Jung 2014). Given the restrictions of an article of this length, I can only touch on these concepts on a surface level, but I hope that my suggested connections can inspire readers to want to delve deeper, as I feel that this is a field where we can achieve many worthwhile insights in the years to come.

Using my own play experience and design work as a departure point, this article will explore how role-playing games can help facilitate growth and change in how we think about and prepare ourselves for our own inevitable deaths. I firmly believe that by conscientiously designing our games to increase their transformational potential, they can become powerful tools for change and self-development (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). Rituals revolving around death and dying have always been an important part of human spiritual and religious practices and symbolic enactment of ritual in games is a natural extension of these traditions (Rusch/Phelps 2020). Larps can provide low-risk opportunities to practice skills we can employ to deal more calmly and gracefully with our own mortality, while helping us build emotional and spiritual resiliency.

Being Alive Is a Temporary State

As fossil records are growing, biologists are still refining when exactly the first modern human, Homo sapiens, walked the earth. Currently there seems to be some agreement that our ancestral mother might have lived somewhat close to 300.000 years ago. Since then, as a species, we have evolved, developed, and changed in countless ways. Further change followed as technology, culture, religion and civilization itself became part of our story, eventually leading to our current globalized interconnected societies wherein almost eigth billion people lead their lives. Of all the thousands of thoughts, feelings, ideas, concepts and similar things that seem to be a shared part of the human experience, some have remained relatively unchanged from the very beginning. Among them we find things like the bonds of family, fear of the unknown, survival instincts, mating, and social connections and networks.

Of these few though, none might have been such an unending source of fuel for human mythmaking, spiritual exploration and just simple ceaseless wonder, as Death. Just as our ancient foremother all those millennia ago had a limited number of days, so will all of us. Then, when our days are spent, we will Pass Away, Part Ways, Pay the Ferryman, Face the Final Curtain, Step out of Time, Cease to Be, Wither Away, Kick the Bucket, Cross the Great Divide, and put on our Wooden Suit. To me, it is quite telling that even when talking about it, we are extremely reluctant to even call it by its name, seemingly fearing that the mere mention of the Eternal Rest might bring it to our doorsteps. The ancient (and current) practice of resorting to idioms – colourful ways of speaking of it without mentioning that of which we speak – stands as a testament to the respect for the potent and possibly destructive magical properties we tend to ascribe to all the things that surround it. As civilization has advanced, with its numerous technological and societal breakthroughs, Buying the Farm itself might have become less present, and a smaller part of the daily worries for many of us, yet and no matter how hard we try to push it to the back of our minds, one day it will no longer be denied. The inescapable truth remains that to be alive is a temporary state, and one day we will all have to take our Final Bow.

Fear the Reaper

Just like Death itself, fear of it seems to also have been a part of the human experience as long as we have been around. Many of the oldest preserved texts in the world show that it was an issue that was important in their contemporary settings. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2100 BCE), the hero Gilgamesh has to learn to accept his own mortality after the death of Enkidu, his closest friend (and possible lover); *The Rigveda* (ca.1700 BCE) contains hymns to Yama, the god of death; and the *Book of the Dead* (ca. 1550 BCE) contains numerous spells to help and ensure safe passage into the afterlife. In short, numerous religious practices from cultures all over the world – among others ancient Egypt, ancient India, the Viking Age Nordics, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and Mesopotamia – all try to alleviate fear of death by offering up different versions of an afterlife. Conceptions of an afterlife are also commonly found in contemporary religious and spiritual practices.

Philosophy has also tried to address the issue for millennia. At the very brink of death (ca. 399 BCE), Socrates famously pontificated that there is no need to fear dying, as "no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death" (Plato 360 BCE). Continuing in this vein, in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, the Greek philosopher Epicurus delivers an argument as to why one should not fear death (300 BCE), and in his *Meditations*, the stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius did much the same (180 CE). Tackling the issue a little differently, Confucius (ca. 500 BCE) sought to soothe any fear of death by advocating for focusing on the solvable tasks of life rather than the mysteries of death (Confucius/Soothill 1910).

Death Anxiety

For centuries, religion and philosophy have both offered numerous ways of understanding and explaining death, and with the emergence of the field of psychology, many later great thinkers also dedicated much of their work to this old issue. In 1896, G. Stanley Hall's research showed that the fear of death was universal (Hall 1896). In psychology, the colloquial **fear of death** is often substituted with **death anxiety**, and the terms are used interchangeably. Robert Langs suggested that death anxiety could be divided into subcategories of predatory, predator, and existential anxiety (Langs 2004). Predator and predatory relate to being harmed by others and harming others, while existential anxiety is based on the awareness of one's own mortality. While the two first categories are important in their own right, it is this latter category that I seek to understand better in this article. The knowledge that all of us will die some day is the basis for existential death anxiety, and research has shown that it is the one of the three categories that is felt most strongly (Sterling 1985). In 1970, Daniel I. Templer proposed the **death anxiety scale** as a way of measuring the degree of anxiety a person feels when confronted with their own mortality. This scale has been revised and improved upon a number of times, and versions of it are applied within a number of fields.

Building on the earlier work of Sabina Spielrein (1912), Sigmund Freud theorized about the **death drive** or **thanatos** as a self-destructive force that existed in parallel with **eros**. But where **eros** is focused on avoiding the unpleasant in favour of pleasurable ex-

periences, **thanatos** is described as a need to seek out the unpleasant and pushes the individual towards acts of aggression, compulsive repetition of unpleasant/traumatic experiences, and self-destructive behaviour (Freud 1922). This ability to be in duality with oneself traces a clear line back through the centuries, from Carl Jung, to René Descartes and even William Shakespeare, all the way back to Plato, and probably beyond. We find this duality again when we combine Hall's and Sterling's mentioned works on the prevalence of death anxiety with Ernest Becker's book The Denial of Death, wherein he argues that humans develop intricate strategies to deny the awareness of our own mortality as a defense mechanism (Becker 1973). This paradox of our existential fear and our conscious strategies to deny the existence of what we fear have for millennia stood at the very centre of humanity's attempts to come to terms with the temporal nature of our existence.

It took Freud years, decades even, to completely come to terms with the dualistic existence of *thanatos*, while his contemporary Carl Gustav Jung seemed to embrace the idea quite willingly. In the 1930 essay "The Stages of Life," he went as far as to not only accept the existence of a drive towards the end, but also advocated for death as a place to find purpose, stating:

> As a doctor, I am convinced that it is hygienic – if I may use the word – to discover in death a goal toward which one can strive, and that shrinking away from it is something unhealthy and abnormal which robs the second half of life of its purpose. (Jung 2014)

Viewing death as a purposeful part of life goes far towards completing the circle back to the earlier spiritual and philosophical traditions mentioned previously in this article, and it seems clear that Jung himself was curious about the possibility of an afterlife, having for example studied the psychology of mediumship. Yet, this approach is not inherently dependent on the afterlife serving up some sort of reward for having led a moral life, but is rather based on the understanding that accepting one's own mortality is a way to increase the quality and enjoyment of the later stages of life. In Jung's thinking, such acceptance could be found through the process of **individuation**, in which aspects of a person's psyche, personality, experiences and similar get integrated into a (hopefully) well-functioning whole: an individual (Jung 1976). We find similar thoughts mirrored in Erik Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development, where later stages of life contain some of the same understanding of acceptance of mortality as a way to increase one's quality of life. In the 8th stage, which concerns late adulthood, Erikson theorized that a person will exist in a flux between integrity and despair, as they weigh up the results of the life they lived. 'Did they accomplish enough? Were they happy? Do they leave a legacy?' To sum it up, Erikson poses the existential question: 'Is it okay to have been me?' (Erikson 1950) If the answer is yes, then a greater level of acceptance of the end, and therefore a greater quality of life, can be achieved. The process of integrating role-playing experiences into one's real life self is not dissimilar from either Jung's or Erikson's theories. Sometimes it might even offer an easier access to the parts of a person's experience in need of processing and a better structured process of integration into the self (Bowman/Hugaas 2019, 2021).

Continuing in this vein, and addressing the inherent notion that the opposite of death anxiety would be death acceptance, John Ray and Jackob M. Najman showed that

it was not only possible, but not even unusual to be able to both accept death and be anxious about it at the same time (Ray/Najman 1974). In other words, they are not opposites, and the absence of anxiety does not mean that one is in acceptance, once again landing us at a paradoxical crossroads. A similar paradox is found among those who are in denial of death, yet still fear it (Becker 1973). Building on the work to understand our attitudes towards our own mortality, Gina Gesser, Paul T. P. Wong, and Gary T. Reker introduced (1987–88), and later revised (1994) the **death attitude profile**, a method with which to measure a person's fear of death, and possible avoidance and acceptance of it. In all of these works, we clearly see a need to understand through quantifying these experiences, so that they become easier to measure and describe. Personally I believe that while this can be helpful, it is important to remind ourselves that there are certain human experiences that can not be reduced to hard numbers alone.

Above, I have just scratched the surface on work in the field, a small selection that points towards vast depths, if you will. What this shows is that humanity has gone to great lengths to try to understand, explain, measure, and structure the complex web of thoughts, actions, feelings, and behavior that revolves around fear of death. This huge library of theory and thinking, with all its deeply impressive contributions, might have moved practitioners in the field themselves towards a greater understanding of the issue, but has it made each and everyone of us better equipped to face our own end? To what degree is it even possible to intellectualize such a deeply ingrained embodied part of the human experience? For my part, I have found throughout life that there is a limit to how much insight about one's lived experience one can integrate with a purely theoretical or intellectual approach. The way I see it, life is an embodied experience, and I believe that embodied experiences often can be easier to understand through embodied practice. Larping is an example of such an embodied practice.

Facing My Own End

During the summer of 2018, as I was having to face my own mortality, many different feelings came up for me. Among them, there was of course both some frustration and resignation, but in general I was surprised at how at peace I felt. I was 39, and naturally I felt that there were many things that I had not gotten around to doing with my life, tasks and projects left undone, remaining answers to unearth to the existential question in Erikson's (1950) 7th stage of psychosocial development, generativity vs. stagnation: 'Can I make my life count?' Yet, all in all I found that I was quite content and had few problems accepting fairly quickly that at the end of the day life is what it is: finite. I guess you never really know how you would feel and act until you find yourself in a situation like this, but I have to admit that before my experience I would have thought that I would have reacted with greater amounts of anxiety and fear.

When you are instructed to stay at home and stay put as much as possible, you are awarded a lot of time to process and reflect on the things you have done in life so far. Among other things I found myself reflecting on the numerous role-playing experiences I had had, both ones where my own character had died and ones where characters close to mine passed away. As a result of my processing, several questions came up: 'Was it

possible that my play experience had prepared me for this real life experience? Had I unknowingly built up resilience and acceptance of death while immersing myself in the fictional lives of my characters? Had I to some degree been rehearsing, almost like an actor to a play, for this very situation?' Before we get further into the answers to these questions though, I believe that a brief overview of my role-playing experience might be helpful to the reader.

Nordic Larp

I have been active as a designer, theorist, organizer, writer and player in the Nordic larp tradition of live action role-playing for over 20 years. Nordic larp originated in the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, which also explains the name itself (Stenros/Montola 2010). The tradition is heavily built on a collective understanding of role-playing as a collaborative creation practice and over the years a number of individuals have contributed to a comprehensive and freely shared collection of tools, theory, designs, and games. Designers who consider themselves part of the Nordic larp tradition tend to favor unobtrusive rules, and consent-based play, and in addition, tend to not shy away from deep engagement with heavy and psychologically and emotionally challenging narrative themes. Over the years, the tradition has grown to encompass a wide variety of play styles and settings. It has also been quite influential on other emerging similar traditions, most notably in other parts of Europe and in the US. It has to be noted though, that these other traditions have emerged in their own right and have all in different ways contributed to a freely shared global pool of knowledge. This movement has been instrumental in expanding the edges of the application of role-playing to new fields in the last couple of decades, among them education, political activism, personal development, and therapeutic practices (cf. Nordic Larp Wiki).

Going back to my musing at the time, I discovered, or rather remembered, that I as a player had in fact experienced themes of facing death and dying for years in various larps from these traditions. Participating in deeply **immersive** larps such as among others *1942* (2000; 2017), *Just A Little Lovin'* (2015; 2018), *Legion* (2016), and *Conscience* (2018), I had explored numerous aspects of both my own character's death and the death of characters close to mine. As I was now finding myself in a real life situation where questions concerning awareness and degrees of acceptance of my own mortality were being thrust upon me, I could quite consciously and easily tap into these experiences, which provided me with both perspective and a certain familiarity that would not otherwise have been available to me. In turn, I could face this crisis in my real life with a fairly calm composure, which I now firmly believe was in part awarded to me from my experiences in fictional settings.

Alibi

When we role-play, we embody a character that is not our everyday self. The character might be either quite similar or quite different (or both) to whom we perceive ourselves

to be, but the important point is that within the setting of the game, we all agree to the premise that we are not interacting with others as ourselves. While role-playing, the permission we grant each other to act without being held accountable as our everyday selves is called **alibi**. Deterding defines alibi "as a motivational account… that deflects negative inference from displayed behavior to a person's identity" (2018: 268) In regards to role-playing, we recognize alibi when we hear statements such as 'I just did what my character would do' or 'That was not me, it was my character.'

In the vein of Shakespeare's (1623) famous quote in *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" (Act II Scene VII Line 139), Erving Goffman postulates that we always present, or perform versions of ourselves based on which specific social **frame** we are currently performing in (Goffman 1959). This theory opens us up to an understanding of identity as a much more fluid concept than we are accustomed to seeing it as. As a matter of fact, Goffman posits that acting and other preformed interactions in our daily lives rely on the same basic skill set, even if actors refine those skills through training:

> A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence [or con] man; but the successful staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of real techniques – the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations. (ibid: 10)

This overlap between player identity and character enactment has also been explored in neuroscience. In 2019, the first neuroimaging study of dramatic enactment was performed, studying actors trained in the Stanislavski method of acting, which found that portraying a character led to both general reductions in brain activity and de-activation of specific areas of the brain (Brown et. al. 2019). That the actors were trained in the Stanislavski method is noteworthy, as this specific method of acting encompasses a range of techniques and philosophies that are common, even prevalent in certain role-playing traditions, Nordic larp being one of these. For example, modern actors following their version of the method often deeply immerse themselves into character, just as Nordic larpers do, especially in the Finnish tradition (cf. Pohjola 2004). It is also a noteworthy point that the imaging was not performed while the actors were acting out lines or any other form of pre-written text, but rather when they were answering questions as their character. In other words, while they were role-playing. In many ways, the technique they used is very similar to the established and commonly applied pre-game role-playing technique hot seat, where players take turns (in the hot seat), answering quick fire questions from the other players as their character (cf. Stark 2013). The theory Brown et al. suggested as a result of their study was that embodying a character leads to a certain 'loss of self,' which implies that we do not rigidly hang on to our perceived identity when we engage in role-playing. So, while it has so far been beyond our reach to exactly pin down where identity is mapped in our neurological system, this research clearly supports the idea that role-playing is in fact an altered state of consciousness (cf. Hugaas 2018; 2019).

When considering alibi and Goffman's concept of the social presentation of self within given frames, we are faced with the following question: What is the significant, if any, difference between embodying a character that is close to our perceived identity and performing a version of ourselves based on the specific social frame we are in? When merging this with the findings from the study conducted by Brown et al., we can further ask: What effect does the observed 'loss of self' in a role-playing setting have on our mind's ability to clearly distinguish between the two? And ultimately: How can a stable sense of 'self' be created when considering the malleability of our consciousness? Is it even possible?

Immersion

One of the more elusive concepts in role-playing theory is **Immersion** (Bowman 2012). In short, as with many embodied experiences, it tends to be something that we recognize immediately when we experience it (when we feel immersed), but then on the other hand tends to elude us when we try explaining it to others afterwards:

> Immersion is not a phenomenon limited to game play. Rather, immersion is a fundamental state of human consciousness taking many forms and encompassing a variety of experiences with distinct cognitive and emotional processes. Despite this plurality, all immersion arises from some form of psychological motivation to engage with certain stimuli. (Bowman 2018: 380)

In 2016, Sarah Lynne Bowman and Andhe Standiford published a suggested categorization of different types of immersion into an analog play experience. Parallel to their work on this, Gordon Calleja had suggested a categorization for digital games that roughly corresponds to Bowman's and Standiford's structure (Calleja 2011). Their categorization for analog games included the following: Immersion into **activity**, into **game**, into **environment**, into **narrative**, into **character**, and into **community** (Bowman/Standiford 2016). In relation to this article, immersion into narrative and character are particularly relevant.

In regards to role-playing games, immersion into character might seem fairly self-explanatory. When role-playing, immersing yourself into the character, taking on their different aspects, ideas, mannerism, and even emotions, is the very core of the activity itself. Of course, there are no distinct hard lines, but in several ways, the immersion into character is in theory what separates role-playing from several traditions of acting. Where for instance acting tends to be heavily reliant on the use of prewritten scripts, role-playing is not, making the depth of immersion into character that follows spontaneous co-creation and reactive embodiment of character easier to achieve. It is important to note though, that this type of immersion is exactly what the above mentioned study by Brown et al. (2019) describes on a neurological level, thereby adding further weight to the argument that method acting and immersive role-playing are closer linked than one might previously have thought. The main limitation to making this connection, is how

the study applied the aforementioned improvisational hot seat technique rather than having the actors act out a pre-written script.

Immersion into narrative happens when we engage deeply with the story that we are part of telling. With regards to practicing social skills through role-play, narrative immersion provides us with the scaffolding we need to make the in-game experience recognizable to our real world selves. In other words, if the story does not resonate with the players, we can get disinterested or disconnected from the experience, and it becomes harder to integrate it into our lives after the game ends (Bowman/Hugaas 2021). In addition, there are several theories around how narrative is an important part of how we construct our identities. For instance, the theory of narrative identity first partly proposed by Dan McAdams (McAdams 1985) states that we tend to weave and integrate important experiences we have into a structured story about our lives. By making what is for most of us a vastly complex and mostly non-coherent experience of life into a structured narrated story, people experience a greater sense of purpose, unity, and a more consistent concept of self (McAdams 2011).

When researching the psychology of narrative experiences, one of the main processes in which audiences interact with fictional characters is identification. Through the process of identification, people can take on the first-person perspective of the fictional character whose narrative they are watching (Oatley 1999). This is similar to what one experiences when one immerses into character while role-playing. If anything, one can argue that the added conscious alibi of role-playing could be expected to facilitate greater merging of the characters' experiences into the player than could be expected from the more distanced, less embodied perspective that people inhabit when engaging with traditional media. The shared role-playing activity gives us permission to identify with the character on a first-person level to a depth that could be perceived as socially problematic/unacceptable if one did so from the point of view of an audience member.

In 2021, a neuroimaging study of fans of the TV series *Game of Thrones*, while studying the process of identification, found neural overlap that might explain it. In their findings, they state:

> These results suggest that identification with fictional characters leads people to incorporate these characters into their self-concept: the greater the immersion into experiences of 'becoming' characters, the more accessing knowledge about characters resembles accessing knowledge about the self. (Broom et. al. 2021: 541)

In other words, what happens to our characters, also happens to us, not only in the moment, but also when we in retrospect try to access our memories. When we take into account the similarity between identification and immersion into character when role-playing, it leads us to understand that what we experience as characters when we role-play do inform our real life identity also after the game ends.

Bleed

A widely reported experience when role-playing is how emotions, feelings, physical states, opinions, thoughts, and other states 'spill over' from player to character, or vice versa. For instance, if you are playing a character that is in love with another character, you might as a player experience similar attraction to the other player after the game ends (Harder 2018). Another example is how you as a player might hold a strong ethical conviction, for instance pacifism, that leads to your warrior character being unable to enact violence in a way they would be accustomed to and expected to do. This transfer of a variety of states between player and character is a phenomenon that is known as bleed (Montola 2010). When the phenomenon of bleed travels in the direction from character to player, as in the example of the player adopting the romantic attraction of the character, we call it bleed-out, and when it goes the opposite way, as in the example of the character adopting the pacifist philosophy of the player, we call it bleed-in. For the sake of this article, I am talking about bleed with regards to analog role-playing, but it is also found in digital games. Even in single player games with little to no free creative input and no co-created or player-created content, bleed still seems to happen (Waern 2010). Can we then even begin to imagine the potential potency of bleed when we ourselves are the creators of our game world, our narratives, our relationships, and our characters?

Over the years, a variety of categories of bleed have been suggested, such as:

- Emotional bleed (Montola 2010; Bowman 2015), where emotional states and feelings bleed between player and character.
- Ego bleed (Beltrán 2013), where aspects of personality and identity bleed between player and character.
- Procedural bleed (Hugaas 2019), where physical abilities, traits, habits, and other bodily states bleed between player and character.
- Memetic bleed (Hugaas 2019), where ideas, thoughts, opinions, convictions, ideologies and similar bleed between player and character.
- Emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017; 2020), where players from marginalized backgrounds experience liberation from that marginalization through their characters. Players can choose to steer toward such liberatory experiences as a means to challenge structural oppression.

As we can see, through bleed and other phenomena, role-playing is believed to have the potential to affect more or less every part of our emotional, cognitive, and even physical being. In relation to death anxiety, which is known to have emotional, behavioral, somatic and cognitive components, it is safe to say that the activity of role-playing has the potential to cover all of these areas to a degree. In other words, when we experience something in character, it can affect us as players in a number of ways. Thus, it stands to reason that specific subcategories of bleed have the potential to affect us in ways that address components of our fear of dying. Of course, it is not as simple in practice, but in general we can say that emotional bleed relates to the emotional parts of anxiety, memetic bleed to the behavioral parts, and procedural to somatic parts.

The Transformational Potential of Role-Playing Games

Over the years, I and others who seek to explore and understand the transformational potential of role-playing games, have informally gathered hundreds of stories from players who report to have experienced profound transformation through games. In 2019, Sarah Lynne Bowman and I proposed a categorization of such reported impacts, and I present them here without the (numerous) sub-categories:

(1) Emotional Processing
(2) Social Cohesion
(3) Educational Goals
(4) Political Aims

With regards to anxiety and/or acceptance of death, the first category (Emotional processing) clearly plays an important part, but there are aspects in all the categories that together play into the processing around these themes. For example, when it comes to play centered around death and dying through role-playing, players can among other things practice grieving the loss of a loved one, reframe past experiences, recognize fears of things like death and abandonment, explore aspects of their personal experience, experience being witnessed, learn to hold space, and learn perspective taking.

As we seek to immerse into a play experience, we regularly have to employ a certain level of pretending that things are different than we rationally know them to be (Pohjola 2004). It can be as easy as accepting that these two chairs in your living room are actually the front seats in a car and you are now cruising down a road, headed for unknown adventure. When we pretend that one object is something else, most likely as they share some sort of similarity – in this case, chairs and car seats – we refer to it as **iconic representation**. This representation of one object as something else can be seen as the most basic form of **symbolic enactment.** On the other end of this scale, where mere physical placeholding gives place to abstract constructs, we find **indexical** symbolic enactment. (Rusch/Phelps 2020)

> Indexical symbolic action can therefore be understood as a process of projecting salient aspects of an internal landscape outward, manifesting them through physical gestures and objects that represent something otherwise abstract. The tangible, symbolic manifestation of elusive ideas now allows their manipulation in a manner that the unconscious accepts authentically as 'real.' 'As if' becomes 'as.' This can have powerfully transformative effects on the performer's inner world. (Rusch/Phelps 2020)

Following symbolic enactment, in order to maximize the potential for transformative impacts to occur, the implementation of **integration** practices is essential (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). By this we mean practices that are consciously designed to facilitate for players to integrate the experiences they have had within the frame of the game into their real life concept of self and the frames of their daily lives. For a deeper read into this categorization and the importance of integration of play experiences, I refer

to our article "Transformative Role-play: Design, Implementation, and Integration." (Bowman/Hugaas 2019) For my part, knowledge of the transformational potential of role-playing has deeply informed both my play and my design practice.

How I have Practiced Dying

In the years leading up to my health scare, I played a lot of different larps, all across a wide variety of settings and themes. At the time, I did not consciously seek out games whose themes revolved around death and fear of death, but somehow I seem to have touched on the theme on a number of occasions, and I present a small selection here.

Just a Little Lovin' (Edland/Grasmo 2011)

In 2015 I played the Nordic larp Just a Little Lovin' for the first time. The larp is set in upstate New York in the early '80s, and revolves around a community of LGBTQ+ characters from New York City during the first years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and a community of cancer survivors with whom they are interconnected. The game is divided into three acts, set in 1982, 1983 and 1984, and unless your character passes away between the acts, you will play a 3 year stretch of their life.

The larp's handling of questions of queerness, sex, and the party culture of the 1980s is often referred to first when people discuss it. However, as one of the games original designers, Hanne Grasmo, points out in her 2017 talk "Larp and I –Till Death Do Us Part," the motivation for creating it was different; "*Just a Little Lovin'* was for me a lot more about the fear of death, than about sex, friendship, and the 1980s. That's why I wrote it. That's why I played it. The reason: I am scared.. to death.., by the thought of my own exit from life" (Grasmo 2017). The second act of the game is even titled 'Fear of Death,' clearly showcasing the creators' intent, and also signaling to the players what the experience of playing the game will be like. Grasmo's talk was part of the annual Nordic Larp Talks, a series of lectures concerning avant garde projects and ideas stemming from the Nordic larp tradition.

My character, the go-go dancer, adult movie actor and sugar baby Chain, led a life of high risk in regards to contracting the HIV virus, which he also did in late 1982. Without going into some of the larp's mechanics that I believe should remain unexplained in detail for future players of the game, I got to play out my potential death in an embodied fashion that included connections to my own emotions, my community, and my own cognitive fear of death. In short, it was a profoundly immersive experience. This scene where I got to enact the character's potential death is one of the clearest examples of a collection of indexical symbolic enactments (Rusch/Phelps 2020) that I can recall ever having experienced. The added layer of being in character led to the fascinating experience of both character and player having a profound feeling of being reborn, and we both went on to enact change in our lives as a result of it.

The summer of 2018, I played the game again, this time with a different character: the wealthy middle aged community hub Terrence 'Mr. T' Thurlow. This character's lifestyle was one of lower risk than my first character, yet he had more to lose. Where my

first character was young, individually minded, and focused on instant gratification, my second character was older, community minded, and preoccupied with legacy, with leaving something behind. I went into the game thinking that it would be difficult for me to have the same profound experience as the first time, but I was mistaken. My character did end up contracting the HIV virus in 1984, and spent the last evening having to come to terms with his own mortality.

The two experiences, different as they might be, both influenced my processing around my own mortality on a profound level. When I was going through my own health issue, I kept returning to thinking about my experiences, and I found that they gave me peace of mind.

Conscience

In February of 2018, I played the larp *Conscience* (Montero et. al. 2018), a game loosely based on the premise of the TV show *Westworld* (Nolan et al. 2017) The setting was a 'Wild West town' amusement park, where wealthy people could come and live out their fantasies of being either white hat heroes or black hat villains in a fictional American western town in the 1800s. The characters that were people of the town were all androids (albeit played by human role-players), so within the fiction they were simply machines that the human characters could potentially treat as in-humanely as they wished. As follows the setting, the large questions that the players were asked to ponder went along the lines of: 'What makes us human? How do we treat those who we perceive as less human than ourselves? How do we engage with our own mortality and the mortality of others?' The last part was informed by how the android characters, although their minds were erased regularly, were in theory immortal, while the human characters were of course not.

My character, the sadistic football star Jamie King, was definitely a villain: a spoiled, bored, and wealthy young man that had known nothing but privilege his whole life. As such, he treated the android characters to all manners of abuse. Not to spoil too much of the story, but of course the android characters do achieve consciousness towards the end of the game, and there is a reckoning. My character did not survive, and as I lay there dying, a death that at least for my character was very well deserved, I to my surprise found that he was clearly not afraid. Not afraid at all.

Yes, he was a bad man, but he had lived every moment with a clear purpose and he always knew what he wanted in life. In short, he had no regrets, he had made his impression on the world, done what he wanted to do, and achieved the things he had set out to achieve. Clearly, this man's actions were not something to emulate, but in retrospect I found that parts of how he had approached life might be. I was reminded again of Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development, this time of the 8th stage, the one of reflection, where one is in flux between integrity and despair, ultimately posing the question: 'Is it okay to have been me?' Having read this theory, I have words to describe my experience, but the knowledge itself did little to create a real embodied understanding of what leads to satisfaction at the end of life. To me, embodying this character over a long weekend led to a level of internalization of this knowledge that years of thinking about it had failed to produce.

Legion

In 2016, I played the larp Legion (Rolling 2015), which is set in 1917 just as Russia had withdrawn from WW1. The setting of this historical game is how the Czech legion, who had until then fought as a unit in the Russian army, find themselves removed from the fighting and at odds with the new rulers of Russia. The legion had joined the fight on the Allied side in order to gain Czech independence from Austria-Hungary, and had little reason to join the ideological fight of the new communist powers in Moscow. The game revolves around how the legion (which it historically actually did), decides to travel east and around the globe in order to reach their Czech homeland, fighting both the bolshevik Reds and the tsarist Whites on their journey there.

My character was a second lieutenant, a professional soldier of many years, and a seasoned leader of his men. In his pocket, he carried the letters of his brothers-in-arms, as they carried letters of his, to bring back home if any of them should fail to make it. He was very much used to being surrounded by death, be it the death of his own men or his enemies, and he knew that any doubt or hesitation on his part would lead rather to the former, than to the latter. He knew that he was most likely not going to survive the war, but he found purpose in caring for his men and doing his best to keep them safe, if even just for an hour at a time.

This complete understanding of his own purpose and what actions he needed to take to fulfill it, gave the character the same sort of acceptance of death as I described earlier with regards to my character at Conscience.

Integrating My Play Experiences

In retrospect, I have clearly integrated parts of the above-mentioned experiences in my life going forward from them. The experiences I had at Just A Little Lovin' have helped me realize that I should not postpone the things I want to do in life, as none of us know how much time we get. As such, they have informed many decisions I have taken, which in turn has helped me live a life more full of great and purposeful experiences, such as travel, connecting with friends, building community, and exploring further into philosophy and spirituality. I did play the game again in 2019, this time playing the character of Kohana, a spiritual guide, masculinity coach, and healer. To me, it felt like I had completed a circle, and could come back to this experience not needing to explore my mortality, but having already faced it, and thus being able to help others in their time of need.

I have always been a caretaker and a guardian of those I care about, but rarely have I been able to experience the deepening of this character trait of mine so clearly as I did when coming back to the game to play Kohana. When I combined this experience with how my character at Legion found deep purpose in taking care of and protecting his people in the middle of a war, I realized how important the caretaker and guardian roles are to me in my real life. As a result of these experiences, I am now more conscious about how doing this work in the real world is helping me feel that I am living a purposeful and fulfilling life.

The calmness with which my characters in Legion and Conscience could face their end, had a profound impact on how I dealt with having to face my own. To me it was telling how two such vastly different characters could share a stoic calmness at the end of life, and although there was not much for me to learn from their actions, the sincerity with which they acted has informed how I go about acting in my own life.

Most profoundly life changing of all was how my experiences made me truly internalize how life is what we make of it, and that we all have a limited number of days. For years before my real life crisis and some of the role-playing experiences I have described, the understanding that I was to go through life quite alone had solidified in me. Although love was abundant in many ways and forms in my life, the life partner that I felt could truly understand and complete me had always been an elusive prospect. Or rather, I felt that I had met her back in 2015 (the first time I played Just A Little Lovin' in fact), but she lived on the other side of the world and there were challenges both numerous and large that made a life together seem like little more than a romantic pipe dream.

The very first thing I did when I woke from my surgery was to let her know that it was successful, that I would be around for quite some time still, that I wanted us to commit fully to a life together, and that for any challenge we faced we would find all the solutions we needed. Sarah is now my wife, and my life has improved in more ways than I could ever imagine. I am truly certain that my real life experience in itself would not have proven enough for me to internalize the knowledge of what one needs to do in order to face the end with acceptance and contentment. For me to make the leap I needed to make in order to be truly happy, the role-playing experiences I have mentioned were instrumental and I am forever grateful that I got the opportunity to have them.

How My Experience Informs My Work as a Designer

Since my life-threatening experience, themes involving death and loss have become a more significant part of my designs. Death as a theme especially permeates the chamber larps/freeform scenarios I design, as I am most often the sole designer on these, yet it does inform how I approach larger collaborative projects too.

The Norwegian Prine Trilogy

I started writing the chamber larp *Hello in There* (2019) while I was recovering from my major surgery in 2018. It is a game in the Nordic larp tradition designed for 6–10 players, which premiered at the Spillerom convention in Trondheim in 2019. This game became my first attempt at specifically processing both the complex thoughts that arose around my own mortality, but also the loss of the last 3 of my grandparents in the course of a 12 month period in 2015–2016. We follow the playable characters as romantic couples over a period of 50 years, as they age and eventually pass away from an unspecified cause. Attempting to create an experience that encompasses an entire life, there are scenes depicting young love, the friendships of early adulthood, the departure of grown children, the onsetting loneliness of old age, and the passing of old friends and lovers.

The game was the first in an ongoing trilogy of freeform black box scenarios that touch very specifically on death and loss. I am currently putting the finishing touches on the next installment in the series, a game that specifically deals with addiction and the loss of a family member to substance abuse. Staying with the inspirational background for the first game, a song by American singer John Prine (Prine 1971), this upcoming game is named in the same tradition: *Summer's End* (Prine 2018). The trilogy is planned to conclude sometime in 2022–2023 with *The Great Compromise* (Prine 1972), a game about patriotism and death as a result of strife and war (Hugaas 2021).

In *Summer's End*, we follow a family torn apart and isolated by the global pandemic. One of the family members (decided during pre-game workshops) is isolated at the family's lakeside cottage, a place that carries vivid and important memories for all of them. This family member also went through a severe accident some time back, and as a result they are dependent on prescription painkillers to get through their day. From there, the story goes on to touch on themes of loneliness, addiction, and death.

The Great Compromise is in early stages of development, but as one might gather, it too follows the same thematic arc as the two previous ones of the trilogy. Together, these games represent a conscientious attempt at using bleed intentionally as a tool to facilitate for transformative impacts on a personal level, with specific regards to tackling issues of death anxiety and acceptance in the following ways:

- Through the experience of emotional bleed, the players may among other things explore aspects of self and others, process grief, experience belonging, practice empathy, explore intimacy, learn to recognize fears, and feel witnessed.
- Through the experience of memetic bleed, the players may among other things experience raised awareness, expand their worldview, practice rhetoric, practice problem solving, and learn to challenge default assumptions.
- Through the experience of procedural bleed, the players may among other things, practice perspective taking, practice empathy, and build confidence. (Bowman/ Hugaas 2019)

An example might be a player like myself having recently lost a grandparent, experiencing the perspective of an elderly person facing death who felt a strong sense of belonging with their in-game spouse. The loss of their own character's life and the life of their in-game spouse might help them not only prepare for their own death in daily life, but also to process existing grief from their recent personal loss. For instance, in a funeral scene the player might feel witnessed in their grief in a way that might so far have been lacking in their real life.

Another example might be how a player who has not experienced any sort of health issues in their life, can gain perspective and practice empathy for others who have not been so fortunate. With regards to this trilogy of games, I think that players who have not felt the impact of drug addiction in their family might gain some nuance beyond the typical political message that drug use is merely a question of moral strength. In short, these games are designed to invite the players to reflect and process their thoughts and feelings around their own mortality and what they find important in life. Hopefully they can also take away insights that will be beneficial to their own lives going forward.

John Prine passed away from Covid-19 in April 2020, adding a layer of bittersweet and poignant profundity to these songs and the larps that they inspired. I am forever grateful for how his talent for writing and performing have added to my life and the lives of countless others.

The Mountain/If I Could See Your Face Again

Together with Dutch game designer Karijn van der Heij, I am currently designing the sister games The Mountain and If I Could See Your Face Again„ both inspired by songs of the same name by Steve Earle (1999; 2020). If I Could See Your Face Again is the shorter freeform scenario version of the weekend long Nordic larp The Mountain, and they both revolve around the small West Virginia mining town of Norton's Gully during a time of crisis. The background story is how the tiny community reacts to an accident that leaves a skeleton crew of miners caught underground and the rescue operation that gets set in motion to save them. While *The Mountain* is still in fairly early development, *If I Could See Your Face Again* premiered at the Stockholm Scenario Festival in November 2021.

The trapped miners are not playable characters, but the players have to navigate how to deal with seeing their loved ones trapped in a potentially deadly situation with little to no hope of getting out. The two games seek to explore how much of our reasons for living and purpose in life we tend to find in connection with others. For me, this is a clear continuation of what I explored in *Hello In There*, with a more dramatic and acute situation and the affected characters being younger and less prepared for the inevitability of their own mortality. Feedback from players of the first runs of *If I Could See Your Face Again* were generally very positive, with several emphasizing how the wait for hearing news between the acts was the most emotionally engaging and draining. To me, it speaks to how uncertainty about the outcome often can be worse than knowing, meaning that fear of losing someone can be felt just as strongly as actually losing them.

The Good Life at the End of the Road

Since the very beginning, humanity has pursued the elusive answer to the question of what makes for a 'good life'. The feeling of somehow not being able to check the necessary boxes before our time is up seems to be the main fuel for an existential fear of death and dying. To counter this fear some offer continued existence after passing, be it in an after-life or as part of a collective unconscious spirit. Some offer peace through philosophical and spiritual practices, and others again seem to think that simple denial is the best way to handle it. I will not attempt a definite answer to this question myself, but it does seem to me that a life well lived contains aspects of facing and accepting one's own mortality, feelings of having found and pursued one's true purpose in life, the ability to direct one's path with agency and integrity, and having cultivated deep and meaningful connections with others. To me, it is clear that to achieve any of these, the ability to identify and transform both internal and external central parts of one's lived experience is required. To me, role-playing offers opportunities to develop these abilities better than any other concept I have encountered so far in life.

Research seems to slowly be catching up to what players have been reporting for years: that role-playing games can have profound transformative effects on deeply personal levels. With the contribution from everything from neuroimaging to connecting role-play theory with established psychology, we are starting to complete parts of the picture of how we can use role-playing to both help us make sense of our own lived experiences, and also prepare us for future experiences, thus better enabling us to achieve those elusive aspects of the 'good life.'

For my own part, it is clear to me that my experiences as a player did prepare me for the health crisis that I went through in 2018. It is also clear that the processing that I have been able to do through game design after this event has been instrumental in further lessening my fear of dying, bolstering my acceptance of my own mortality, and fundamentally adding a lot to my general experienced quality of life. It has helped me make better choices that are more aligned with my own sense of integrity and my own needs, helped me identify what I find valuable and purposeful in life, and allowed me to substantially deepen my connections with others. In short, it has helped me steer myself towards what I will consider a life well lived when my time comes.

I believe that the way larps so far have been used to provide low-risk opportunities to practice skills we can employ to deal more calmly and gracefully with our own mortality, while helping us build emotional and spiritual resilience, is merely the beginning. If we choose to consciously use the knowledge and experience we have accumulated, we can further develop role-playing games into powerful tools for transforming ourselves, our communities and our world for the better.

Myself, I can hardly imagine a life better lived than one in service of such transformations.

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Part IIb – Practice: Research

Exploring Applications of Videogame Magic through Tumblr's Pop Culture Witchcraft

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Keywords: *neopaganism; online cultures; pop culture witchcraft; spirituality; Tumblr; Undertale; videogames*

Introduction

The occult, once hidden and veiled in mystery, seems now to be emerging into the light, particularly on social media. The TikTok hashtag #witchtok, a portmanteau of 'witch' and 'TikTok,' has (at time of writing) over 24.9 billion views, and there are currently over 17.3 million posts under the hashtag #witch on Instagram (plus 7.2 million filed under #witchcraft, and 8.4 million under #witchesofinstagram). In 2018, makeup retailer Sephora set the blogosphere abuzz with their 'Starter Witch Kit,' a $42 USD set including a tarot deck, rose quartz crystal, sage 'smudge' stick, and several perfume samples. After outcry from practicing pagans, Sephora pulled the kit from shelves, but it is one example along many of the growing market for crystals, tarot decks, and other witchy ephemera among the TikTok and Instagram crowd (Villarreal 2018). If an aspiring spiritualist wishes to follow in #WitchTok's digital footsteps and take their #witchaethsthetic to the next level, embracing witchcraft as a practice or a religion, where might this beginner witch turn?

It is perhaps simplest to begin with religious witchcraft; this chapter will discuss secular witchcraft practice later. The 'occult spirituality' or 'New Age' section of any given bookstore is likely to stock texts by authors who structure their books as introductions to religious witchcraft, complete with strict rulesets. A glance among Amazon's top 20 best-selling Wicca, Witchcraft, and Paganism books[1] seems to target new witches specifically: eight books advertise as various types of guides or encyclopedias, and some books

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[1] ""Best Sellers – Wicca, Witchcraft, & Paganism." Amazon. Accessed 3/24/2022, https://www.amazon.com/b/?node=11309334011&ref_=Oct_d_odnav_22&pd_rd_w=uNueu&pf_rd_p=72459b27-e231-4837-b61c-b057ff0c50ac&pf_rd_r=T8TZN6ZBQ6X9QQ2K9K3N&pd_rd_r=3c11d748-92de-42b7-abdb-941a7c054a22&pd_rd_wg=YZM8X adjusted for repeats – Spell Book for New Witches ranks #4 in paperback and again at #8, but in hardcover.

feature 'beginner' or 'new witch' directly in the title. Barnes and Noble features chakra and crystal guides, scented candles topped with 'wellness crystals,' and texts like *Spells for Change* (Castanea 2022) under its 'New Age and Metaphysical Shop,' and even without sorting specifically for Wicca, there is crossover between both retailers' bestselling offerings. Published texts on religious witchcraft carry a certain sense of authority: there is an assumption that a published text is somehow 'objectively correct,' and that, like other religious texts for sale in bookstores, the knowledge within is ancient. The book's presence on a store shelf suggests the existence and influence of editors, historians, fact-checking, and other signifiers of 'accurate information.' For millennials and Gen Z, who grew up with the internet and warnings that 'anyone can lie online,' published books might seem like a clever start. However, some beginner witches live with prying adults, lack disposable income, or any number of other factors that make the purchase or possession of witchy books risky. Even eBooks saved to a device might pose problems. In such an environment, where allowance money is preciously hoarded and secret shelf space is rare, choosing exactly the correct beginner book becomes fraught. In these cases, the beginner witch may turn to the black scrying mirror of their smartphone, to discern the 'best' book to start with.

Unfortunately, online research may only serve to complicate the problem. Authors with dozens of bestselling pagan titles to their names are not immune to online 'cancel culture,' nor to the extensive research powers (and long memories) of some online witches. Silver Ravenwolf, for example, has long been lambasted by both Wiccans and witches alike for the sheer amount of misinformation in her books, for encouraging teens to lie to their parents, and for selling racist 'mammy' dolls online. Some of Ravenwolf's purported crimes reveal inherent problems when writing non-fiction books on magic and the occult; what is immutable fact to one author is mere coincidence to another. How can an author unquestionably 'prove' that a spell has been successful? How do we academically (read: in an unbiased, clinical manner) address the feeling of the presence of deity? Other accusations against Ravenwolf, and discomfort with her work, stems from the social justice angle – she takes elements of 'closed' practices (faiths and religions like Hoodoo which belong to very specific cultures and therefore do not accept converts) and perpetuates racist stereotypes. Excluding individuals, 'nonfiction' research on witchcraft falls prey to the same sorts of problems any anthropological research does – history is written by those in power, and that power can lead to myopic viewpoints and unintentional bias. Zora Neale Hurston's interpretation of Haitian voodoo practices grants a respect and openness between observer and observed, whereas European explorer's descriptions of religious practice by indigenous North Americans tend towards dichotomies between 'civilized' Europeans and 'heathen' natives.[2] The 'history' of witchcraft is no different in this manner: the words of people of color are less likely to be touted as truth, and some magical practices, such as vodun or hoodoo, are primarily associated with people of color and therefore are historically negatively portrayed. Wicca, an allegedly pan-European religious craft founded by a British man, is commonly described as a religion of 'white magic,' magic of love and light, magic for healing and positivity; this type of framing sets up a racist dichotomy between 'good,

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2   Haunani-Kay Trask's *From a Native Daughter* beautifully exemplifies this phenomenon.

pure,' white magic and 'black, dark,' or evil magic. For the reader sensitive to language like this, the published world of Wicca can seem exclusionary and harmful.

Many prominent 'New Age' authors such as Scott Cunningham, DJ Conway, and Silver Ravenwolf tend to conflate witchcraft in general with Wicca specifically[3], relying on and referring to a somewhat contested history of Wicca and a myopic concept of witchcraft practice. 'Wicca' refers to a full religious structure, with a witchcraft/magical element. This religion was either founded or 'discovered' by Gerald Gardner in England in the late 1930s. Some Wiccan authors, such as Buckland, maintain the idea that Gardner merely facilitated a resurgence of what was an ancient European nature religion, kept secret for thousands of years under threat of the global power of the Catholic/Christian church. Others believe that Gardner created an eclectic earth religion wholesale, from "any source that didn't run away too fast," (2004: 52) including Freemason traditions, Romantic interpretations of Greco-Roman mythology, and a loose (and vaguely racist) conceptualization of prehistoric society. Witchcraft practice, whether secular or religious but non-Wiccan, is much more expansive, and much more culturally diverse. Brazilian candomblé, Haitian vodun, Cornish folk tradition, or the Italian evil eye all comprise some element of folk magic practice, which may be entirely unrelated to the 'witchcraft' found in published texts – and whose practitioners may not even self-identify as witches.[4] To equate Wicca (specifically) and witchcraft practice (generally) not only leaves all of witchcraft susceptible to Gerald Gardner's reliability crisis, it erases important cultural distinctions and conflates unrelated traditions. Some types of witchcraft practice truly do predate Christianity; to imply that witchcraft as spiritual practice is less than a hundred years old is to do a great disservice to a great number of faiths. Further, this confusion of witch practice and Wiccan faith imposes specifically Wiccan structures and rules onto any type of witchcraft practice, whether or not those rules are justified or supported by its original tradition. For those seeking alternatives to Wicca, or those whose occult practice must stay hidden, the internet is full of anonymous corners where all sorts of witch-practitioners dwell, and many of those practitioners are very willing to offer up free advice.

Beginning the witchcraft journey online can grant access to these previously silenced voices and allow for more playful experimentation – breaking away from the rules and peculiarities of Wicca. If we acknowledge that the origins of modern witchcraft are wider than Wicca, both steeped in pre-Christian tradition **and** entirely invented, it becomes possible to continue to question and expand what witchcraft practice means today, for us as individuals. The social media website Tumblr, a microblogging site which functions as a haven for popular culture fan communities, finds itself home as well to many witch practitioners continuing Gardner's work of making "any source that doesn't run away too fast" (2001: 52) into a spiritual practice – and expands the net of those sources. On Tumblr, it is possible to brush up against Norse heathens, Mexican brujas, Greek polytheists, or

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3   Although there are many 'types' of neopaganism, Wicca is a popular variant. Among Amazon and Barnes & Noble's top 10 Best Sellers in their Wicca, Witchcraft & Paganism sections, over half are Wicca-inspired or directly Wiccan.

4   For this reason, I will be interchangeably using the words 'witch' and 'witch-practitioner' to refer to non-Wiccan witchcraft practice.

people who worship the Nine Divines depicted in the *Elder Scrolls* videogame franchise. It is possible to find versions of witchcraft that encourage practitioners to hone their gut instincts and make connections that feel correct, to practice critical thinking and to adjust information to suit their needs, and to break the false dichotomy between 'black' and 'white' magics.

Although there are many types and varieties of witchcraft discussed on Tumblr, the practice of 'pop culture witchcraft' is of particular interest to this volume. This chapter will attempt a one-to-one comparison of 'published' Wicca versus pop culture witchcraft, utilizing *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft* and the Wiccan standpoint as it compares to posts related to pop culture witchcraft and witchcraft practice on Tumblr. *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*, originally published in 1986, is self-defined as "foundation material" and the "introduction to Wicca for numerous seekers." (2002: 16) The *Book* is certainly exhaustive; it covers fifteen 'lessons' in just over 300 pages, spanning everything from dream interpretation to Wiccan weddings. While it is certainly a useful guidebook for beginning Wiccans, it is not without its issues. Although Buckland's book has stood the test of time (it is still among Amazon's best sellers), I find that it has specific issues for Tumblr's userbase: namely, millennials and Gen Z, those #witchtok and #witchesofinstagram audiences. Further, I believe Buckland's text is indicative of its entire genre; wider published 'pagan' nonfiction media falls into many of the same issues Buckland's *Complete Book* does, especially the idea that witchcraft automatically equates with 'Wicca.' By titling his book the *Complete Book of Witchcraft*, Buckland misleads and potentially serves the wrong audience. The book functions best as a guide to Wicca, not witchcraft. Witchcraft does not need to involve a highly structured religious system – there are atheist witches, secular witches, agnostic witches, and all types of combinations thereof.

Sympathetic Magic

Both Wicca and many forms of 'online' paganism utilize a system of sympathetic magic – the idea that what is done symbolically is done in reality. Sympathetic magic is performed primarily through symbolism, visualization, and intention: specific **symbolic** items/ingredients are chosen to use in the spell, the practitioner **visualizes** something happening, and everything involved is catered towards reflecting the spell's particular purpose, or **intent**. Many systems of magic involve an extensive system of **correspondences:** colors, planetary symbols, moon phases, herbs, days of the week, and more that relate to or are used for various purposes or intentions. Llewellyn Publishing, a prominent Wiccan and pagan publishing house, releases an annual Witches' Calendar, featuring lists of colors, various planetary movements, and moon phases for each day of the month, as well as stones/crystals, animals, flowers, and zodiac signs for each full month. Spellwork for growth, money, or fertility, the calendar directs, should be conducted on a 'green' day. A money spell might be performed on a day associated with green, using a green candle, which is perhaps placed in a symbolic circle of coins or Monopoly money. Scott Cunningham, in his book *Magical Herbalism*, associates High John the Conqueror root with prosperity (2003: 166), so the aforementioned candle may be anointed with an oil containing this root for an extra boost. When anointing the candle, or placing it in the ring

of coins, the practitioner might envision leaving their boss's office after securing a raise, or receiving their unusually large tax return check, thereby visualizing the intended outcome of the spell. Within pop culture witchcraft, the practitioner can look for references to correspondences, either direct or indirect, in the media property they draw from, with varied levels of interpretation. The *Elder Scrolls* series feature specific in-game methods by which players can 'summon' its world's deities. The Daedric Prince Sheogorath, a deity of madness, is summoned to his Shrine with an offering of a head of lettuce, a skein of yarn, and a Lesser Soul Gem – if the 'real life' Sheogorath worshipper wishes to call upon him, they would only need to decide what type of crystal a Soul Gem might be. In *Dark Souls*, the player can summon another player for aid with a White Sign Soapstone, easily found in the 'real world,' so a spell for another person's assistance might feature a soapstone decorated to more closely resemble the image in the game, perhaps combined with more 'traditional' spell elements.

One of the most direct examples of sympathetic magic is the 'poppet' – a doll made to represent a certain person out of wax, clay, or fabric. Poppets are often stuffed with herbs associated with the spell's intent before being dyed, embroidered, or otherwise decorated with specific colors or motifs, and/or 'connected' to the spell's target in any number of ways. The witch then uses the poppet as a proxy for the person it represents: whatever is done to the poppet is symbolically done to the spell's target. Sympathetic magic does not, of course, need to be this explicit. Jar spells and bottle spells are very popular on Tumblr – a container is filled with herbs, crystals, or other magical items related to the spell's purpose, possibly including small trinkets (for the pop culture witch, videogame related keychains or other small figures would work well), then sealed with colored wax. The jar or bottle is then placed in a specific place concurrent with the spell's intention: home protection bottles might be buried in the backyard or in a flowerpot, safe travel bottles might be placed in a car's glove compartment, or home happiness bottles may be placed prominently in a sunny kitchen window.

Buckland's *Complete Book* places a great deal of emphasis on the religious and ritual elements of Wicca, and very little on spells or magic. In fact, Buckland creates a clear divide between the two at several points in his text; in Lesson One, he reminds his readers to keep spells separate from the "religious side of witchcraft," (2002: 39) and instructs his reader to learn more about the religion of Wicca (here conflated with witchcraft) before attempting to understand spells. When writing one's own spell, some understanding of sympathetic magic, correspondences, symbols, or astrological timing (moon phases, the zodiac, planetary movements) is necessary. If a beginner learned, from the previous lessons, how to set up an altar, which colors correspond with which ideas, etc., then the beginner would be prepared to create their own spell using these elements. The structure and organization of Buckland's text is therefore clearer to the experienced witch practitioner: with a stronger understanding of correspondence systems and sympathetic magic, one can break down Buckland's spells into their composite elements, and in doing so, discover how to alter or rewrite them to better reflect one's own mix of traditions and practice. But it bears repeating that not all witches are Wiccan, and even then, not all Wiccans 'need' every single tool and lesson Buckland prescribes. Nowhere in his text does Buckland indicate that skipping around in the lessons to suit one's own individual practice is permissible or encouraged. The reader is directed to follow Buckland's direc-

tions exactly, from his own tradition: most of the *Complete Book* deals with Seax-Wiccan rituals and methods, a sect of Wicca Buckland himself founded.

The following brief history of Wicca aims to distinguish the religion Buckland practiced from the wider practice of witchcraft, and to establish the creative space pop culture witchcraft utilizes.

The Published History of Wicca and Buckland's Approach to Magic

As alluded to earlier, a common assertion among published pagan texts positions Wicca as a revival of an ancient religion, persecuted for thousands of years and hidden from a conflation of the Catholic Church specifically and Christians in general. This religion, according to many Wiccans, was unearthed and revived in 1939 when British civil servant and amateur anthropologist Gerald Gardner was initiated into a Wiccan coven (the term for a group of practicing Wiccans) by a direct descendent of an ancient English pagan coven, the priestess 'Dafo.' This coven, according to Gardner, was a remnant of a pan-European "Witch Cult," (2004: 19) which had evaded persecution by Christians and survived for centuries underground. Many popular published witchcraft texts today follow in Gardner's wake, insinuating or directly claiming that global historical witch trials were intended for (and successful at) locating and punishing actual pre-Wiccan pagans. Although there is no evidence to suggest that those persecuted during historical witch trials performed rituals or believed in a religion analogous to today's modern neopagans, the pseudohistorical myth of the 'Burning Times' is a common one. Often, published pagan texts construct a dubious antagonistic relationship between Christianity and forms of paganism, using global witch trials (historical or modern), the Bible verse Exodus 22:18 ("Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live")[5] and the idea of Christianity as 'oppressive' as a basis. Buckland dismisses Christianity as 'man-made,' even as he uses obfuscating language to encourage the idea that the Wiccan 'Old religion' is, if not an unbroken line (and derived from the gods?), then at the least a family craft or 'religious cult' that lasted 'twenty thousand years' before Christianity (Buckland 2002: 25).

Unfortunately for Wiccans (but fortunately for pop culture witches), there is no evidence to suggest that the coven Gardner joined was truly an ancient, pre-Christian underground religion, nor much evidence for Murray's pan-European witch cult. Historian Ronald Hutton dismisses the ancient religion myth succinctly: "No academic historian has ever taken seriously Gardner's claim to have discovered a genuine survival of ancient religion." (1999: 206) Hutton exhaustively compares Wicca, other occult or secret societies and information on Gardner's associates and interests to point to Gardner as a 'founder' rather than a "discoverer." Indeed, Hutton addresses the creation and founding of other esoteric mystery societies such as the Rosicrucian Society in England and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, both of which utilized existing rituals and traditions to gain legitimacy and claimed "initiatory link[s] with…respected older bod[ies]," (1999: 75) a pattern repeated in the framing/founding of Wicca by Gardner and his followers.

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5   Interestingly, Bonewits and other authors suggest that the term 'witch' is here a mistranslation of a word for 'poisoner.' See Bonewits, *Witchcraft: a Concise Guide*, CA, Earth Religions Press, 2001, p.25.

Wicca relies on its mythological history to better support its ideas. If Gardner is not a 'reviver' but instead a 'founder,' Wicca becomes a comparatively young religion, and its principles become suspect. The Wicca that Buckland and others attempt to teach is a religion full of rules, with no clear reasonings behind them besides 'tradition:' but if this tradition is merely decades old, why stand on tradition? Throughout the text, Buckland uses historical art and literature to 'prove' Wicca and witchcraft's ancient nature. In one example, Buckland supports his argument that witches should work "skyclad," or naked, using "early illustrations of Witches at the sabbat." (2002: 71 ebook) These 'early illustrations' include works by Francisco Goya, who admittedly did paint naked witches, but also depicts clothed witches holding baskets of disassembled infants. If we can conclude from Goya's art that witches have 'always' worked skyclad, we can also conclude that they have also 'always' mutilated children or consorted with the Christian devil. If Catholics and Christians worked together to burn 'true' pre-Wiccan pagans at the stake, if there is truly such a rivalry between Wicca/pagans and Christians, why are the works of Christian and Catholic artists held up as accurate depictions of witchcraft?

If Gardner drew from any source he pleased, using previous esoteric societies' practices and rituals to legitimize himself (and he is not alone; Cynthia Giles discusses the "synthetic process" (1992: 75) of occult writers in the aggregate in her history *The Tarot*), the pop culture witch is similarly empowered to take inspiration where they find it, and legitimize it however they please. The concept of Wicca as a decades-old religion instead of a centuries-old religion provides a great deal of 'wiggle room' to find a faith or a witchcraft practice that feels good, not necessarily one with any basis in 'objective truth.' To accept Wicca as invented from Freemasonry and other varied sources is to accept that 'mystery' traditions can be malleable, and that pop culture witchcraft is as valid as any other spiritual practice – or to accept that witchcraft practice does not need to be associated with an established 'historical' religious framework in order to be valid.

To conflate the practice of witchcraft with Gardner's invented Wicca is to whitewash and risk losing centuries of unrelated witchcraft and folk magic practices. Buckland himself attempts to distinguish Wiccans from witches at one point in his text: Wiccans are those who follow the Wiccan religion, whereas witches "start their own practices…draw[ing] on any, and often times, all available sources" (2002: 18 ebook). This is dangerous, according to Buckland, since most beginner witches "do not know what is valid and relevant," (ibid, 14) unlike, presumably, Buckland himself or Gerald Gardner. Buckland may be willing to dismiss the structure and hierarchy of Gardner's 'original' sect of Wicca[6], substituting his own Seax-Wiccan rules and structure, but he is very opposed to newcomers outside of Wiccan faith calling themselves witches. He goes on to express concern that there are covens mixing "smatterings of Satanism and odds and ends of Voodoo together with Amerindian lore." (2002: 18 ebook) This type of casual racism runs throughout his *Complete Book*. 'Amerindian lore' is so vague a phrase as to be functionally useless and perpetuates hundreds of years of European-American erasure, conflation, and violence against indigenous Americans and Alaskan natives. There is no singular 'Amerindian lore;' to conflate the disparate beliefs and traditions of 574 federally

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6   There are many sects or types of Wicca. Buckland founded a tradition he calls Seax-Wicca, which he shows preference for in his *Complete Book*.

recognized tribes (National Conference of State Legislatures 2019) (and hundreds more unrecognized) in the United States alone is an egregious oversimplification. Voodoo, similarly, is often incorrectly used as shorthand for any number of pan-African religions across the diaspora. Even Satanism can refer to at least two distinct branches: the structured ceremony of the Church of Satanism as practiced by the followers of Anton LaVey, and the secular politics of the Satanic Temple. While it is true that a practitioner may draw from these disparate sources, they are not dissimilar to Wiccans themselves, combining Eastern ideas like chakras with concepts of Egyptian deity and European harvest festivals – but examples like voodoo and Satanism utilize racist and Christian concepts of 'darkness' to incite fear responses. To stray from Buckland's prescribed path is to open the new practitioner up to danger.

Buckland's text is set up to function as, as its title implies, a 'Complete Book' of Wiccan witchcraft. It holds fifteen lessons, three appendices, and a full recommended reading list. Each lesson concludes with two sets of questions: a reflective set and a set of 'examination' questions (with correct answers at the back of the text), and both mandatory and recommended reading lists. The order of the lessons may dismay the beginner witch in search of a handy spell or two; 'magick'[7] doesn't show up until Lesson Eleven, over two hundred pages into the print edition. Buckland devotes fourteen chapters to Wicca as it is worked in a coven (a group) before addressing the solitary practitioner at the very end of his text: he has covered everything from sewing ones' own leather sandals to petitioning the IRS to establish a new Wiccan church before addressing how to begin a witchcraft practice without a coven. Despite his assertions that Wicca is a religion for intelligent thinkers, Buckland leaves very little room for interpretation or personal flair throughout his *Complete Book*, and in fact leaves the careful reader with a great deal of questions. In his section on casting a ritual circle, Buckland instructs his readers at length on how to open a circle, what symbols to use if robed or naked/skyclad, and firmly directs them never to exit the circle once opened. He does not, however, tell us **why.** If people attracted to Wicca are 'thoughtful,' why not engage that trait with more than a series of reflective questions with prescribed answers? This rigid approach to occult religion seems to spring from a desire to establish Wicca as a 'legitimate' religion amongst the older faiths of the world – not dissimilar to its falsified history. Pop culture pagans, as this chapter will describe, instead choose to operate gleefully in the imaginary space – if everything is made up, everything is possible.

Making Magic from Wicca's Inclusivity Issues

Henry Jenkins (2016), scholar of fan practices and fan cultures, describes fandom (belonging to a fan community) as a "balance between fascination and frustration" (247). Feminist fan practice, including pop culture witchcraft, becomes a venue to rewrite stories, to insert oneself, or other marginalized voices, into popular media. Women rewrote *Final Fantasy XV* to 'correct' its sad ending: the world of *Final Fantasy XV* was

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7   Aleister Crowley is commonly associated with adding the 'k' to the word 'magick,' but as Crowley is a controversial figure, I choose not to spell the word in his fashion for the rest of this paper.

inviting, well-built, and felt real, but the tragedy befalling their beloved characters frustrated them enough to take matters into their own pens. The connection between marginalized voices (particularly women) and fanfiction writing is well-documented, and pop culture witchcraft can sometimes become an extension of this practice.[8] For pop culture witches, the fascination and frustration does not solely lie with the media property: there is a frustration with pagan religion, often Wicca, itself.

Raymond Buckland attests that Wicca is a religion for "intelligent, community-conscious, thoughtful men and women of **today**," (emphasis his) and a religion with a focus on "equal rights [and] feminism." (2002: 18) Certainly, some feminists are attracted to the aesthetics or the religious elements of witchcraft; both Ronald Hutton and Margot Adler devote an entire chapter to specifically American feminist witchcraft practice in their witchcraft histories. Claiming space in fan culture, especially through spiritual practice, is a radical act, often undertaken by marginalized communities. Seizing power through witchcraft is attractive to women and queer-identified people; it is not uncommon to see books with titles like *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* (Sollee 2017) or *Becoming Dangerous: Witchy Femmes, Queer Conjurers, and Magical Rebels* (West/Elliot 2019) in either feminist studies or occult sections of stores, and there is a history of American feminists in particular utilizing witchcraft rhetoric to further radical feminism – such as groups like the short-lived Women's International Conspiracy from Hell, or WITCH (1968–1969). This is especially evidenced on Tumblr, where many witches, pop culture and otherwise, share stories of finding power in witchcraft practice. This chapter will deliberately conflate Tumblr witchcraft with feminist or other social justice practice; it is certainly true that not every witch on Tumblr declares themselves to be a feminist, but the group skews heavily in that direction. Spells designed to hex Donald Trump, for example, garnered thousands of notes – the sample population of witchy Tumblr surveyed for this chapter leans heavily left. In general, compared to other social media, Tumblr seems to skew more queer and more liberal (Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021: 129), often with a specific focus on feminism, fan practices, and community action. The Tumblr community is, in many cases, a community for whom media has not traditionally represented them, or has represented them poorly, through tokenization or negative stereotyping. The intersection of pop culture witches, Tumblr, and Wicca is not without friction, but that friction can become the spark to fuel an inclusive, progressive magical practice.

At its core, Wicca is a duotheistic religion, worshiping binary God (sun) and Goddess (moon) archetypes (Buckland 2002: 119). However, these archetypes devolve into gender essentialism quite quickly, and Wiccan correspondences are littered with references to 'masculine' and 'feminine' energies. Although Wiccan practice tends to blend many European religious traditions into one (Cornish folk witchcraft, Norse heathenry, Egyptian mythology, Greco-Roman gods), it also tends to skip over or ignore elements that do not mesh with this strict gendered binary. Crossdressing or some type of gender fluidity appears in myths about Thor, Hapi, Gilgamesh, and the Greek prophet Teiresias, and the goddess Ishtar is often represented with a beard. Personal interpretation is a significant element of non-Wiccan witchcraft practice, and also of fanfiction. Queer and otherwise marginalized people scour media for subtext; statutes like the Hays Code or the strict

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8   See Johnson dissertation, forthcoming.

regulations of the Chinese media market have ramifications on the way American media depicts relationships, and some elements of queer gender presentation or queer relationships become lost in translation. Fans bring subtext to the forefront in their fanfic or fan theorizing, and in this way make space for themselves and their identities in the media they love. But Buckland's Wicca does not provide this subtext, nor space for personal gnosis.

The God and Goddess are represented on Wiccan altars through statuary or symbols – often, a chalice for the Goddess, and a ritual dagger ('athame') for the God. Modern feminist thinking, cognizant of queer and trans identity, tends to conceive of gender along a spectrum, so Wicca's reliance on gender essentialist symbolism like 'woman = vagina = chalice' does not mesh with modern feminist ideals (or even the feminist ideals of past decades – Anne Fausto-Sterling's *The Five Sexes* questioned concepts like this in 1993). In rituals and celebrations involving the full coven, the chalice is often held by a female priestess, furthering its association with female anatomy, and the dagger wielded by a male priest. The phallic imagery in Wicca is sometimes taken to extremes – Buckland describes a 'priapic wand,' with a carved phallus on its end, used during certain festivals and rituals. A pagan religion with such a heavy symbolic emphasis on male/female sexual binary does not resonate with a group of people questioning the idea of gender as a dichotomy, gender as a system of 'opposites,' or gender that reduces a person to their anatomy – not to mention a group of people for whom secondary sex characteristics are not immutable fact. By reducing people to their anatomy and to gender essentialist concepts of the 'meaning' of that anatomy (men are strong and virile; women are passive and fertile), Wicca brings up potentially painful concepts of body and identity. The Goddess is often depicted in three aspects: Maiden, Mother, and Crone, but these aspects define the Goddess strictly through her fertility status (virgin; pregnant; barren). Pop culture witches or pagans have more options in this realm: videogames provide more shades and styles of female identity, as well as (especially in more modern games) depictions of genderfluid identity or nonbinary identity.

Wicca's gender essentialist and heteronormative ideas of anatomy, sex characteristics and gender performance extend to practices as innocuous seeming as the traditional Wiccan greeting. Buckland's proposed greeting from one Wiccan to another is "Blessed be," (2002: 289) which is a shortened version of the Wiccan Five-Fold Kiss. To perform the Kiss, one coven member greets another through five kisses, reciting a line of the following blessing as they kiss each body part:

> "Blessed be thy feet, that have brought thee in these ways.
> Blessed be thy knees, that shall kneel at the sacred altar.
> Blessed be thy womb/phallus, without which we would not be.
> Blessed be thy breasts/chest, erected in beauty/strength.
> Blessed be thy lips, that shall utter the sacred names." (ibid: 229)

Contemporary feminists, particularly those who advocate for queer and transgender rights, balk at the assumption that it is possible to 'tell' whether a person has a womb or a phallus from their outward appearance, let alone the idea of greeting someone through their genitals. Performing the entire Five-Fold Kiss, or greeting someone with the short-

ened 'Blessed be,' excludes not merely trans and gender dysphoric practitioners, but practitioners who have undergone mastectomies or hysterectomies. Further, consent to sexual acts and individual bodily autonomy are integral parts of modern feminism; although any individual may be willing to consent to the entirety of the Five-Fold Kiss with another specific individual, using such an intimate greeting casually with all other Wiccans runs counter to feminist ideals and sensitivities.

Buckland's interpretation of Wicca is extremely heteronormative and myopic in approach. Each love spell in his *Complete Book* refers to a man/woman pairing, each ritual involving a full coven requires both a priest and a priestess, and his handfasting/handparting (wedding/divorce) rituals refer to a male groom and a female bride. Homosexuality or queer identity is barely referenced at all, but for once in the section on reincarnation: "a person male in one lifetime and then female in the next...might have carried over feelings and preferences from one life to the next." (2002: 26) Treating heterosexual sex as inherently some type of 'magic,' worthy of being depicted repeatedly throughout the year's holidays, while homosexual identity is merely an aberration in reincarnation, further demonizes and 'others' people already forced to the fringes of society. The concept of transgender identity or gender fluidity do not appear in Buckland's text; people are reduced to completely fixed symbolic parts. Meanwhile, *The Legend of Zelda* games *Ocarina of Time* (1998) and *The Wind Waker* (2002) gave us a crossdressing Princess Zelda – pop culture witches of the late 90s had their own framework for moving out of damsel in distress tropes or gendered approaches to stories. Buckland claims the learned Wiccan practitioner can heal another person's maladies by directing positive energies at the afflicted; that there is no space for queer identity or magical gender fluidity in the same religion seems outrageous. It may be tempting to attribute this negative concept of queer identity to the time period in which Buckland was writing – but books such as *Gay Witchcraft* (Penczak 2003) and *The Gay Wicca Book* (Willborn 2002) were published contemporaneously with Buckland's revision of his *Complete Book*, and Isaac Bonewits refers completely neutrally to the idea of queer witches in his *Concise Guide*, revised in 2001.

For the holiday Beltane (May 1), Buckland's suggested ritual involves a Maypole dance, which symbolizes the "union of male and female." (2002: 127) Beltane is associated with "breeding seasons for animals, both wild and domestic," (2002: 126) therefore a ritual centered on reproductive, heterosexual sex is, according to Buckland, apropos. Beltane is not the only ritual with these sexual motifs: the athame and chalice are popular in Gardnerian Wicca, the 'sect' of Wicca descended directly from Gerald Gardner's work. Some sects of Wicca even feature a 'Great Rite,' a 'symbolic or actual' depiction of heterosexual sex through ritual. When depicted symbolically, a priest inserts a ritual athame into a chalice held by a priestess (Adler 2010: 170). Buckland (2002) devotes several pages to 'sex magick' in particular, outlining exactly how this magic is to be conducted – but only between a male coven member and a female (or a solitary practitioner alone). Even without the heterosexist assumptions, and without assigning sacred meaning to bodily anatomy, many feminists would express discomfort with this focus on ritualized reproductive sex. Feminists worked for decades to eliminate cultural ideas that women's societal value is tied up in their reproductive abilities, and the question of legal access to safe abortion remains thorny in many parts of the world. Many people, regardless of their life experiences or feminist identity, would not wish to participate in a ritual during which

at least two participants openly copulate, even without considering feminist concepts of consent or power dynamics inherent in relationships. Though Buckland and others tout Wicca's freedom from prudish, Christian ideas toward sex, the attitudes evident in Buckland's *Complete Book* demonstrate their own sense of sexual mores: yes, (heterosexual) sex is more openly discussed and encouraged, but queer sex and queer relationships do not appear here. Feminism and social justice, particularly fan interpretation of popular media (Dym et al 2019: 154), often function as refuge for queer-identified, asexual, or transgender individuals, as well as individuals who have experienced rape or sexual abuse. Fan practices, such as fan fiction or pop culture witchcraft, often function as ways to navigate trauma and redefine existing media as a safe haven. By combining spiritual practice with fan practice (i.e. flexibly adapting media for inclusive, feminist purposes), and specifically by moving away from Wicca's focus on male/female sexual activity, pop culture witches reconceptualize myths or stories to suit and complement their identities and spiritual needs. Difficulties in translation can become fuel for alternate 'readings' of characters, providing ripe opportunities for pop culture witches to latch onto characters or stories. The character Poison, from Capcom's *Final Fight* and *Street Fighter* franchises, was introduced by Japanese developers to break up the all-male Mad Gear gang roster. But Capcom worried that American audiences would react poorly to depictions of violence against women, so Poison was (derogatorily, at the time) referred to as a cross-dresser, and replaced in American ports of the game with a male character. Despite this, the concept of Poison as gender transgressing stuck, and today she may serve as an archetype or deity figure for pop culture witches: an out and proud trans woman. Similarly, the character Bayonetta (from the *Bayonetta* series) can serve as an example of either a queer woman, a trans woman, or simply a sex-positive woman with her own sexual agency, depending on whose interpretation one leans into (Myers 2014).

Even without questioning base ideas of gender presentation and bodies, Buckland does not come across as particularly feminist, nor interested in women as distinct individuals. In his lesson on herbalism (herbal healing), he first lists chamomile as a treatment for "cases of nervous hysteria and all nervous complaints in women," then later refers to pennyroyal and rue as herbs useful for "female complaints" and "female disorders," respectively (2002: 194). Both pennyroyal and rue can be used as abortifacients – is Buckland suggesting that the only female complaint or disorder is unwanted pregnancy? Nearly every other herb in the lesson addresses a much more specific ailment. "Female complaints" or "female disorders" do not seem to be code for menstruation, as he refers directly to "menstrual problems" (2002: 315) in his lesson on more general healing, and two different colors are suggested for treating "menstrual problems" and "female complaints." (2002: 271) Hysteria has a long history in sexist medical practices, a history Buckland seems content to add to. Why are "nervous complaints" in women treated with chamomile, but damiana or skullcap can be used to treat "nervous and debilitated persons" (2002: 226) more generally? What is the functional difference between women's nerves and men's? The closest Buckland comes to an explanation is in his section on dosages: the reader is instructed that "the state of the uterine system must never be overlooked," (2002: 207) without any further instruction on what to look for or consider. Admittedly, the herbalism lesson is vague in reference to several ailments, and this does seem to be part of the nature of herbal healing.

However, Buckland's dismissive treatment of women and their bodies appears again and again in his *Complete Book*. Menstrual blood is a suggested ingredient in a protective witch's bottle, along with broken glass, old razor blades, rusty nails, and urine. (2002: 281 ebook) By returning to the concept of sympathetic magic, the reader can decode the purpose of these ingredients – sharp, dangerous objects and bodily waste (urine) are repellant, therefore they can be contained in a bottle designed to repel negative energy. Buckland appears to be suggesting that menstrual blood is 'waste' like urine, or at least something to be avoided – but he equates salt, a potent magical ingredient, with semen and therefore with life. Many feminists and witch-practitioners interpret menstrual blood as protective and nourishing, as menstruation is a shedding of tissue the body has accumulated to create a 'nest' to sustain a pregnancy. Judika Illes, in her *Element Encyclopedia of 5,000 Spells*, refers to menstrual blood as "the force that activated conception," (2004: 442) and as "the single most potent magic spell ingredient" (2004: 703). Illes lists spells using menstrual blood for love potions, protection (similar to Buckland), fertility, and more – her spells are sourced globally, not merely from the Gardnerian and Seax-Wiccan traditions, as Buckland's are, and include traditions Buckland spurns, such as vodun or hoodoo.

In his section on establishing a coven (a group of Wiccan practitioners), he takes a few paragraphs to explicitly declare modern women to be unfit Wiccan leaders: "These days there seem to be few women capable of handling the difficult position of High Priestess..." (Buckland 2002: 295), Today's women, according to Buckland, "get onto an ego trip," confer "degrees"[9] onto (presumably unworthy) coven members "like a mother doling out candy," and attempt to build up their covens' membership numbers "simply so that they can claim 'I'm a more important High Priestess/Queen than you are.'" (2002: 286) Accusing women of getting onto 'ego trips' is odd in a text this self-referential; in the introduction to *The Complete Book*, Buckland credits himself with bringing Wicca to the United States (2002: 15 ebook), and refers throughout the text to Seax-Wicca, a sect he himself created, while denigrating other traditions, sects, and practices. Many of the 'Suggested Reading' sections at the ends of chapters feature his own writing, as does his extensive 'Recommended Reading List' at the end of the text. Buckland cites Gerald Gardner as an authority figure; although Gardner was initiated into a practicing, existing coven, he is given license by Buckland to 'rewrite' their rituals 'as... they should have been' (2002: 10). Buckland credits Gardner "almost single-handedly" (2002: 15) with Wicca's revival, ignoring the influence of women such as Dafo, the priestess Gardner claims initiated him into her coven, and Doreen Valiente, an early Wiccan author and collaborator of Gardner. Dr. Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) predates even Gardner's earliest work on Wicca. The shelves of modern New Age or pagan sections of bookstores are similarly full of women: DJ Conway, Ellen Dugan, and Silver Ravenwolf boast particularly prolific careers. It can certainly be argued that Gardner and Wicca are inextricably tied, but to imply (even at the time of *The Complete Guide's* first publication in 1986) that the resurgence of neopaganism, or the modernization of 'ancient' folk magic practice, is entirely Gardner's doing seems egregious. Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1979) predates

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9   Traditions such as Gardnerian Wicca involve a system of 'degrees' to denote status within the coven.

Buckland himself by nearly a decade; women's contributions to this religion are innu-
merable.

"It's a Hellsite, But It's Our Hellsite"

The nature of different social media sites drives different types of community engage-
ment; even the same users act differently on different sites, since each site serves its own
purpose. Tumblr, originally designed for self-expression and "interest-driven commu-
nity," (Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021: 5) attracts a queer audience, deeply invested in
fan communities and in the flavor of Tumblr (as a site, and a community) itself. (Tiiden-
berg/Hendry/Abidin 2021: 212–213) Each Tumblr user shares content from one of seven
categories, including text, audio, video, photos, and web links, making Tumblr a good
composite home for the varied elements of a users' online identity; the same blog can
contain links to Spotify playlists, YouTube videos, or longer-form writing. There are a
variety of ways to interact with other users on Tumblr, but they are all at a bit of a re-
move, and the site's bugs make even these interactions a challenge at times. Tumblr al-
lows use of tagging, like other social media, which can facilitate finding blogs with sim-
ilar content, but users have created a meta-language through the tag function, which
famously doesn't always work. Tumblr users, often minoritized 'underdogs' themselves,
have created a community out of lovingly mocking their 'underdog' social media; users
share posts to sarcastic yet affectionate tags like 'functional website' or 'hellsite' to discuss
the various bugs, odd behaviors, and UI choices Tumblr staff rolls out. Use of browser
extensions or other workarounds are a popular method of bypassing Tumblr's various
shortcomings. One popular extension is XKit, with features intended to improve acces-
sibility for disabled users, hide ads, or hide unpopular features. Users lovingly lambast
the site for 'eating' posts, asks, replies, and more – actual social participation on this so-
cial media is best achieved through reblogs, which are also the most public way to re-
spond to someone else. They continue using the site because its pros outweigh its cons:
for example, Tumblr displays posts chronologically, not algorithmically, a rarity in social
media sites of 2022. This section will explore the various advantages of Tumblr for pop
culture witches, a conglomerate of politically active, often queer people involved in fan
communities and spiritual practice.

Crucially, Tumblr is anonymous. For queer, pagan, or politically active communities,
this privacy is invaluable. Anonymity allows individuals experimenting with queer iden-
tity the space and freedom to explore personas away from judgmental family or employ-
ers, fanfiction authors a venue to connect and share ideas without fear of legal action
from original media copyright holders, and pagans and witch practitioners a place to
learn from each other with no 'paper trail.' Anyone not yet 'out of the broom closet' (or any
other types of closets) might be unable to join publicly visible Facebook groups, or be will-
ing to use their own face and voice to make content on TikTok, but Tumblr communities
go unnoticed. And unlike other social media, Tumblr's design and function makes hiding
in various closets much simpler. Tumblr blogs are easily hidden from Google search re-
sults, password protected, or locked down so that only other Tumblr users can see them.
Users can 'follow' each other, but there isn't a 'friend' feature, or even a clear way to iden-

tify which users regularly interact (without following those users and noting patterns). Users who follow each other and regularly interact refer to each other as 'mutuals,' a word with much less 'real-life' meaning than 'friend.' A snooping parent would be hard-pressed to identify which Tumblr users their broom-closeted child regularly interacted with without closely reading a great deal of their blog's content, as well as the content on other people's blogs.

The structure and nature of Tumblr provides "high interactivity" but "low reactivity:"(Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021: 44) the site encourages users to respond to each other, but this interaction is not quickly parsed as it is on other social networks. The main form of discourse and interaction on Tumblr comes from 'reblogging' – sharing one user's post to another user's blog, with or without commentary. Reblog chains can get quite long as users write back and forth to each other, discussing the content of the original post. Reblogging between mutuals is the most obvious method of communicating, since a reblog generates a post in the other user's dashboard and a notification, making the conversation difficult to miss amongst many notifications. But these notifications, while potentially irksome, are also a boon: all reactions to a post ('hearts' and 'reblogs') are contained under the heading 'notes,' and without drilling down into the notes themselves, it is not clear who reacted to a post, and in what way. By combining likes/hearts and reblogs with commentary, it is possible to see that a post is gaining traction, but not (at a glance) whether that traction is positive or negative.

 Some users enable 'asks' on their blogs, a feature intended to allow other users to ask them questions. In reality, 'asks' become a popular way to interact with other users, especially those with larger followings – sometimes popular blog owners will invite their followers to share dreams they've had or tell stories in their ask boxes. Anonymous asks must be enabled separately – by default, a user must be logged in to submit an ask to another user. Author Neil Gaiman maintains a Tumblr blog, and he is therefore somewhat accessible to any Tumblr user. Warren Ellis, writer of the Netflix adaptation of *Castlevania*, shocked and alarmed Tumblr users in February 2020 by personally reblogging and responding to a joke post about the show (moonkitty 2020) and then referencing the post in an interview later that year (Stone 2020). This type of interaction is certainly impossible with Raymond Buckland (who died in 2017), or even with many other published pagan authors. For pop culture witches, easy access to creators can validate their readings of the source material: Gaiman, for example, is known to chime in on posts about *Good Omens* to clarify his intent for the book and later, the show.

Abigail Derecho describes fanfiction as 'archontic' literature "...with its parts and wholes that never stabilize into one definable text, with its texts in constant expansion and motion, its archives endlessly expanding..." (Derecho 2006: 75) Tumblr is a demonstration of archontic works – the more users who reblog a post and add text or tags, the more the post takes on a life of its own, divorced from its origins.[10] Each Tumblr blog functions as a personal archive curated and created by a single user, and once a post is reblogged, it becomes part of another user's archive, endlessly moving between and through archives. This motion away from original source is a boon for pop culture or

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10   In fact, there is an entire genre of Tumblr witchcraft designed to strengthen the more the spell
       'moves' between blogs.

other witchcraft practitioners: the use of recognizable symbols and commonly refer-enced correspondences in sympathetic magic combine with associations from a media property everyone participating in a given spell understands. Online, unlike in an edited, structured witchcraft text, it is unreasonable to expect that any given user will have the full context of a single blog. Each spell for the Tumblr audience must be written with the knowledge that it will be divorced from the rest of the original blog's content: each user sees their own individual 'dashboard' of content, generated mostly from content they have specifically opted to see (posts reblogged by users or tags they chose to follow). Each post containing a spell must have a complete set of instructions and information – any given user's system of correspondences or symbols may differ, so Tumblr spells invite revision or adaptation. Each spell needs to exist as part of the specific Tumblr ecosystem and archive, applicable to wide interpretation and spiritual practice. Tumblr, therefore, operates less like an exhaustive textbook and more like a stereotypical grimoire, or a wizard's spellbook in *DnD* (Gigax/Arneson 1974). This element also suits Tumblr well for 'in the broom closet' or less 'traditional' types of witchcraft practice, such as pop culture witchcraft. Art, writing, music, and links to other resources coexist within a single blog, structured exactly as the blog owner intends it, sometimes without direct commentary. Some witchcraft blogs are curated carefully to be digital shrine spaces, mixing spell posts with nature photography or high-quality gifs of candles flickering in lanterns. The blog in its entirety may be excused as merely an expression of a dark aesthetic, rather than evidence of a witchcraft or pagan practice. Other users share and reblog so much content, with so much of their own commentary, that anything incriminating is buried amongst memes, chatter about any variety of TV or movies, and more.

Paganism on Tumblr

Tumblr blogs function at once as private and public space – by reblogging and tagging, users foster a collaborative, constructive approach to witchcraft practice, versus print media's instructive style. This fractured and user-generated curation of content, as well as its removal from Wicca, lends itself to a more relaxed approach to learning any sort of witchcraft practice. The online environment very often assumes a witch will practice alone; most rituals on Tumblr are nowhere near as elaborate, nor as struc-tured, as the coven rituals Buckland outlines. Tumblr's anonymous nature makes it a popular witchcraft resource for beginners, as well as witches who are 'in the broom closet.' Unlike the exhaustive lists of 'necessary' tools and supplies given in Buckland's *Complete Book* and other published witchcraft texts, Tumblr witchcraft focuses on a more grounded, less expensive approach. Tumblr witches are as likely to live in cramped stu-dio apartments and dorm rooms as rambling, haunted Victorians. The prudent Tumblr spellwriter cannot assume their audience has even an entire 'altar room' to themselves; 'pocket altars,' small enough to fit inside an Altoids tin, are quite popular. Accessibility and relevance of materials, herbs, and other supplies vary from witch to witch: there are no prescribed 'rules' for pocket altars, unlike Buckland's extensive directives through-out his Lesson Two. Witch practitioners share examples of their pocket altars and the items within, typically including some small crystals, birthday candles/tea lights, small

packets of herbs, or even miniature tarot decks or pendulums. The high scalability (Ti-idenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021: 43) of any individual Tumblr post creates an egalitarian approach to learning witch practice. Although there are certainly popular blogs with large followings, known for giving consistently good or practical witchcraft advice, any one user can write a spell that becomes popular through reblogs and tags.

Tumblr's longform discourse lends itself well to learning about a topic, whether that be a particular fandom or witchcraft practice. One such conversation began when Tumblr user fernandfaun wrote a post titled "Baby Witch Question," (fernandfaun 2022) tagging it with 'baby witch,' 'green witch,' and 'witchblr.' By tagging their post, fernandfaun attempted to expand its audience beyond their followers. Users who frequent or follow those tags reblogged the post, adding their commentary and advice. The post garnered (to date) 150 'notes,' or interactions (both likes and reblogs), from other witches, adding to it and elaborating on the question. There is a certain rigidity about most published pagan texts – spells are conducted in a certain manner simply because 'this is how it is done,' with little introspection or room for adjustment. The wide variety of traditions and witchcraft practices on Tumblr allows for more space for interpretation, adaptation, and the use of baneful magic (curses, hexes, or jinxes, frowned upon by traditional Wiccans like Buckland). Although it is true, as Buckland asserts, that "anyone [on the internet] can claim anything," (2002: 308) and there is a wide variety of nonsense on Tumblr, this is true of almost any topic on the modern internet, as well as in the published sphere. Critical thinking, then, becomes a vital skill for the witch learning online. Buckland's own text features a recommended reading list, but no bibliography or citations – and this is not unusual for 'New Age' or 'spiritual' texts, as alluded to above. Tumblr users are certainly not exempt from believing baseless internet lies, but there are prominent witchcraft-related blogs devoted solely to debunking common witchcraft myths, and to spreading accurate information. Pop culture magic frees practitioners further; any personal interpretation of media can be argued to be valid, and any spell can be adapted to better suit the practitioner's needs.

Buckland advises against adaptation at several points in his *Complete Book*, assuming that every Wiccan will need some element of the various methods he provides lessons for in order to build any spell at all – also presuming that his readers are **only** Wiccan, and are therefore bound by the Wiccan Threefold Law (energy put out into the world will return to the individual three times) and Wiccan Rede: "An' it harm none, do what thou wilt." (Buckland 2002: 13) Wiccans, especially when compared with witch practitioners online, are generally disdainful of curses and other baneful magic. For Tumblr, cursing is a method by which to take power, a method to do wrong to those who have wronged others. The image of the witch, the potential and threat of her power, is enough to cause a reaction. To identify with the frightening image of the witch is to break out of the stereotypically feminine, to ignore the male gaze, and to take on a mantle of danger. To comport oneself as a witch is to claim a specific type of power. As a home for minoritized communities, a social network that caters to and embraces queer identity, neurotypical identity, and the concept of the underdog in general (Tumblr of the 2010s leaned heavily into defining its users in opposition to users of other social networks, particularly Facebook, (Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021: 1–2) and this mentality remains a decade later), Tumblr users are primed to embrace the wickedly powerful and the conventionally unattractive.

Tumblr girls are 'not like other girls,' who exist to be admired; Tumblr girls seize power to sink ships. The witch is free from the male gaze; she is a hag, a crone, or otherwise disgusting. The witch is a downtrodden figure, an outcast who takes control and power; she turns men to pigs and agrees to 'live deliciously.' (*The Vvitch*, Eggers 2015) She is a poisoner, a bride of the devil, a killer of children. She can cause crops to rot or her enemies to sicken or die. Published Wiccans, and some other witch-practitioners, are deeply invested in remedying this image in order to create a respectable status as a peaceful earth religion. This type of rhetoric leads Buckland to admonish cursing, and Silver Ravenwolf to advise teenagers to tell their parents they are working with 'angels' instead of gods or spirits, (Ravenwolf 2003: 232) but vigilante witchcraft in forms like this is attractive to the marginalized and those who feel otherwise powerless.

Pop culture witchcraft, a conflation of fan activity and witch practice, is a means to take power from archetypes, symbols, and themes in media, especially media already popular with marginalized groups. It can be examined through theories related to fan fiction – in particular, Mafalda Stasi's characterization of **fanon**. Fanon, a portmanteau of **fan** and **canon** (the 'factual' elements of original media works), "is developed by the fan community as an integral part of the process of interpretation" (Stasi 2006: 121) – as fans engage and connect with a piece of media, they interpret that media in personal, significant ways, including spiritual practice. Witchcraft and Wiccan practice itself is a series of these interpretations and communal shared practices: even while Buckland credits Gardner nearly 'single-handedly' with reinvigorating pagan practice, Buckland saw fit to adapt, re-interpret, and change Wicca to create his own sect of Seax-Wicca, and to acknowledge, even begrudgingly, other sects. The exact elements of witchcraft as religious practice that make it difficult to academically analyze – objective verification that a spell 'worked,' quantifiable evidence that a spirit or deity prefers one type of offering over another – suit it to the community-built practice of online witchcraft generally, or pop culture witchcraft specifically. Despite his insistence that there are, in fact, correct ways to witch, Buckland stresses that the importance of a coven is in its shared strength. One witch may be skilled at dream interpretation, another at reading tea leaves, and the whole coven is made stronger through each individual's specializations. There is no singular correct way to interpret religion or witchcraft practice, and by moving away from published pagan media and its focus on promoting individual authors' methods and styles, the neophyte witch can utilize the entire community to find an interpretation that feels correct.

Pop culture witchcraft is an interpretation of how pop culture's magic **could** work in 'the real world,' as well as an interpretation of how witchcraft **does** work, built by the people who practice it, through communal interpretation and various series of shorthand devices. In fan fiction writing, the original media serves as "powerful shorthand device:" (Stasi 2006: 122) the author and reader understand the setting, world, and characters already. There may be established relationships within the original media, or established endings, but fan fiction redevelops and reconceptualizes these based on subtexts and fan theories, as well as fans' communal interpretations. Fan practices, including pop culture witchcraft, take advantage of the gaps or creator oversights: what information is left out of canon? These gaps provide room to play and adapt. The pop culture witch practitioner takes ideas from a media property, simultaneously referring to and expanding on cor-

respondences and symbolism from Wicca, other pagan practices, or perhaps the symbolism and correspondences of the media itself. The spell needs to 'work' on two levels: within the context and canon of the media, as well as within the context and canon of modern witchcraft practice. Ingredients called for need to not only symbolize the sympathetic magic elements, but also the media itself. The link between the pieces of the spell – its symbols, visualization, and intent – is made clearer by the link to the media property. Pop culture witchcraft becomes more accessible to newcomers than the strict do's and don'ts of Wicca – it is not necessary to read 10 chapters on history, various correspondences, and an entire herbal encyclopedia to begin to build a spell. The existing pop culture canon establishes much of the framework itself, and examining other similar spells online helps fill in the gaps.

"You're Gunna Have a Bad Time Curse": Pop Culture Witchcraft on Tumblr

In this section, I will break down a spell inspired by the 2014 RPG *Undertale*, written by Tumblr user nightmarist (2015). The curse, titled 'You're Gunna Have a Bad Time Curse,' refers to a hidden boss fight in *Undertale* and assumes the reader has a deep familiarity with *Undertale*, its lore and story, and the mechanics of sympathetic magic – symbolism, visualization, and intention. *Undertale* is famous for its near-unique approach to gameplay: its tagline is "the RPG game where you don't have to destroy anyone." (*Undertale* website, 2014) *Undertale* and its characters refer to the creatures the player character will come up against as 'monsters,' rather than enemies, and every character except the player is some type of monster, serving to humanize the creatures and build player empathy. The game manipulates player expectations and the conventions of the RPG genre and subverts conventions of videogames in general, while simultaneously acknowledging them in tongue-in-cheek ways. The first character the player encounters, an anthropomorphic flower who introduces himself as Flowey, cheerily begins to instruct the player on the mechanics of the game. In most videogames, this type of character would guide the player through a short practice version of the game's battle system, but Flowey lies to the player about the game's mechanics before unfairly attempting to murder them. At this point, the maternal, kindly character Toriel (whose name is a play on 'tutorial') appears to the rescue. She proceeds to meticulously guide the player through the first level of *Undertale*, called the Ruins. Her approach is a direct opposite of Flowey's, and a mockery of tutorial levels of games in general – she would prefer the player not participate in battles at all, and she significantly comedically underestimates the player's ability. At one point, she literally takes the player character's hand to guide them through a very simple puzzle, taking the videogame slang for an overly involved tutorial ('hand-holding') to its extreme.

Toriel instructs the player to 'stall' while encountering monsters by talking to them, until she can come and help. The battle system is one of the most significant departures from other videogames: in each battle, players have four options at the start of their turn: Fight, Act, Item, and Mercy. Each monster encounter in *Undertale* can be completed without fighting: the player must discover the correct action or combination of actions listed under 'Act' to unlock the ability to 'spare' the monster through 'mercy.' Actions vary from

monster to monster, sometimes themed around the opposing character's personality and appearance. Froglike monsters called Froggits have two possible options under Act: Compliment and Threaten. Complimenting Froggit will cause it to become 'reluctant to fight you,' explicitly indicating that it is able to be spared. Most types of monsters in the Ruins, the first level of the game, are very simply spared – some, such as Whimsums, can be spared on the first turn, without Acting at all. During opponent turns, monsters shoot projectiles at the player, who must navigate their 'soul,' a small red heart, away from the projectiles. The game explicitly and implicitly guides the player at length toward using 'actions' and sparing monsters rather than fighting – the first two battles in the game are scripted. In the first, Toriel asks the player to practice on an inanimate dummy, supervising and appearing visibly pleased if the player chooses not to fight. In the second battle, she interrupts partway through to glare at the opposing monster until it leaves. Even without Toriel's help, everything in the Ruins guides the player towards choosing mercy, and unlearning the habits gleaned from decades of earlier games. None of the monsters in the Ruins seem to be terribly interested in actually hurting the player; some give health back, others' projectiles lazily drift around and are easily avoided. One monster, a ghost named Napstablook, spends one of their turns displaying the text 'Really not feelin up to it right now. Sorry.' Instead of using projectiles against the player. Froggits appear outside of battle as well, to dialog with the player and provide more information on successfully sparing monsters. The boss (final) fight of the Ruins is Toriel herself – if the player spares her repeatedly, she gradually loses interest in fighting, until her projectiles actually repel away from the player and she relents, to let them pass. The world of *Undertale* is populated with heavily personified and characterized monsters; the game wants its player to feel empathy for the monsters and find the act of fighting them emotionally difficult.

Undertale works with some level of meta knowledge – Flowey, the game's antagonist, is entirely aware that he is in a videogame, and that the player can reload saves. If the player quits without saving and reloads, Flowey will snidely remark, and he appears after the Toriel fight to mock the player for their pacifist methods or otherwise comment on the turnout of the fight. *Undertale* does not easily allow the player to start a new save file – choosing Reset upon booting up the game only allows the player to reset their level and story progress. The player name will not change, and resetting progress provokes comment from Flowey as well as causes certain characters to remark that the player seems familiar. Even uninstalling and reinstalling the game will not reset it entirely; the player must actually delete files from their console or computer. This type of mechanic is certainly not specific to *Undertale* (the 2017 game *Doki Doki Literature Club* notoriously plays with character meta knowledge as well), but characters' meta knowledge, and the game's emphasis on empathy for other characters, is significant to the 'You're Gonna Have a Bad Time' curse.

There are three distinct endings in *Undertale*, each corresponding to a specific play style, or 'route.' If the player catches on quickly to the game's intended nonviolent strategy, killing close to zero enemies (the 'pacifist route'), they unlock the 'true ending,' after which they are encouraged not to play the game again, as the world of *Undertale* has now been made peaceful. If the player kills some enemies, or passes a certain story point and stops killing enemies, they unlock the 'neutral ending,' and can replay the game to see

the 'true ending' and complete the story (this is the 'neutral route,' which seems to be the most common). The requirements to spare some enemies are slightly obtuse, so the neutral route seems to be *Undertale*'s attempt to forgive ignorance.

The third ending, the 'bad ending,' is unlocked by completing what is colloquially referred to as the 'genocide route.' To complete a 'genocide route,' the player must, as the name implies, destroy absolutely all enemies they encounter. This goes against the concept and intention of the game, and even the conventions of most other videogames, and is therefore much more tedious and difficult than other playstyles in *Undertale*. The genocide route involves a good deal of 'grinding,' as the player must remain in each story area until there are absolutely no enemy encounters left, going out of their way to destroy all life in the world of *Undertale*. This is not only antithetical to the way *Undertale* wants to be played, it is also unusual in a traditional videogame sense. Generally, players kill enemies directly in their way (depending, of course, on genre). Upon saving at a save point during the genocide route, a dialog box will appear, specifying how many monsters are left to be killed in that level. The act of methodically seeking out increasingly rare monster encounters **solely** to commit murder is unusual in videogames and is designed to deepen the player's sense of embodying a cruel, inhuman creature. Monsters appear afraid of the player character – where they were plentiful in the true or neutral routes, there are far fewer repeat encounters in the genocide route. Completing the genocide route corrupts the save file, altering any future pacifist or neutral playthroughs. Each route significantly or slightly alters non- player character interactions with the player: notably, the characters Flowey and Sans, for whom the curse is named. The genocide route requires unwavering dedication; if the player stops killing every monster possible, the game reverts to a neutral route. The genocide route differs as well in that many of the more lighthearted sequences do not occur – the implication is that the characters involved are too afraid of the player to appear, or were evacuated by other characters. After a certain point, monster encounters are signified with a smiley face icon over the player character's head, instead of an exclamation point – the player is now characterized as so diabolical that they enjoy the act of killing, and finds the opportunity to do so exciting. Even Flowey, the character who tries to kill the player character at the first chance, seems afraid of what the player character has become during the genocide route.

In the true and neutral routes, Sans acts as a friendly guiding character for the player. He has a distinctive style of humor, is notably lazy, and at times appears to be one of only two characters aware that he is in a videogame, living in a world manipulated by the player's actions. After leaving the Ruins, the player is ominously stalked by Sans before he introduces himself with a whoopie cushion. He is established immediately as a carefree joker who deeply loves his brother, Papyrus. Papyrus' greatest dream is to capture a human, so Sans asks the player to cheer him up by playing along with and getting 'captured' by Papyrus. During the genocide route, Sans appears aware of the player's cruelty, even early on. He advises the player to keep 'pretending' to be a human, and the title of the curse, 'You're Gunna Have a Bad Time Curse' refers to a line of Sans' dialogue early on in the genocide route, reflecting the warning he gives for going against the 'correct' manner of playing *Undertale*, and ignoring the game's extensive warnings and instructions to choose nonviolence. Sans appears as a boss in the genocide route only, and his fight is especially punishing, requiring incredibly precise movements to survive, let alone win.

Some characters in *Undertale* alter the player character's movements during fights: Sans affects the impact of gravity on the player avatar, turning the red heart blue and delaying the reaction time between key input and movement, complicating the fight further. Additionally, Sans reacts to the way the player has manipulated the gameworld by manipulating the rules of his own fight: even if the player successfully completes an attack on Sans, he implies he is cheating and sidesteps the hit. Throughout the fight, Sans dialogues with the player, explaining that as he watched the player manipulate the world of *Undertale* and massacre everyone in their path, he decided he can't stand idly by while the player cruelly chooses to reset everything in the gameworld and destroy everyone. If the player manages to survive against Sans for this entire dialogue, Sans offers the player mercy, the mechanic the player was intended to use against all other enemies in the game. He cites friendship being important, another key theme of *Undertale*, and is the only other character besides his brother, Papyrus, to believe the player can change their murderous ways. If the player chooses to attempt another attack despite the mercy, Sans redoubles his efforts, manipulating the battle system even further. Sans breaks the 'rules' *Undertale* has so far established for the player, reflecting the player's choices to ignore the rules of the game. His attacks change speed, he continues to manipulate the speed at which the player avatar reacts to key inputs (changing it from blue to red over and over), and the battle system becomes nightmarishly difficult, and even more precise: the player barely has seconds to react to each change. Eventually, Sans 'gives up,' refusing to take his turn so that the player can't kill him. Like many fights in *Undertale*, the Sans fight becomes a test of patience more than endurance at this stage. At the end of the fight, Sans moves offscreen to die, asking his brother Papyrus (murdered by the player earlier in the game) a question, one final strike to the emotions.

The 'You're Gunna Have a Bad Time Curse' ingredients, in the manner of sympathetic magic and pop culture witchcraft, refer to and symbolize the imagery of the Sans fight: a black cloth, an animal skull (sic: 'cat skull (or a dog skull? Whatever kind of skull you think Gaster Blasters are))', a blue and red stone, blood, bones, and a candle. In this curse, the red stone represents the curse's target (a reference to the player character's "soul" during battles) and the imagery of *Undertale*'s battle system. The instructions for performing the curse involve setting up an altar or working area to mimic the Sans fight, arranging the skull, bones, and red stone the way they would appear in the game. The animal skulls required for the curse represent Gaster Blasters, a skull-like weapon Sans uses. A mild argument arose through a reblog of nighmarist's curse: user zaphtiera adds that they believe the skulls to be goat skulls, not cat or dog spells as nightmarist suggests. Nightmarist responds, noting: "They're fictional skulls in a fictional piece of work... In spellcraft, you can use whatever proxy you like so long as you feel it's right for your intentions. Hell, doesn't even need to be a real skull..." (2016: n.p.) This is a unique concern of pop culture witchcraft, which tends to encounter materials or objects that do not exist in 'real life.' Sympathetic magic does tend to be made up of symbols, particularly when working spells directed at an individual. Love spells may call for clippings of hair or an object belonging to the target, and many spells and herbal/crystal encyclopedias suggest substitutions for rarer or difficult to find ingredients. Within pop culture witchcraft, the symbols and ingredients may become more abstract, and substitutions or interpretations become more necessary. The inhabitants of *Undertale* are monsters not found in

'the real world.' If a Gaster Blaster looks like a goat skull to zaphtiera and a canid skull to nightmarist, both interpretations are valid and permissible. Interpretation blends with intention, and with personal correspondence and accessibility. Perhaps the practitioner has a beaver or squirrel skull found in the woods, or a plastic Halloween decoration of a skeletal cat, and is willing to use them as proxy for 'whatever type of skull' Gaster Blasters are. Perhaps the practitioner is artistically inclined and interested in replicating a Gaster Blaster more accurately, using direct references to *Undertale*. Fanon slots into place as users build and share interpretations.

By replicating one of the most mechanically difficult and, at some stages, most boring (Sans actually falls asleep at one point during the fight, wasting several turns) fights in *Undertale*, the 'You're Gunna Have a Bad Time Curse' symbolically brings a difficult, tedious struggle down on its target, as a reaction for entirely soulless behavior. The caster assumes the role of Sans, manipulating the 'battleground' and the target's reality, refusing to let the target see even if the caster has been beaten. The curse's target is someone who always chooses violence and cruelty, seeking out opportunities to harm others. By casting the curse, the caster is taking a last stand after repeated warnings and ignored opportunities for the target to change negative behavior.

Conclusion

The recent rise in interest among Gen Z and millennials to cultivate a witchy aesthetic or collect crystals may spark an interest in an actual witchcraft practice (secular, religious, or otherwise). There are number of resources for the budding witch practitioner to choose from, each with specific pros and cons: published resources in bookstores or libraries, though listed as 'nonfiction,' may refer to outdated, racist, or otherwise problematic ideas or false histories of witchcraft practice. Raymond Buckland's *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*, one such text, is an example of this type of material in the aggregate. Although it has been in print for decades, and is certainly an exhaustive approach to the Wiccan religion, some of its ideas and approaches may not resonate with younger practitioners, and its title (referring to Witchcraft rather than Wicca) may be misleading. Buckland's approach is geared towards the group practitioner, and his reliance on the Wiccan Gardnerian origin story may lose him credibility. Some potential witchcraft practitioners, for various reasons, may choose to seek information on witchcraft practice via the Internet: TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr have become popular for 'baby witches.' The Tumblr approach to learning witchcraft can be far more inclusive (of traditions, sects, secular paths, etc.) and less strict; for example, Tumblr witch practitioners on the whole do not seem to have the concern with baneful magic, or cursing, that Buckland and other published Wiccan authors do.

Though the internet can certainly be misleading, Tumblr in particular lends itself to a collective version of witchcraft that empowers practitioners to create their own paths, picking and choosing gnosis that suits them. One such gnosis is pop culture witchcraft, a combination of fan practices like fan fiction and witchcraft practice. This practice is indicative of Tumblr itself: it is a conglomeration of fan and witchcraft practices, a chance to elevate media into spiritual practice through shorthands and personal archiv-

ing. It serves as a counterpoint to Raymond Buckland's heavily prescriptive approach to witchcraft, in conjunction with the wider Tumblr community. Pop culture witchcraft on Tumblr can be much more accessible and approachable for beginners, particularly when compared with Buckland's 300-page text. Any given pop culture spell features a shorthand likely already familiar to the average Tumblr user (references to a pop culture property, such as a videogame), and symbolism or a system of correspondences that at once relate to Wiccan or other more 'traditional' witchcraft practices, familiar to the average witch practitioner. Pop culture spells can therefore be simpler to parse for the newcomer: if the reader is familiar with witchcraft and has played *Undertale* (or even seen *Undertale* gameplay), they are equipped to use nightmarist's spell.

On Tumblr, the process of sharing others' content to ones' own blog (reblogging) and adding commentary makes pop culture witchcraft even more accessible. Reblogging a spell, such as user nightmarist's 'You're Gunna Have a Bad Time Curse,' saves it to another user's personal archive, with their own notes, adjustments, and suggestions. Reblogging additionally alerts the original poster (user nightmarist) of the response, potentially enabling a conversation with and access to the original author that is difficult to impossible with published pagan authors. Even if the reader has never read an offline pagan text, the use of shorthand, access to authors, and the contributions of users who shared the post first make a more accessible, customizable 'version' of witchcraft.

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Where the Magic is

Ceremonial Magic as a Design Perspective for Mixed Reality Immersive Experiences

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Keywords: *ceremonial magic; design framework; design methods; experience design; extended reality; interaction design; occult; mixed reality; rituals*

Introduction

Ceremonial magic and technology have been flirting since the dawn of the new millennium. 'Technowitches' like Patricia Telesco and Sirona Knight promoted the wide range of domestic appliances such as mobile phones and microwaves that can act as magical media (Telesco/Knight 2002). Neopagan authors have encouraged city-dwellers to form a psychic bond with electrical and mechanical objects, pushing for an acknowledgement of our techno-centric reality. In recent years, when video call media, such as Zoom, and social media are being extensively used for ceremonial magic, ceremony masters who also go by the name 'occult technologists' combine art, magic, and technology to innovate experiments in theoretical and applied sorcery. It was no surprise that one of the memes making rounds during the pandemic was a parallel between zoom meetings and seances, 'George are you with us – can you hear us – is there someone else with us – we can't hear you'. The occult, the mystical, the magical, have been inspirations or even central metaphors people use to understand technology and designers to explain it.

> "From installing wizards to voice commands and background daemons, the cultural tropes of magic permeate user interface design. Understanding the traditions and vocabularies behind these tropes can help us produce interfaces that use magic to empower users rather than merely obscuring their function" (Borenstein/Nov 2015: n.p.).

In the technology design field, interaction, experience, and game designers have explored the psychology behind magician showmanship to understand how these can be used to build an immersive technology experience. Kumari et al (2018) and Tognazzini (1993) have discussed magicians' techniques such as illusion, misdirection, spectacle,

dissimilation, and aesthetics, and how these can be used to steer the audience experience in a game. Agnes Bakk (2020) draws parallels between immersion in Virtual Reality (VR) and the concept of illusion created by magicians. There is significant information in these works about how to create the illusion for the audience and how to work with it as a magician. With this shared goal, there is indeed a direct parallel between the work of magicians and that of immersive technology designers. However, our exploration goes far beyond magicians' shows, and the nevertheless important aesthetics of showmanship and science of psychology that subsumes the created illusions. We turn to occult experiences, specifically ceremonial magic, and try to understand their phenomenological layers so that we can draw parallels between them and immersive technology experiences. In our exploration we are not preoccupied with the illusionary nature of the 'unreal' or 'virtual' world but with the fact that the virtual, or augmented real in our case, offers a different perception of the world, and the opportunity to reach a different stage of being/understanding/perceiving. How one, practitioner or participant transits to this stage, what Lycourinos calls **changing the worldview** (2017: 62), is at the heart of our exploration. In this initial exploration, we use both scholarly and practical ceremonial magic resources, along with insights from experts, specifically industrial and game designers, occultists, and academics that we had the opportunity to interview for this paper. We are interested in what we can learn from these practices to create transformative immersive experiences.

In the design of our framework, it is important to define the technological tool, since, even if some aspects of the framework can be abstracted for other immersive technologies, the degree to which the tool shapes the design is a fundamental part of drawing the parallels. In this work we choose to focus on Mixed Reality (MR) technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), and having particularly in mind AR glasses such as Microsoft Hololens[1]. AR glasses are a pair of glasses with the ability to superimpose digital material in the physical environment, in the same way mobile augmented reality does but in a more realistic way, using holographic visuals, and by using whole-body interaction. With AR glasses users can still see the physical environment while wearing them. In VR, since the user cannot directly see the physical space, some VR headsets such as Oculus Quest 2 have the option for passthrough AR, where the real world is displayed to the user via a video feed by means of a stereo camera on the headset that has depth-perception. The advantages of wearing a pair of glasses is that it does not create a digital divide where everything is experienced through a screen the viewer holds at all times, as is the case with mobile augmented reality (MAR). MAR also quickly brings fatigue and does not allow for full body interaction as the hands are engaged. We are not interested in the use of AR glasses for practical work cases such as assisting with manufacturing, driving or cycling. Our proposed framework could work in the design of MR workspaces but in order to draw parallels between ceremonial magic and immersive technology design we need to align their goals. The goal of an MR workspace is increased efficiency and productivity, whereas we are interested in meaningful experiences that seek to ignite some change to the viewer, e.g. experiences with the goal to educate, cre-

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1   https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/hololens. Accessed 3 May 2022.

ate awareness, elicit an emotional response, invite reflection (such as immersive art) and so on.

It is important to note here that drawing parallels between these two disciplines was not an easy task. The topic is extremely complex and wonderfully rich. It contains concepts that have been discussed and dissected from multiple perspectives in literature, notions which are defined as much theoretically as they do empirically, and a great body of work that could lead to many papers. For this reason, we consider this work to be a superficial first step in connecting the two disciplines, and for this reason we chose to speak to practitioners beyond our theoretical research to ensure we have some orientation and guidance in the beginning of this journey. Our intent is to create discourse in this area, inspire academics and practitioners, and offer the framework as a base for future iterations, especially informed by practice.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows: In Section 2, we briefly describe ceremonial magic as a communal or solo practice, and in Section 3 we introduce the reader to the meaning and characteristics of rituals in ceremonial occult practices. In Section 4 we describe our methodology while in Section 5 we introduce the design pillars of an MR experience and describe how we synthesised them looking at aspects of occult ceremonies. The chapter ends with some concluding remarks about next steps.

Magic(k), Solo Practice and Communal Paths

Magic or Magick, there have been different paths of western esoteric traditions that differ in scope, ethics, philosophy and vows of secrecy. In this section we briefly explain some of the terms that have been important to our approach. According to Crowley, magick should be spelled with this extra k and one of the central reason was that he considered it to be anything that moves a person close to fulfilling their ultimate destiny, which he called one's True Will (Payne 2018: iii).

In order to include her scientific experience as a psychologist into her occult research and practices, Dion Fortune paraphrased the famous Crowley statement, defining magic as "the art of causing changes to take place *in consciousness* in accordance with will" (Fortune 1934: 175). Ceremonial magic is generally defined as magic in which the practitioner uses specific rituals to achieve specific results. Also called high magic, ceremonial magic uses as its base a blend of older occult teachings – Thelema, Enochian magic, Kabbalah, and other various occult philosophies are typically incorporated. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* described ceremonial magic as containing two parts, 'Geocie and Theurgie,' or goetia and theurgy (1530). He distinguished magic between natural magic, mathematical magic, enchanting magic, juggling or legerdemain (closer to what most people today associate with the term 'magic'), and ceremonial magic (van der Poel 1997). Although this was the first documented use of the term ceremonial magic, the practices involved had been around for at least a century or two, as the rituals have been noted in the grimoires of early Renaissance and medieval-era magical practitioners. In Frazer's famous book, *The Golden Bough* (2003), the efforts to control nature for day-to-day survival lead the early man to resort to magical practices.

Ceremonial or ritual magic is not preoccupied with illusion or giving the participant a sense of autonomy when there is none, like magicians do. Magic, through its rituals, might be said to "comprise, or at least describe, a system for comprehending the entire world. It provides a means for navigating among the varied forces that comprise and shape material creation and promises its practitioners methods of controlling or at least affecting those forces [...] allowing them to perceive occult aspects of nature" (Bailey 2006: 1). In order to differentiate occult practices from showmanship, Crowley added an extra letter to Magic(k), however, in order to include all schools and paths of ceremonial practice and for the remainder of this paper we will use the term 'magic' to describe western esoteric practices. Once more we wish to clarify though that in this paper, we do not refer to illusionary showmanship practices. The occult is a constructed world where magic turns in to search its contingencies, as Gell writes, however, as he continues using a metaphor to Plato's cave, "this world is a reflection of the real world" (Gell 1974: 26). Therefore, as in the real world, is it a social event or a secretive practice for the solo or few practitioners?

Occult derives from the Latin *occultus*, meaning 'hidden' or 'secret'. The hidden and secretive can frame the entire practice or just part of it. The anthropologist Malinowski (1974 [1925]) had also regarded magic as directly and essentially concerned with the psychological needs of the individual, as Fortune did later in her own definition. She included in it that, 'Will' point towards the personalised well thought, designed and constructed experience. In the work of Lycourinos (2017) we read that "private and clandestine rituals as opposed to public and communal ceremonies, magical beliefs and practices comprise a shadowy and tenuous, but still often carefully constructed, realm" (2017: 61). However, other definitions of magic, and especially the ones that derive from working with shamanistic practices, take it a step further including, apart from the Will and needs of the practitioner, the social aspect. In our work, we seek to include both single user and multi-user MR experiences since each one poses different questions with respect to the design of MR experiences. We look then into both the solo esoteric practitioner and the communal and shared part of ceremonial practice, such as the one by Radcliffe-Brown who argued that a magic ritual elevated the social importance of an event (1964). Another line of theorists, including sociologists Durkheim and Mauss, also defined magic in terms of its social function. In his seminal work with primitive occult practices, Marcel Mauss[2] (2008) goes far enough as to state that only social occurrences can be considered magical. Individual actions are not magic because if the whole community does not believe in the efficacy of a group of actions, it is not social and, therefore, cannot be magical. It is understandable that this sentence could seem to exclude the postmodern solo occult practitioner, however their online presence and need for networking, sharing and connecting, in esoteric societies, social networks and fora, brings forward the social as much as the embodied aspect of magical practices (Lycourinos 2017). In The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912), Durkheim argued that magical rites involved the manipulation of sacred objects by the magician on behalf of individual clients not of the community, referring to one practitioner on behalf of a client. Even Mauss maintains an

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2   First written by Marcel Mauss and Henri Humbert in 1902, *A General Theory of Magic* gained a wide new readership when republished by Mauss in 1950.

essentially Durkheimian view that "magic is private while religion is public and communal, and he also advances the notion that magic seeks immediate and practical results". (Mauss 2008: 174–78).

Rituals in Ceremonial Magic

We use rituals all the time, as ways to frame, concentrate, meditate, focus, express gratitude or pain, or as a way to let go and escape the world around us. A ritual doesn't have to be magical or mystical or ceremonial. And even when it is perceived as such, there are fierce debates conducted over the meaning and relevance of the words 'magic' and 'ritual' (Hutton 2018). In our research we will refer to rituals of ceremonial magic. Magical rituals, rituals within ceremonial magic practices, can offer insight into specific ways in which objects and human bodies become inscribed with meaning and power and they are "a shadowy and tenuous, but still often carefully constructed, realm that helps shape a society's basic conceptions about both spiritual and natural forces that imbue the world with meaning" (Bailey 2006: 9). According to Turner "rituals are 'a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests.'" (Turner 1972: 1100).

According to the work of Mauss regarding ancient and shamanistic ceremonies, a magician's acts are rituals. Psaltou (2008) writes that

> "although these rituals may often appear simplistic and trite, generally they are neither simple acts nor devoid of formality. Mauss insists that the contrary, every magical act entails a set of prerequisites, deemed absolutely essential for the achievement of the ceremony's goal, and similar to the rules and prerequisites of religious rites." (171)

The scope, timing, setting, certain procedures, the artefacts, even the specific day of the performance are essential facts to its very existence as rite and ritual. A ritual more specifically, must be constructed in a way that is able to include, initiate and turn the audience into participants. For Sala,

> ritual is intended to influence the spiritual (otherworld, magical) realm. It uses magical links or correspondences which are processes and tools supposed to affect the extra-dimensional realm. This then reflects back into the tangible reality. So ritual is a way to achieve results which don't follow the normal rationality and causality, but have their own. (2014: 20)

Scholars who have studied ethnographically and ritual magic in detail discuss a few aspects of this process; the change in the state of consciousness – subjective alterations of ordinary mental functioning (Ward 1984), ritual objects to assist the altered state of mind, a narrative that subsumes the transition and helps maintain meaning across the different states, and a subtle body which is "the necessary embodied cognitive condition for producing the exploration of cosmological narrative as a participatory worldview" (Ly-

courinos 2017: 67). Ritual externalises belief through physical embodiment and codified performance that allows it to be shared through a community (Mohyuddin 2015: 2). In many rituals, and especially in much more current practices such as Chaos Magic, there may be no audience at all but the solo practitioner, however, we choose to see even this solo practice as one of high embodied and communicational value. More specifically in Chaos Magic, the post-modern path that has at its core personal experience, deconditioning and gnosis (Hine 1995: 15), its rituals can start from the personal to end up to the universal. For example, in Hine we read that Magic

> is about change. Changing your circumstances so that you strive to live according to a developing sense of personal responsibility; that you can effect change around you if you choose; that we are not helpless cogs in some clockwork universe; All acts of personal/collective liberation are magical acts. (1995: 11)

Myth as Narrative

The mythologist Joseph Campbell (2005), in an interview he gave he said that "a ritual is the enactment of a myth. And, by participating in the ritual, you are participating in the myth" (Campbell/Moyers 2005: n.p.). Other scholars and practitioners believe that myths and folklore are derived from rituals, for "ritual is not, originally, a cognitive thing. It was there before myth, language, self-consciousness" (Sala 2014: 154). Mircea Eliade (1975) believed that one important function of myth is to provide an explanation for ritual and that "recital of myths and enactment of rituals serve a common purpose: they are two different means to remain in sacred time" (Chimininge 2019: 53). However, not all scholars of rituals and/or mythology believe ritual emerged from myth or myth emerged from ritual. Some scholars and practitioners, allow myths and rituals a greater degree of freedom from one another.

Embodiment

Even though we have no purpose in diminishing the power of storytelling and fiction, especially since we are following a dramaturgical perspective, we would like to highlight the importance of embodiment and enaction in meaning-making and change. "A ritual cannot be without doing, without body, without praxis. There needs to be an embodied participatory experience and repetition. This is how we create meaning", was mentioned to us during our experts' interviews, by enactive design scholar Andreas Grzesiek. Barbara Myerhoff (1977) writes that:

> the most salient characteristic of ritual is its function as a frame, a bit of behavior or interaction, an aspect of social life, a moment in time is selected, stopped, remarked upon. But this framing is fiction. Artificial, its very artifice is denied and the claim is made that its meanings 'are as they seem,' as presented. We should not forget that 'rituals are acts, bodily expressions and even as modern rituals are loaded with cognitive meaning, myth and language, this is not the origin of ritual.' (199–200)

Then Sala continues with bringing forward another extremely important part of the magical ritual, the one of rhythm, timing. He suggests that "the word ritual is more related to timekeeping, the Sanskrit word *rita*, translated as 'order or truth', which is again related to the word *rhythm*" (2014: 51). Therefore, again we should pay attention to the embodied experience, the timing and rhythm of the ritualistic practice.

Performative

Looking at contemporary ritual designers such as the Ritual Design Club, they focus on the performative nature of the ritual, the enactments participants go through to reach transformation, suggesting actions that resemble a dramatic staging, with roles, symbols, props and enactments (Ozenc/Hagan 2017). In ancient, contemporary and postmodern rites and ritual design, we were able to identify the common importance of preparation, setting, timing as well as the importance of using specific artifacts that include, transit and support symbolically and practically the occultist, allowing proper entrance, inclusion and change. Trying to further understand and frame a ceremonial magic ritual, we choose to work with Van Gennep's tripartite model of ritual (Abeliovich 2018; Butler 2004). Van Gennep found a tripartite sequence in ritual observance: separation, transition, and incorporation. This model is based mainly in rites of passage and is highly influenced by Joseph Cambell's Monomyth model (Campbell 1956), as he divides the journey of the hero into three parts, **Departure**, **Initiation**, and **Return**. We chose this model, as it supports different types of occult rituals and due to Cambell's influence in modern fiction, is also being chosen by modern occultists in their ritual designs. Van Gennep's work strengthens the importance of a myth/narrative structure within the ritual. Social events, religious rituals, festivals, games, theater productions, and art installations, were framed under the unifying rubric of performance. The ritual, as a durational process of becoming, binds and constructs the individuals as a group, its dynamics, and Arnold Van Gennep's three phases (Abeliovich 2018).

Metamorphosis

In his extensive research on rituals, Sala (2014) has stated that the human mind needs help in concentration: "one needs to align body, mind and heart to get into that state of altered state of consciousness. The tools help to get there as well as repetition and a familiar and safe environment" (Sala 2014: 77). As Polito et al (2010) observe, trying to define an altered state of consciousness (ASC) is notoriously difficult. They gave examples of ASCs that include (but are not limited to) sleep, daydreams, meditation, hypnosis, trance, sensory deprivation, dissociative states, hallucinations and states induced by psychoactive substances (Polito et al 2010: 919). They also cite Tart's (1972) definition that "the traditional approach has been to describe an ASC as a change in an individuals' pattern of mental functioning which they recognise as being qualitatively different to normal waking consciousness" (Polito et al 2010: 919), and cite research that has found this definition inadequate. For their research, they conceptualise ASCs as "subjective changes to these patterns of mental functioning as operationalised by an empirically validated measure of altered state experience" (ibid). In a magic ritual, this altered state of con-

sciousness, or any desirable change, can vary from the expected results to utterly unexpected synchronicities. By synchronicities, we refer to meaningful coincidences or more specifically, coincidence of events that appear meaningfully related but do not seem to be causally connected or as Jungian psychoanalytic theory defines them "meaningful coincidence of two or more events where something other than the probability of chance is involved." (Jung 1960: 44). According to practitioners "energy follows intention, thought manifests itself in matter. Not on the crude level of making objects appear from nowhere, but things just happen. Synchronicity is no longer accidental, but the result of the magical focus" (Sala 2014: 140), altering space, perception, experience, consciousness and even the way the participants perceive their reality with short or long-lasting effects, a metamorphosis, "of 'being-in-the-world' as a 'magician'" (Lycourinos 2017: 74).

Liminality

Liminality is the realm between two positions or conditions, where the rules and boundaries of the social order are nonexistent. The term liminality comes from limen, meaning 'threshold', and refers to the 'betwixt-and-between' state in the process of spiritual or psychological progress (ibid: 113). This threshold is of paramount importance to the practitioner both in the start and end of the experience, as the practitioner transitions from and back again to the 'real world', as well as in transitions during the ritual itself.

The liminal experience is characterized as being removed from time and space (ibid: 112). This liminality brings out the importance of space, setting and transition from one threshold to the other, towards a ritualistic process. For the purpose of this paper we define liminal space as "one that exists at the interface of two others" (Sonnex et al 2020: 3) and as a concept "is clearly an important aspect of the separation element of ritual" (ibid).

We have briefly analysed some aspects of ceremonial magic, and in the next sections we explore how these can be a source of inspiration and drive the creation of our proposed design framework.

Drawing Parallels

In the creation process of the design framework, it is necessary to adopt an appropriate methodology through which we view the design. The discussed aspects of an occult ceremony draw a picture of a performative space that has a beginning, middle and end (e.g. initiation, staging…), transitions through different states (e.g. liminality), participatory enactive interactions (e.g. embodiment, artefacts, ecstasy, senses), and a goal of creating change for the participant via constructed meaning (e.g. metamorphosis and magical thinking through synchronicity). Through the rituals, we also evidenced how fundamental narrative is to ceremonial magic. Combining the performative nature of rituals, and the significance of a narrative structure led us to view the design of an MR experience from the perspective of **dramaturgy**. In Performance, Adam Versenyi defines dramaturgy as "the architecture of the theatrical event, involved in the confluence of components in a work and how they are constructed to generate meaning for the audience"

(Versenyi 2010:176). In other words, dramaturgy is the orchestration of the different parts of theatre making in a way that achieves its aims – to create a performance that will enable audiences to create meaning in what they experience. This can be true as much for occult as for MR experiences, particularly if the latter seek to incite change, which is the kind of experiences we focus on. For example, Dima (2022) has drawn on dramaturgy to create a design framework for MR heritage experiences in historic sites that seek to educate. Looking through a pair of dramaturgical lenses allows us to work with the two areas, ceremonial magic and MR, from a common base and draw parallels easier.

In order to synthesise a set of design guidelines we will take many of the aspects that we discussed in the previous sections and integrate them as building blocks of an MR experience which we name Design Pillars. Borrowed from the discipline of Games Design, Design Pillars are building rules of a game that work as filters and serve the game's goals. They are rules that support the design goal and the vision of the designer (Metcalf 2018). In ceremonial magic, the goal translates as the will or intent of the occultist. Similarly, in an MR experience, design pillars are the rules that need to be attended to with respect to the goals of the designer. The specific MR experience goal and the will/intent can be widely different. In order to abstract them in a way that helps us draw parallels, we look beneath the specific goals and into what is a fundamental goal for all MR experiences (that seeks to create some change) and an occult ceremony. We argue that both share in common the aim **to engage the participant**. For MR experiences that seek to evoke change, engaging the practitioner is a prerequisite, for example Bower (1992) proved that when people are engaged, they learn. Equally, an occult practitioner has to be engaged in the ritual in order to concentrate, meditate, and observe the changes in the state of consciousness needed to achieve the transition from the **ordinary** to a **magical** worldview, to magical thinking (Rosengren/French 2013).

During the process of sketching a draft of the design pillars, we were confronted with a lot of questions about what each pillar should be and include, as well as questions about aspects of rituals, such as meaning-making and the role of immersion, the complex concept of transcendence, and its connection to the equally challenging concept of immersion, which has been dissected from multiple perspectives in literature. To enrich our understanding, given the limited resources available, we sought to interview a group of experts in technology, religion studies, and design, who, in different ways, combine their work with the occult. These scholars and practitioners were (expertise in their own words): Antonios Diamantopoulos – game designer, Andreas Grzesiek – enactive design scholar, Julia Huisken – industrial designer, Dr Jordan Brady Loewen – a scholar of religion and digital media, Joshua Madara – techno-occultist and occult technologist, and Dr Ralph Moseley – computer scientist, yoga teacher and ritual facilitator. The interviews were conducted in writing by email. We sent them five questions to respond to, one of which included the design pillars and requested their feedback on them (Appendix). The respondents were unlimited in how they would answer the questions and were free to not respond to any of them without explanation.

Design Pillars of an MR Experience

Our first step in drawing parallels between ceremonial magic and design was to iden-
tify, analyse, and understand what makes an esoteric ceremony. The works of Dion For-
tune, which provides the theoretical basis of ritual magic, Israel Regardie, W. E. Butler
and Aleister Crowley among others were used, to help us understand how ceremonial
practices are constructed. We also studied contemporary aspects of occult ceremonial
practices that blend different aspects of more traditional techniques into a postmodern
school of magical thinking, such as Chaos Magic and the works of Peter J. Carroll (Car-
roll 1987) and Phil Hine amongst others (Hine 1995) that we briefly referred to earlier.
It became clear that due to the nature of the subject and the different esoteric schools
of practice, identifying the structural blocks of a ritual into a unified form, was a work
that far exceeded the scopes of this paper. Trying to examine, understand and also sim-
plify the building blocks of an esoteric ceremony proved to be an arduous job because
of the different ceremonies, paths, practices, and schools of esoteric thought. Instead,
we turned our focus towards common aspects and qualities instead of the actual spe-
cific steps and building blocks. Derived from our research, synthesis, and interviews we
ended up with four specific qualities of a ceremonial magic ritual, (1) orientation in which
we added the preparation, magical thinking, initiatory and staging part of the ritual pro-
cess, (2) transitions in which we included the elements of liminality and transition in
space and time, (3) enaction to include the embodied participation and use of senses in
the process and last, but certainly not least, the (4) meaning-making pillar. The last pillar
could be an umbrella pillar as it includes the crucial part of the change, through narrative
and synchronicity. However, we decided to add it as another pillar, at least in this initial
framework. Recognising the dramaturgical nature of the different occult experiences,
and considering some of their common aspects, we propose the following design pillars
for MR design:

Table 1: Design Pillars for MR experiences based on aspects of ceremonial magic

Orientation	Transitions
Staging On-boarding/initiation Off-boarding	Liminal spaces Pace Place
Enaction	**Meaning Making**
Embodied participation Sensorialism	Metamorphosis Synchronicity

When talking about MR experiences, we have adopted the word 'participant' instead
of the more commonly used **viewer**. The word **viewer** immediately puts vision as a pre-

dominant sense when wearing the glasses, something we do not intend to set as a design assumption since other senses are equally important. The use of the word also limits the properties the person who wears the glasses has as a participant and interactor, and embodied agent, notions that, as we will explain later, are important to the design from our perspective.

Orientation

Orientation refers to the entry point of the experience, the initiation stage of a ritual where the participant prepares for the journey. In a ritual, participants prepare mentally, emotionally, and physically for their journey. The practice of ceremonial magic includes tools made specifically for this use. The preparation of the participant and the space is of paramount importance, if not the most important part of the experience according to more traditional practices and modern schools of magical thinking, such as Chaos Magic (Carroll 1987). In the interview, Huisken mentioned that "in some studies rituals were invented that worked against the assumption that the aspect of repetition is constitutive of rituals. This leads to the conclusion that rituals can be decoded and also be designed". In an MR experience, they would follow the same preparation and in addition they will be preparing to add the MR headset as another parameter of their journey that helps towards the goal. This initiation has to be carefully constructed so that context is established and the role of the headset is clearly defined and understood as a means to the journey rather than the goal. In design language, this is called the **user on-boarding**, with **off-boarding** being the end procedure. Diamantopoulos, talking about tabletop games, highlighted the importance of setting the context "to ensure the words used are interpreted as intended and so affect the players views and actions as desired". Imagine someone walking into an art gallery and being given a headset. How are they further introduced to the experience? What language is used? In what capacity does the participant participate?

We have mentioned the importance of artifacts and specific magical tools in the ritual. Durkheim (1912) argued that magical rites involved the manipulation of sacred objects by the occultist. Participants of a magical reenactment in order to secure success for the future, would use props and crafted artefacts to anchor stories and myths (Sala 2014, 161). For the MR headset to be seamlessly integrated into the experience there has to be a narrative within which the presence and use of the headset is justified. For example, a very obvious role of the headset can be that it offers a different view of the world and can be enabled according to the emotional and mental state of the participant each time without losing the sense of space and the presence of others, if any. With Microsoft's HoloLens 2, one can bring up and down the glasses easily to switch between using them or not without losing sight of anything at any time.

How would then such an initiation take place? How do the glasses look? Are they provided as-is or are they decorated with ornaments related to the narrative of the experience? What is the narrative of the MR 'ritual' within which the headset materialises? What role does the participant play? Who is the participant? What are they doing there? Are they alone? Such questions set the stage for the rest of the experience and provide a base for the narrative structure, which runs through all pillars.

Transitions

Transitions involve design questions with respect to how the participant proceeds to the next space, the next part, the next stage, what happens and how do they enter the next stage in the most seamless manner possible. There are many non-deliberate states in which we find ourselves in everyday life due to a variety of factors internal or external. When we are tired, for instance, we are predisposed toward sleep. However, there are cases when a specific state has to be deliberately reached. The transition from the real to the virtual, or augmented real, is such a transition. Alfred Gell (1974) writes that "Magical or Ritual thought has its origin in the reflection in the transcendental sphere of the constitutive activities of mind" (25), positioning the occult world in an imaginary space that reflects the real world. In parallel, MR experiences, as technology-mediated rituals, do the same exact thing. Moseley noted that "the virtual domain lends itself to mirror a kind of simulacra of the occult envisaged astral planes, where, of course, true magick is believed to occur". The on and off-boarding states are also part of these transitions. In all these cases, mechanisms are needed to guide the brain towards the specific state and it is imperative that the transition happens smoothly. A few works have explored the construction of the ritual world from different perspectives, most notably Moseley's (2019) exploration of the concept of **liminality** in ritual magic and how it can be applied for a deep VR experience. In anthropology, liminality is the ambiguous and difficult to define space in between the participants' pre-ritual state and before their transition to the post-ritual state starts (Turner 1979). Moseley, who is also one of our interviewees, explored the transition between mental states of consciousness and how aspects of liminality are important factors for a smooth transition between states focusing on using **anchors** and **portals** to create the liminal space and guide the transition. Portals are a successful choice of tool because they are a metaphor of transition, while anchors give a sense of safety net and guide through it. From a design perspective, it is useful to ask what type of transitions can be created and what happens in these liminal spaces. For example, Loewen asked if transitions are meant to be seamless and quick or if it is important for participants to spend time in the liminal space. Liminal spaces can be ephemeral but can also play a role in the story and allow for a longer engagement with them. They can be, for example, spaces of reflection, safety, experimentation (a space opposite visually, emotionally, and aesthetically to the rest of the **world**). Each one can also be different. For example, the on- and off-boarding liminal spaces have to be longer as initiation and ending spaces. Our interviewee Huisken wrote about on and off boarding that "the putting on and taking off of the glasses marks a time period, similar to chronological sequences within a ritual". In the interview, Moseley mentioned that allowing for a narrative is important to the transition of the ritual experience, the narrative being 'beginning – induction, middle – the main experience, ending – exiting, grounding, bringing back to the physical corporeal reality'.

Guidance is important in transitions, and it can be given via multiple sensory modalities, e.g. coming from a narrator or directional sounds (audio only), from the script of a virtual character or from interface elements on the glasses (audio/visual), from vibrations on a wearable connected to the glasses and so on. The absence of guidance can also be the absence of **external** guidance. Moseley notes that "as the individuals reach appro-

priate points in a rite or sequence, the guide senses and interacts with guiding comments – if there is a lack of biofeedback, or physical observation, then the guide must watch their own internal states to guide the process". When is it important to not have external guidance in an MR experience and what do we seek to achieve with this? How can design balance the use of anchors and giving some **space** to the participant so that the goal is achieved without breaking the experience? How do interaction/game designers help participants with wayfinding, i.e. where to go and what to do next?

Enaction

Enaction is an important part of rituals and of experiences in general. Enaction is the view that knowledge comes from the coupling of perception and action during our interaction with the world orchestrated by our senses. Sensory and motor engagement and sensory-motor coordination are the main channels through which we constantly perceive the life-world (Merleau-Ponty 1962). As Larssen et al. (2007) expressed it, "sensing and motor skills are in constant dialogue, performing in concert. The organisation of our movement patterns depends upon our habits of perception" (2). The body is our interface to the world and, as such, it has a central role in this interplay. Enaction is an inherently phenomenological perspective whereby the participant is an **embodied** agent in the ceremony/experience. Since the audience is turned into a participant in magic rituals, enaction takes a central role and includes the body in more than one way. In occult studies, there is scarce literature on the role of the body in ritual magic from the phenomenological perspective. Lycourinos (2017) is one of the few who suggested "that the logic of modern magical ritual should be identified in terms of how it aspires to generate the subjectivity of 'being-in-the-world' as a 'magician' and focused on the 'ritual body' as a critical interface for the study of magic" (4). During a ritual the body is constantly in action, for example, positioning oneself in space, chanting, meditation, wearing a specific attire, and holding objects. The body is also a receptor and emitter of spiritual forces, and a means to embody a change of state of consciousness in the participant by sending and receiving spiritual energy.

In an MR experience, the body can be approached from the same phenomenological perspective since the goal is to engage the participant in an embodied experience that will help them acquire new meanings. In digital design, Paul Dourish (2001) introduced the theory of embodied interaction in his seminal work 'Where the Action Is' (Dourish 2001). Dourish views digital technology as part of our being-in-the-world and emphasises that it should be designed based on how we understand and appropriate it and act through it as embodied agents in the world. Enaction and embodiment are central to how we propose to approach the design of MR experiences and we can draw on the ways the ritual body is constructed to identify fruitful design methods. Wearing the MR headset changes the wearer's embodiment. Wearing the headset affects the whole body, and the way the participant moves in space and understands space and place. How do participants interact with the new embodied way of moving around, and how does it change their perception of the real world and of themselves? Going back to the guidance questions of the role of the headset in the Orientation section, what if the glasses are viewed as a ritual object? Can they be a meditative device? Is it an alternate view of the world and

how does the participant affect this world through their senses and movement? How is the hybrid world constructed to allow participants to navigate and change it as their state of consciousness changes? How is this justified and reinforced within the experience's narrative?

For example, the moment of invited mindfulness that we described in Transitions, when no guidance exists, is also a moment of the experience where one explores the liminal space within or just outside one's comfortable limits, thinking of how to move and sense next, a state that is intricately linked to the body. How does design support the participant at this moment? Loewen's question of pace of transitions reveals a direct link between pace and the participant's embodied understanding of the experience. The enactive engagement is different if one is allowed to have their own pace in the experience than when not, and the design should follow the desired goal each time. For example, the importance of pace and its interplay with embodied and situated learning was one of Dima's findings in her investigation on agency in a heritage MR experience, and was incorporated as one of the key components of her design framework (2022). Loewen in their interview also emphasised the importance of a 'less is more' approach, that

> some of the easiest ways to achieve an altered state of consciousness is actually via sensory deprivation or the overwhelming of one particular sense rather than 'multi-sensoriality'. In fact, sometimes rituals are used to heighten the attention and focus to a singular action as a form of askesis which can achieve the desired altered state.

The question for design then is how it can support moments of sensorial deprivation, and where/when are these needed in the experience? Notwithstanding, it is also important not to focus on what the participant sees but also what else they sense and how they move. Do they wear anything else or carry anything that can make the absorption of the headset a natural part of the experience? What is the connection between chanting and sounds, picked up objects, movement, and the audiovisual material present in the headset?

In addition, if participants are in the presence of others, going back to the practices of communal magic, how does the others' presence change the individual and collective embodiment? All the previous design questions can be asked having multiple participants in one place. Also, what do participants see/hear/touch/sense in common? How does each participant affect the others? How does the individual's state of consciousness affect the collective one?

Meaning-Making

Meaning Making follows enaction towards an elevated state of comprehension of the surrounding world and beyond when combined with each one's own background experience. Dourish (2001) and Wright et al. (2006) suggest that human experience is constituted by continuous engagement with the world through acts of meaning-making at many levels. Although there is no clear consensus on the conceptualisation of meaning, four dimensions are predominant across various perspectives: coherence, purpose, significance, and self-transcendence (van de Goor et al. 2020, 1). The authors explain that coherence is the cognitive dimension of meaning, when events fit in with existing beliefs

and expectations, purpose is the future-oriented motivational dimension, significance is the evaluative component, and self-transcendence subsumes all three and is defined as reaching an ASC.

Accordingly, in rituals, meaning-making is a continuous process that may or may not lead towards ASC (and self-transcendence) but where meaning-making is always present. A ritual marks an event where the ordinary is suspended for a certain time, and a magic moment of transcendence may or may not occur, giving the person a perspective and a narrative about how their life is meaningful. The ritual itself transforms the participant's experience. Recent studies such as the ones by Magnani have stated that the "symbolic habits in rituals can function as memory mediators which are able to play significant roles in human cognition and action. They can maximise abducibility and so recoverability of knowledge contents, including at the unconscious level" (2017: 321). A ceremonial magic participant enters and experiences the same ritual with similar or completely different reasons each time or in comparison to other participants. They might enter in different mental and psychological situations, with different Will or different embodied situations similar to how an MR user would enter the MR experience. In a similar manner as with the previous pillars, the main design question here is how do we design for meaning-making? How do we design experiences that enable the participant each time to form meaning according to their own specific point of entry and reason of entry? Some rituals are rigid and very specific while others are much open, allowing room for surprise and personalisation. What are the design considerations for an MR experience which aims to be in some or full extend non-prescriptive? And what is involved in the design of an MR experience that allows the participant to become, to transform and change through embodiment and cognition, which is what usually separates a successful ritual, and in our opinion a successful MR experience, from a mundane one.

In addition, one of the main components for meaning-making, and indeed for the other three pillars, though it may not be as paramount in these as it is here, is narrative. By narrative, we mean the structure of the experience that gives the participant the tools to engage in meaning-making, the space to create coherence, find purpose and significance and, potentially, self-transcend. If we accept that rituals are enactments of a myth, MR experiences can be enactments of a narrative. In contrast to storytelling, narrative refers to the way a story is told. This allows for a plethora of ways to engage a participant, telling them a story being the most explicit of them. A narrative abstracts the story's information and how it is structured, which is a dramaturgical decision, does not matter – it only has to have the power to enable meaning-making. Orientation, Transitions and Enaction play a role in its structure, for example a transition can be purely narrative-enabled, a narrator pointing the participant towards something, and at the orientation stage the context has to be set. Liminal spaces of reflection provide a pause that may help meaning making, and these spaces can be enriched with sensual and aesthetic content according to the goal to further enable meaning making. Eventually, under this pillar, the design questions related to narrative look at it holistically, ensuring coherence with the previous pillars, and ways to prioritise purpose and significance with respect to the change the designer wishes to bring to the participant.

Loewen posed an interesting question on change in their response to us: "If a player/user leaves the experience unchanged, is it a failure?" It is possible of course for

the designer to work with a framework for engagement and the participants not to experience change. However, the goal of this framework is to engage. Meaning-making is necessary for engagement, and when there is enaction there is always a meaning-making process no matter how unrelated to the experience's goal the meaning is. So, if these two pillars are met, the experience will be engaging. Our fundamental thesis for this framework is that we design for engagement, and for meaning making, and from there change may come. In addition, this remark strengthens the two last pillars, enaction and meaning making, and we argue that the presence of both is fundamental to engagement.

A Note on Immersion

We have so far avoided to apply and analyse the notion of immersion not because it does not exist in both rituals and MR experiences but because in our endeavour to scaffold a framework for design, the question of how does one design **for** immersion is a multi-dimensional and complex task to analyse, and one difficult to measure. From the many definitions of immersion one that is useful for our perspective is the state of being so fully absorbed and engaged in an activity that one loses self-consciousness, and is considered a passive state. However, in both rituals and MR experiences enaction and embodied interaction are at play so Csikzentmihalyi's Flow experience, "the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement" (1975: 36), is more apt to cases where people act, such as ours. Sonnex et al (2020) describes how researchers who explore ritual practices equate ASC in rituals with Csikzentmihalyi's Flow experience, which is described as "the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement" (1975, 36), and ASC is also considered a liminal experience (Turner 1974). When one is in flow they are engaged, and any interruption of flow, Madara discussed in the interview, "can take the person out of, well, flow, which may be a breakdown more generally than of transcendence per se". Flow is a concept that is much more clearly defined than immersion, and can be easier measured, while its connection with engagement makes it an easier concept to design guidelines for. Its connection with immersion is still under scrutiny. In games literature, flow has been used synonymously with immersion while Michaelidis et al (2018) showed that immersion and flow do not appear as conceptually distinct, and their proposed differences are not compelling enough to set immersion apart as a different mental state (2018: 5). Since the conceptual differences, if any, between immersion, flow, and engagement (subsequently ASC, liminality and metamorphosis) is still a topic under scrutiny, and due to the challenge that creating design guidelines for immersion poses, we choose to not use immersion in our framework and use engagement as our central goal. However, we believe that this is a rich area for further research to be explored in future expansions of the framework.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter drew parallels between ceremonial magic rituals and MR experiences and explored how aspects of the first can be viewed from a design perspective. Our aim was to then transfer these aspects into MR experience design and construct a framework to

guide the design process. In doing so, we followed a dramaturgical perspective exemplifying how the design space for both rituals and MR is inherently performative and invites embodied and enactive interactions from the participants. In our journey, we consulted a vast body of literature and practitioners and scholars who work between design, technology and the occult to better understand a very complex and rich topic.

This design framework is by no means complete. There is much more detail in the aspects we have explored, concepts that are under ongoing debate in the scholarly world, while the topic requires a lot of empirical input, much of which remains hidden. In addition, there are many more aspects of ceremonial magic that can come into play and further enrich the framework. We open it to other researchers and designers who wish to experiment with it, amend, and debate it. It is in our imminent plans to evaluate it within a practical project.

Acknowledgments

Appendix

Interview Questions

(1) Have you ever tried an immersive technology experience?/Have you been part of a magical ceremonial/occult experience?
(2) Do you see any type of connection between a ritual ceremony and immersive tech experience? If so, what is the nature of this connection?
(3) Would you describe any experiences you have participated in using immersive technology (AR or VR) as 'transcendent'? If so, what made you feel like this?
(4) If you felt transcended, would you say you were definitely immersed or do you think there is no relation between the two states?
(5) This is our draft framework for designing immersive tech experiences inspired by ceremonial magick design (the building blocks which we call design pillars). We invite you to share your thoughts.

- Orientation (Staging, on-boarding/initiation)
- Transitions (liminality)

- Enaction (embodied participation, multi-sensoriality)
- Meaning Making (metamorphosis, synchronicity)

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Part IIIa – Videogames: Experience

I Believe in Videogames
A Medium's Potential for Spiritual Experiences

Felix Schniz

Introduction

Technology and spirituality can be argued to stand in a paradigmatic correspondence. Remarking on the sprawling advent of new technologies in the mid and late 19th century, Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan noted that spirituality established itself as "a technology in its own right" (2016: 902): It enabled practitioners to connect amongst each other as well as with what they believed to exist beyond a concrete reality via "diverse techniques, codes, electrics, song and dance, political address, scientific experimentation, parlor games" (ibid.) and other strategies. In the 21st century, the digital age expands this plethora with ephemeral cyberspaces that may serve as "[vehicles] to inform, enlighten and support knowledge and truth seekers" (Di Maio 2019: 427) who intend to engage with their spiritual side, or may stumble upon their spiritual sentiment without even noticing so before. The extraordinary appeal of these realms is that they are much more than a cultural archive (in the sense of Assmann 1988: 13) of readily accessible slices of knowledge. Instead, they offer dynamic and interactive means of affective engagement, encouraging users to creatively connect with the spiritual (ibid: 428) or to find themselves in a mode of engagement with the medium that unexpectedly inspires an awareness of their inmost for the mysteries of the unfathomable which we typically connect to the spiritual realm (cf. Welte 1965: 33).

To understand why videogames are an essential part of this digital offer that allows to engage one's spirituality, one must be willing to rethink technology at the crossroads of public understanding (achievement, progress, etc.) and personal meaning (cf. Parcey 2001: 1–13). They connect interactive engagement with the phenomena of immersion and embodiment through their unique remedial composition (cf. Bolter/Grusin 2000: 5) and do so at an unprecedented scale of accessibility. As generally available entertainment products, videogames are the perchance most commonly available provider of fictitious

virtual spaces that allows its users to explore them without prior expertise. These users are typically referred to as players because these virtual spaces invite playful interaction in a half-reality of fictional, narrative content that is guided by hard-coded rules and mechanics (following Juul 2005). Such virtual videogame worlds not only incite curiosity but can be based spiritual imagery or reflect upon it (cf. Bosman 2016). They are the tools that enable players to enter virtual spaces shaped by cultural knowledge to seek and make spiritual experiences, and this potential is due to their interactivity; tightly connected to each player's subjective disposition.

Personally, I have struggled to allocate my research on videogames, and the spiritual experiences that they may provide, appropriately within a scientific framework. Even though videogames can be described as a sum of objectively definable components, of algorithms, rulesets, and audio-visuals, for which countless taxonomic models exist, the actual player experience happens outside of exactly definable norms due to the ergodic state of the game, and the hermetic and esoteric quality of human nature. Even models specifically aiming to explain the dimensions in which players are affected by videogames (such as the MDA-model by Hunicke/LeBlanc/Zubek 2001–2004) may explain how games intend to affect the human being but cannot answer for every subjective, intimate, and thus private sentiment. At large, this is of course an issue that goes well beyond game studies. The creed of scientific objectivity by default cordons off an engagement with issues that must be explored within and negotiated from a personal perspective. "We are persons whose bodies can be studied according to the impersonal laws of physics", argues B. Allan Wallace, "but who's minds are subjectively experienced in ways science has not yet been able to fathom" (2000: 8). The act of spirituality equals the act of creating a technological framework to assess issues of immense personal importance. Videogames as a technical framework may overlap with this act and provide a virtual environment to explore spirituality on one's own terms. 'Personally,' therefore, is precisely where and how this research effort must take place – and this acknowledgement of the spiritual is an implicit work order to the scientific reappraisal of experience-oriented game studies.

In the following, I aim to create awareness for the untapped, yet existent dimensions of the experiential spectra videogames may provide by elaborating on two co-dependent theses: Firstly, that videogames may provide players with spiritual experiences and, secondly, that it is necessary to consolidate academic-scientific and personal-poetic modes of writing to examine these spiritual experiences. This train of thought begins with a theoretical mediation on spirituality and play, specifically focusing on how they may overlap. Building upon the observations of Johan Huizinga ([1949] 2016) allows me to find a common core in one of the foundational metaphors of contemporary game studies: that of the **magic circle**, the mental image of a boundary which separates the wilful ritual from an ordinary everyday life experience. To subsequently describe why videogames are extremely capable of providing us with subjective experiences, what a methodology to describe these experiences may look like, and to illustrate its capabilities with an example, I henceforth and regularly paraphrase concepts introduced in my monograph *Genre und Videospiel: Einführung in eine unmögliche Taxonomie* (2021) and my yet unpublished dissertation *What is a Video Game Experience?* (2021). In both works, I have argued for the videogame as a digital ***objet ambigu***, an understanding that allows me to imagine them as a medium of potential for subjective interests, needs, and desires. From this theoreti-

cal framework that foregrounds the importance of the self and the private to understand the role of videogames as facilitators of spiritual experiences, I seek a way to express such experiences without abandoning the scientific norm of accessibility and transparency. I provide an overview of different academic methodologies that consciously deal with the use of I-voice to discuss intimate experiences for scientific purposes and correlate them to the work of game studies pioneers who also intended to highlight the experience of self in their research. Following and evaluating these trends, I propose the self-designed method of **close performing** to negotiate between personal sentiments and academic purpose to explore experiences, especially such elusive ones as spiritual experiences in gaming. A brief excursion into the videogame *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room 2015) follows this in order to demonstrate the capabilities of the method to mediate between theoretical frameworks and personal, in part introspective, observations, before concluding with a summary of insights and an appeal for a re-evaluation of style and voice in academic writing on videogames.

The Spiritual Experience

Spirituality is a concept of mystical grandeur commonly connected to the belief in, belonging to, and understanding of higher concepts and their importance to one's ordinary life (Steinpatz 2020: 161).[1] Quite literally touching upon the infinite and unimaginable, the term is of such a semantic magnitude that its use for analytical purposes must ultimately be doubted (cf. Motak 2009: 133). At its broadest, spirituality is a gateway to transcendence, the engagement with everything that may exist beyond a perceivable reality, "discovered in moments in which the individual questions the meaning of personal existence and attempts to place the self within a broader ontological context" (Gorsuch/Shafranske 1984: 231). Thinking of spirituality through such questions actually is a helpful strategy to break its complexity down into meaningful pieces. We often get in touch with our spiritual side – when we are confronted with existential queries and marvel – perchance without even realising their spiritual tint. Such questions, as they may occur to us in everyday life, occur in the following dimensions:

- **Contemplating time**: How and when did existence begin? When will it end (if it ever ends)?
- **Contemplating space**: Where am I (cosmically speaking)? Are there other beings in this universe?
- **Contemplating existence**: What am I? What Is my purpose in life?
- **Contemplating relations**: What is my relation to others? To me and the entirety of everything else?

Such queries protrude in every relation of the self and its transcendental embeddedness: that with other humans or living beings, that with a God or any given deity, and even the

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1   In reference to von Balthasar's understanding of spirituality as a *durchstimmtheit*, a permeation of such grand-scale concepts with every act and decision of the self (1967: 247).

relation of self to itself (Dahlgrün 2018: 68). What they also share and convey is a longing to understand an infinite field of unanswerable wonders and worries which are explored by science, yet far too big to answer them satisfactorily in their current state. An individual's inability to find meaning, hope, peace, love, comfort, strength, and connection in life nevertheless depends on an individual's ability to handle these contemplations and their personal beliefs. Failing to encounter them may lead to spiritual distress: a clinical condition that is linked to states of distress, anxiety, scorn, and crestfallenness (O'Brien 2011: 148; Schmucker 1996; Young/Koopsen 2005: 212). Upholding an individual sense for the spiritual thus can be regarded as a mental health pillar. Seybold and Hill, for instance, argue that the positive effect of spirituality has been greatly explored regarding its connected emotions "(e.g., forgiveness, hope, contentment, love)" (2001: 23) that "might benefit the individual through their impact on neural pathways that connect to the endocrine and immune system" (ibid.). The human mind yearns to understand and to experience comfort in the knowledge of fitting in, of having a 'rightful' place in existence. We **want** our lives to matter and to understand our purpose in the grander scheme of things, so to speak.

Spirituality, expressed in the longing for cosmic meaning, belonging, understanding and embeddedness, reveals at least two critical qualities of the elusive term. Firstly, spiritual longing is universal. The questions raised above do not belong to a specific dogma or gnostic tradition. In fact, such questions may even be raised without a deity or belief in mind at all, suggesting that such a longing may as well be experienced by those who consider themselves to be agnostic or atheistic. Secondly, these questions reveal an underlying quality of the spiritual: that of an active want or desire. Spirituality is not only a longing for something beyond-rational but an active, open-minded seeking (Dürckheim 1984: 151) to counter one's existential dread of the void – and thus, a subjective practice.

The spiritual experience, as it connects the personal to the universal state of being, is an "apprehension of the infinite through feeling" (Roy 2001: 4) – an experience of extreme magnitude. It bridges the singular self with an assumed, cosmic entirety, and is expressed as a large-scale dichotomy in the works of many philosophers, scholars, and theologists. Blaise Pascal, for instance, famously negotiated such a sentiment in his *Pensées*: "I see nothing but infinites on all sides, which surround me as an atom, and as a shadow which endures only for an instant and returns no more." (Pascal [1670] 1910: 80). In *Das Heilige*, Rudolf Otto famously approaches the raw sensation of the sacred beyond religious and rational constraints (cf. [1917] 2014). He describes that its massive effect on us arises as counterplay of extremes: the ***mysterium tremendum*** – the frightful reverence in the face of the transcendental (ibid: 13–14) – and the ***mysterium fascinans***, the fact that transcendence is yet an awe-inspiring mystery (ibid: 42). It is a harmonious contrast (ibid.), a fulfilling fascination with a higher power but, simultaneously, a realisation of oneself being at the bottom of this cosmic power dynamic. Considering art history, it becomes evident that many creative trends intended to express spiritual sentiments in a similar fashion of approximating that beyond reality, which cannot be expressed, by harmonising strongly contrasting elements in their works. Spirituality in art emerges from the interplay between the solitary and the universe, the highest highs and the lowest lows, typically in a sensory or emotionally overwhelming fashion. In Romantic art, for instance, spirituality emerges in the shape of the sublime. The motif juxtaposes na-

ture's magical beauty and the imposing danger, relying on core themes like storms or vast mountain ranges to create what Edmund Burke calls a "delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror" ([1765] 2015:109). Spiritual music follows similar patterns. Carl Gombrich, for instance, elaborated on church music as an approach to **Apophaticism** and **Cataphaticism**; the joy of all sound and no sound in church music as following similar principles to celebrate the transcendental infinite (2010: 564). Videogames, meanwhile, invite their players to actively seek out how and where they may appeal to their spiritual senses. In an interview with Adam Biessener, Dave Pinchbeck, the lead designer of this paper's case study *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, described his personal play experience of the wild west action-adventure *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010). He details how he explores the world of the game to gently trot up to a mountain and gain utter joy from gazing at the virtual environment beneath him (in Biessener 2011: n.p.). The anecdote shows that videogames grant a unique medial and artistic approach to the spiritual, where, instead of being confronted with overwhelming magnitude, players may seek it out themselves or even stumble upon it by mere accident. Pinchbeck may have experienced his sensations during that sunrise precisely as it counterpoints the fast-paced gameplay of *Red Dead Redemption*, or because the solitude of the moment inspired him to contemplate the relationship of himself with the grandeur of nature itself. Their capability for interactive exploration speaks to the private and subjective notion of the spiritual experiences, which is ultimately nurtured by the very composition of the medium and the concept of play itself.

Even though the artistic motifs connected to spirituality intend to evoke strong emotions, the exact nature of such an experience to the thinker, spectator, listener, or player is difficult to assess scientifically. Spiritual experiences are inner experiences. They emerge from purely subjective sentiments and are, consequently, neither objectively negotiable nor communicable to others (cf. Hammel 1997: 40). Robert Sharf summarises the reasons for this inaccessibility of the spiritual experience in four defining qualities (in Bush 2012: 201):

> It is absolutely **private**: it happens in isolation from the experience of all other (human) beings. This also means that the ones making the experience are unable to communicate them transparently.
> it is **subjective**, which modifies the idea of its privacy by a non-normative evaluation. The one making the experience is the only being entitled to evaluate its intensity, quality, meaning.
> It is **indubitably divine**. It can be a hunch, an intuition, or a conviction of the one making an experience that it is indubitably and veritably connected to a transcendental contemplation.
> It is an **immediate** sensation. The one making the experience cannot prepare for its instant occurrence.

Subsequently, one would have to ask how (and if) spiritual experiences can actually be explored. They happen under the explicit exclusion of others, as per Sharf's definition, and their divine quality manifests 'ad hoc' in a subjective sensation. Consequently, spiritual experiences are often reflected upon through the periphery, their signifiers being the

centre of attention rather than their respective, uniquely personal signifieds. On the one hand, this means that researchers are bound to approach spiritual experiences through their environment – the conditions under which they happen or the means by which the ones having spiritual experiences are capable of sharing them, even if what they describe may not be an entirely accurate description of their internal processes. On the other hand, it suggests that a worthwhile strategy to unriddle the spiritual experience may be to look at the studies of phenomena which likewise describe dedicated states of mental elevation beyond ordinary life. The following section, therefore, sheds a light on the shared affective and cognitive mechanisms of spiritual and ludic rites.

Spirituality, Play, and Videogames

All play is rooted in spirituality – and likewise, all spirituality is equally rooted in play. This chiasmic argument, while seemingly exaggerated in its simplicity, does indeed overlap when we regard the sacred and the ludic as dedicated frames of mind. Both terms represent, in Turner's sense, liminal, "independent domain[s] of creative activity" (1974: 65). They encourage us to enter a state of mind that surpasses an ordinary, concrete reality, and follows its own modes of meaning making. Brian Edgar points out that "[worship], like play, is 'fictitious' in that it copies life in the 'real world' with symbolic eating and drinking and washing, with dress-ups and special actions and movements and songs, and yet it is not exactly the same; it has its own unique form and meaning" (2017: 27). He bases his observations on Romano Guardini's *Spirit of the Liturgy* (in ibid.), which also refers to Christian rites as joyous play that shall arise from a sphere beyond the grave severity of reality – arguing that the sacred may only arise from beyond the constraints of worldly purpose. In a similar fashion, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, often regarded as the foundational work of Western game studies, encapsulates how the ***différance*** of spirituality and play confluences in the idea of the sacred-earnest act:

> The child plays in complete–we can well say, in sacred–earnest. But it plays and knows that it plays. The sportsman, too, plays with all the fervour of a man enraptured, but he still knows that he is playing. The actor on the stage is wholly absorbed in his playing, but is all the time conscious of "the play". The same holds good of the violinist, though he may soar to realms beyond this world. The play-character, therefore, may attach to the sublimest forms of action. (Huizinga [1949] 2016: 18)

Huizinga portrays the sacred-earnest as act which one fully understands as playing, acting, or make-believe, yet commits to and executes with a distinct sincerity. The person playing *Quake III: Arena* (ID Software 1999) knows that they are not killing another being when shooting it but uses this real-world vocabulary in full earnest (and most likely quite a bit of frustration) during the act of playing the game. The person losing the trusted ward-companion Yorda in *ICO* (Team ICO 2001) may experience as devastating loss due to its dramatic narrative impact and change in gameplay, which is subsequently deprived in terms of meaningful interaction (Harrer 2018: 98). It is the wilful act of entering a liminal state which Huizinga expresses in his metaphor of the **magic circle**, the artificial

border one crosses to enter the state of play. Drawing from the Indian *Mahābhārata*, in which prince Yudhisthira entered a gambler's den and, by crossing into it, accepting it as a sphere governed by its own rules which are superimposed upon the rules of ordinary life. Huizinga's usage of the magic circle as a metaphor is an interesting one. While the *Mahābhārata* does not mention a particular form, the circular form is a commonplace symbol of Western esoteric practices (Chatley 1911: 137) in which a round line of banishment or protection drawn on the floor creates a "limit [to] the magical environment" of the spellcaster (ibid.). In both cases, however, the sacred-earnest tone of the otherworldly environment – may it be that of the gambler, that of the spell-caster (or that of the sportsman, or player, were we to continue in Huizinga's example) – provides a distinct order to the events happening in its elevated state, authorised by voluntarily accepted rules. Gordon Calleja thus notes how the magic circle thus "inscribes the boundary … between the idealized ritual of play and the mess of ordinary life" (2015: 213).

Videogames are a specific category of game that relies on digital technology to invite its players into the magic circle, where they may have gameplay experiences that are accessed via technical means. In the ongoing acts of digitization – "the conditioning of social structures and practices through the process of being digitized" (Grieve Helland Singh 2018: 140–41) – they provide new spaces in which sacral play can be enacted. They offer "the possibility for players to manipulate the content and form of a videogame and/or the possibility of a continuous information exchange between the user and the game system" (Weber et al. 2014: 83) and are, in that sense, an omnipotent systemic magic circle. Videogames provide hard-coded boundaries which are mediated direct and immanently, and in which soft, human interactions occur.

Understood as a digital, virtual home for the sacred-earnest, the videogame is an aesthetic and narrative setup for the players – a stage only present in the circuitry of computers and home consoles, audio-visually manifested by loudspeakers and monitors, and filled with environmental properties for players to explore. Janet Murray famously introduced the idea of the videogame as stage of (self) fulfilment in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), where she presents the eponymous machine of the sci-fi universe *Star Trek* as means to rethink the capability of videogames to immerse players onto a virtual stage; a fictional framework provided by the technical capabilities of the medium. The Holodeck serves as a digital cave of wonders in *Star Trek*, in which a supercomputer can recreate a virtual depiction of any desired place, time, scenario, or character ensemble. The protagonists of *Star Trek* make use of these capabilities by imagining themselves as heroes in their own scenarios (such as in Scanlan 1988) by acknowledging them as metaphoric means and taking their own actions within a virtual setting as an example to rethink their behaviour or actions outside of it (cf. Chalmers 1998), or by using its fictional worlds to find inspiration for their research (cf. Singer 1993). At times, the protagonists even experience **bleed** (in the sense of Montola 2010 and Bowman 2013) and find themselves unable to separate between their 'real' emotions and those facilitated by the play-like experience of the Holodeck's virtuality, such as when protagonist Geordi La Forge falls in love with a hologram (cf. Beaumont 1989). While technically not on par with such a *Wunderwerk* quite yet, videogames strive for a similar sort of engagement. All key ingredients are there: the virtual stages (ordered in videogame geographies as maps or level structures), the props (or items) giving players meaningful tools to interact, other actors (may they be human

players or artificial non-player characters), but also general stage directions (in the shape of a narrative and basic mechanics). Play, as Lévy puts it, only unfolds via player action:

> The virtual begins to flourish with the appearance of human subjectivity in the loop, once the indeterminateness of meaning and the propensity of the text to signify come into play, a tension that actualization or interpretation, will resolve during the act of reading. (1998: 53)

The fact that videogames are interactive media by heart also means that they can only grant experiences if one interacts with them. Their virtual worlds provide a bare excess of potential meaning making instances – though their order and ultimate effect on the player experience are built on "hybridized processes … [of] mediated performance and life improvisation" (Davis 2006: 101).

Within the digital magic circle of videogames, spirituality and religion can be handled in different nuances. Rachel Wagner argues that we can analyse the interplay of these two habitual practices and the cultural artefacts arising from them through four lenses as necessary to describe the intersections of the religious and games (cf. 2015: 3–6):

> **Religion in gaming**, meaning the representation of actual religious practices and traditions in videogame environments.
> **Religion as gaming**, meaning existing practices that would allow interpreting religious (inter) action as play or playful.
> **Gaming as religion**, meaning any way in which gaming-related activities, such as the communal behaviour of gaming communities and fandoms, could be described akin to religious communes.
> **Gaming in religion**, meaning the application of games at the centre of religious practices or games that can be argued to have a religious-educational function.

For the sake of analysing videogames as providers of spiritual experiences, it is apt to combine the first two lenses precisely because private and intimate experiences, just as the very personal experience of play, take place in a specific frame of mind. Even though there are games with a more differentiated approach to the topic, many of them are purposefully designed to be educational on religion. In other instances, "A great many video games that feature or represent religion in some way tend to have a kind of mechanical theology that sees gods as technologies to be manipulated for power" (Schut 2014: 260). Many games deal with a display of religion that is not intended to have us directly reflect on belief initially. It plays, for example, a distinct role in setting up conflict-oriented games like *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios 1997), a real-time strategy game in which players guide the development of ancient civilisations with a focus on generating soldiers and sending them towards an enemy and often in the guise of cultural and religious clashes. Here, ideological markers embedded in a historical setting are applied to distinguish parties involved in a conflict. Belief is embedded as a tangible element in tech trees, unit upgrades, and specialised troops with distinct functions. While this may provide a historically laden perspective of ideology (cf. Praschak/Ancuta 2019), we could argue that they teach religion through a historian's lens rather than encourage players to engage with their spiritual sides and that religious imagery may or may not be re-

sponsible for a spiritual experience in a videogame. Evident audio-visual, narrative or mechanic cues alone are not the only criterium by which we question. Rather, I want to ask how gameplay can provide the individual with actual spiritual sentiments, even if their content may not be evidently linked to religious practices as such. Spirituality can arise for personal reasons alone from all sorts of games, meaning that to explore the issue thoroughly, one must frame any approach that focuses on what is present in the game and how it may affect players with that subjectivity in mind.

In prior works, I have established my position that the videogame is, first and foremost, a medium of potential (Schniz 2021a: 23). Potential typically expresses itself as a human factor: it arises from present capacities and develops based on how human beings make use of these capacities. The videogame's appeal as a medium granting immense interaction to players, bears a striking resemblance to the **objet ambigu**, as originally imagined by the French philosopher Paul Valéry (cf. [1923] 1991). Based on his writings of a young Socrates, who is puzzled by a small rock that cannot be defined in origin, the **objet ambigu** – the object that is open to interpretation or of several meanings. Key trait of the **objet ambigu** is its indefinite **gestalt**: It denies each and any structural securement, as it defines different and perchance incompatible origins, functions, or structures in its texture. Due to that, the **objet ambigu** is an artwork that reverses the principle of interpretation. Instead of being endowed with meaning by the interpretation of its beholder, it cannot hold meaning which is ultimately allowing one to conclude its beholders. In Valéry's fable, it took an **objet ambigu** for Socrates to realise that he wants to be a philosopher. The puzzle posed to him by the small pebble did not leave his thoughts, encouraging him to seek wisdom rather than become a shipwright ([1964] Blumenberg 2017: 97).

The videogame can be seen as a digital successor of the **objet ambigu**. Where Valéry had to invent a mysterious shape that mainly provides its winding, partly contradicting facets through an inventive reader's imagination, videogames are the ever-altering composition per definition. Its contents require players to actively engage with their content. Therefore, agency – "the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player's intention" (Mateas 2004: 21) – has become a key term in contemporary game studies. The way their contents unfold, or the potential that they may unfold, is dependent on a given player's intent and performance. Brendan Keogh rightfully argues "the player and game must be considered as a singular, inseparable whole" (2014: n.p.), an inseparable amalgamation of potential for development within the virtual magic circle and even for long-lasting player developments. Daniel Martin Feige describes this as the act "*des sich selbst durchspielens*" – the art of playing through yourself (2015: 173). Playing a videogame in this understanding is a profound tool of introspection. Players reflecting on how they play a videogame – what they want their avatar to resemble, how they embed their agency into the virtual environment and derive meaning from it, and such – are bound to learn as much about what makes themselves themselves as what makes the game the game. It is a setup bound to inspire an understanding of personal matters, such as one's own spiritual needs.

A decisive factor in the perception of a videogame's spirituality is its fictional, virtual world which players explore and within which they, according to Feige, may also find reflective engagement with their selves. Stef Aupers fittingly characterises the world of a videogame as possessing a mythopoeic spirituality (2015: 77). By enabling players to ex-

plore a videogame's cyberspace freely, they likewise enable their players to immerse into a world different from their own, guided by its own functional and narrative rules. Even though players acknowledge these virtual worlds and their lore that potentially involves rites of magic, acts of prayer, or other facets of spiritual engagement as products of imagination, Aupers argues that these interactions "have real spiritual value" (2015: 77). Aupers's idea is very much in line with Bartle's considerations on immersion and influence: just as one interacts with a virtual world based on real-life expectations, the virtual world may, in return, also facilitate expectations about our reality (Bartle 2004: 701). Considering the spiritual potential of videogames, one can argue that they may immerse players into virtual worlds that aesthetically function on principles of spirituality in a fantastic fashion and ultimately encourage them to play through themselves within this framework. By way of illustration, the action game *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware 2019) allows players to roam a Sengoku-era Japan in the avatar of the eponymous ninja warrior **Sekiro**. The game's interpretation of the era merges historical dates with Japan's rich mythology. Players encounter fabled beings such as mischievous **Yokai** or vengeful spirits and encounter even more abstract concepts of the transcendental – such as a boss fight that has players enter the realm of four monkeys (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, do no evil) (ibid.) – which can be read as taking place entirely within a metaphor. The game thus encourages players who actively explore its world, influenced by spiritual phenomena, to reflect on themselves based on their play experience. Do they believe in spirits? What does the believe in mythical beings, deities, reincarnation, and other principles introduced by the game have to do with their own identity? What do they think of the (supposedly) character-shaping influence of the spiritual metaphor? The inhibition threshold to reflect upon one's spiritual side appears significantly lower when immersed in a fantasy world which is orchestrated towards the sublime or a general ambience that evokes a sensation of unison and longing between players and game worlds. Aupers concludes that "spiritual play provides a feasible strategy for all those modern people in a disenchanted world who 'want to believe,' but consider themselves too secular to do so." (2015, 90)

The Need for an I-Voice in Game Studies

The videogame is the medium of self-made experiences, of personal potential lived out in a digital, virtual, and agency-granting environment which may incite spiritual contemplation. If we play a videogame, the choices we make in it reflect on our state of mind and our personality, allowing us to come to a deep understanding of ourselves and our spiritual longings. The self is the nexus of an experience-focused videogame analysis – and likewise the neuralgic point when science ought to break with what Wallace called the *Taboo of Subjectivity* (cf. 2000) and express personal and spiritual sentiments.

If I wish to share an intimate videogame experience in an academic fashion, I must at first examine what repertoire allows one to explore the self, i.e. what role an I-voice plays (or is allowed to play) in 'hard' sciences. Writing in I-voice and scientific writing traditions stand in a problematic relation that juxtaposes the aim for objective writing with the need for subjective expression. For the longest time, writing in I-form has been

shunned in academic writing (Thomson 2023: 104). With very few exceptions – such as 'allowing' authors to refer to themselves in an introduction to lay bare their contribution to the readers – style guidelines mention it as unprofessional and as not allowing the argument of the paper to speak for itself. Objectivity has been steadily questioned though (cf. Hardin 1993 in Thomson) because, ultimately (and hermeneutically speaking), no human account can provide a definitive objectivity. The conducting researcher always plays a role in their work, which is why an attestation for this personal nexus in science and, thus, the I-voice has re-emerged. Thomson argues that one cannot separate a researcher from their research (Thomson 2023: 104). For this reason, there is a recent trend in academic writing magnifying that "craving to find out what's inside of you, what makes you more than how you've been shaped by the academy to talk and write" (Nash 2019: 27). Interestingly though, Thomson connects this train of thought with the idea that a researcher's I-voice should, in an academic text, be correlated to a strong verb implying their research activity, providing the example that a researcher should not "write 'I feel'" (Thomson 2023: 105). While Thomson's statement coherently fits into her argument of coherent and transparent scientific communication, the idea of avoiding such expressions must be challenged when science ought to discuss the very personal. What would then be done with research questions and fields specifically handling questions that lie beyond the positivist scope such as the human experience – or more specifically, a human experience which has been identified as extraordinarily subjective and private?

Commonly, the I-voice finds a justified function not only in recent authoritative voices of academic writers but also in qualitative methodologies aiming to shed light upon inner processes of research subjects. Sciences that deal with the human self, such as psychology, first and foremost fit this description. One typical method here is the so-called Experience Sampling Method. Experience sampling was introduced by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and Reed Larson (1987). In this method, participants are asked to write down their impressions like a diary entry, record themselves as they speak about an event, or be invited to interview with a researcher accompanying the study. In these cases, the researchers serve as a gatekeeping instance of scientific integrity. To guarantee the collection of genuine, personal data points, researchers must ideally, draw deductions about their participants, which ought to provide a personal account in I-voice.

Methods such as the autoethnographic approach, as practised in social sciences, enable researchers to speak from their own perspectives. The method intends to allow researchers to personally report on events they experienced themselves in "…an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis/Bochner 2000: 739), allowing field experts to connect a self-reflected observation, both internally and externally, with a theoretical framework. Finally, there are traditions strongly related to artistic disciplines in which I-narration is purposefully chosen to give its authors a more expressive means to connect abstract thoughts and impressions. Such is the case for the Dérive (cf. Debord [1958] 1981). This peripatetic method, which the Situationist-collective established in 1950s Paris, enables a researcher to drift through an environment, allowing them to focus on their surroundings, capture the essential ambience they provide, and encourages them to put them into words. The written report of a **dérive** is as poetic or prosaic as it is scientific, as its in-

tent should enable the researcher-flaneur to express whatever personal state they were in during their stroll.

Using the I-voice in qualitative research also attracts a distinct scepticism that is rooted in the need for trustworthy communication between author and audience. The reasons why readers may think of an author as unreliable in their I-centred presentation of research results are manifold: Scholars operating in discourses that are outspokenly ideological, for instance, cannot avoid embedding their I-voice in a socio-political climate, which may make readers doubt if they engaged with an observation or a self-propelled agenda. A personal narration also is, as Arthur Bochner put it, much more focused on an individual's attempt to make sense of a situation, imbuing it (and its description) with poetic qualities (2000: 270). A story told from a personal perspective may be anchored in real-life events via citations of and references to events, dates, or happenings for which proof exists, but an author's individual experience of the event and its subsequent translation from personal experience and text are a matter of individual rhetoric. These examples make clear that readers must be able to consider a scientific author using the I-voice as trustworthy and, on a larger scope, that these scientific authors must also be able to worker under high, self-imposed when composing and editing their personal report. Ultimately, these (self-set) demands are the reason why the discussion of topics that evade objective truth by default is the hardest challenge of integrity in academic writing. Spirituality, like the other pillars of the great Hegelian tripartition of Good, True, and Beautiful matters, can only be discussed from an intimate and individual position as they deny all but the subjective perspective (Kurz 2015: 42). Mansfield sees the I-voice as "a meeting-point between the most formal and highly abstract concepts and the most immediate and intense emotions" (Mansfield: 1), thus encapsulating why an I-voice is a necessity for the documentation of personal sentiments just as much as why such narrative strategies always bear the risk of causing an argument to fall victim to inaccessibility by a lack intersubjective common ground or trust.

In game studies, there is a distinct necessity for the analysis of such subjective experiences and thus, the foregrounding of the self. As has been established along the musings of Feige and others, videogames are as much about the self as they are about the medium. As a medium of the self which grants a never seen before amount of personal autonomy within a fictional system, it needs to grant a voice to that self and its respective experience. From a design perspective, experience has been identified as the centre of the videogame (cf. Schell 2008: 10; Sylvester 2013: 7). Jesse Schell even goes as far as admitting that designers may aim to provide their player audience with a specific experience through mechanics or a narrative framework (2008: 10).

> Video games have the capacity to form a number of subject positions, whether through their hardware, representations, narratives, gameplay mechanisms, so on. Of course, this is not a capability unique to video games as a medium. Still, it is important to recognize and interrogate the ways that video games and their specific qualities construct particular subjectivities. (ibid.)

The need for the self to shine through in written texts on videogames becomes evident in journalistic pieces, for instance. Authors reviewing videogames, most notably those that

left a strong emotional impression on them, already tend to recount their gameplay expe-
rience as narrators of their own stories. One such example is the review "Journey and the
art of emotional game design" by Nick Harper, found in the online edition of the Guardian
(2012). The world of *Journey* (thatgamecompany 2012) is opulent, and the players need to
explore it, even though it is never clearly spelt out, heartfelt. Its vast landscape brims with
massive and overwhelming landmarks in which the player avatar is significantly smaller
than the rest, resembling an immersive sublime. The avatar is held at the loser's point of
the screen (cf. Wiegand 2019: 23), a tiny speck of player identification drowning in mas-
sive mountain ranges or spectacularly large-scale weather phenomena expose the frailty
and minuscule tone of one human life in comparison to the world us such and the scale
at which it takes place. Thus, the sublime can be understood as evoking the spiritual key
notion of the infinite vs the finite by juxtaposing the tiny player avatar with the massive
and menacing world surrounding them to an effect reminiscent of the sublime. Even
though players can neither die nor be hurt in *Journey* – in the worst case, players may fall
a passage of jumping across platforms or an environmental puzzle – these surroundings
evoke mystery and a sense of fear.

   In *Journey*, this distinct sense of the sublime is also invoked by the fact that the avatar
is, central to the game's tone, often a plaything to its happenstances. This can be seen
in one element central to every player's pilgrimage, namely the scarf. The scarf is, in a
sense, the only possession players have as they play *Journey*. It serves a decorative pur-
pose as much as it supports players in their journey. As it reacts to wind, it can always
guide players in the direction they must go without breaking the intradiegetic, HUD-
less tone of the game. In his own self-made play experience, Harper describes the key
time of the game as an enduring metaphorical tool, connecting players to the landscape
and its deeper emotional meaning:

> At first there is immobilisation. The team uses the scarf mechanic to manipulate the
> player's emotions, first freezing it and then shrinking it as the player struggles up
> the mountain. This removal of abilities is a design strategy to make the player feel
> less empowered, to raise their anxiety. In Journey it works brilliantly – the first time
> I struggled up the mountain I stopped and questioned whether I should continue, as
> I watched my scarf slowly float away in the breeze. For a moment I was immobile.
> (2012: n.p.)

Harper regularly relies on I-voice throughout the report to recount events from the game.
This emphasises the connection between him, his avatar, the game world, and the expe-
rience that the connection between these elements that *Journey* provides him with. His
mind revolving thoroughly around the challenge that the game provides serves us read-
ers as an example of the phenomenon of immersion and how it inspires him, in turn, to
reflect upon his role and function within the game and its greater meaning. Moreover,
Harper's narrative mode is interlaced with references to dramaturgic structures and the
experience of tension and excitement in videogame narration, which he at first com-
pares to the excitement felt when an underdog wins at a tennis match, then later raises
to a meta-level by discussing the psychological effects of human beings going through
change (ibid.). Following his descriptions in which he correlates the personal and the

scientific, and even though his sources are, due to the standards of journalistic writing, not indexed in an academic fashion, Harper is able to provide objective gravity to the descriptions of the intimate effect of the game and the personal meaning that he derives from it.

Harper begins to correlate the game to an experience of grief and acceptance, such as in his descriptions of a central item of the game: the avatar's scarf. The scarf serves as one of the few helpful tools available to the players in *Journey*. Beyond being a symbol of warmth and comfort in a harsh and overwhelmingly vast and empty environment, the scarf serves as a compass of sorts, the direction in which the wind drags it, telling players where they should head. Hence, the experience of losing the scarf unexpectedly later in the game is a sad surprise to players, fitting in well with the underlying motif that Harper reads from the game. To him, "[t]he scarf is the representation of … equaling an experience of death and rebirth" (ibid.). As he shares his strong emotional response to the game's interplay of visual storytelling (the player losing an inanimate but nevertheless trusted companion) and gameplay effect (the player losing their guiding tool, which creates a momentum of loss and hopelessness), the readers are taken along a personal experience going from loss to sadness, to a hope that these events took place as intended in a grander scheme of things. Auper's idea of a mythopoesis shines strong in such personal reflections because Harper, while acknowledging the videogame as an artefact of interactive fiction, apparently made an experience within the confines of its virtual world that fits the criteria of spiritual momentum.

In academic writings on videogames, using an I-voice – and moreover, specifying why using it –helps to untangle the relation of avatar, game, and player. Doris Rusch's shared play experience of *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent 2001) wonderfully exemplifies this.

> For now, let me clarify that James is the character in the game's story, I'm the player of the game and thus our goals and intention don't always match. It therefore makes sense to view James and me as two separate entities and I will acknowledge this distinction by talking about "us" when James and my actions, goals and intentions overlap. I will refer to James as his own character, when I'm dealing with the prescribed, story related parts of the game. Whenever James' perspective is irrelevant and my experience or actions as a player are in the foreground, I will say "I". (Rusch 2009: 2)

Rusch clearly distinguishes between her avatar James, who is intradiegetically driven by his own emotions, agendas, and narrative setup, and her own player actions. At times they may overlap, at others not so much. As we are represented by an avatar in the virtual world, which we may be in full control of but who may also act against our wishes in scripted events or cut scenes, it is important to clearly state when and how an I-voice is used.

Another similar acknowledgement of purposeful I-narration, this time to highlight subjective sentiments, can be found, for instance, in the work of Rosa Carbo- Mascarell. In her analysis of walking simulators, she opens by establishing the ***dérive***, in its embedding in situationist practices, as a fitting mean to reflect on the personal experience of a videogame. This connection appears evident due to her selection of game genre, as walking simulators are, as the name implies, defined by the act of contemplative wander-

ing (cf. Muscat 2016). Carbo-Mascarells selection of methodology is a thorough acknowledgement of the I and its importance in the act of playing a videogame and, likewise, of the I-narration to adequately capture such an experience: "I as a researcher must be situated in the game and let myself be immersed in it, reading the provocations caused by the design of the game's landscape. My approach will be that of a literary explorer." (Carbo-Mascarell 2016: 2). Carbo-Mascarell exercises these practices by keeping a game log as she plays and intermingling it with secondary sources (ibid.). Throughout, her I-voice shines through, as in the following:

> each revelation I encounter through virtual movement draws me further into the game. There is no passivity to the way I uncover Sam and Lonnie's relationship. I find an intimate diary page in which Sam describes her sexual experiences with Lonnie which Katie promptly puts down. I realise I am, like the urban explorers, adding my own experiences to the story in the way my embodied character or I explore and react to it. To Garrett (2013) this is the way to add heritage to place, rather than the encasing of story in glass and marketplace value. (Carbo-Mascarell 2016: 10)

This way of writing allows Carbo-Mascarell to connect personal encounters of the play with their emotional impact and, in turn, to connect that impact to a higher level of abstraction. It effectively turns the I into a mediator of the inner and higher meaning.

Building on Carbo-Mascarell, I developed the idea of **close performing** and aimed to turn it into a follow-up methodology. I acknowledge Carbo-Mascarell's situationist approach to videogames, which, by allowing players to explore a virtual world as an avatar, encourages them to "explore the ambience" of a place and to focus on their very subjective observations and thus, allows them to recount their own experiences while academically embedding them and combine the means of the dérive with the literary method known as closed reading. Close reading is a strategy encouraging a scholar to focus on the finesse of detail and focus exclusively on the artwork itself (Nünning 2013: 105). Uniting these methods combines Mascarell's profound understanding of these virtual worlds with an acknowledgement of their artificiality. Videogame worlds thrive in environmental storytelling. They are highly symbolic spaces in which every aspect can possess narrative qualities (cf. Jenkins 2004). When humans enter a fictional space, explains Werner Delanoy, the constraints and binding logic of everyday life lose their grip on them, and they are encouraged to see things in a different light (2002: 3). While Mascarell's text effectively and elegantly brings forward the critical notion of the I, their approaches are also characterised by certain oversights when engaging with videogames. The ambiguity and arbitrary of the dérive, for example, are actually built on a duality of wanderer and world. While built on ergodic principles, the videogame provides more clearly designed pillars that ought to shape its gameplay experience.

Close reading, meanwhile, is built on a strong reliance on fixed sequence in a text. Games, however, demand a more procedural literacy (Bogost 2005: 32). Thus, a dérive is the natural counter-concept. It is fluid, ambiguous, and open to new combinations not coming from the eye of the beholder but from that which is freely and openly explored. One close reads a videogame, so to speak, as one performs within its virtual world. Close performing follows the notions of Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011: S. 304–5), who en-

courage scholars to clearly frame the lenses by which one is analysing a videogame in order to lay bare why certain facets are paid specific attention to, whereas others may be neglected. This laying bare of distinct targets is an important differentiation in the still novel and ever-evolving methodological toolbox of game studies. As Rudolf Inderst elaborates in what he refers to **close playing** a videogame (2023: n.p.), portraying one's gaming capital – such as the motivation to play a certain game, one's experience and familiarity with its genre conventions, etc. (ibid.) – and research interest has a major impact on how the detailed observation of one's gaming experience plays. The statement of close performing a videogame thus bears a reliance on Inderst's observation and is, in that sense, a clarification on the lenses used. It marks a scientific text as focusing on hard-to-capture phenomena, sensitizes its readers for the effective, non-avoidable presence of subjective and maybe even poetically tinted text passages and necessary inclusion of the I-voice[2] in relation to a crucial and close examination of their build-up and effect on player experience.

What I do is to structure my observations along a guideline of four steps:

- **Immediate observations**: The initial experience of a videogame is built on a Heideggerian sense of *geworfenheit* (cf. Moralde 2014: 3). Players are catapulted into a virtual world that they assume is based on real-life principles and yet, its ontology is defined by systemic factors beyond player knowledge. This is explicitly decisive in how players are introduced to their *alter ego* and a*lter veritas*. One must learn to walk and move in this fictitious environment and understand how hardware input translates into one's avatars agency. Initial clues, such as the background knowledge provided by a cutscene or the extra-diegetic tutorial input of command options, help players to understand their temporary domain.

  Thus, I open a report of my personal play experience aim to describe the direct sensations that I notice in a videogame and how they impact me. What are the defining scene-setters, what are the mechanical cues, how are my first opportunities to interact with this world designed, and what expectations do they set for the upcoming gameplay?

- **Short-term actions**: Following the examination a videogame world-introduction is an analysis of performative options that the game directly provides me with. I take inventory of the ways in which I may meaningfully interact with my environment and in how far they are contextualised within the virtual world. In a game like *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe. 2011), for instance, most short-term actions are derived from the complacent narrator-voice and the complicity or (futile) confrontation that I may seek within the Kafkaesque virtual world, consisting of endless corridors and hallways that change according to the narrator's whim. Finding a way out of the game's proverbial bureaucratic maze –or eliciting in how far I may resist the narrator are regular occurring short-term actions.

  The aim is to understand precisely how I can exert agency with an avatar, how these actions fulfil a role and purpose within a narrative framework, and what this means for my play experience.

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2   A factor acknowledged, though not pivotal to all close plays, as Inderst's work suggests.

- **Long-term insights**: Long-term insights do, in a sense, refer to what Kirkpatrick describes as the temporal rhythm of a game (2011: 73–79). The structure and procedural composition of a videogame can be described as a progression of meaningful patterns – which, under the lens of close performance, refers to a game's short-term actions. Long-term insights therefore arise from an extended examination of how short-term action occur in a game. Which actions are regularly repeated? Do they change, adapt, or counteract one another?

  Where does my repertoire inspire me to go, how would I describe the flow of this process, and where are the breaks at which I have to make decisions? How does the variety of short-term actions that I am presented with influence my play-experience on a long-term basis?

- **Cascadic notes**: Every playthrough of a videogame is different. These differences may be an integral part of a game's systemic setup. Games featuring procedurally generated content may provide players with newly arranged geographies or item locations every time their criteria for a reset are fulfilled, and games featuring a 'new game plus' mode explicitly motivate players to engage with them again by offering new rules (e.g. a higher difficulty) or narrative content to explore. Moreover though, a new playthrough also offers a different content experience due to player behaviour. Players may, for example, decide to play a role-playing game with a different character class or to follow different paths in moments where a game demands to select one of several mutually exclusive choices. Even in games that only offer minimum optionality, no player will perform and feel exactly in the same way as during their first playthrough. Thus, a game must be played several times to fathom its experiential potential.

  I refer to this step as cascadic because it is not only concerned with additional play cycles but also a reminder that these further cycles demand another iteration of the first three steps of a close analytical performance: Does the game allow or inspire new immediate observations, short-term actions, or long-term insights?

The intent is to play a game several times with these layers in mind to take notes. The dimensions ought to create a balance between acknowledging very personal direct impact and their abstract embedding. The procedural expansion of the four steps in terms of observed time stretches helps to grasp the meaning of a game's infrastructure and allows one to trace patterns and core motifs of the game. Ultimately, repetition is a necessary part due to the procedural nature of games. Depending on how many randomised elements they contain, some can change drastically from play to play.

My Play Experience of Everybody's Gone to the Rapture

In the following, I provide a personal account of my gameplay experience of *Everybody's gone to the Rapture*, which is the third in a series of walking simulators by the Brighton-based development studio, The Chinese Room. As is typical for the genre, walking simulators focus on slow-paced exploration, are void of any time pressure or exercises that demand quick reflexes, lack combat gameplay and authorial narrative railroading. Walk-

ing simulators ideally invite players to explore them in their own pace and on their own terms regarding the interpretation of their environmental narrative clues. Without any challenging demand in its mechanical and narrative dimensions that would occupy a player's attention, then, the genre appears to be ideal for the exploration of the self and one's inner experiential sentiments as inspired by their virtual world. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* uses these mechanics to embed the players in a scenario that follows the tropes of a cosy catastrophe (cf. Aldiss 1973: 293–95), a dramatic event that is nevertheless presented as calming and hopeful. Embodying an anonymous shell avatar (Schallegger 2017: 45) that does not reveal its identity by any clue, players explore the small village Yaughton after it has been struck by an apocalyptic event. The excerpt begins in the next paragraph and is paraphrased from my dissertation, in which I compared and analysed different inner experiences across several games (cf. Schniz 2021b). It has been edited to foreground the usability of the close performing method and to allocate and describe an intimate play experience:

My **immediate observations** are concerned with how *Everbody's Gone to the Rapture* immerses me into its virtual world by establishing a motif of strong magnitude in aesthetic and emotional contrasts: After starting a new game, players are exposed to a black screen and a voiceover that appears to be a radio message. Subtitles identify the speaker as one Kate, who claims that it is "all over now" and that she is "the only one left" (The Chinese Room 2015). The game does not grant me much time to comprehend this message, however, as the screen quickly fades to the pencil drawn image of a landscape first before said image turns into a 3D animated landscape. All of this is accompanied by a monumental soundtrack reminiscent of opera music. With this sudden and massive shift from quiet voice to loud orchestra, accompanied by the fad from black to still image to lush, vivid landscape, overwhelms and immerses me – so much, in fact, that I do not realise that I can move around for a long while. There is no extradiegetic message informing me that I can take over and move around now. The game fully adapts to my tempo and curiosity.

These early minutes of my play-experience already set the spiritual experience in its shape of extreme dichotomy as a leitmotif of the game. I stare into a black screen during the voice-over, a setup which emphasises the forlornness of Kate, who is reduced to distress call passing the void. Then comes a hand-drawn image of a countryside scenery which slowly fades into the colourful 3D environment of the game, accompanied by the game's orchestral soundtrack. It is an immense transition, ranging from total lack of colour and sound to an enchanting landscape brought to live by details such as flowerheads gently tipping back and forth in the wind, or the morning fog that can be seen in the distance. I interpret the lush environment as a pastoral, the artistic motif of the innocent, humble, and nature-connected human (Baldick 2001: 186). It is overwhelming me to a point where I momentarily forget that this is a game to play, a notion seemingly supported by the introductory sequence as well: the game does not provide any extradiegetic HUD input once the cinematic part of the introduction ends, and I can actually begin to play the game. I lose myself in the landscape depiction before realising that I am now able to move around and may explore the idyl. Moreover so, however, the transition encourages me to juxtapose the very beginning of Kate and her message of a doomed world with the serene environment ahead of me. I remind myself that the pastoral may also serve as

a motif of the elegiac: in art history, pastoral paintings were also made in the name of mourners, depicting how they went along a journey with a loved one who passed away and where the surrounding harmony serves as a tranquilising backdrop and escort to make the journey into the realm of the dead (ibid.). This immediate band of associations, provoked by the central motif of the end of the world and its embeddedness in two vastly different depictions, is setting the scene for my playthrough.

In my **short-term actions** in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, I find myself mainly concerned with the game's central environmental attraction – an entity referred to by the game as 'Pattern' at later points that is scattered across the landscape in shape of small, glowing orbs. After exploring my environment for a bit, I notice a flicker of light atop a staircase, near a fenced-off generator and, by approaching it encounter my first of these orbs. As I move closer to it, a controller icon appears in the bottom centre of the screen. Such encounters, I am about to learn, are the only moments in which I am extradiegetically engaged by *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, which marks the player-orb interaction as a remarkable instance in a game that is otherwise entirely built on walking, listening, and gazing. The short gameplay sequence initiated now – I am asked to move the controller in a gentle sway – is a tender sensation. As if carefully handling a fragile object, I active the orb. With another flicker of the orb, the in-game time switches to night, and tendrils spread out from the orb and form three humanlike silhouettes. They enact a short, dramatic scene in front of me, an argument between scientific staff of the observatory and a facility manager.

This encounter establishes how my further short-term experiences of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* are bound to occur. Even though the game's environmental storytelling, also includes radio calls, visual clues hidden around the village, it mostly occurs via the orbs of the pattern, the cosmic presence which seemingly is responsible for the disappearance of all human beings. There are two types of orbs in the game: some are stationary and almost invisible until they are interacted with, others glowing brightly and patrolling back and forth on set paths. Through my first encounter with them I already learn that they serve as records of sort: they allow to "tap into memories" (Corriea 2015: n.p.). They are "echoes of the past" (Hamilton 2016: n.p.), play short scenes upon interaction which show inhabitants of the valley going on about their every-day business. While these excerpts cannot be dated precisely, they come from different time intervals ranging back from potentially weeks in the past up until shortly before life in the village has come to an end.[3] Through their occurrences, I begin to engage with the past of Shropshire and different inhabitants of the village. I learn about Jeremy and Wendy. I learn about their lives and worries. I accompany them unto their death. Their representation as glowing lights makes this all less tragic. Scattered across *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*'s pastoral are glowing light orbs.

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3   As later sequences from the orbs reveal, Yaughton was bombed with nerve gas in order to stop the Pattern from spreading beyond the village. Since no bodies can be found throughout the environment, however, it can be assumed that the Pattern made people disappear before they faced a (presumably more gruesome) death by gas. Players never leave the area and never communicate with human beings from outside the valley, suggesting that the Pattern did spread after all.

Moving from short-term to short-term experience for me combines the sensations of a **Dérive** with those of a curious detective. I aimlessly wander the environment, often spending hours in single areas, trying to puzzle together what world-ending event has happened in the village from environmental details, but do stop or change direction as I notice a glowing orb around. One orb I find in front of a bus station, for example where I am reintroduced to the characters Stephen and Kate. The little snippet of every-day life this time talks about Stephen's work as a researcher. Each and every of these vignettes condenses a slice of life to its affective essence. The time of the day always turns to night as they begin to play, the darkness blending out all surroundings and setting the glowing silhouettes into my personal centre stage. Their body movements are minimal and only hinted at by their ghostly apparitions, their facial expressions non-existent entirely. I have to focus on their voices – and thus open myself automatically to their intonation and emotion. In total, I find orbs belonging to six characters: Kate and Stephen, as introduced already, Wendy (Stephen's mother), Stephen's uncle Frank, Pastor Jeremy, and Lizzie (Stephen's ex-fiancée). Every orb provides me with another scene that I can follow, interpret, and contextualise as a part of my journey. I learn that Wendy has an issue with Kate, most likely due to her ethnicity, or that Jeremy finds himself alone in his church towards the end of the journey, where his interaction with the pattern resembles an angry call upon God by a crestfallen pastor. Exploring this universe of homely affairs after the impending end of the world inspires "private moments of connection between people, or something as intimate and extraordinary as someone's death, were played off against this huge sweeping cosmos" (ibid.).

Regarding a **long-term insights**, I can say that the more time I spend in the game, the more I begin to notice and to appreciate the places seeming detachedness from linear time. The ambience of the virtual landscape is not affected by a linear progression of day and night. Rather, the times of the day change as I reach certain spots in the game and time also reverses when I return to places that I have visited priorly. Since I have begun to grow accustomed to the gameplay, I can now take more other phenomena into consideration. No extradiegetic music is heard at all over long stretches of walking. In houses, the atmosphere is intense and scary due to the lack of both, an extra- or intradiegetic soundtrack and I constantly worry about something to startle me all of a sudden. The absence of music makes the sound of the orbs even more alienating. Upon interaction, the scenery gets overlaid by a massive wall of orchestral music. The game's soundtrack is decidedly non-dynamic, meaning it does not react to player action, but that music is activated in reaction to reaching specific areas in the virtual environment. I more and more realise how *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* is built on the rhizomatic to unfold a logic of duality. "This diegetic player experience delivers both narrative impacts, as players empathise with stories of the characters in their moments before death and agency as they assemble the larger narrative" (Wood 2017: 30). Seen as secluded shards, most of the individual story bits throughout the game share a slice of misery that an inhabitant of Yaughton experienced. As the wanderer of the cosy post-apocalypse, however, I am able to draw connections that these people could not draw, see, or know about in their lifetime. I develop the feeling of being not an authorial author but an authorial curator of sorts, one who possesses the secret knowledge of a spectators who approaches a situation from distance, observes, and draws conclusions from this engagement in the afterlife. I ex-

perience a sentiment of responsibility for these ethereal memory items scattered across the landscape and begin to understand that, as a player, I am able to connect them and to create a whole that is more harmonious than what any of the inhabitants may have sensed. As Hamilton summarises it:

> Kate says that we each have an "other;" a person or entity that makes us whole. She talks about how the Pattern shows everyone happy: Jeremy has found God, Wendy has been reunited with Eddie, Frank is with Mary, and Lizzie and Stephen are together. Kate's other [we may assume] is the Pattern itself. (2016: n.p.)

As avatar in this virtual world, I am blessed with the agency to find these orbs connected to the lifetimes of these humans and retrace their last steps before their world ended. Through the gameplay of the walking simulator, which allows me to navigate through the environment but otherwise forces me to rely on my perception and contemplation rather than in-game functionalities to make sense of what is happening, I find myself spiritual pilgrimage in the sense of an "experience profoundly dependent on material environments, and sensory stimuli, expressed through human interaction with those environments" (Dyas 2021: 3). I am experiencing the world as a mediator between microlocal shards of memories and information: a facilitator of tiny apocalypses, rather than the apocalypse (Pinchbeck in Kuhar 2015: n.p.). This is where the spiritual, to me, unfolds at its most evident in *Everybody's gone to the Rapture*. Individually, the orbs that I take give me samples of worries from the inhabitants of the village. Most of them revolve around interpersonal conflicts that, when following each story through its completion, could not have been resolved by an individual in their lifetime. As a wanderer of the cosy post-apocalypse, however, I am able to draw a greater picture from their sum, to approximate a whole. My role in this virtual world is that of the meaning maker and curator, collecting all these individual stories and learning to see these mortal flickers as a whole that is infinitely encapsulated in a state of existence beyond human time. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* thus keeps me in a back-and-forth through which I am able to engage my spirituality via the game's tacit handling of these extreme positions; Its juxtaposition of player-life in a still, cosy post-apocalypse, the lone avatar in chase of an intangible cosmic pattern, quiet-and darkness and audio-visual opulence. Feeling a sense of connection and embeddedness could not have happened without the ending happening first.

Replaying the game several times to experience its **cascadic** dimension emphasises the motif of a uniting, warmly embracing transcendence as achieved through player interaction. While the game's contents do not change – which I assumed but did not expect fully, since the first walking simulator game by The Chinese Room, *Dear Esther* (2012) plays effectively with randomised content with each playthrough – I begin to notice meaningful elements in the scenery that I have not noticed in my first playthrough and exploring the surroundings off the trodden path. I begin to see the ever-changing pattern as a symbol of infinity which, after making these mental connections, connects everybody happily in the afterlife. My engagement with the pattern over several playthrough equals a metaphor for the spiritual experience itself. Depictions of the end of the world offer a cathartic experience and in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, just as in many other British representations, this catharsis is counterbalanced through a

harmonious depiction on a peaceful countryside (Hoffstadt/Schrey 2011: 31). A spiritual experience is, after all, the interpretation of patterns that we can only undertake subjectively and according to our own preconditions, our cultural upbringing, and the hopeful intends of our spiritual imagination (Antes 2002: 341). Moreover, and coming from a lifelong admiration for videogames – personal at first and scholarly later on – this understanding of how spiritual experience harmonises with my understanding of how videogames affect us as a medium. A videogame is a world system that we players explore, rarely knowing the whole from the start but puzzling it together step by step – just as we only understand that a pattern actually is a pattern by retracing individual geometric proportions until we see a repetition of units building up. Having a glowing pattern being as the divine apparition of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, to me, is a meta-expression of the spiritual capabilities of videogames: The transcendent and meaning-providing whole is right in front of me. All I need to be is daring enough to follow my intuition and the clues it provides until I can make sense of it.

The game always ends where it began: At the observatory which overlooks Shropshire County. It is a fitting metaphor for my experience: an observatory connects the skies to the Earth. It is the place where the patterns of celestial bodies are closely inspected and interpreted as it fulfils the function of a vantage point, far enough away from a matter so that it can be observed from a perspicacious distance. The observatory in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* is a vantage point for the above just as much as it is one for the effects of a cosmic phenomenon 'below'. It is a place residing above and outside of the village, where the pattern's glowing orbs are. I am reminded of this privilege because it serves as the games starting and ending point. I internalise it as my personal alpha and omega to the events of the game. For the ending part, my avatar spawns behind the locked gates of the facility. After exploring the perimeter and entering the building, I find one last audio tape in which Kate states that "Everything is light now. Everything has come to rest" (The Chinese Room 2015). *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* thus concludes on a revelation of dualities. It offered me an experience in-between understanding an event of greater importance and retracing individual aspects of the game. It made me encounter personal tragedies, served as little slices of a timeline, portrayed them as grains of a timeless, all-encompassing network. This pattern, in which their individual meaning remains intact connects them to a harmonious, peaceful state beyond time. By following an esoteric pattern, present yet evading any meaning but the one I imbue to it, I connect the narrative elements of its systemic framework as a self-driven agent in a pastoral environment. I achieved what I understand as a connection between the singular and the whole. One player, one avatar, entangled in the glowing presence of an eternal state. I experienced a revelation in transcendence.

Conclusion

Reading this paper to its very end has, as subjective matters tend to do, most likely elicited an opinion from you. Maybe you agree with Nick Harper's reading of loss as the spiritual leitmotif in *Journey*. Or perhaps the overwhelming feeling of transcendence that I experienced in my close performance of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* resonated with you.

Imagining you huffing 'nonsense!' now and looking for another academic read is, while disheartening on a personal level, also quite possible. Maybe none of the examples discussed in this chapter strike you as particularly spiritual at all, or maybe there is that one, other game that inspired you to ponder about the meaning of believe in your everyday life, and you dearly missed it in the prior contemplation. All these reactions are valid if they are coming from your firm understanding of your subjective desires. They shape a kaleidoscope of personal accesses to matters of spirituality – and the fact that all these reactions are possible when reading this paper emphasise the importance to discuss them even more. Spirituality is an intimate topic, and the fact that it eludes our assumed interest in intersubjective debate and assessment should not be taken as a criterium of exclusion from our scope of discourse but, quite contrarily, be seen as an incentive to foster ideas that allow us to engage this *mysterium tremendum fascinans et digitalis* – the transcendental potential of videogames.

This text aimed to provide insight into how videogames may enable their players to make spiritual experiences, as well as the stylistic and methodological challenges of discussing them from a research perspective. Spirituality can be defined as a transcendental need for universal belonging and making sense of one's existence. This may occur in experiences of a strong duality of infinite and finite or of finding purpose. The pervasive magic circle demarcating the (mental) space in which games take place, denoting them as different from the rulings and ordinary state of the everyday, provides an experimental space to find such purpose if one wilfully succumbs to its rules. Understanding videogames, then, not as a finite facilitator but as an infinite provider of potential for realising spiritual experiences guides our analytical attention towards a spatial understanding of the medium – its virtual architecture of belief, if you wish, and its proselytes – and its importance to enable spiritual agency. Videogames offer a dual kind of immersion: They allow players to sink into virtual worlds where they have simultaneously encouraged them to metaphorically sink into themselves, to explore their own needs and to engage with their spiritual side. The spiritual experiences possible in this virtual (self)engagement setup are manifold, as this text's selection of examples has portrayed. It explores videogames as a playground of intended spiritual actions, and, ultimately, a pocket prayerbook of the cyber-citizen, who is educated in self-educational truth via agency exerted in virtuality.

Following the theoretical complex of the spiritual experiences that videogames may provide, the latter part of the text brought forth the problematic relation of scientific writing and the usage of an I-voice in texts. While a strong I-voice in academic writing is contemporarily taken as a descriptor for the actions and thought processes undergone by a researcher, the I-voice in relation to research related to personal experiences is taken with scepticism and generally regarded to potential fallacies of bias and an unnecessarily prosaic tone. The issue at hand is that topics such as the expression of spiritual experiences, a topic of utmost personal nature, needs to be expressed with an equally personal voice. Game studies especially face a precarious issue here, as the content of any given videogame is fully dependent on player interaction and the subjective experiences that players may have within their virtual worlds are, accordingly, difficult to access via objective means. The fact that the usage of I-voice and the evident need of players to share their personal videogame experiences has been expressed in reference to journalist Nick Harper, games scholar Doris Rusch, and expressed in my close performing method, as

exemplified by sharing my own spiritual experience of playing *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* in an attempt to structure personal impressions that is, nevertheless, self-aware of its personal mode of recounting.

The text thereby highlighted the manifold invocations of spiritual experiences as present in videogames and, thus, provides grounds for further research that may enable us to frame a private phenomenon scientifically. While it is easy to speak one's mind and personal opinion about a videogame, up to the point of expressing personal, emotional contemplations, the actual challenge of game analysis lies in connecting these sentiments to objectively discernible attributes of the medium (cf. Jennings 2015: n.p.). What videogames lack, however (or rather what game studies lack), are the means to analyse this phenomenon. Many questions, especially concerning the formalisation of videogame analyses, are still open (Inderst 2023: n.p.). This paper and the insights I have hopefully provided thus far can be read as an incentive for examining means and methodologies in game studies. Foundational theoretical insights of play and belief, overlapping in the act of the sacred and ritual, have long coquetted with one another. The individual must be more acknowledged in the methodology surrounding the videogame, as every play-act is a subjective affair. Only then can extraordinary experiences, such as the experiences of spirituality that may arise from a videogame, be brought forth for critical examination and, thus, benefit designers and our cultural understanding of videogames as artefacts of spiritual potential.

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Fittingly Violent[1]

Narrative Properties of Violence in Digital Games

Frank G. Bosman

Keywords: *ethical gameplay; ludo-narrative dissonance; morality; morality system; violence*

In the game *Half-Life* 2 (Valve 2006), the player controls silent protagonist Gordon Free-man, who is tasked to fight the alien Combine invasion terrorizing Earth. Together with his iconic crowbar, Freeman starts to shoot and kill alien soldiers and wildlife, the lat-ter especially in the form of 'headcrabs', turning their human victims in still conscious but powerless shells of their former selves. Amidst the depression of the occupation of Earth, Freeman's former boss, the scientist Wallace Breen, had stepped into position to rule the planet in the name of his alien overlords. Breen is convinced the Combine-initi-ated process of 'adaption' will provide not only the only possible change of humankind's survival, but also marks the beginning of her next evolutionary step. In practice however, the Combine 'synthesize' the races they invade with their own DNA, resulting in rather horrifying creatures that mindlessly obey their overlords' commands.

On first sight, Freeman's mission seems to be a moral justifiable one: he involuntar-ily starts a revolutionary movement, that tries to free Earth from the Combine's grasp. But in the course of his attempts to overthrow the aliens, Freeman leaves a trail of death and destruction in his wake, not unlike in the vast majority of videogames. Even though one could argue that Freeman is acting out of personal preservation, since the Combine actively hunts him, or to serve the greater good of collective freedom for humankind, or even that the majority of synthesized enemies are literally beyond redemption, it is Wallace Breen quite ironically, who questions the hero's moral judgement.

During a public broadcast, he addresses Freeman directly:

> Tell me, Dr. Freeman, if you can: you have destroyed so much, what is it exactly that you have created? Can you name even one thing? I thought not.

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1   By mentioning the female [male] function designation in this chapter, always both forms are meant if not indicated differently.

On at least one level, Breen's objection to Freeman's actions is understandable and maybe even morally justifiable: he has done literary nothing else than killing people and destroying objects. Freeman has not, indeed, constructed anything during the game's duration. *Half-Life* is not the only game addressing the theme of violence, its moral justifiability, and its societal benefice, nor the most vocal one on the international game market. Games series like *Fallout* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008; 2015), *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007; 2020; 2012), and *Metro* (4A Games 2010; 2013; 2019) feature a morality system judging the player's in-game behaviour against a pre-determined ethical framework (Bosman 2019; Knoll 2018). Other games, like the *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software 2009; 2012; 2014; 2019) or the *Serious Sam* (Croteam 2002; 2005; 2011; 2020) series, ignore all moral questions and present a playful, version of reality, including an abundancy of consequence-free violence.

The whole subject of videogame violence is heavily debated, by both game scholars and game critics alike (cf. Anderson et al. 2007; Gimpel 2013; Gunter 2016). Some games were even (temporarily) banned or discontinued because of their graphic depiction of violence or its (supposed) glorification of crimes. Famous examples are *Rape Day* ([anonymous] 2019), in which the player has to plan and execute the rape on a mother and her two daughters (Wales 2019); *Pakistan Army Retribution* (Punjab Information Technology Board 2014) based on 2014 Peshawar school massacre in Pakistan (Rahool 2016); and *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015), playing as a misanthropic mass-killer on a genocidal crusade to kill as humans as possible (Matulef 2014).

However, understanding games as "digital texts" (Bosman 2019: 37–56) and using a communication-oriented method of text analysis (Van Wieringen 2020), I differentiate between three possible starting points of discussing violence and videogames. (1) One could discuss violence and digital games from the point of the 'real author', that is, from the perspective of the game creators and game publishers. What is their moral responsibility in all of this? How does the gaming industry try to shield minors from excessive violence? Do disclaimers and classification systems function as intended?

(2) The second perspective on violence and games is that of the 'real readers' of specific games, that is, individual gamers and their experiences while playing. What are the real-life influences of in-game violence on individual players and their psychological well-being? (3) The third perspective is that of the text-immanent author-reader, meaning, the role of violence on the décor of the game's narrative. What are the narrative properties of violence in videogames' narratives? And how is the text-immanent player positioned within and towards the in-game violence and he/she participation in the execution of that violence?

The first two perspectives are text-external, while the third one is strictly text-immanent. This third perspective is the one I will be using in this article. By inventorying the possible narrative properties of violence in videogames, it will be possible – as I will demonstrate – to fuel a more inclusive approach to the general discussion on violence and games. This is even more true since videogames as a genre – and their necessary interactive nature – harbour a unique communicative property (Bosman/Van Wieringen 2021). Games are the only communication medium allowing a text-immanent reader/player to 'merge' with the character of the in-game protagonist (the player's

avatar), charging the immanent-reader with the responsibility to relate himself towards the violence he himself is executing.

In this article, I will argue that violence has five distinct narrative properties within games' narratives: (1) motivation for the game's protagonist, (2) trivialization of violence, (3) dehumanization of the victims, (4) moralization of violence as an ethical option, and (5) problematization of violence. Of all five types, I will discuss different case studies, nknown on the role of the text-immanent player within the game's narrative. Because of the unique communication properties of games, I will focus on the position of and consequences for the text-immanent player.

Motivation

The first narrative property of violence in digital games is providing a motivation for the game's protagonist, and therefore the text-immanent reader/player, to come into action, usually in the form of violence against the hero him/herself or a greater group the hero is emotionally attached to (Bosman 2021). At the beginning of their adventures, heroes (to be) are frequently confronted with abducted, maltreated, or murdered relatives or friends, and even the decimation or right-out destruction of their family, gang, town, tribe or people by one or more villains who serve as the main antagonists for the duration of the game's narrative.

A couple of examples will suffice. Especially the Canada-produced *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft Montreal 2007–2017; Ubisoft Quebec 2015; 2018) is an illustrative one. In more than one instalment, the prime motivation for the game's protagonist is the murder of a loved one. In *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009), young Ezio Auditore's father and two of his brothers are hanged for a crime they didn't commit; in *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012), the young native American Ratonhnhaké:ton witnesses the ransacking of his village by apparently British troops; in *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014), Arno is confronted by the murder on both his biological and adoptive father; in *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft Montreal 2017) the proto-assassin Bayek isnknowned by the cruel murder on his young son; and in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018), the young Persian protagonist is thrown from a mountain by his/her own father because of an oracle's prophecy. Other examples include *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games 2017), in which the young Aloy witnesses the murder on her foster-father Rost; *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019), in which Porter Sam is forced to travel westwards to rescue her kidnapped sister; and *Metro Exodus* (4A Games 2012), in which Artyom is – partly – motivated by his urge to find a cure for his poisoned wife, Anna.

These circumstances provide a morally justifiable and emotionally understandable context in which the violence the hero utilizes in realizing his revenge is more or less pacified. The hero does not start the circle of death and destruction, but reacts to it, trying to end it eventually, but only on his own terms. The hero is not the perpetrator, but the victim of the violence even if his use of deadly force outweighs – qualitatively and/or qualitatively – that of the original happenings. Because the other started the violence, the hero is freed of any moral obligation to contemplate his/her actions.

This leads, sometimes, to a rather confusing ludo-narrative dissonance (Hocking 2007; Toh 2019) in which the game's story tells the text-immanent to do one thing, while the game's mechanics teach him to do quite the opposite. Again, the *Assassin's Creed* series provide a clear example. The Assassin Order, based on the historical Islamic sect of the Nizari Isma'ilites (Bosman 2016), operates through a creed, which states, among other things, to "stay your blade from the flesh of an innocent" (Ubisoft Montreal 2007: n.p.). The game series' narrative really tries to drive the point home that the Assassins only target high-profile individuals whose wickedness is beyond a shadow of a doubt, but to reach these targets it is quite necessary or at least unavoidable to kill a host of lesser enemies, the majority of which have no moral connection to their evil overlords (Sab 2014). Another example is (the reboot of the game) *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013): in the cut scenes of this game, a young Lara Croft struggles to kill an animal for food or with "the fact that she's had to kill a man to defend herself" (Amendola 2016: n.p.), while during the actual gameplay Lara does not seem to have any problems with those two things.

What applies to the in-game protagonist, **mutatis mutandis**, also applies to the text-immanent reader of the game. The player is given a motive for his own involvement in the hero's violent actions against humankind. Even if some of the 'heroic' violence is done in cut scenes, out of reach of the player's control, the entanglement of the player's avatar and the payer himself is not broken. From a communication point of view, both instances still coincide, even when control is temporarily lifted. Because of this entanglement, the motivation of the game's player for the use of deadly (in-game) violence is the same as for the player's avatar. Of course, individual players can have other motivations to play a game – curiousness, boredom, the need for a challenge, etcetera – but the text-immanent player necessarily has the same as his in-game character.

Ultimately, games like *Assassin's Creed*, *Metro Exodus* or *Death Stranding* communicate that – within the right context – violence is perfectly justifiable, that is, as retaliation on earlier experienced violence. The victim becomes the offender by turning the latter into a new victim. The text-immanent player is presented with an in-game motivation: violence bringeth violence. But the morality of this metanarrative only holds for those who end up winning the conflict. It's a gaming variant of **Quod licet Iovi, no licet bovi** ("What Jupiter is allowed, a cow is not") in which the gamer is contextualized as the in-game God, whose decisions are morally just and right exactly because he is in that position. Other games challenge this mechanism, as will be discussed later on in this article.

Trivialization

The second narrative property of in-game violence is that of trivialization. Its paradigm is simple: violence is just a lot of fun. The violence **towards** the player's character is portrayed as a consequent-free event, only slowing their progression through the game, while the violence done **by** the player's avatar is presented equally carefree. It is, in other words, a power fantasy. The game's protagonist is never confronted with the lives of his victims, nor their family or loved ones who mourn over the death of their beloved. This property borders on that of alienation (see next section below), but distinguishes itself by

producing a type of in-game enemy that is not particular gruesome, horrible, or unlikeable, but rather forgettable, interchangeable ones. The hero's adversaries are objectified and reduced to one purpose only: to be slain by the player's avatar.

Games and series like *Serious Sam* (Croteam 2002; 2005; 2011; 2020), *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software 2009; 2012; 2014; 2019), *Grand Auto Theft* (DMA Design 1997; 1999; 2001; Rockstar North 2002; 2004; 2008; 2013), and *Bulletstorm* (People Can Fly/Epic Games 2011) portray casual, cartoonish, over-the-top violence, including gruesome executions, exploding bodies, flying body parts, and funny accompanying commentaries by either the dying or the game's protagonist. In *Serious Sam. First* (2001) and *Second Encounter* (2002), the title hero comments things like "Yeah, it's all fun and games until somebody loses an eye" (after his first killing of a Gnaar, a huge on-eyed monster), "Die when I kill you" or "goooood morniiiiing Babylooooon" (n.p.) (a reference to Levinson's 1987 film *Good Morning, Vietnam*). And the *Grand Theft Auto* series alone has a wide range of controversies tied to its name: *GTA IV* (2008) got the stigma of a 'murder' simulator' (Jackson 2008) because of the ability to drive while being drunk, killing many pedestrians, and *GTA V*'s (2013) notorious mission By the Book featured a scene in which the player had to torture someone by means of waterboarding, beating him with a wrench, apply electric shocks from a car battery, or extracting a tooth using pliers (Panic-Cidic 2019: 43–44).

In the broader discussion about the aesthetics and poetics of fictional violence in novels and films (Symonds 2008; Sheehan 2013; Appelbaum 2013), one argument frequently heard: it is **only** a story, it is not the real thing. Viewers can enjoy films like *American Psycho* (Harron 2000), *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick 1971), or *Django Unchained* (Tarantino 2012) only because it is fictional: in real life they would – very probably – never cope with such acts of violence against themselves or anybody else for that matter. In videogames, things are much more complicated due to its genre-specific characteristics. In novels and films, violence by and to the story's protagonist is witnessed by the text-immanent reader, who is – principally – unable to intervene: he is necessary passive. In digital games, however, the violence done to or by the game's protagonist also applies to the gamer himself. If Sam is enjoying his killing spree in *Serious Sam*, or if Trevor is indulging himself in torturing, it is the player who executes both ordeals, and who shares their visible and audible enjoyment. Of course, a real reader/player of the game could be horrified by the in-game violence and his/her active role in it (and even decide to quite the game), but that luxury is not for the immanent-reader.

The trivialization of (in-game) violence can also be linked to the 'inconsequentialness' of violence and death to the text-immanent player (Bosman 2018). Since games left the arcades and its focus on tricking the player to spend as much money as possible on new tries (by ramping up the difficulty spike and allowing the player a very limited set of retries), the vast majority of games allow the player to die and respawn endlessly at no or very low costs (loss of some money, progress, or experience). Even though the majority of games refrain from giving any 'logical' explanation for this capacity, some of them construct a narrative embedding of this ludic mechanic.

Prince of Persia (Ubisoft Montreal 2008) and *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) provide the protagonist with a last-minute human aid, while *Assassin's Creed* utilizes an in-game virtual reality machine, called the Animus. Even though, the game industry recently adopted somewhat of a fancy for the inclusion of a permadeath option (Bartle 2016:

88), essentially meaning that one death forces the player to re-start the game from the very beginning, the – usually violent – death of the player character has lost any meaning, except that of a ludic feedback mechanism. And because the player's in-game death has lost its real-life, highly serious quality, the death of the antagonists have too.

Dehumanization

A third property of violence in digital games is that of alienation. While studies seem to suggest that real players experience diminishes perceptions of their human qualities and are seemingly prone to do the same with both their in-game enemies and real-life adversaries (Brock et al. 2011; Greitemeyer/McLatchie 2011; Markman 2011), the game protagonist's enemies are usually also constructed in such a way that they are devoid of any human relatability (Burgun 2015), making them ideal targets for the game's protagonist.

Many games feature such dehumanized adversaries. In the *Doom* series (id Software 1993; 1994; 2004; 2016; 2020; Midway Studios San Diego 1997; TeamTNT 1996), they are – quite literally – demons from hell. In *Control* (Remedy Entertainment 2019), the enemies are alien lifeforms from another dimension, who invaded ours by taking over humans. In the *Wolfenstein* series (id Software 1992; Raven Software 2009; Gray Matter Interactive 2001; MachineGames 2014; 2015; 2017; 2019), B.J. Blazkowicz is up against Nazi's or genetically altered and/or diabolically powered 'Übersoldaten'. In the *Half-Life* universe Gordon Freeman mows down hordes of de-humanized creatures, either the Combine-synthesized humans or post-human zombies beyond any hope of recovering.

Russians (Valerino/Habel 2016) and Arabs (Šisler 2008) have also played the role of stereotypical bad guys, whose deeper psychological complexity is utterly neglected. There is an infamous mission, called 'No Russian' in *Call of Duty. Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009), in which the player can participate in a mass shooting at a Russian airport. The mission leads to considerable international protest and disgust (Horiuchi 2009). Especially war simulations like *CoD* but also *Battlefield 3* (DICE 2005) and *Medal of Honor* (DreamWorks Interactive 1999) excessively use Muslim and Arab stereotypes as 'cheap' enemy types (Mirrlees/Ibaid 2021).

The dehumanization of the other – may it be aliens, Nazis or Arabs – allow the player to postpone or even side-track any moral objections involved in the created mayhem. If it is not human you aim for, no morality is involved. Even further, if the player's in-game enemies are de-human, or maybe even in-human, the ending of their existence is not immoral or even amoral, but an ethically praiseworthy action. The text-immanent player is charged with the communication by the in-game author to judge his violent actions as a moral obligation: freeing the (game) world of Nazi scum or Russian terrorists makes it a better place.

In *Half-Life 2*, there is a very famous mission called 'Ravenholm', named after the eerie town by the same name. Gordon Freeman has been warned upfront by his fellow resistance members: "We don't go to Ravenholm anymore"(Valve 2006: n.p.). The reason for this ominous description become clear very soon after entering the city: the Combine have launched a massive amount of 'headcrabs' unto the city by means of special rockets. These headcrabs position themselves on the head of their human victim, taking full

control over all movements. The game heavily suggests that these 'zombies' do maintain all their intellectual and emotional capacities but are deprived of expressing them in any way. When on the brink of death, usually because Gordon has set them on fire – the level is designed specifically to use environmental means of disposing your enemies, they appear to regain control over their bodies again, screaming on the top of their lungs: "I am burning. Please God, kill me. I am burning"(ibid: n.p.).

During the mission, Gordon comes across a strange ally, Father Grigori: a bald, ring-bearded priest of some sorts, who took upon himself the task of "tending to his flock" (ibid: n.p.). In his laboratory, Gordon discovers mutilated human corpses, apparently the remnants of Grigori's utterly failed attempts to separate victimized human from its headcrab. Grigori only knows only one cure left: to quickly end their suffering by shooting them in the head with his signature shotgun. During this 'service' he can be overheard saying things like:

> I remember your true face! – The grave holds nothing worse! – Balm for your afflic-tion, child! – I think nothing less of thee! – Rest, my child! – Come to the light! – It is not me that you want, it is the light that shines through me! – Yes, my children, it is I! – Come my children! It is not me that you seek it is the light that I bring! (ibid: n.p.)

The unique situation of the Ravenholm residents constructs an interesting moral conundrum for the player, even though the game does not allow for any decision-making by the player: you must shoot the zombies if you want to reach the end of the level. But the horrible sounds of the dying zombies, the slowly unraveled background of the headcrab invasion, and the paradoxical tenderness with which Grigori tends to his flock, produce the equally paradoxical juxtaposition of the zombies as both dehumanized and successively re-humanized. Even more pointy, the re-humanization is only procured when they are killed, which is precisely the result of the stripping of their human identity and respectfulness.

Moralization

In the cases of motivation, trivialization, and dehumanization, the violence performed by the protagonist/player is deemed unproblematic by the game's narratives. The case of *Half-Life 2*'s Ravenholm level, however, already indicated that a more intrinsic in-game reflection on the adoption of violence as a self-explanatory and morally unambiguous means to a purpose is very well possible. Games have tried to do so by two related but differentiated means: moralization and problematization of game protagonist's violence.

Moralization of in-game violence occurs when the game presents the player with at least two options to pass a challenge, enabling him to choose between a violent or peaceful solution. The *Assassin's Creed* series is a good example of this. Usually, the player of an instalment of the series is able to tackle a problem – entering a building, stealing an artefact, escaping from captivity – resorting to straight-on violence or silently bypassing all resistance without being detected. Even though some missions dictate that the

player should finish the stealthy, the majority of instances the game allows for both options without favouring one. Killing innocent bystanders will cause 'desynchronisation', forcing the player to restart the mission, but executing enemies will – usually – not. The distinction between innocent civilians and enemies, however, is just as often depending on ludic than on narrative circumstances.

Some games want to emphasize their negotiation of morality. The most common way through which such is happening, is by the use of a morality system (Bosman 2019). In short, videogame morality systems can be defined as implicit or explicit digital systems within a particular game that morally rate certain player actions and/or choices on the basis of a presupposed ethical framework. Games featuring such a system are *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), and *Bioshock* (2K Boston 2007), and the *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007; 2010; 2012), *Metro* (4A Games 2010; 2013; 2019), and *Fable* series (Big Blue Box Studios 2004; Lionhead Studios 2008; 2010). Some of these systems are explicit – the game communicates to the text-immanent player that his behaviour is monitored and morally judged, leading – probably – to short and/or long-term consequences in terms of ludic and narrative elements in the game; other systems are implicit and leave the player in the dark about its own existence until – usually – very late in the game.

While morality systems are a well-established game mechanic, they have come under criticism (Knoll 2014; Nguyen 2016; Svelch 2010; Zagal 2009). These critics focus on the two-dimensional (dualistic) nature of the systems, their selective morality, the inconsistency of the rule systems, and – again – the danger of a ludo-narrative dissonance. As Sicart (2013) has mentioned, the problem with many morality systems (especially the explicit ones) is that the gameplay actually encourages ludo-strategic behaviour in gamers instead of the required narratological-ethical behaviour (Knoll 2014). This means that players are more inclined to look for the biggest advantage in terms of gameplay and to disregard the morally charged game narrative.

A good example of the difficulty of using such a system is the *Dishonored* series (Arkane Studios 2012; 2016), especially the first two instalments. Both games feature an implicit morality system, called the 'chaos system', that monitors specific actions of the player. In *Dishonored*, the player controls a royal bodyguard-turned-escaped-convict Corvo. Corvo can increase the chaos in the game world by killing assassination targets and other human beings, getting spotted by an enemy or alarmed civilian, letting alarms be rung, bodies to be discovered, or execute certain side objectives. Doing the opposite reduces the chaos. If the city is on high chaos, the difficulty ramps up (ludic), while the overall tone of the narrative darkens (narrative). When on low chaos, the game retains a relative easiness in play. The chaos amount influences the endings of the games too in significant ways.

However, *Dishonored* seems to feature an ethical system in which assassination is placed as the worst crime of all; and all other less bad or worrying. Even if your victims are of a specific nasty kind, assassinating them always results in an increase in chaos, while disposing of them otherwise, will decrease chaos. In every case, an alternative method of disposing of the antagonist is indeed very well possible. For example, Corvo can just kill Thaddeus Campbell, the high Overseer, or mark his face with the so-called Heretic's Brand, making him an outcast of the system he himself upheld for so long. To dispose of Lady Boyle, Corvo can kill her during a party in her mansion, but it is also possible

to kidnap her and deliver her into the hands of Lord Brisby, who has clearly all kinds of perverse and sadistic intentions towards the lady. And to get rid of master inventor Kirin Jindosh, Corvo can – again – kill him merciless, but can also subject him to intense electrotherapy, depriving him of his former genius. Arguably, these 'non-lethal alternatives' are morally equally bad or maybe even worse than outright murder. Again, a ludo-narrative dissonance is lurking in the back.

Another, more subtle version of a(n implicit) morality system is found in the *Metro* series. The player receives or loses morality points by a number of 'innocent' actions, like talking to the people in line before the hospital, giving alms to poor people, retrieving a child's teddy bear, let enemies live after they surrendered, or freeing captive prisoners. The player is not communicated that and when his actions are morally judged, but for two vague and faint sound effects: the breeze of a wind through a tunnel (losing points) or the dripping of water in a cave (gaining points). The endings of all three instalments of the series are influenced by this implicit system, resulting in a more or less desirable conclusion of the stories.

In all these cases, the game burdens the player with the choice how to cope with the possible (more or less violent) scenarios. The text-immanent author of the game offers the player two or more options to continue the story, positioning the text-immanent player even more strongly as an entity within the game's narrative. Of course, the playing of a game involves a practically uncountable amount of choice from the part of the immanent-player (almost exclusively ludic in nature), but when presented with an implicit or explicit morality system, the game's story gears into a narrative hyper-focus. It forces the player to make a concise and deliberate choice how to further the story, and to do so within the context of the character-building process of the player's avatar, that emerged from a continuous identification and entanglement between the player and the game's protagonist.

In the cases of motivation, trivialization, and dehumanization, the in-game violence is postulated by the game's immanent author, leaving the player-avatar no choice but to participate in the violence as it is dictated by the author. Of course, real players can choice to refuse to participate by leaving the game itself. However, the text-immanent player cannot do so. In the case of games involving morality systems, the agency is placed explicitly into the hands of the immanent player. Violence is localized in the moral agency of the player, and so is the moral responsibility of resorting to violence, or to refrain from it.

There are games that transport the possibility of a real player to quite the game and thus refraining from executing violence within the game's world to the level of the immanent player by incorporating a non-interference option. In *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014), when game's protagonist Ajay Ghale meets dictator Pagan Min, the latter asks the player to wait in his dining room. When waiting for thirty minutes, thus not engaging the possibility to go and wander around the palace and effectually starting the game's further narrative, Pagan Min re-enters and gives Ajah what he wants. The game will end by rolling the credits, skipped more than 99% of its content. The same is possible at the beginning of *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montreal 2018), when the nameless deputy/avatar can refrain from arresting sect leader Joseph Seed, ending the game quickly and very peacefully in comparison with playing through the game as intended.

Some scholars suggest this agency positions the immanent player not only as a character in the décor of the game's narrative, but also on the position of the immanent author himself (Adams 2013). The argument is that the player choices how the story unfolds, thus taking the creative power usually strictly reserved to the author of a story (Lopes 2010; Tavinor 2009). I disagree, however, since the authorial power given to the game-immanent player is always and principally limited by those options provided by the author to the gamer. If a player wants to fly, but the game does not enable the player to do so, he cannot fly. If a player wants to choose a theoretical third option in a given dualistic morale conundrum, he can only choice from the two offered to him by the author.

Problematization

A fifth and final property of violence in videogames is problematization. These games don't offer the text-immanent player the luxury of a possibility to escape his moral responsibility for his own violent in-game actions; not in the form of an understandable reaction to prior violence towards him; neither are his enemies de-humanized creatures without dignity, who can be shot at his own leisure; and neither is an alternative option to act provided to and for him. He must carry the whole burden, and only he.

In a lesser sense, several games characters voice such a problematization. Think of what Wallace Bree from *Half-Life 2* said to the player, quoted at the start of this article: "Tell me, Dr. Freeman, if you can: you have destroyed so much, what is it exactly that you have created? Can you name even one thing? I thought not" (Valve 2006: n.p.). And indeed, the player has not built up anything, but destroyed creatures and buildings all the more. In *Bioshock Infinite*, when the young woman Elizabeth witnessed Booker DeWitt's slaying of hordes of enemies, she comments: "Do you ever get used to it? The killing?" (Irrational Games 2013: n.p.). To which he replies: "Faster than you can imagine" (ibid: n.p.). And again, the player is in the midst of what outside the game would be considered a murder spree.

In a greater sense this property of violence can also be found as an integrate part of the game's grand narrative. An example that immediately springs to the mind of experienced gamers is that of *Spec Ops. The Line* (Yager Development 2012). It incorporates many elements discussed earlier in this paper. At a first sight it is a fairly standard military combat simulator, but underneath is questions everything that genre has to offer (Lee 2014; Jørgensen 2016: Keogh 2013; Hamilton 2013). The choice of genre is remarkable, since it is exactly the military shooter that has provoked the most outspoken criticism towards videogames as propagators of violence (Romaniuk 2017; Schulzke 2013; Wells 2012; Payne 2016).

Spec Ops. The Line is a third-person tactical shooter, taking place in an apocalyptic version of Dubai – probably the reason the game has been banned in the United Arabs Emirates (Reed/Blain 2017; Rego 2012) – and is based on Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and the film based on that novella *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Coppola (1979). Massive sandstorms have cut of Dubai from the rest of the world, resulting in countless Emiratis and foreign migrant workers to wait for the inevitable end. The 33rd Infantry Battalion of the United States Army, on their way back from Afghanistan,

volunteered to help the citizens, defying a direct order to leave the city themselves. After contact with the 33rd had seized, the United States send in an elite three-man Delta Force team to carry out reconnaissance.

This small group is led by Captain Martin Walker (voiced by Nolan North), who served with 33rd's leader, Colonel Konrad, in Afghanistan. Walker is accompanied by 1st Lieutenant Alphonso Adams and Staff Sergeant John Lugo. When arrived in the city, Walker and his team find out that the 33rd has installed martial law began committing atrocities on the civilian population. To complicate things even more, 33rd's staff members tried, quite unsuccessfully, to issue a coup d'état, while some civilians started a CIA-fused insurgence of their own. Within this wasps' nest, the Group Walker must establish their own survival.

The games include a heavy ludo-narrative dissonance, but here it is intended and an important part of the game's narrative. The game instructs the player – by means of its ludic feedback mechanisms – to push through and kill everything that comes in his path, while simultaneously mocks and judged the same player – by means of its narrative – for doing so. A poignant example is found in the 5th level ('The Edge'). Walker overhears the following conversation between two 'rogue' 33rd soldiers:

> **Soldier 1:** You know, with all the shit goin' on, I forget how beautiful this place can be.
> **Soldier 2:** I feel ya.
> **Soldier 1:** You know, sometimes at night I'll just come out here and sit. Just listen to the wind.
> **Soldier 2:** Yeah, reminds me of how the wind used to howl through the trees where I grew up. Kinda peaceful, actually.
> **Soldier 1:** Hard to believe there's any peace in a place like this, huh?
> **Soldier 2:** You gotta look for peace, not matter where you are, man. Helps remind you what you're fightin' for.

This part of the narrative is intended to invoke feelings of recognition and sympathy in Walker, urging him to see his adversaries for more than just 'enemies' (dehumanization), but as fellow-Americans who have dreams about a peaceful future. Ludically however, the player has no other choice to continue the game than to shot them both. Sneaking past them is technically impossible, and when they see Walker they will immediately engage him, not in the least because Adams and Lugo – whose actions are out of control of the player – will not hesitate to start firing.

The game features – in the same vein – a number of pseudo moral choice; moral in the sense that they present a moral dilemma for the player to solve (moralization), but pseudo in the sense that any of these choices are utterly meaningless. You can choose to kill a 33rd soldier or let him escape (level 4, 'The Refugees'); choose to save a CIA agent, who is apparently necessary to escape the hell of Dubai, or some innocent civilians (level 7, 'The Battle'); choose to mercy kill another CIA agent who just robbed the Dubai population of an important water reservoir, or let him burn in the car crash he himself is responsible for (level 11, 'Alone'); and choose to kill an angry Dubai mob that just hanged Lugo, scare

them off by shooting in the air, or let the mob stone Walker and Adams, nudging the player back to the first two options (level 13, 'Adams').

Some of these pseudo moral choices stand out, for different reasons. At a certain point, Walker and his team see two men strung up by their arms, their mouths taped over. By radio, Konrad explains to Walker that these two 'animals' couldn't control their instincts: the civilian stole water – a capital offense in desert-struck Dubai – while the soldier, sent to apprehend him, murdered his family in the process. Walker now must decide who has to die, by shooting either of them dead. This moral conundrum, however, can be circumvented. Walker can try to leave, but he will be shot by snipers. Walker can stall his decision, but the same snipers will target Adams and then Walker. Or Walker can shoot the snipers – which is no simple task – resulting in even more deaths than at the initial choice. In the end, a choice is presented, but without any in-game consequences (except for some dialogue). The choice is narrative, not ludic.

The second one is the most well-known scene from *Spec Ops* (level 8, 'The Gate'). Walker and his team approach a heavy formation of 33rd soldiers, who were, just some instances ago, rounding up civilians. While it is unclear why the civilians are rounded up, the game taught the player earlier that the 33rd soldiers did not hesitate to execute innocent civilians in order to get a CIA agent talking (level 7, 'The Battle'). The player assumes the 33rd is up to no good. When overseeing the battle scene, Adams point to a M120 mortar. When Walker contemplates the possibility to use is, Lugo remarks it fires white phosphorus rounds. Lugo disagrees.

> **Lugo:** You know we can't use it.
> **Adams:** We might not have a choice, Lugo.
> **Lugo:** There's always a choice.
> **Walker:** No, there's really not.

Walker's observation is the hermeneutical key to understand the game's apparent ludonarrative dissonance: you don't have a choice. Walker, and therefore the player, has no other choice to proceed through the game than use the mortar. When choosing to take down the soldiers by conventional means, the game just keeps spawning enemies until Walker and his team are run over. And even though a real player can always choose to quit the game – thus avoiding the use of the phosphor – the text-immanent reader cannot: he must use the weapon.

When using the mortar – or rather the laptop attached to it – the game interface changes from the usual third-person perspective to a top-down view, overseeing the battlefield. Walker/the player can move a crosshair over the battlefield, where soldiers are represented as white hallows on a black background, and choose where to shoot the phosphor. In other games, the player is not confronted with the consequences of such an attack, leaving his casualties to the imagination (trivialization and/or dehumanization), but in *Spec Ops* the player, as Walker, has literally to walk through it.

Walker and his team witness the effects of the phosphor on the 33rd soldiers: they are heavily burned, some crying and growling in their death struggle. One of them shouts: "Hello? Is anyone there? Please, I'm-I'm trapped. I-I can't feel my legs" (Yager Development 2012: n.p.). Another one, just before dying, whispers: "We were helping…" (ibid:

n.p.). Confused over the content of the dying man's words, the three approach the outer section of the battlefield, where they discover another group of casualties of their phosphor attack: a substantial group of refugees, who were – apparently – taken by the 33rd to be evacuated.

It is a haunting scene, not only for Walker, Adam, and Lugo, but also for the player. Women, men, and children are heavily burned, exposing partially their carcasses. During the cut scene, the camera focusses on a mutilated mother-and-child – evoking associations of the Christian iconography of Mother Mary and Child. She embraces her child tightly, holding her to her breast, while covering her eyes with her hands. Walker is lost for words – it was his words that initiated the attack and his directions the mortar shells fell to – but Lugo and Adams argue bitterly. Desperately Adams repeats what Walker said earlier: "We didn't have a choice!" (ibid: n.p.).

The game presents the consequences of the player's choice to the player in bright and horrifying colours, without any room for properties as motivation, dehumanization, trivialization, or even nknowntion (since the choice is a pseudo one). And while other games implicitly make the connection between the player and the player's avatar – like the earlier discussed instances in *Half-Life 2* or *BioShock Infinite* – *Spec Ops* is really addressing the game-immanent player in a direct and unavoidable way, thus transferring the moral responsibility from an in-game character like Gordon Freeman or Booker De-Witt to the one controlling that character. And the game is quite self-conscious about it. When Walker storms a radio tower, the DJ Robert Darden (level 12, 'The Rooftops') comments: "Aw, jeez… where's all this violence coming from, man? Is it the videogames? I bet it's the videogames"(ibid: n.p.).

This self-conscious, fourth wall-breaking capacity of the game's text-immanent author is also apparent in several loading screens shown in the game. A number of them try to – implicitly – sooth the consciousness of the player by explaining that the use of phosphor is not forbidden, and that collateral damage is unfortunate but also unavoidable and therefore not immoral.

> Collateral damage is any incidental damage that occurs as a result of military action. Such damage is not unlawful if it is not excessive. (…) Collateral damage can be justified, if the gain outweighs the cost. How much do you think Adams and Lugo are worth? (…) White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in many types of munitions. It can set fire to cloth, fuel, ammunition, and flesh. (…) Though controversial, the use of white phosphorus against personnel is not prohibited. (…) Survivors of white phosphorus often suffer severe damage to the kidneys and liver, as well as the cardiovascular and nervous systems. (Loading screens 45, 99, 46, 47, and 94)

Eventually, the immanent author of the game becomes personal, directing himself explicitly to the immanent-player of the game, judging his actions in the phosphor incident:

> White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in your slaughter at The Gate. It can set fire to soldiers and the innocent civilians they are trying to help. (Loading screen 96)

More and more loading screens appear addressing, judging, and even mocking the player ("you"):

> You are still a good person. There is no escape. (...) The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care? Can you even remember why you came here? (...) This is all your fault. (...) Do you feel like a hero yet? (...) How many Americans have you killed today? (...) It's time for you to wake up. (...) If you were a better person, you wouldn't be here. (...) You can't go home. (Loading screens 93, 95, 97, 100, 101 through 105, and 108)

The screens relate an ambiguous message: the pl'yer should not be here, but cannot leave either, playing with the distinction between the text-external real player (who can quit) and the text-immanent one (who cannot do so). The screen also invokes the notion of 'the real', suggesting the possibility to distinguish between in-game and out-game violence, again playing with the identification between real and immanent player.

> To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless. (...) Kill a man, and you are a murderer. Kill everyone, and you are a god. (Loading screens 106 and 109)

When Walker finally reaches the headquarters of Colonel Konrad, the true nature of the game events become clear for both Walker and the immanent reader. Konrad is already dead – he killed himself much earlier already – but is still capable of talking to Walker in the form of a materialized voice in Walker own head. This Konrad explains that Walker's PTSS – developed earlier in Afghanistan –   played tricks with his mind: almost the whole game was a re-enactment of real events as they appear in Walker's mind, desperately to find moral justifications for what he did (the choice I discussed above).

The player now has to choose: he can shoot Konrad, shoot his Walker's reflection in the mirror, or wait until Konrad pulls the trigger. When Walker is killed, the game simply ends by showing Walker's dead body. When Konrad is killed, the player is given another choice. Walker, dressed in Konrad's tenue, is met by American soldiers trying to pull him out of Dubai. When the player hands himself over to the soldiers and enters a military nknowne, one of the soldiers asks him: "How did you survive?" (ibid: n.p.) to which he answers, "Who said that I did?" (ibid: n.p.). When the player chooses to engage the soldiers (and win the ensuing fight by killing all soldiers), Walker is seen taking one of the radio's telling: "Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai!" (ibid: n.p.) the exact same sentence he uses at the beginning of the game towards his – now dead – comrades Lugo and Adams.

The game offers different endings, but – as was the case with all other choices – there is no really 'good' or 'bad' ending. In all scenarios Walker is dead or must live with the ever-present memories of the atrocities he has done in both Afghanistan and Dubai. War, violence, crimes: it can only go one way, the destruction of all involved. The in-game violence is principally problematized by *Spec Ops*, more or less forcing the player to engage in crimes (ludic), and then scrutinize them about it (narrative). All responsibility is placed in the hands of the immanent player, who has no change whatsoever to steer into clearer

water, to resolve the situation peacefully, or to not engage at all. Violence is a path, the game claims, to which is no escape and no survivors.

Fascination, terror, and morality

Discussing the phenomenon of violence in digital games is possible on various levels, as I have discussed in the introduction. One could take on an author's perspective – why did this developer choose to incorporate a violence scene? One could also take an audience's perspective – what are the effects of in-game violence on actual gamers? But one could also look at the narrative use of violence in games – what are the properties of violence within the game's narrative? I have identified five of such narrative properties: as motivation for the protagonist/player, trivialization of violence, dehumanization of the antagonists, moralization of violence, and problematization of violence.

Does this have any ramifications for the world outside the game? In overviewing the five narrative properties of violence in digital games, two indicative aspects surface: (1) we, as human beings playing violent games, are both fascinated and terrified by violence (see table #1); and (2) we have an ambiguous attitude towards violence we perform in the games we play (see table #2).

Our fascination with in-game violence surfaces in the property of trivialization, in which the on-screen enemy is reduced to a mere toy or object the player is free to do what he likes. This kind of violence empowers the player, makes him feel in charge, in command, even god-like. No further thoughts are given to those who are killed in-game. They have no history, no future, no distinct characteristics, no family, no friends, no value other than being butchered.

This kind of fascination with in-game violence borders to the property of dehumanization. Aliens from outer space, Nazis, Arabs, communists, zombies, monsters from hell, all are creatures robbed of any human characteristics, other than the one allowing the players to kill them without mercy: they are different. While this otherness allows the player to purge them mercilessly, these in-game enemies are not just fascinating to kill (trivialization), but also provide the necessary evilness to feel proud of doing so. The threat these enemies pose is terrifying enough to negotiate any hesitation the player might feel taking them on. Especially when the treat is directed towards they player or the avatar's loved ones (motivation). I will return to the last two properties later on.

Table 1: Narrative properties of in-game violence, ranging from being communicated by the game as (very) fascinating to (very) terrifying.

(Very) fascinating	trivialization
	dehumanization
Ambiguous	motivation
(Very) terrifying	moralization
	problematization

Secondly, the five properties show different (in-game) moral options towards the use of violence by the protagonist/player. In the case of trivialization, there is no moral consideration present in the game's narrative: fun and explosions do not mix well with ethical deliberations (if one wants to avoid a massive ludic-narrative dissonance, that is). In the case of dehumanization, however, an implicit moral positioning is in place: the game instructs the player it is morally justifiable to murder all his enemies, because of their inherent and self-explanatory wickedness. No one is allowed to think twice about ethics if confronted with zombies or Nazis. The same applies to the motivational property: when the protagonist is acting out of well-provided vengeance towards his former perpetrator, the game implicitly insinuates moral justifiability (motivation).

If trivialization is presented as amoral, and dehumanization and motivation as moral, what leaves that for the last two properties? Well, in the case or the moralization property, the game communicates ethical ambiguity, both in terms of giving multiple options to resolve a situation, usually a violent and a non-violent one, and in terms of the moral value of said options. In some games utilizing a morality system, the options given to a player remain morally vague, as was the case in the *Dishonored* series. Is killing always the ethically evil option, no matter what the alternative is? Is stealing from an enemy corpse better or worse than stealing from a living citizen? Morality is very complex and almost in every practical case very contextual and contextualized, a very level of sophistication no game can quite deliver (yet).

If in the case of moralization, the game communicates moral ambiguity towards the player regarding the use of in-game violence, the property of problematization tells the player exactly how immoral his actions actually are. *Spec Ops. The Line* is the perfect example of this property and of the kind of games that signal implicitly to the player how immoral his behaviour is. These kind of games forces the player to contemplate his assumption of the self-explanatory nature of his own use of violence. In the case of *Spec Ops*, the only possibility for the player to escape (his own) moral judgement provided to him by the game, is quitting playing all together; a possibility open for any real player, but not for an text-immanent one.

Table 2: Narrative properties of in-game violence, ranging from being communicated by the game as amoral, moral, morally ambiguous, or immoral.

Amoral	trivialization
Moral	dehumanization
	motivation
Ambiguous	moralization
Immoral	problematization

Consequentially, on the level of moralization our stance towards in-game violence is somewhere in between fascination and terror. We can be fascinating (still) by the power and agency we have on the unfolding of the game's narrative – explicitly by our choices

– but when the game places the player in a morally difficult, ambiguous, or even 'unfair' position (that is, when no morally justifiable solution can be achieved in the game), the fascination can be altered to or be mixed with terror.

This moral ambiguity is erased in the property of problematization, and therefore the violence appears more terrifying than fascinating to the immanent player. The phosphor scene from – again – *Spec Ops. The Line* is a haunting example of this. Motivation, trivialization, and dehumanization are out of order in this example, because Walker/player has no grudge towards the civilians, and neither are these civilians portrayed as anything but innocent. And since the player has no (real) agency in the decision to use the phosphor or not, moralization is also outside the parameters. The aftermath of the phosphor attack has a terrifying and eve stating impact on both Walker and the immanent player.

Final thoughts

In-game violence is a complex and fascinating topic within game studies. Much attention has been paid to the effects of in-game violence outside the boundaries of the games themselves, but the narrative complexity of the use of in-game violence has been somewhat neglected. Nevertheless, digital game feature a lot of different ways they use violence towards and by the player as a part of their narratives, either explicitly or implicitly communicated to the player.

The differentiation between these different narrative properties of in-game violence is necessary for a deeper understanding of videogames narratives specifically, but also for a broader understanding of their cultural significance generally. Real-life violence exists, it has been a part of human history for as long as we can remember. Fictional violence, may it be in the form of novels, films, or games, also exists, and has been a part of our collective memory for as long as we invented writing.

The exact relationship between fictional and real-life violence is still heavily debated upon, as I have shown earlier in this article. It might be that in-game violence stimulate real players to act more violently outside the game. It might be the opposite: games providing a safe environment where violent inclinations of real players can find a consequence-free outlet. One thing is for sure: both are in a relationship with one another. And studying the one, will shed light on the other.

If we study real-life violence, we can understand what place it has in our fiction. And if we study in-game violence, as I have tried to do, we can understand more of the society these games exist in, are produced by and have their influences on. Understanding the different narrative properties of in-game violence might help us to understand why people behave violently outside games, as they empirically do. The properties of motivation, trivialization, dehumanization, moralization, and problematization occur also in real-life.

Knowing the game is key to understanding it.

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Part IIIb – Videogames: Perspective

Spes Ultracombinatoria
Neo‑Human Spirituality and Digital Games

Leonardo Marcato

As cultural products and peculiar kind of texts, digital games can be considered as **in some way** situated chronologically and culturally inside a given time and a space. They speak about possible pasts, presents, and futures, in a language that players understand and can process –and critically approach, if they want to. This is generally more evident in so-called 'indie games', with them having in most cases more creative leeway to pursue authorial goals and ideas. Still, some glimpse of the artistic power and fertility of this medium is evident in high‑budget productions. Sometimes, big publishers release a title where the authorial direction is strong enough to convey not mere clear messages, but a refined voice to communicate that message or the breeding ground for further inquiry and analysis by players and scholars. The digital game industry reached a maturity with which it meets the issues, challenges, and possibilities of another sector of the entertainment industry: cinema. Like movies, digital games are a medium for both artistic pursuits and financial gains; like them, they are experienced by many people and have the chance to impact their worldview. However, in the case of digital games, these issues, challenges, and successes are multiplied exponentially. This is not only because of the amount of money involved, but also due to the **pervasiveness** of the digital game medium.

To experience a movie, back in the golden age of the medium, a person would have needed to physically go to a place where movies were being projected: theatres, communal halls, drive‑ins were places that created a sense of separation from daily life and offered a leisurely escape into a story, albeit a passive one. The diffusion of television meant that these venues were diluted into more intimate situations, like one's living room, which means these experiences have remained personal and passive. Even the possibility to view a movie on our phones and tablets are often occasions to close ourselves off during a commute or even social gatherings, thus highlighting the possibility for pas-

siveness of the medium. On the other hand, a particularly good or enticing movie can be a communal experience that goes beyond the mere discussion of technical merits and flows of a film projection. Particularly interesting is the case of *cineforums*, a confessional version of *ciné-clubs*, founded in the Italian Jesuit education system, where the discussion after a film show about the movie's merits is often filled with references to cultural, ethical, and social elements. However, there is still a certain degree of separation between the media and the public. It is a separation that still underlines how, on one side, those who make the movie can be seen, and on the other, those who watch it and can best discuss it. There is no way for the public to interact directly with a movie.

This is not the case for digital games, or at least not completely. During the act of playing, a person is not only watching a story or situation unfold but is experiencing it in a way that allow them to be part of it in a very specific way. In some sense, even for those games where the storyline and characters are not the focus of the production, a player can be seen as existentially involved with the game through the act of playing. This is true in case of any kind of play and game: it is not by chance that the act of play has been analysed by many scholars, from Huizinga to Moltmann, from a spiritual perspective. Additionally, as stated in the first sentence, we can consider digital games as situated (chronologically and topologically) only **in some way**. This is due to the peculiar nature of the digital medium from which they are created and into which they operate. Such '**some way**' has the potential to let a player further analyse what their existential involvement in the act of play can be, as immersion (the moment where a player is fully experiencing the game as if they were inside the game world) pushes the boundaries of game involvement that may encompass all aspects of one's life.

This is the reason for which the relation between the act of playing modern generation digital games and spirituality is such an interesting topic, philosophically speaking. The idea of digital agency, of avatar, of immersion (all topics deeply examined by numerous authors) can open the ground on how spirituality can be seen as evolving in the contemporary world. It also helps in understanding what the advancement of technology means for this fundamental element of Human nature, so strictly tied to how we think and how we approach the world (Newberg et al. 2001). Discussions on trans-humanism, post-humanism, and how to define Human nature and evolution are nothing new, but one must not forget that we cannot tie this discussion to technology only. The very word 'trans-human' is historically and culturally tied with spirituality. One of its first occurrences is one of the most pious operas of Human literature:

> Trasumanar significar *per verba*
> non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
> a cui esperienza grazia serba.

In these three verses of his *Divina Commedia* (Paradiso, Canto I, verses 70–72), the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri create a new word to express how, in his view, Human nature can transcend itself in order to embrace a higher, divine state. It is something that cannot be expressed by words and needs to be accepted by divine grace. On the one hand, it is true that Dante's *transumanar* it is a completely different, almost specular view of how the Human can express its full potentiality from the contemporary idea of transhumanism as

an evolution of humanity through technical and technological means. Additionally, this concept needs to be contextualized in the time and place when it was written by Dante. On the other hand, it shows the deep relation that is established between the Human and Reality: when words fail, experience can build a deep understanding of a possible future. In experience lies the potentiality of a philosophical inquiry about the relation between digital games and the future of our species, an inquiry that can leverage the peculiarities of acting in a non-physical world.

To properly express this argument, this paper has been divided in two main parts. The first part will present the ontological foundation, underlying the hybrid nature of digital games, through the ideas presented by the work of Luciano di Letizia and Joo Han Kim. Even if their work can be considered outdated, given the quick evolution of digital technology in the current day and age, I will try to show how their approach can still provide a suitable starting point. It will also present the Multimedia Interactive Opera, a concept proposed by Marco Accordi Rickards (2021) and that can be a suitable foundation to analyse a digital game as a work of art according to its peculiar nature. Next, the paper will move on to establish a spiritual approach on conscious gaming, through a case study of *Planescape Torment* (Black Isles Studio 1999), *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). The second part will use these tools to analyse transhumanism and posthumanism in *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Project Red 2020) and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011) to see how these themes are presented in the titles themselves. Additionally, it will try to show how a philosophical approach can be conducted on them, problematizing the issues of Human nature from the peculiar perspective of **techgnosis**, a peculiar spiritual approach to technology. The conclusion will offer a different way to harmonize technology and spirituality with a keen eye on the Human nature, with a brief look at how these themes have been presented in *Sid Meier's Beyond Earth* (Firaxis Games 2014).

One methodological point needs to be expressed before starting, though. Generally, there are two main ways through which philosophy can approach digital games. The first one tries to see them as subjects of philosophical inquiry, analysing them with concepts and arguments varying from phenomenology to ontology to logic. This approach favours the more theoretical perspectives, as it expresses in sound terms the nature of digital games from various perspectives, be it the idea of acting in a digital world, the ontological status of the digital world, or how the tools of logical analysis can be applied to digital games. The second way views digital games like any other cultural artifact, such as movies or books: an analysis of their themes, how they represent them, what impact they may have, and so on. The point here is that our discipline has its full toolbox available to act on digital games and is able to reach great results while doing so – as the literature on the subject shows. I am fully convinced, however, that there is a third approach: as I will try to argue by speaking about 'conscious gaming', we can do philosophy **with** digital games. That is, their peculiar hybrid nature and the element of immersion give them the potential to become another tool in the 'philosopher's toolbox', and one that is very useful to approach the contemporary world. I am aware of the risks that this approach can have, especially because digital games are part of a proper industry, and as such need to be analysed with that in mind. However, these kinds of connections have not deterred scholars from analysing movies and TV series; therefore, I believe that a critical approach

to digital games can work despite their relations to the market and all that entails. It will surely make arguments more difficult; but this can be quite the exciting challenge for a critical mind.

The Ontological Status of Digital Games: Multimedia Interactive Operas

If we want to over-summarize what a digital game is, we can consider it as a kind of program that can be executed from any kind of computerized platform elaborate enough to run it: personal computers, game consoles, mobile phones, and even fridges in some cases. In this program, a placer can interact with digital worlds, stories, and ludic experiences through a graphical interface. From the 'simple' platformers or flight simulators to authorial narrative experiences, all digital games develop a very peculiar kind of interaction between the game world and the player. This interaction, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, can be considered as the proper peculiarity of this kind of contemporary cultural production. For this reason, especially when looking at agency in videogames and how its influence can stretch beyond the game world, videogames become a compelling artifact from a theoretical point of view.

When we act, we usually modify our surroundings through our body. We are physically inside a physical world: to move a rock, we extend our hand, pick it up, and carry it to another place. Every act that an agent in the world do is tied to this basic physical interaction between a body and another body, between a thing and a thing. Even in the case of immaterial things one could say that there is some kind of physicality involved. While we take part of a discussion, 'hard sciences' show us that there are several changes in the physical structure of our surroundings and ourselves that allow this discussion to take place: neurons flashes to give orders to lungs, tongues, and mouths that emit small movements that generate frequencies that are carried by the movement of air particles to hit a specific bone in our ears. Through this very material and physical series of phenomena, a great exchange of non-physical things is built and create new things. This cannot be said about what we experience in a digital world; but these worlds can still have a very much physical effect in those who partake in it. For this reason, it is important to clarify what the ontological status of digital games is; that is, the justification for speaking in a proper ontological way about digital games and not only about the objects in them. The peculiar hybrid nature of a digital game can make it be considered as an artistic piece, as has been claimed before (Quaranta 2013), but with a specific difference that requires further theoretical speculation.

Di Letizia's phenomenological approach on games ontology starts from a basilar question: "do the objects of digital games exist?" In order to find an answer to this, he employs the tools of process philosophy (Whitehead 1979; Manzotti 2006): the idea that a being is not something that is given, but something subject to a constant process of becoming, a continuous change. According to this speculation, existence is a quality pertaining to the relationships established between subject and object. When a subject observes a phenomenon, its physical representation is not the mere vehicle of perception but the phenomenon itself that cannot be separated by it. For example, di Letizia says (2015: 111), a rainbow exists in the moment when solar rays cause specific neural

events. By looking at the physical colourful arch in the sky, an effect is produced in the observer; that is, a process (a causal chain of events) happens that was not there before. The interaction between observer and observed thus creates a 'difference in reality', something new that did not exist before. Such difference is ingrained in the dimension of experience: digital games might not be 'there' in a physical sense, but both the physical representation and the subject are. Their object exists in a hybrid sense: the torch in *Alan Wake* (Remedy Entertainment 2020), for example, is at the same time a string of code, a block of pixels and a torch to be manipulated, both to light up the surrounding and to be used as a weapon against the Dark Presence.

But what differences and hybrid sense of existence say about the ontological nature of digital games? Di Letizia (2015) proposes the definition of digital games as **recursive formal systems**, that the phenomenological approach turns into the experience of immersion in the game by the player and then the tele-presence of the self in the avatar. With this word we refer to the extension of the player in the game world, where it experiences as part of itself the avatar's sense of ownership and sense of agency (Ibid; Gallagher 2000). The definition of digital games as formal system, ingrained in game design studies, is useful from an operative point of view. By looking at a digital game as a set system of rules, language, and symbols, a game designer can manipulate the code, art, and narrative composing it; a player can play it; a critic can examine it; a philosopher can speculate on it. Example of such approach is how a gaming journalist expresses his review on a digital game: they examine the artworks, the gameplay, the controls, and every element that builds up to the final product. All this stems from the decision made by the team behind a digital game. For example, *Life is Strange* developer's goal was to tell a story influenced by player's choices. Every part of the game was thought-out and studied to transmit a meaning to the player: even the setting, northwest Oregon, was chosen in order to give the players a 'sense of looking inside ourselves'. This title is a classic example of a digital game where the creative director's impact is noticeably felt on the final product. As happens in a movie, where photography, story and acting concurs to the final product, digital games are born from a harmonic relation between artworks, gameplay, narrative, and player freedom, or interaction. If we accept the interaction through gameplay as the first and foremost way for the player to enter in a relation with the digital game, it can be said that this is the quality marking digital games as art (McManus 2011). These elements are then 'embodied' in a computer program, which can be pointed out to be their substrate and formal cause of existence.

This harmonic relation situated in a computer program, that is, the informational nature of a digital game, seems to point to another way of thinking about the hybrid nature of digital games. The focal point lies in the fact that digital games are mainly digital products, and thus can be fully part of the speculation of philosophy of information. If we focus on the element of data in digital games, every element can be seen as a 'piece of information' according to Bateson's definition (Bateson 2000): a difference that makes the difference. Evolving from this point, Luciano Floridi (2012) speaks of *dedomena*, signals, and symbols, to show how this difference is structured. *Dedomena* describes a lack of uniformity in the real world, signals are lack of uniformity between two physical states of a system and the lack of uniformity between symbols is, for example, the difference between P and B as letters. Again, there is a focus on differences: digital games find their

meaning in the act of being played, where the difference is underlined and exalted as fruitful in the player's **immersion** in the game (Björk/Holopainen 2005) or its **incorporation** (Calleja 2011): the first refers to the experience of playing a game generically from a psychological point of view, while the second looks at it from a bodily point of view. Another approach to the existence of objects in digital games follows the idea that digital beings can be considered a thing because of the phenomenological characteristics we can find in them (Kim 2001). A digital being has unity of circumstances, the selfsameness of the perceived persisting of the 'thing-totality' and exceed Heidegger's three types of representation: a torch in *Alan Wake* is not simply a sign for a torch, nor is the perception of a picture of a torch. We can have the rendering of a torch, but the rendering is not sign of the torch, or the graphic tablet the artist used to draw it, or the PC where the game runs. In pointing a torch toward the Dark Presence, *Alan Wake* players do not manipulate a sign of the torch, but the torch itself through instruments; they are not bodily-there to themselves, nor they are an 'empty intending'. The relation that the player experiences in playing a digital game build from the difference between his perceivedness and the presence of his actions in the game. Digital beings are

> a paradoxical entity – it has a certain "bodily presence" (perceivedness) without "being bodily-there". We may call it quasi-bodily presence (…) what we actually use is not a computer but a digital-thing. (Kim 2001: 94–95)

that is, a digisein. In the experience made by the players this paradoxical digital entity, delocalized, synchronized, and correlated (Floridi 2012: 22) acquires an ontological status that is both objective and subjective. There is no substantial difference between the torch used by a player and the torch used by another player, since they are the same line of code and created by the same creative team. And yet, they are two different torches because the game copies, the machines on which they run, and the players are different. We have, again, the hybrid sense of existence of a digital game, only that this time the peculiar way of considering the digital game as a digital being can bring it even closer to an artwork, where the aporetical relation between art piece, artist and bystander is crucial in determining its qualities. Moreover, as the possibility to compare choices made in the story implemented in *Life is Strange* shows, even in games focused on narrating a story instead of the competitive gameplay the relations between players adds to the qualities. This gives often birth to a rich dialogue between players: digital games and forums burst with 'theorycrafting' about games with deep narratives, encouraging debates about story elements and 'what ifs' that make the game grow beyond its intended boundaries. Thus, it is not only a formal system but includes certain qualities that pertain to the Infosphere dimension (Floridi 2014) with a focus on experience, bringing it closer to a continuous digital art performance than a mere work of art.

The relational dimension of a digital game can then help its ontological inquiry. More than difference, a term that might be useful to describe information in digital games might be *différance* (Derrida 1997): the constant productions of differences in an active movement of interrelations of meaning in language that can't be verbally expressed in its entirety. Its history is the **grammatisation**, which is the retention of information on different *hypomnemata* (supports for memory, texts), physical, cultural and social (Stiegler

1998). Bertrand Stiegler expands this in the digital dimension by saying that internet is a collective hypomnema, or in other words a group of

> milieux of human geographies technically associated, made of practitioners instead of users, amateurs instead of consumers, contributors instead of clients and providers. (Stiegler 2015: 102)

This milieu that is internet expresses itself 'multimedially': texts, images, sounds and the like interact between themselves in a constantly creative dimension in order to convey their meaning. This multimediality resides also in the devices used by this onlife humanity (Floridi 2015). Mobile phones, PCs, tablets, laptops; all concur to the *milieux* and are connected in an ever-evolving interrelation, where *différance* extends beyond mere verbal language and grows in every *hypomnemata* available. Digital games are particularly impacted by this growth, especially those that bring forth a self-consciousness of their nature as a new artistic media due to the involvement of creative directors. Consider FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* (2011): a game renowned for its difficulty that produced the new 'Souls-like' sub-genre of digital games thanks to its innovative gameplay. During the years it birthed a strong community devoted to the creation of different ways to play it, fan-art, fan-fiction, modders, and 'lorethrough' (playthrough where the community member play the game to show and explain the world and story of a game, rather than its gameplay). The original game has been re-imagined by the players up to the point where it cannot be played without considering every element that the player culture keeps adding. It has become a **symbol** according to what Raimon Panikkar means with this term: a pure relation between meaning, vehicle, and subject, impossible to be discerned in its parts without its destruction, fertile in the ontological determination of a τόδε τι, of thing-that-is which is no longer an individual substance with its autonomy but a constant dynamic movement of interrelations (Panikkar 2008b: 239–74). The relation between the players and the game can change both; not from an aesthetic point of view but an ontological one. By looking at a digital game in this way, then, the difference between information as symbols becomes *différance*. Its elements of information are not lost, but with this kind of vitality a digital game sees its nature of **inforg** (the term Floridi uses for digital organisms from the perspective of his ethics of information) confirmed and reinforced thanks to the *hypomnemata* involved in it becoming a milieu of lacking, meaning, and desires of players, and a game's meaning greatly exceeds that originally thought by designers. Moreover, a digital game is subjected to the ethics of information (Floridi 2014: 146–57), since the ever-growing quality and quantity of information can prevent entropy to devour it or can even 'resurrect' it, as the players' community is able to give new meanings to old games. In this sense, a digital game can be seen as a proper example of **inforg**: it is born by information and grows with the accumulated information that both player communities and further iteration and episodes can give; it can be genre-defining thus spawning similar titles; it can expand over the limits of 'games culture' and become part of the public discourse, in all the possible good and bad ways. It has a proper **memetic** nature – both in the original sense expressed by Dawkins (1976) and in the common sense of something part of the internet culture.

Summarizing, the ontology of digital games may be described in three different hybrid ways: 1) a recursive formal system of harmonic data expressed by a PC and distributed in digital form, experienced by the player thanks to the immersion in its world, where it being hybrid lies in the different statuses acquired by the elements part of the system; 2) an artistic digisein, a digital being for which the experience of its thing-totality is cardinal in structuring the relation with the players and between them; 3) an **inforg** or milieu of information, created by game designers, enriched by players, guided by the ethics of information. These three ways are equally apt at defining a digital game, according to the standpoint from which a player can approach it: a product of computer technologies, a product of contemporary culture, a denizen of the Infosphere. Common to these ways are the categories of difference (between game and physical world) and relation (between game, players and designers): two dynamic characteristics, that can change according to where and when a digital game is experienced. Moreover, the elements involved in the creation of digital games, from setting to arts to music to narrative, are each a single form of art; but none is enough to pinpoint the element of artistic creativity in digital game design. It is the presence of the ontological category of relation as a mutual fertile interrelation that brings the aesthetic speculation on digital games on the theoretical level.

As operative definition for digital games when considered ontologically, it can be then proposed the expression Multimedia Interactive Opera (henceforth, MIO), created by Marco Accordi Rickards (2021) to underline a game's artistic value that this paper proposes to reformulate. As MIOs, digital games can be seen as the art products peculiar of the Infosphere, where all the media that concurs to them represent the intrinsic virtue and are tied to gameplay: the interactivity between players and game and the players themselves, its relational quality. Not merely a form of interactive fiction (Tavinor 2005), but considered in relation with other works of art, MIOs accepts the three hybrid ways of considering a digital game. Formal systems, digital expressions, milieux of information all concur to the definition of a particular art piece thanks to the peculiar quality of the relation expressed both in interaction through gameplay and interaction between players. The harmony of the elements that compose an MIO is expressed by the word 'Opera'. In Italian language, '*opera*' means 'workpiece', 'artefact'; but it is also that art form made by singers performing a dramatic work of mixed narrative and sound score in a theatrical setting. This play-on-words wants to underline the hybrid nature of the digital game as a work of art, while the 'Interactive' is a strengthening of the quality of relation. This affirmed ontological status expands the original definition of MIO, integrating what both phenomenology and philosophy of information can express about digital games. This definition, while lacking the objectification of the previous three due to its focus on relation does not aspire to encompass every game ever made. It is more a proposal for the evaluation of some past digital games, made to urge game designers alike to become conscious of what a digital game can be in the panorama of the anthropocene's Fourth Revolution: a proper form of artistic production. Authorial control over production can take advantage from this concept in order to keep its prominence. A digital game can be a work of art that, even in its reproducibility as an **inforg**, possess the possibilities to recover the 'aura of artistic production' that contemporary art lost (Benjamin 1966) – and this is the spiritual approach to conscious gaming.

Two Clarifications on the Spiritual Approach and on Conscious Gaming

Before delving into the theme at hand, two important clarifications must be made here. The first is the fact that by **spiritual approach** I do not mean something that pertains only to religion per se, nor only a kind of techno- gnosticism (Davis 2015) applied to digital games as we will see in the second part. By 'spiritual' I mean an integral approach to the totality of Human's life (Panikkar 2011). There is a Christian spirituality as well a Buddhist, Marxist, and liberal spirituality: a term that tries to convey a quality of action, of thought, not tied to some kind of immaterial doctrine but pertaining life in all its aspects. It means to hear the Rhythm of Being (Panikkar 2012), embodying Human's *sacra quaternitas perfecta* of body, self, being and spirit. Translating Panikkar's heavily symbolic language: spirituality is nothing more than a self- conscious approach to daily life ingrained in the knowledge that what we are and what we do cannot be compartmentalized and separated from every other part of our being, but rather is in a constant relation with everything else, even if we are not aware of that. His expression of the Human as a 'cosmotheandric mystery' wants to point it out as πάντα πως, *quodammodo omnia*, a metaphor in a constant tension toward totality not in a transcendental way but in a dynamic state of being (Panikkar 2010: 135–41). Not only subject nor only object, the Human finds its focal point in a relation between itself, the world, and that Silence from which meaning proceeds (Panikkar 1980). Faith, here, might be a misleading word for our approach to Reality: but neither worldview would be a good term, for its focus on *noematic* content without *pisteuma*. A concept created by Raimon Panikkar in dialogue with Husserl's phenomenology (Panikkar 2001: 54–55), *pisteuma* points to the content of a 'faith' not as a system of belief but as the interpretative framework that allows each Human to experience the world. It is the qualitative dimension that makes a statement to be true or false in any given worldview and that is able to change the ontological qualities of a being before any further analysis and rationalization, because it cannot be explained without its reduction to a quantitative value. Thus, spirituality is an approach to life that does not rejects rationality but accepts it along with what is believed and unspoken, its **mythos**, which is that 'something' that

> we believe up to the point where we are no longer aware that we believe in it. (Panikkar 2008a: 92)

This speculation has found a great use in practical philosophy (Tarca 2013) because it points to a mystical approach in everydayness that combines an opening to Reality and a necessity for intellectual inquiry in every movement. *Pisteuma* is not a negation of *noema* but its 'other side'; what builds between them is not a contradiction nor an opposition, but a mutual fecundation.

The second clarification relates to 'conscious gaming'. It was used for the first time by Accordi Rickards (2002) to express an approach to gaming equidistant from 'casual player' and 'hard- core player' and is currently kept alive in the Italian gaming community by the YouTube videos made by Michele Poggi. By being a thoughtful consumer while buying games and supporting creators (as opposed to the casual player) and not transform his passion in an elitist and self- referring culture (as opposed to the hard-

core player), the conscious player plays in full knowledge of the digital game as an artistic expression capable to convey meaning, ideas, and emotions. This approach, useful for gaming critics and reviewers, also have something to say in philosophy of games as considered in this paper, if joined by the deeper philosophical question about being Human. Without this joining it will remain only a useful guideline for game designers, consumers, and critique – it might even be a good expression of what a phenomenological approach can say about gameplay and narrative. But conscious gaming formulation can include the ideas of practical philosophy of intellectual inquiry and pisteumic openness to what a digital game can say about Reality. It thus becomes not simply awareness of meaning, ideas, and emotions, but a philosophical way to play those digital games that have enough authorial directions, artistic depth, and interactivity to be able to create a relation with the player and between players. In other words, a philosophical way that recognizes those ontological and existential aspects of digital games expressed earlier. It must be stressed that this proposal is not some kind of saying 'how we must play', or a supposed 'correct' way of playing. Without a full knowledge of the mechanisms that spring into action during gameplay's experience and without the consciousness of risks and problems that digital game addiction might bring, such an approach cannot be presented. Rather, conscious gaming in the sense just expressed is **an exercise of practical philosophy**, much like how roleplaying can be described (Marcato 2015). As I will explain, it is also crucial for a digital game to be suitable to such analysis. Although I am not talking about an elitist approach to games, so that only certain 'artsy' games can be useful for practical philosophy (as this would be against the idea at the core of this argument), but rather that a title must have some elements, be it gameplay or story or setting, that allow for such an approach.

The Peculiarity of the Question: Ravel Puzzlewell's Riddle

Having established the peculiar quality of digital games as MIOs in the relation that grows between the player and the game and between players, and having clarified the concept of both conscious gaming and spiritual approach, the next step lies in understanding how this relation is structured and what it means for the player as a human being: 'what can change the nature of a Player?'

This question is a quotation from one of the most successful digital game RPGs: Black Isles' *Planescape: Torment* (1999). In this acclaimed title, the protagonist is called Nameless One. In an undefined past time, due to an unspecified crime that would have condemned him to an eternity of suffering, the Nameless One sought immortality at the hand of the night hag Ravel Puzzlewell. As payment for Ravel's ritual, the Nameless One gave the only true answer to her most difficult question: 'what can change the nature of Man?' The answer the player can give will be part of the conclusion, but the riddle's context must be explained. The creation of a protagonist whose focal point was immortality and loss of memory at each 'death' can be seen as a choice made by game designers to combine a) player freedom in the choices of character creation and development and b) the narration of a set story. It is unknown how many 'lives' the Nameless One lived; nor if his final death, the goal of the game, is the definitive; nor there is a canon answer the Nameless

One gave to Ravel Puzzlewell; but it is implied that his answer was the only true one because he himself believed it. There is no correct answer, because everything can change the nature of Men: in an existence determined by a constant change of self-perceivedness, self-determination, and capacities, where a subject is open to the world and thanks to the experiences it is well beyond its biological, cultural and historical Self (Sartre 1936), the Human is a constant dynamic event whose nature is *dynamis*.

A quick note on this must be expressed, especially due to contemporary very important topics about identity that needs to be acknowledged. Here, I propose a definition of dynamic Human according to Raimon Panikkar's idea of mankind as **cosmotheandric mystery**. To summarize the argument, I use the term 'Human', capitalised, in order to reject:

- Every form of sexism that might derive from the use of a male or female term to designate our species (as 'mankind').
- Every form of absolute that might derive from the use of a collective noun for a specie that annihilate the irreducible interrelational unicity of every member of that specie (as 'humankind').
- Every form of limitation to the biological dimension that might derive from the use of a classificatory term that separates the Human from its biological settings and closes its doors to the strength and fertility of a Mystery of which the physical dimension is richness but not excluding (as 'human race', 'human being').

Positively speaking, the term 'Human' wants to propose a notion of our being where 1) its *dynamis* is the only way to ontologically speak about it and 2) *τέχνη* can return to be integral and positive part of our being, without any risk of 'dehumanization', if driven by a spiritual *τέλος*.

To return to the topic at hand, in a more analytical way, this question can be translated as follows: what can a philosophical approach to digital games say about our being Human? This question is different to those normally intended by philosophy. In the conclusion of his work, Di Letizia (2014: 309–22), in order to dissolve the objection that a digital game 'is just a game', reaffirms phenomenology, information philosophy, and process ontology as able to give the answers to five key aspects of philosophical speculation: 1) mind 2) ethics 3) reality 4) brain 5) society and culture. By showing how a game's "magic circle" (Huizinga 1967: 114–5) grows into the real world over the boundaries of make-believe, his phenomenological approach appears effective in analysing the digital game experience. His most important contribution lies in arguing how the Self of the player is in the game as well as outside it (Di Letizia 2014: 298–300), enriching a debate philosophically that pertains mainly to cognitive sciences and psychology (Argenton et al. 2014) and game studies (Bittanti 2004). Being part of a phenomenological speculation, his approach interrogates digital games thanks to the concept of noema and intentionality. It is here that lies the difference: Ravel Puzzlewell's riddle, as translated above, does not have only a *noematic* content, strictly rational and born from knowledge, but moves from the *pisteuma*, from what we can believe be true, and only after that it is analysed and challenged and/or validated by *ratio*. The torch in *Alan Wake*, in a player's worldview, is a torch before any other speculation and nothing more than a torch until any other question is asked.

This is the reason for which the Nameless One gave the only possible correct answer to the hag's riddle: it is a *pisteumic* answer that become *noematic* only once challenged. And by asking what digital games can say about our being Human, the path marked by phenomenology crosses the bridge towards the spiritual. A player's emotional involvement in the game is fundamental in determining the question status: it has already been shown how digital game impact emotions (Frome 2007), but the element of *pisteuma* seems to point to another direction.

The Sea of Doors and the "Human Without Destiny": Spiritual Approach in Conscious Gaming

A spiritual approach in conscious gaming, starts from accepting that a game is not 'just a game', but an integral part of our being Human; the neurological, cultural, and experiential point of view are beginning and complement of how this might be expressed. It is a philosophical question that challenges the assumptions of a Player's nature and points to Human's nature; moreover, it can help showing how an MIO can have the 'sacral aura' of works of art in the contemporary, digitalized, and informational western culture. Not every game can have the right conditions to be experienced using this approach, obviously, in the same way as not every movie carries deep philosophical meaning, or how not every book bears the same literary value. This is a crucial part of this proposal: by accepting the relational nature of games intended as MIOs, as argued earlier, a player should be able to identify which digital game is appropriate to be played as a practical philosophy exercise. The two philosophical exercises in conscious gaming that follow recognize the games presented as MIOs thanks to both their intrinsic virtues (artistic direction, powerful soundtrack, apt gameplay) and relational quality (being *différance* of relation with the player and between players). The following quick case studies can be seen as an example of how this approach can leverage a deeply authorial title, and how these kinds of digital games can be used as a tool for practical philosophy.

In the development of Irrational Games' *Bioshock Infinite*, its game designers gave an unintended answer to the philosophical question that we advanced in this argument. After having her multidimensional powers fully restored, once again being able to open rifts (called 'tears' in-game) between different realities and universes, the character Elizabeth transports Booker DeWitt (the player) to a peculiar place called the 'Sea of Doors': an endless expanse of lighthouses over the sea. In the game's setting, this represents the quantic variables and constants of different realities in the many-worlds interpretation as presented by quantum physicist Bryce Seligman DeWitt, namesake of the character. In this vast expanse of possibilities, the main antagonist, Zachary Comstock, searched and found all the elements that allowed him to transform the utopic (dystopic?) fling city of Columbia into a powerhouse capable of challenging the nations of the world – and even to conquer them, in an alternate reality. One of the cardinal characters of the story, the Songbird, is created by looking at one of the alternate realities nearest to Comstock's Columbia: the Big Daddy from the first *Bioshock* chapter (2K Boston 2007). In the Sea of Doors, the player sees different version of his character and Elizabeth walk towards other lighthouses in a mimicry of their movements, but always with a slightly varied de-

tail. "There is always a lighthouse, there is always a man, there is always a city"(Irrational Games 2013) says Elizabeth, in reference to all *Bioshock* games (since 2007): lighthouses, cities, and a man fighting against a destiny that ties him since the beginning of the story are a common thread in all episodes of this series. It can be argued that these varied details, if expanded in an infinite setting, are able to cover every movement's variation made by a player in multiple playthroughs and by different players in different playthroughs. There, in the Sea of Doors, the player is offered a glimpse of their own nature: a dynamic constant in a sea of variables, not only for different playthroughs, but different games too. In a sense, Kevin Levine (the lead designer of the series) and his team are suggesting us to look at their games as 'tears' not only on other stories, but also on other aspects of ourselves. "Every lighthouse is a door" (ibid.); the closest ones open to other playthroughs of the same title but is easy to imagine that the farthest are to other games. Lighthouses turns into towers, then into castles, or skyscrapers, each one a door to another game, another experience. An experience of conscious gaming kept on the noematic level is aware of the story's meaning and the connection with quantum theory and can appreciate the setting's artistic level. The spiritual approach adds something more, without risking to 'read too much' into a game. A spiritual approach to *Bioshock Infinite* makes the player aware of the *pisteuma* behind the experience of gaming and what it means to be a player, having the chance to cross games, settings, narratives, gameplays. It makes the player aware of the potential to keep all the experiences made while immersed in a digital game and to transport them in their everydayness. Much as different aspects of the same character can be a force of good and a force of evil according to what we experience, different aspects of the Human can be raised and developed according to what inside the stories we live and what we believe can resonate with us. Player and characters of every game played 'live' two different experiences, where the former is aware of the latter (but not the other way around) thanks to the phenomenological mechanisms of immersion. This philosophical acknowledgement is felt in the whole player: mind, body, personal relations, but also cultural, anthropological, and professional speculations; all are impacted by the meaning that arises from such dynamism of the relation between player and characters. In the end, the *différance* is such that, like Booker DeWitt, at the very end of *Bioshock Infinite* gains the consciousness of being both himself and Zachary Comstock, a player can affirm in a certain, hybrid way to be both themself and any character ever played.

In being aware of this relation with his characters, the player can be in a certain state of freedom between different choices and narrations; state of freedom situated more in emotions than in rational reasoning, as suggested by an interpretation of Dontnod Entertainment's *Life is Strange* guided by this approach. This game, like *Bioshock Infinite* involved with quantum theory in its themes and narrative, was designed (as said in the first part) in order to 'give a sense of looking inside ourselves'. The choices that Max Caulfield, the player's character, is guided through thanks to her capacity to rewind time, from a noematic perspective make the player reflect on free will, action and consequences, and friendship value. But the emotional involvement generated by the game seems to indicate something more, something that is tied to the nature of Max as character. The relation between Max and her childhood friend Chloe Price is drawn and narrated in such a way that the player is involved way more than other games, both in the narration and in the characters. Not considering the occasions when the player rewinds time in order to

progress the story, we can identify three principal different timelines: 1) the main time-line, 2) the timeline where Chloe's father survives an accident and Chloe is reduced to a paralyzed condition, and 3) the timeline where Max wins the photographic contest and flies to San Francisco. These timelines are connected by definite turning points: 1) the day Chloe's father dies and 2) the day Max saves Chloe from being shot and, thanks to this emotional struggle, discovers her powers. In the game the character keeps mem-ory of everything the player experiences, for gameplay purposes. Thus, the player can progress in the story using notions, dialogue options, objects, and the like. In one of the 'timeline jumps' during Episode 5, Max clearly states this loss of memory to Chloe: "in a few minutes I won't know any of this happened… nothing. (…) You'll have to tell me ex-actly what I did and said just now" (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). Due to this, it can be said that Max does not remember anything if she returns to a timeline before and after producing a change, because it was not experienced by the player. During the game, the various choices and story lines are designed to open to the player to the inner turmoil of a contemporary teenager between memories of childhood, present school and romantic struggles, and perspectives for the future of their career. The complex net of characters and feelings involved are designed to generate attachment in the player that build up until the very end of the story. The final choice (made under a lighthouse, by the way) forces the player to a hard decision: to sacrifice Chloe to save the town, or the other way round. This is enough to justify an internal struggle in the player before choosing. Max, as a character, surely 'suffers' through the same or an even stronger emotional struggle. It is possible that, at some point in one of two Max's futures, she experiences another emotional struggle due to remorse that sends her back in time to the moment the game began – and there, she does not remember anything. Under this light, each playthrough is another iteration of the same narration; the character cannot remember, but the player does. Be it for exploring different paths, for trying different choices, or for experiencing the same story, the player turns Max in the 'Human without destiny', a wandering Hu-man (Marcel 1980) purely dynamic and entangled in a relation of mutual experiences of events not yet lived. This characteristic, if applied to MIOs with a strong narrative com-ponent, can make the emotional involvement of the player in a game, from a spiritual ap-proach to conscious gaming, akin to that peculiar nostalgic feeling for events that never happened. It is clearly an aporetical expression: How can someone have nostalgic feel-ings for something that was never experienced? Here, again, lies the *différance* between player and character: the memories of a game, which justify the game itself by being phe-nomenologically experienced, if looked through a spiritual approach to conscious gam-ing, are in a certain 'hybrid' state and concurs to the nature of the *pisteuma* the MIO can help to build in the Human.

Digital Sublime and *Cyberpunk*: Ultra-Material as Door to the Transcendent

Given the hybrid nature of the digital medium and the hints of transcendence that it can contain, it is no surprise that the idea of some kind of 'digital sublime' (Mosco 2004) was pushed forward when technological advancement in the field showed what potential it might bring to Human's everyday life outside of imagined science fiction stories. The idea

of a digital sublime suggests that when we are faced with a new, advanced technology, we have the same experience of the sublime that Romanticism started to theorize upon both in philosophy and in art. To summarize Mosco's theory, the digital sublime is the intense experience of marvel at the ideas, concepts, and consequences of a technological advancement that up until that moment was not present, or if present, not yet fully shared to the public. At the time of writing, the positive reactions towards the perfectioning of generative AI like ChatGPT can be described as a kind of digital sublime. The idea that algorithms have advanced so much that an AI can now delve into the domains traditionally thought as only accessible by Humans to produce art and literature is awe-inspiring to some, as they may understand it as a promise of comfort and ease of existence. There is, however, those who extend stern critique of the concept of the digital sublime and the positive attitude towards technology that it brings, as it does not allow for a critical analysis of the risks that new technologies might advance (Numerico 2022). Those who oppose it, again by taking the example of how much AI has advanced in recent years, say that it risks giving a too optimistic opinion on these kinds of technologies, thus clouding judgement. Critics' perspective is quite radical: new technologies are instruments and as such need to be considered, with full knowledge of the fact that they share the same potential of those technologies that have brought forth ages of conflict past and world-level tensions during the Cold War. It is not a new debate, as time and time again voices are raised in warning against a technological advancement unbound by critical thinking. This is the reason for which every discussion about new technologies must be rooted in a critical approach towards τέχνη that can recognize potentiality and risks at the same time; and any discussion on digital games and their potential as philosophical tool must share this approach. It is easy, in fact, to get carried away by the well-crafted worlds and game experience that the industry presents to the players and users. A spiritual approach to the experience of a digital game in the 'conscious gaming' sense can mitigate these scenarios we presented –and at the same time help in understanding the relationship between the Human and the ever-growing digital. It might also be considered as a way through which contemporary sensibilities can experience the age-old concept of **transcendence**.

Let's consider CD Project Red's *Cyberpunk 2077*. While riddled with flaws in the gameplay, it presents themes strictly tied to the idea of transcendence through the Machine. It can be seen as one of the finest examples of the cyberpunk movement and aesthetics, being as it is the digital game transposition of the Tabletop Roleplaying Game *Cyberpunk 2020* (Mike Pondsmith 1988) and its subsequent incarnations. In this title, a player follows the story of V, a mercenary operating in Night City, who during the classic 'heist-gone-wrong' trope of crime stories ends up inserting the digitalized consciousness of one of the most acclaimed rockers into his augmented brain. The rocker is a cross between mercenary and rockstar: Johnny Silverhand. From here, the story throws its co-protagonists into a long struggle to understand how this ghost in the machine-brain can be extracted without killing both host and digitized consciousness, and what this means for the bigger picture of constant war between the megacorps. The themes of immortality and Human nature are strictly tied to the gameplay. The game developers and writers did an impressive job of presenting a vast spectrum of how a hyper-technologized Human can react to an ever-advancing τέχνη. In Night City, there are people that completely reject any kind

of augmentations, and others that try to 'chrome themselves up' as much as possible, up to the point of falling to the ever-present threat of cyberpsychosis. This is an interesting gaming mechanic, present in the tabletop games as well, that could really be a starting point of a whole different paper. But suffice it to say that it shows how far the addition of technology into one's very own being, both physically and mentally, can bring a person far from their Humanity (Pondsmith 2022). All of this is set in a huge, sprawling open-world style map that the player can explore up to its most remote areas. When exploring further and further and reaching spaces far from the urbanized centre of Night City, the environment becomes progressively emptier and more deserted, but also more realistic and meaningful.

Cyberpunk 2077 can thus provide a huge number of examples and elements that can be helpful in the approach I have tried to formulate. Aside for the main plot struggle of a digitized consciousness to understand what it is (Just a simulation or can it be considered a real, living entity?) the world CD Project Red and Pondsmith present to the player is breath-taking. They can meet Buddhist monks that tear all technological augmentation from their bodies and live in poverty, subject to the violence of bands of thug that forcefully augment them just out of spite. They can meet netrunners that completely rejected their humanity and upload their consciousness in the Net. They can even meet what seems to be entities born directly from the collective upload of huge amount of data, like a naturally emerging artificial intelligence (and this would be another very interesting starting point for another paper). But most importantly, they can see dozens and dozens of everyday people, progressing through their normal lives that integrate technological enhancements and advancements in their existences, oblivious to the high-level theorizing that the player do with the two co-protagonists, V and Johnny Silverhand. In this sense, *Cyberpunk 2077* presents a world where the technological element of a dystopian cyberpunk society is on one side heavily material, a proper *res* and *substantia* that grounds the lives of its inhabitants, but that can also open the doors to something that transcend that very same technology, be it by embracing or rejecting it. Especially interesting is how the impermanence of the digital in the net can be seen as the experience of some kind of non-physical experience akin to religious mystic experience in the sense the Voodoo Boys express. This is, in the game, a gang of very expert hackers and thugs that build up a faith system by crossing Haitian voodooism faith in loas and spirits with the (in-game world) reality of the already mentioned emerging artificial intelligences.

All these elements, when met during the game, on one side enrich the story the designers tried to tell, but on the other, are elements that give further elements on the understanding of the relation between Human and technology. Once again, the idea of a defined nature of the Human is challenged; quite the contrary, it is presented as a constant dynamic between the physical and mental dimension and how the implementation of technology can bring to this discussion. It is, of course, an approach that goes to the direction of transhumanism in the contemporary sense of the word (and not according to Dante's *transumanar*, unfortunately). However, rather than wanting to give a clear answer to these questions and a direction towards which pushing the player, *Cyberpunk 2077* can be interpreted as a problematization of these themes. Being a role-playing game, *Cyberpunk 2077* present all of this in its narrative, thus providing a rich ground for further analyses.

Neo-Humanism in *Beyond Earth*

Sid Meier took a different path: *Beyond Earth* does not have much in terms of narration as a strategic game, but it presents a world. The only narration predates the game events: with great hubris, Humans almost destroyed the planet with pollution, wars, and by exhausting its resources. States and private companies have built colony spaceships according to their own traditions, thus presenting the player a choice of sponsors that range from American Reclamation Company's specialization in spies and undercover operation to Franco-Iberian culture advancement. The introduction movie shows these characterizations in a moving way, with the corporative building of ARC's spaceship or the blessing of Slavic Federation's seeding vessels by an orthodox priest before take-off. Here, the indirect narration expressed through building, units, and technologies descriptions tells of the Great Mistake, the Seeding, the quest of the Human for a new place to live, where to atone for its past sins –or to repeat them.

The term 'lore' used by the community of players to describe this peculiar kind of silent narration is particularly appropriate here. It can trace its origin from Old English *lār*, 'to learn', to the Old German **laistjan*, 'to follow a track', and up to the Indo-European root *leis-*, 'track, furrow'; it is also connected to Latin *delirium*, 'madness'. To follow this story means to search for the footprints in every corner, to follow the tracks and the ditches in the environment, looking for every little detail that might give a hint to the bigger picture. It means for the player to have an attention to details and to be in a very particular mind-set in order to find meaning.

Players can decide to just follow the game mechanics and build cities, create states, and relate to other factions via diplomacy or war; but sometimes the game shows its world thanks to environmental storytelling, and here players can make a conscious act to follow these hints toward a better understanding of the game's world. There is no big story as in *Cyberpunk 2077*; there is no huge and defying struggle against megacorporation to save the life of a simple mercenary. Here, descriptions and quotes are what accompany the player in their chosen civilization's evolution.

The player is presented with three branches of possible Human advancement, each one tied to a different victory scenario. **Supremacy** sees the Human become more and more tied with digital technologies, ultimately merging with them in a synthetic life form where Human flaws have been corrected by computing power and immortality is achieved uploading one's consciousness. **Harmony** rejects the environmental sins of Humanity's predecessors and welcomes alien life, trying to integrate them in the Human genome to live in harmony and reach the whole Planet's awakening. **Purity**, on the other hand, tried to correct the errors of the past by keeping the human genome intact and establishing control over technology, without dominance of neither and embracing the idea of the Human as a peculiar and dynamic being. Discovering new technologies connected to these ideologies brings a civilization closer to its ideals – or, with the Rising Tide expansion, allows a player to adopt hybrid play styles. Every technology discovery or erecting of a Wonder (unique buildings that give an edge in different areas of a civilization's development and play style) is accompanied by a quotation of one of the sponsors' leaders that shed light on a possible outcome of its ideology.

This is an important point: there is no narration but a quotation that helps immersion by the player in the game. Everything else is built by the player during the experience of the game; it is left to the player's imagination to create the story of the Human during the Seeding of a new Planet every new playthrough. *Beyond Earth* lets the player build their knowledge of Humanity's past, of the various scenarios and the possibilities of the future, piece by piece. It is a slow process that requires players to be patient and listen to the quotes, open the in-game encyclopaedia, and read the stories of buildings and units and to suspend the game and discuss it with other players in forums and social networks. If experienced with an open mind that welcomes stimuli for reflections and considerations, playing the game presents various elements that can stimulate to think about the future of the Human. What will be the relation with our environment when we finally accept that anthropocentrism has to be abandoned and rejected? Is integration with technology a road to embark upon or we will have to keep ourselves in an interrelation with it? The slow pace of a turn-based strategic game allows a player to reflect during the gameplay, much like reading an essay or a paper.

Conclusion

In playing *Planescape: Torment*, the player is able to follow the steps of the Nameless One's story and give another answer to Ravel Puzzlewell's riddle. No matter what the player chooses as an answer, the hag always accepts it, for the same reason: it is true for the Nameless One. A player can answer according to the story their character lived or according to their personal choices. In the very conclusion of the game, when the protagonist is confronted with his own mortality and has to fight it in order to gain the right to finally die, he summarizes this effectively:

> If there is anything I have learned in my travels across the Planes, it is that many things may change the nature of a man. Whether regret, or love, or revenge or fear –whatever you believe can change the nature of a man, can. I've seen belief move cities, make men stave off death, and turn an evil hag's heart half-circle. This entire Fortress has been constructed from belief. Belief damned a woman, whose heart clung to the hope that another loved her when he did not. Once, it made a man seek immortality and achieve it. And it has made a posturing spirit think it is something more than a part of me. (Black Isle Studios 1999)

Humans, if we accept the idea that they can be understood as *dynamis*, can be seen as the embodiment of this concept. We are constantly changing and evolving around a relational core, and while technology is one of the elements that change and evolve (at a **staggering** rate), it is also at the hearth of what means to be Human. However, without consciousness of how this evolution and this *dynamis* happen, being overwhelmed by the sirens of an untamed digital sublime is no longer just a risk, but a reality of our everyday life.

Digital games can be a tool for practical philosophy to analyse these issues and search for solutions, if looked at in a certain way. Hence, I tried to build on Marco

Accordi Rickard's concept of Multimedia Interactive Opera to identify which can be the characteristics of a digital game in order to be used in practical philosophy. I have then suggested the idea of **a spiritual approach of conscious gaming** as methodology of this peculiar practical philosophy proposal, and tried to argue with case studies of *Bioshock Infinite* and *Life is Strange* what this approach can say about the nature of the Human. In the second part, I have further expanded this approach on two other case studies, *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Sid Meier's Beyond Earth*, to argue that a spiritual approach to the themes of transhumanism and posthumanism, once cleared of the interesting but dangerous impressions of an unbridled digital sublime or an acritical techgnosticism, can help in understanding what the relation between Human and technology can be.

Of course, I am fully conscious that such an approach is open to criticism. This is the reason for which the proposal presented in this paper is a workflow, an approach, rather than a definite argument. While I am convinced that it truly possesses the potentiality to enrich all philosophical approaches to digital games, it not only requires more refinement, but it also needs to be continuously tested in order to keep the pace of the, once again, staggering rate of technological advancements.

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Sacred Places and Spatial Design in Fantasy-themed Isometric cRPGs

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The aim of this analysis is to assess the spatial narratives evoked by sacred architecture in digital games. The scope of the research is limited to those computer Role Playing Games (shortened, cRPGs) which implement isometric, top-down perspective. The focus on non-(full)3D environments is motivated by some specific narrative and level design solutions implemented in such games, that affect the orientational agency (Carr 2003) of the players' characters while taking advantage of various forms of environmental story-telling (Fernández-Vara 2011). In the analysis, I will concentrate on the issues of space, verticality, map layouts in relation to sacred objects and buildings, and other means of connecting games' mechanics with interactive and non-interactive elements of sacred architecture. This research treats the definition of architecture quite broadly, including sacred structures of various types and origins (Wescoat/Ousterhout: xxi), incorporating human(oid) and environmental agency alike.

The main sections of this analysis concern two distinct modes of facilitating meaningful narratives and interactions through the introduction of sacred architecture and spatial design. First one focuses on temples, shrines and other places that are situated in a clearly defined space within the (graphic representation of the) game world. Second one refers to places which quasi-religious provenience is suggested rather than directly communicated through labelling performed on the level of graphical interface, which makes their in-game representation more open to themes of ruination, non-human agency and references to the (oftentimes ancient) history of a particular region. While clearly signalled sacred spaces encompass fully functional – from both narrative and mechanical standpoints – religious facilities, the implied and non-obvious sacred grounds are communicated through environmental storytelling and non-direct references to the in-game lore.

In the following section, I will present the reasoning behind the selection of titles for this study, key concepts of sacred spaces used in the research as well as a general overview of the theoretical underpinnings.

Introducing the Spiritual Spatiality

I focus predominantly on the fantasy-themed titles, with a few examples taken from post-apocalyptic games for the sake of comparison. The research material encompasses games based on the *Dungeons&Dragons* license: Infinity Engine titles such as the *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare since 1998) and *Icewind Dale* (BioWare since 2000) series, as well as their indirect continuations featured in the *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment since 2015) series. Staying true to the cRPG genealogy, several examples are referring other games in the genre, especially *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (Troika Games 2001) and *Tyranny* (Obsidian Entertainment 2016). The rationale behind this selection follows the crucial differences in conceptualizing religion and spirituality when it comes to fantasy-themed and science-fiction/post-apocalyptic titles, the two categories that comprise the majority of isometric cRPGs. Lars de Wildt puts forward that "science fiction-based religions indicate a radical and unacknowledged ontological shift in the perspective on religion: religious, spiritual or occult phenomena are no longer located in nature (as in history- or fantasy-based religion), but in a man-made technological world" (Wildt 2020: 141). Although there have been some interesting instances of fantasy-themed cRPGs where on the narrative level metaphysics got intertwined with the very material cultural output of past civilizations (as in the *Pillars of Eternity* series), searching for the ghost in the machine has indeed been reserved for the settings closer to the modern-day level of technological advancement.

Following the seminal work of Clara Fernández-Vara, this analysis is based on the premise that "spaces are one of the obvious bridges between narrative and games" (2011: 2) and that they "can evoke and construct a narrative experience while navigating a space". Building on the work of Henry Jenkins, Fernández-Vara argues that space can be conceptualized through its "basic qualities" which are "movement, contests, and exploration" (Fernández-Vara 2015: 101). Many of the religious themes explored in this paper stem from the Jenkins' notion of environmental storytelling in game design, where "organizing the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution" (Jenkins 2007: 58). These in-game spaces are "rule-based" (Fernández-Vara 2015: 101), and signalling religious undertones through the cohesive application of particular architectural or environmental traits is a common strategy in designing challenges within digital games. Spatial narratives are arguably in the centre of meaning-making associated with digital games, although the idea of a 'sacred space' is not as easily transferred into the realms of digital worlds. Given the divergent definitions of religious objects, understanding the in-game sacred spaces poses similar problems to describing the 'sacredness' of space in contemporary world; Douglas Hoffman claims that "a definition of sacred space is tantamount to expressing the ineffable, presenting the unpresentable, or describing the divine, which in many cultures and faiths is taboo" (2010: 2). This research aims to disentangle the meanings – and functions – of sacred spaces in a very specific, now largely derelict type of digital games, and as such tries to contribute to the ongoing discussions on the modes of translating the religious themes, expressions and spatial design into the medium which imposes significant technological and discursive constraints on the ways in which such process can materialize in a

finished, interactive product. The overarching premise of the rationale followed here is that "the game's topographical arrangement – and the shape into which it moulds the player's path – can become the narrative's chief organising principle" (Vella 2011: 1).

There is a special perspective through which players explore sacred architecture in isometric-style cRPGs. As many of these titles have a fixed and non-adjustable camera view, oftentimes only two out of four walls in a given room or building interior are on full display. This results in the rest of the space – often unexplorable or even altogether obscured from the view – being transformed into an implied space, a space which by default should 'inherit' the properties of the elements which are normally visible to the players. The older Infinity Engine titles use this constraint in creative ways, introducing multi-faced rooms with numerous walls, interactive panels and non-standard cubature. However, the cRPG sacred places are rather tame and conservative in their spatial design, with more architectural leeway being given in locations where the narrative extravaganza is amplified by some form of a non-obvious environmental design, such as in the Spellhold Asylum in *Baldur's Gate II*.

There is a connection between the projected verticality to establish hierarchical, architectural order, and the rationale behind placing temples and other graphically distinct sacred spaces on the maps of particular locations. Temple of Yondalla, dedicated to the Halfling's Goddess, in *Baldur's Gate I*, is placed within a short travel distance to the game's biggest and most intricate dungeon crawl, the Durlag's Tower, which allows players to access its crucial services (e.g. identifying items and resurrecting fallen party members) with relative ease during the time-consuming exploration of its four underground levels. However, other spatial dynamics are often employed with relation to sacred places: from the division of the sacred area itself into different sections to delineating sacred space through religious artifacts, various design strategies were employed to convey the meaning associated with religious architecture.

Possible strategies to explore sacred places are afforded to the players by the in-game architecture: growth in strength of an individual adventuring party member is inextricably tied to the progress made in the understanding of spatial design. The logic of gradually acquiring special insights and unveiling what remained hidden at the beginning of the journey is a recurring theme in isometric RPGs. In *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (Troika Games 2003), the first major location inside the titular temple is The Throne Room which contains a secret passage revealed at the end of the game, allowing the party to face the final confrontation. Similar logic is employed in the way in which Temple of Tempus is implemented within the *Icewind Dale*'s narrative arc. This time, the sacred place is available to be partially explored at the beginning of the journey, but it hides a mystery reveled in the very last chapter of the game. As argued by Jonathan Z. Smith, the sacredness of a particular space is inextricably connected with the potential to perform rituals within its borders (1988: 18). The common feature of the titles analyzed in this chapter is that they connect in-game actions with religious rituals that unlock new spatial dimensions of the in-game world.

In the subsequent parts of my analysis, I would refer to the works of Jeanne H. Kilde who writes about a specific "power dynamics" in Christian architecture (2008: 4). According to her studies, church buildings are considered "dynamic agents" in the process of cultivation and preservation of formalized manifestations of faith. She enumerates three

types of power associated with sacred spaces: divine, social, and personal The first one is a direct consequence of such space being a home of a supernatural force, often personified and possessing a fixed set of properties and characteristics. Social power is tied with hierarchies and division between the clergy and lay persons inhibiting a given area, and personal power comes from a personal experience of visiting a shrine or a temple. I would argue that such agonistic take on the sacred spaces fits well with their contextualization in cRPGs, and this tripartite framework will inform the rationale presented in the following sections.

Sacred spaces can also be considered places of transcendence, where architectural elements prompt a re-framing of our senses towards the un-earthly beings and ideas. This notion can be explored through the idea of 'nondirected attention' that is evoked when one contemplates or slowly immerses in the natural surroundings while subsuming to their calming and healing powers, which Rebecca Krinke associates with the set of architectural inspirations observed in Christian and Shinto buildings (2015: 48). The architectonics of sacred spaces in videogames can be – and oftentimes is – embedded in the digital representations of nature, and comparison between the urban-themed sacred space and sacred outdoor areas can help to bring forward their distinctive teleologies: how they serve both a mechanical and narrative role in proving players with explanations regarding the purpose of the gameplay and even underscoring the whole worldbuilding aspect of a fictional, digital universe.

Sacred City, Sacred Architecture

The overarching idea that informs the particular conceptualization and interpretation of sacred architecture in this paper refers to the notions of modularity and interactivity. For the sake of this analysis, sacred spaces are treated as objects built from the components that constitute integral building blocks of the gameplay. This approach allows to assess the temples, chapels and sacred natural areas according to their **explorability**, interactivity and general purpose defined by both the narrative and mechanics of a particular title. The somehow formulaic architecture of sacred objects in games lies partially in their asset-driven modularity: once the design framework defining the features of a given object has been established, it could be easily modified to fit diverse range of environmental design purposes.

In Athkatla, the main city hub of *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, at least one temple is present in six out of eight map areas. Although most of them are somehow connected with minor or major quests, their architectonic structure mainly allows for a convenient placement of key NPCs (non-player characters) who are usually permanently allocated to their designed spots. Top-down perspective favours more open spaces, and separate rooms or hidden areas are scarce. Interestingly, active temples in cities rarely suggest a division between the prayer- and service space and 'sacred' space reserved for the presence of high clergy. Conversely, if the temple interiors are more extensive and contain any points of interest for players to discover, their architecture makes a clear distinction between the part which blends with the surrounding architecture of the city and the part which must be accessed (in most cases – descended into) separately. Examples of this

spatial trope can be witnessed in the first iteration of *Pillars of Eternity*, where both Temple of Eothas in Gilded Vale and Woedica Temple in Defiance Bay look like small and inconspicuous ruins on the area map. Additionally, the underground temple trope in cRPGs is closely tied to dungeon-esque spatial design stemming from the classic *D&D*-based role-playing games, where the interconnected corridors and a mixture of confined and commodious rooms provide a playground maze for players' parties to explore.

Commenting on the neomedieval architecture of computer RPGs, Daniel Vella and Krista Giappone observe that "power relations seem generally more negotiable –even horizontalized –in the tavern" (Bonello Rutter Giappone/Vella 2021: 108). Similar conclusion can be drawn with regards to the temples where NPCs representing very different social strata share the same space. Especially in *Dungeons&Dragons*-based games, clergy and official religious figures to be found in temples and sacred objects usually perform a set of functions regardless of their denomination. Some items offered for sale may differ according to the assigned alignment of the deity worshipped in a particular area, but the services remain consistent across clergy associated with 'evil', 'neutral' or 'good' deities.

Conveying religious meaning in the fantasy-themed games rarely happens without the evocation of the myth and mythic-esque narrative structures so persuasively introduced in the popular writings of Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell that have been hugely influential in shaping the key texts of contemporary popular culture. Eliade's interpretation of the rationale behind the spatiality of sacred places reveals the desire of evoking a special realm that is not bound by the earthly constraints of the everyday life. As he writes in *The Sacred and the Profane*,

> The intention that can be read in the experience of sacred space and sacred time reveals a desire to reintegrate a primordial situation – that in which the gods and the mythical ancestors were present, that is, were engaged in creating the world, or in organizing it, or in revealing the foundations of civilizations to man. (Eliade 1959: 91–92)

Sacred space in digital games oftentimes mirrors this desire of unmediated agency – the temples and sacred sites quite literally amplify the divine presence and its tangible manifestations. The idea of an understated, albeit always present and extremely pervasive notion unifying the multitude of religions, cultural customs and formative narratives at their ideological and cultural core has been utilized also as one of the foundations of computer role-playing games from the isometric era. Interestingly, this can be seen not only in games repeating the framework of the Campbell's **hero's journey** (Campbell 1973) or relying on essentialist understanding of religious needs to facilitate hierarchical social structure underpinning their fantasy settings, but also in the level- and environmental design of these titles. The aforementioned religion historian and phenomenologist Mircea Eliade has been criticized on the basis of his essentialist approach to the practices of spirituality:

> The romanticism that influences theories of religion like Eliade's ignores modern linguistics, and "impeaches the status of language in order to preserve ontology from

anthropology and maintain the privilege of unmediated, direct experience". (Apple 2013: 49)

It can be argued that the spatial and symbolic unity which Eliade tries to establish between the common dwellings, everyday artifacts of domestic culture and sacred spaces is represented more accurately in the digital worlds of cRPGs rather than in the actual historic data. This "unmediated" experience of religion in cRPGs manifests in several ways. First, the presence of religious artifacts of a very tangible – and, to some extent, commodified – power is tied to the temple shops, where players can obtain items imbued with certain divine magic. Second, and this pertains more to the post-apocalyptic titles, sacred spaces are where players can meet 'religious' people; not just priests, but also lay persons who can usually be interrogated about their beliefs. Third, the de-contextualized presence of religion devoid of anthropological ambiguities and individual practices permeates games as systems, as the cohesive and clear-cut features of the key religious actors are crucial in conveying a narrative that would be at the same time immersive and relatively unconvoluted. Players' clear understanding of fictional spiritual practices is secondary to their grasp on religion as a system – which is a crucial worldbuilding component in many narratives.

If the architecture of sacred places is multi-layered and requires active engagement from the players, it usually means that a quest-driven narrative structure takes over the worldbuilding and lore-heavy exposition, the traditional two surface elements of temples in cRPGs. Such locations **de facto** serve as dungeons in more combat-oriented tabletop systems, where each room is filled with enemies to vanquish and puzzles to solve. The religious, lore-driven spatial narrative is substituted with exploratory desire motivated by a very tangible outcome: a material reward for players' expenses in the shape of rare artifacts and other lootable goods. However, the openness to pillage and murder in most cases connects with the fact that a given dungeon has been previously defiled and forcefully taken over by some evil creatures, and now the players' agenda is to somehow purify its desacralised whereabouts. The lingering aura of mystery in the gaming representations of religious architecture remains largely disconnected from the social and communal dimensions characterizing their real-life counterparts. It can be argued that "the architecture of virtual worlds [...] suggests cathedrals or mosques or pagodas without being identical to physical religious buildings" (Shut 2014: 270), albeit such mimetic resemblances in fantasy-themed cRPGs first and foremost signal their narrative functions rather than reference any concrete religious system. In addition to spatial properties, players may also get audial clues as to what to expect from a newly discovered sacred area; in *Baldur's Gate II*, temples devoted to Talos and Lathander each have very distinct sound sets.

Even though it is quite clear that "religion [...] serves as a source of magic, quests and items in fantasy games like *Skyrim* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*" (de Wildt/Aupers 2020: 1444), the role of in-game artifacts in establishing and delineating the borders of sacred spaces remained largely unexplored by the game studies scholars. To investigate the relevance of cult objects and artifacts in cRPGs, it may be useful to assess the instances in which the conventional spatial narratives associated with sacred spaces are modified and designed to transgress their utilitarian role. Prominent examples can be experienced in

Baldur's Gate II and include two major quest lines (*The Cult of the Unseeing* and *The Deaths in the Umar Hills*) located in areas related to Amaunator, the god of order, sun, law, and time[1].

In the canonical *Forgotten realms* timeline, after the fall of the Netheril empire, Amaunator essentially became a dead deity, and as a result the sacred places devoted to him do not offer any services. Quests linked to the former cult areas of the Yellow God employ spatial narratives connected with verticality: players' party must descend into the underground to fight off evil forces and restore the order. The common denominator for both of the questlines are items that need to be retrieved and assembled to successfully accomplish the tasks. The Rift Device Rod and the Symbol of Amaunator motivate the exploration of the underground areas, but their key role is to indicate the borders of the sacred spaces. Once used, Rift Device must be brought back to the underground temple, and any attempts to leave the dungeon with the item in the inventory result in the main protagonist being turned into dust. Conversely, the Symbol of Amaunator allows to enter the inner sanctum of the Temple Ruins, giving players access to resolve the quest and battle the main antagonist who corrupted the now-defunct temple. In both of these quests, the items marked with special religious importance are employed to signify the vertical delineation of the sacred and the profane, which would otherwise be very hard to achieve in an isometric cRPG. Here, the divine power gets intertwined with the personal power associated with religious space, and the idea of sacralisation of space through the human activity (Kilde 2008: 8) prevails against the sacredness understood as being established through hierophany which "reveals an absolute fixed point", an ontologically undisputable centre of religious presence (Eliade 1959: 21). Whereas *The Cult of Unseeing* makes players descend into the sewers of the Temple District in the city of Athkatla, the exploration of the Temple Ruins requires venturing into the wilderness first. The next step in my analysis of the spatial design of sacred spaces in cRPGs moves beyond the confined and organized areas marked by the presence of civilization, venturing instead into the realm where the discourses of primordiality, nature and sacredness are interlaced in conveying religion-related narratives.

Sacred Nature, Sacred Landscape

Referring back to Campbell's and Eliade's persuasive usage of the myth, it can be noted that it could be implemented to link the environmental 'sacredness' with the understanding of religion as a culturally significant system of beliefs. Elizabeth Parker comments that myth "carries a sense of both antiquity and yet fluid contemporaneity. This delineation makes sense when we think of the forest environment: it is a setting in which we imagine a multitude of myths to have occurred in the past, and yet imagine, now, that we may yet encounter them" (2020: 38). Wild lands in classic cRPGs are the realm of systemic religious pliability. Contrary to the cityscapes, there is no hierarchical verticality that would impose an order of exploration (and exploitation) of sacred spaces,

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1   https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Amaunator. Accessed 27 August 2023.

and signs of ruination blend in with the quasi-romantic aesthetic flavour of picturesque landscapes.

Parker aptly notes that "the forest [...] has been widely construed as an *antichristian space*", and "religion in the woods is usually presented as skewered and [...] the epitome of this is to be found in the significantly persistent image of the forest as a perverted Eden" (2020: 272). This is symptomatic in the instances when clergy or religious figures are spotted outside the sacred spaces; *Baldur's Gate*'s Bassilus, a mad cleric of Cyric who takes the undead around him for his family, dwells in one of the game's numerous wilderness areas (also known as Red Canyons) among the stony ruins, which is an architectural sign of both his moral and functional deterioration. It is important to note that abandoned temples, churches and other religious buildings in cRPGs actively use ruination as an aesthetic strategy to evoke **Ruinensehnsucht**, a specific longing for deteriorated remnants of architecture (cf. Fuchs 2016), calling for both exploration and contemplation. A 'sacred' space analogous to Red Canyons stony ruins in *Baldur's Gate* can be found in Larswood map, where two characters approach players' party with a rather malicious intent. In the official wiki, this location is curiously considered a "construction site of a druidic shrine"[2], which links to the other, rarely explored, albeit interesting trope connected with visual and narrative signs of desacralisation: positioning and labelling religious locations as 'excavation sites' of archeological importance. We can witness the prevalence of this trope whenever there is a narrative need to justify the excursion to remote places in the corners of a particular game world map. There is no coincidence that the temple ruins oftentimes remain outside the scope of the in-game civilization; one can hardly find examples of abandoned (and haunted, or taken over) buildings and sacred sites within the city space, as if the architectural and metaphysical signifiers of religion gradually lose their meaning along with their proximity to the in-game cultural hubs. The only obvious exceptions to this are locations beneath the city, but their very presence is often a threat to the aboveground 'civilized' religions. Here, another prevalent trope is confirmed: only the monsters are truly at home in the open nature – this statement resonated even in the very heart of nature-admiring romantic movement (Heringman 2004: 80), where the aesthetical roots of classic Western fantasy imagery arguably stem from.

Temples and sacred places are oftentimes also teleological in their design. The Temple of Trials in *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios 1998) is perhaps the most striking example of the utilitarian approach to supposedly sacred architecture devoid of nearly any spiritual, narratively embedded meaning, although fantasy-themed titles also have their share in using dungeon-esque spatial design under the guise of religious architecture. Some digital games include visual and narrative clues that link the journey of the hero through the in-game spaces with the advancement towards the godhood. For example, Jared Hansen explored the resemblance of "patterns of progression" from the profane to the sacred in traditional Shinto, Buddhist and Christian architecture in relation to the spatial representation of character's gradual empowerment in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD 1998) (Hansen 2021). However, most fantasy-themed isometric cRPGs assert the hero's journey through dialogues and encounters rather than spatial signs, and religious coding of isometric dungeons plays a secondary role to testing the players' combat

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2   https://baldursgate.fandom.com/wiki/Osmadi. Accessed 27 August 2023.

and negotiation skills. The Temple of the Forgotten God *in Icewind Dale* makes for another example of a sacred space which is in fact a linear dungeon devoid of any side quests, with only tangential evidence hinting at lore referring to Forgotten Realms pantheon[3]. The Temple is remote and requires rather long journey from the nearest hub of civilization, which signifies the presence of yet another recurring cRPGs trope: those sacred spaces which necessitate travelling through natural habitats are coded as explorable, albeit more or less inherently evil. Serpent's Lair Temple in *Icewind Dale II*, hidden among the Jungle of Chult, also follows the theme of Nature being a hiding place of rich and complex, yet perilous religious cults.

Among the most interesting instances of religious architecture strongly tied to the environment are locations where organic and non-organic nature is directly associated with a deity or someone possessing godlike powers. In *Tyranny*, there are at least two distinct maps built on such narrative premise: Howling Rock and Jagged Maw Shrine. Both are connected with Cairn, a powerful figure who has the ability to command the elements of the earth. Archon Cairn is literally buried among the rocks which make for the vast majority of the landscape, and the slow agony of the remnants of his living force is responsible for periodical earthquakes. Jagged Maw Shrine and the Archon himself are revered among the Beastmen, one of the local tribes. *Tyranny* unusually portrays the conflicting interests over the aforementioned areas: while some factions wish to conduct scientific experiments on the Cairn's petrified but still living body, others wish to end his suffering and stop the detrimental earthquakes. The complicated nature of this conflict, further amplified by the game's original take on including moral decisions into its narrative mechanics, highlights the multiple layers that can be considered in the assessment of a sacred space: its origins, history, present socio-political impact and even its possible deleterious environmental effect. This example underlines the social power contained within the sacred space – the power to facilitate group identity (in this case manifested in the Earthshakers faction residing in the area), but also the power to generate antagonisms between those arguing for a distinct form of divine presence and those denying its spiritual dimension altogether. In a sense, the sacredness of the aforementioned spaces is negotiable, and features an interesting clash between the scientific and spiritual approaches to religious dilemmas (cf. Pisarey 2020).

There are very few cRPG titles that connect religious tropes of mythical and science-fiction provenance, and *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, a unique mixture of fantasy and steampunk, certainly counts among them. This title introduces a multi-staged quest that prompts players to visit the game's sacred locations in a particular order. *Arcanum* features twelve distinct altars located in different regions, each dedicated to one god or goddess and providing bonuses to the players' party when a suitable offering is made. Some of these places are just statues, sometimes linked to a mini-quest that needs to be completed to secure a reward. Here, the interesting element of spatial design refers to the specific idea of pilgrimage – travelling between sacred places to achieve a spiritual prize. The *Ancient Gods* quest requires a map that illustrates the connections and hierarchical order of shrines, and some lore-related proficiency is needed to avoid curses

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3   One of the randomly generated treasures in the first level of the Temple are *Boots of Moander*, an artifact named after a long-forgotten (and considered dead as well as powerless) deity.

being imposed instead of blessings. Such digital pilgrimages can be considered just one of **allomytic**, that is "exploring nonexistent traditions" (Anthony 2014: 39), elements of interactive design. However, the spatial allocation of the interconnected altars and shrines reveals their role in environmental storytelling that supports the game's encounter design philosophy: both pacifist and extremely agonistic approach to gameplay are equally viable. An example of this is *Falcon's Ache*, a location of the Elven God of Wisdom altar, where each violent action by any character is immediately punished by death from the hand of gods for disturbing a sacred ground. Even given this condition, players' party can still verbally provoke a group of NPCs residing in the area, which – if played correctly – results in their demise after violating the laws of this place.

Conclusion

In the analysed titles, a certain structural cohesion and functionalization of sacred space is very noticeable. Allocating a teleological rationale behind the spirituality, religion and especially the design of sacred objects and locations underscores a bigger narrative frame through which these titles convey information about the lore, game world and even basic mechanics governing the gameplay. As insightfully observed by Leonid Moyzhes, in the *Baldur's Gate* series players must confront the fact of the god's absence – the death of the protagonist's father, who also happens to be the god of murder, strikes a peculiar postsecular note (2020: 75). The dialectics of presence and absence are extremely important in the construction of digital sacred spaces in cRPGs. The divine, social and personal power dynamics that constitute the meaning conveyed through spatial narratives are all employed in the cRPGs, and due to the unique aesthetics and design of these titles, the isometric cRPGs can be used to transgress the conventional spatial boundaries of sacred spaces, as demonstrated in the selected case studies.

The more defunct, ruined and abandoned the temple, shrine or monastery, the more agency it affords to the players. While exploration of sacred spaces does follow the general rules and key mechanics of the given game – in combat-oriented cRPGs the design of sacred architecture would be more focused on encounter design – city temples and aboveground structures of religious provenience are very different from the exploitable underground dungeons, even if both categories are narratively labelled as 'temples'.

The approach presented in this study has its limitations. As Jeanne Kilde observes, "although church spaces foster certain relationships and encourage certain behaviors, they do not necessarily require or determine those relationships and behaviors" (2008: 200), and similar conclusions pertain the digital game spaces. Isometric role-playing games historically asserted more agency to the players in terms of agonistic behaviour; plundering even functionally and mechanically uninteresting sacred places is usually possible without breaking the critical narrative path to successfully complete the game. Second limitation is tied to the historical accuracy and relevance of the in-game architecture from the perspective of heritage studies, which has not been assessed in this study. This issue would require a separate inquiry, as the topic at hand calls for a thorough mapping of sacred spaces against the architectural traits specific to a particular historical period.

In general, graphical conventions afforded by top-down view and party-based mechanics result in the architecture of sacred places being subsumed to the requirements of pathfinding and encounter design. Isometric cRPGs have to accommodate for the impact of interior design on both combat and non-combat encounters, where party placement and formation are crucial factors in achieving tactical advantage or initiating a dialog by a character developed to match such tasks. In the 3D, modern-day cRPGs – such as the third instalment of the *Baldur's Gate* series – the verticality and spatial design would arguably be employed to different ends than it has been the case in their isometric counterparts. Given the recent resurgence of the *Dungeons&Dragons* franchise (Sidhu/Carter 2020), future assessments of sacred digital spatiality in the upcoming fantasy-themed computer role-playing games have to take into account the evolving stance of this immensely influential system on religion and play. Inclusivity, diversity and the overhaul of traditionally combat-centred design approach could all play a pivotal role in the implementation of religious spatial tropes in digital RPGs.

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Franchised Esotericism

Religion as a Marketing Strategy for the *Assassin's Creed* Franchise

Lars de Wildt

Keywords: *Assassin's Creed; commodification; content analysis; developer interviews; esotericism; perennialism; religion*

Introduction

Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft since 2007) is steeped in religious plurality. Christian and Muslims vie for possession of a Judaic artefact created by a pantheon of Ancient Greek, Egyptian and other gods. Its audience, however, is not just huge but likely secular: indeed, it is more likely for young Westerners to encounter religion in videogames such as *Assassin's Creed* than in a church, mosque or synagogue.

    Assassin's Creed [AC] is a franchise of action-adventure games in the alternate history setting sketched above. It was started in 2004 by a team led by creative director Patrice Désilets, producer Jade Raymond, and writer Corey May. Being tasked initially with making a new *Prince of Persia* game (Broderbund 1989), they instead developed a new Intellectual Property around a machine, the Animus, that can access memories embedded in human DNA. Based on this narrative premise, players primarily take control of 'Assassins:' members of an elite guild of assassins based initially on the Muslim **hashashin** who lived in the mountains of Persia and in Syria between 1090 and 1275 (Daftary 1994, p. 5). In periods and locations across history, these Assassins vie for control over the world with a rivalling faction: the Templars – based in turn on the Christian 'Knights Templar.' This premise serves as a basis for a franchise counting, as of writing in February 2022: twelve 'main' games (Table 1), twelve spin-off games, a feature-length movie, a symphonic orchestra tour, three short films, 13 graphic novels, ten novels, a board game, and three editions of an encyclopedia.

Table 1: The main Assassin's Creed [AC] games as per February 2022, sorted by historical setting, with abbreviations.

Setting	Period	Title	Abbreviation	Release
Ptolemaic Egypt	49–43 BC	Assassin's Creed Origins	Origins	2017
Peloponnesian War	431–404 BC	Assassin's Creed Odyssey	Odyssey	2018
Viking invasion of Britain	873 AD	Assassin's Creed Valhalla	Valhalla	2020
Third Crusade	1191 AD	Assassin's Creed	AC1	2007
Italian	1476–1499 AD	Assassin's Creed II	AC2	2009
Renaissance	1499–1507 AD	Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood	Brotherhood	2010
	1511–1512 AD	Assassin's Creed: Revelations	Revelations	2011
Colonial Era	1754–1783 AD	Assassin's Creed III	AC3	2012
	1715–1722 AD	AC IV: Black Flag	AC4	2013
	1752–1776 AD	Assassin's Creed Rogue	Rogue	2014
French Revolution	1776–1800 AD	Assassin's Creed Unity	Unity	
Victorian era	1868 AD	Assassin's Creed Syndicate	Syndicate	2015

In 2020, Ubisoft reported internally that *Assassin's Creed* should be considered one "of the four most successful new brand launches in the history of video gaming" (Ubisoft 2020a: 14). If that sounds like a game company tooting its own horn – a recognisable sound to those who study any cultural industry – it is nonetheless based on some solid numbers. Although Ubisoft is hesitant to publish exact numbers per game or franchise, its annual report for 2020 claimed over 155 million *Assassin's Creed* games sold since 2007, and "100+ million unique players" (Ubisoft 2020b: 3). Later in the same year, the newest title, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal 2020), was claimed to have sold more units in its first week than any other entry in the series, and its "record performance for the Assassin's Creed® franchise [meant a] total yearly revenue up 50% vs prior record set in 2012–13" (Ubisoft 2021: 1).

For such a popular franchise, *Assassin's Creed* [AC] builds on something increasingly unpopular: religion. This chapter aims to show that *AC* nonetheless uses, and then aestheticizes religion in two ways – perennially and esoterically, as will be elaborated below – which serve to attract the largest possible audience. This involves answering the following questions, along which the chapter is structured:

(1) Who plays *AC*?
(2) What is likely to be their religious position? And
(3) How does *AC* represent religion for this (secular) audience?

Based mainly on a content analysis of the franchise itself – additionally informed by player interviews (de Wildt/Aupers 2019), online discussions (de Wildt/Aupers 2020), developer interviews (de Wildt/Aupers 2021), and analyses done elsewhere (cf. de Wildt, 2020) – I will argue that *AC* uses the structure of videogames and its transmedial franchise more broadly to lead the believer-consumer of *Assassin's Creed* to actively construct meaning through bricolage.

Assassin's Creed's Crowd

Who plays *Assassin's Creed*? Although exact statistics are not publicly available, the typical *AC* player is a young, college-educated man from North America or Western Europe. Due to practical limitations, not all demographics are perfectly reliable, recent, or specific to *AC*. For this reason, I go over the sources for them one by one, from most to least specific, noting each time how reliable and specific they are, and concluding nonetheless that those demographics (Western, young, male, college-educated) are highly likely to be true to a large extent. A quick caveat about a definition that runs through this text: when I refer to 'Western' and 'the West' as shorthands throughout this chapter, I am first of all echoing the demographic and geographic delineations made by the research I am referring to. Secondly, when using it 'myself,' by the West I mean those (settler-)European and settler-colonial cultures that are hegemonic on, geographically speaking, Turtle Island (North-America); in Europe, especially Northern- and Western-Europe; and the various non-ceded territories of Australia and *pākehā*-settled New-Zealand: territories with many shared cultural, historical and linguistic traits that we often collectively but vaguely identify as 'Western,' in which contemporary cultural industries produce much (but not most) of the world's commercially successful movies, music, and videogames; and in general the cultures through whom dominant concepts of 'religion' and 'secularisation' are defined. It is also, for full disclosure, where I grew up as a Dutch author.

Assassin's Creed players are mostly North-American or European. Based on Ubisoft's own sales figures from its annual financial report (Ubisoft 2020a: 8), most games were sold in North America (49 per cent) and Europe (34 per cent), vis-à-vis only 13 per cent in Asia and 4 per cent in the 'rest of the world' (Figure 1). The report does not break these sales down per game, but it is safe to assume that *Assassin's Creed* follows this pattern, being Ubisoft's best-selling product.

Assassin's Creed players are furthermore primarily men, even when compared to videogame industry averages in the European Union and the United States. According to an industry report from 2011 by third-party business analysts *GameVision*, 81 per cent of *Assassin's Creed* players were men (Sacco 2011). Although no such report has been updated since 2011 (to this author's knowledge), the company's 'brand maps' consisted of comprehensive surveys and interviews with "over 5,000 consumers in the UK, Germany,

France, Italy and Spain" (GameVision 2011: n.p.), each focusing on a specific franchise (ibid.).

Fig 1: Assassin's Creed franchise sales from 2018–2020 by region, report freely available (net bookings, in € millions) (Ubisoft 2020a: 8)
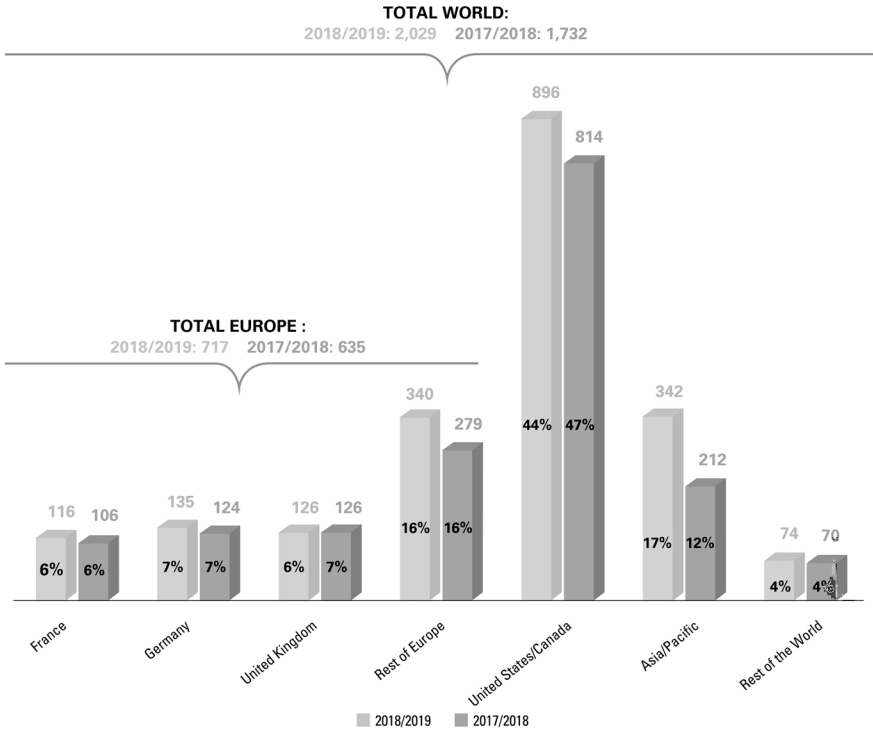
The same report gives a breakdown of *AC* players' ages (by gender), showing 39 per cent of the players surveyed to be below 19 (Figure 2). In that same year, European market research by the *Interactive Software Federation of Europe* [abbreviated ISFE] recorded only 12 per cent of players under 19 (ISFE 2012: p. 11); while the *Entertainment Software Association* in the US recorded 18 per cent under 18 (ESA 2011: p. 2) – current data puts players under 18 years old at 20 per cent in 2021 (ESA 2021: p. 2). With the caveat that *GameVision*'s data are a decade old, this does suggest that *AC*'s core audience (in 2011) was both younger and more male than players in general.

Finally, players of videogames in general are likely to be highly educated. Without being able to obtain data specifically about Ubisoft or *Assassin's Creed*, various studies of videogame playing populations indicate that players in general are higher-educated than the general population (e.g. Griffiths et al. 2003; Nagygyörgy et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2008). Although many of those sources focus on specific games or genres, a more general study by a Florida Healthcare provider presents a number of college- and higher graduates as high as 47.89 per cent out of 1045 'self-identified' gamers surveyed (Blackford 2020) – although self-identification with the gamer label or subculture is notoriously

skewed when it comes to gender, race and sexuality (cf. Shaw 2012), there are no indications this affects levels of education.

Fig.2: Assassin's Creed players age and gender breakdown in 2011, based on a freely available report by MCV and GameVision (Sacco 2011)
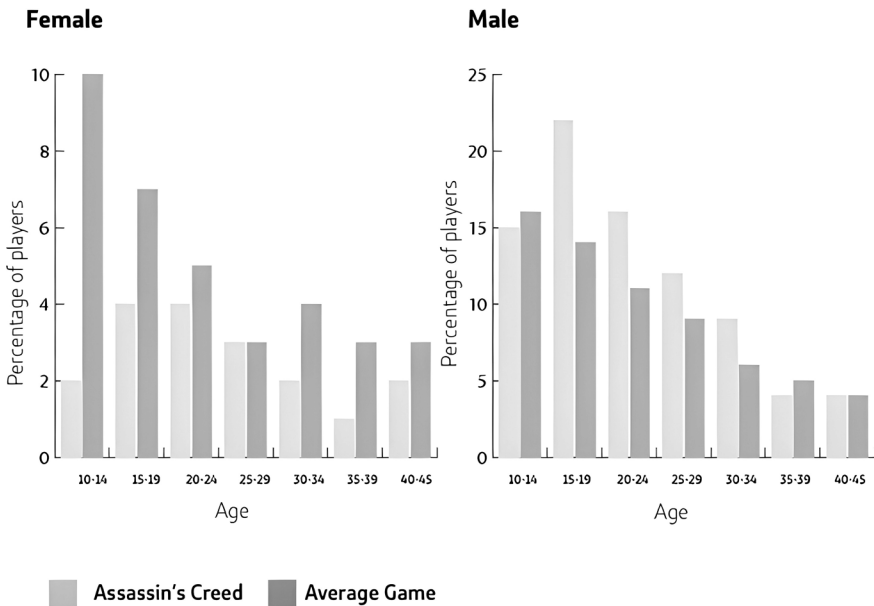
As I wrote, these sources are not ideal: they are simply the best information available. Although it is certain that *AC* players mostly reside in North-America and Europe, it is not more than **plausible** that they are male, young, and educated. It is easy – and encouraged – for readers to dismiss this demographic estimation as vague or unconvincing. I believe it nonetheless supports the main argument below, which stands on its own. At worst, this study bases itself on the *AC* games itself, on twenty-two people who made them – and in some cases were decisive or even originatory in making them – and eight people who played them. As a methodologically informed suggestion, and when triangulated with both the games analysed here and the plausible (but occasionally outdated or very general) demographic sources above, I argue that these twenty-two developers and eight players stand to illustrate the wider group described above, and more importantly: the demographic that the *AC* games seem largely designed for.

Assassin's Creed's Crowd's Creeds

With those caveats in mind, then, players of *Assassin's Creed* are likely young, Western men of relatively high education. This does not mean they are exclusively young, Western-educated men; it does mean that they conform overwhelmingly, and with quite some certainty, to this demographic – especially in comparison to the general (videogaming) public. The reason I set this out so elaborately above is that, upon closer inspection, this

demographic, perhaps coincidentally, is the same demographic that leads global secu-
larisation. I add 'perhaps coincidentally' because while part of *Assassin's Creed*'s success as
a franchise **might** indeed be its serving religious content to an audience most divorced
from religion out of anyone in the world; that is **not** what I argue for here – if only be-
cause I am reluctant to compare such content to gameplay, narrative, marketing and all
the other elements contributing to success. Instead, all I observe here is that *Assassin's
Creed*'s audience is largely made up of a demographic that is an overwhelmingly secu-
lar demographic on a global scale. Throughout this chapter, as announced, I simply ar-
gue that exactly this audience is attracted to *AC*'s aestheticisation of religion as it was
designed (and marketed) by *AC*'s developers. Let us start with the first point, and I will
conclude this chapter with the latter.

As I have stated elsewhere, it is "more likely for 'young' people in the 21st century [...] to
encounter religion in videogames than they would in church or anywhere else" (de Wildt
2023: 13). This may sound simply provocative, but it is true that 2.2 to 2.5 billion players
globally (>28.5 per cent of the population) and 338 out of 512 million EU citizens (66 per
cent) spend about six hours per week on average in-game (Limelight 2018; Newzoo 2017;
WePC 2019). Their average age is around 34 in the U.S. (ESA 2018: 4), and 31 in the EU (IS-
FE 2021: 7); whereas weekly church attendance for adults under 40 years of age is 36 per
cent globally, 28 per cent in the US, 16 per cent in Canada and 10 per cent in Europe, and
declining (Pew 2018). Put colloquially, for many adults, especially well-educated West-
erners below 40 like me, church is a thing we see on a screen – where the magic is **real**
– instead of on Sunday. People in general decreasingly go to places of worship such as
churches, mosques, and synagogues (Brenner 2016); decreasingly belong to a specific tra-
dition (Davie 1990), nor regard religious beliefs as relevant to their lives (Voas/Crockett
2005).

All of that is to say that generally, people are becoming less religious in the West
(WIN/GIA 2017; Zuckerman 2006), even in the U.S., which were long resistant to secular-
isation (Pew 2019). This is especially true the younger and more educated they are (Pew
2018; Johnson 1997); and more so in the case of men – by comparison to whom women are
more religious in general, especially Christian women (Hackett et al. 2016), and includ-
ing non-church traditions such as identifying as spiritual (Houtman/Aupers 2008). In
other words, the audience of *Assassin's Creed* finds itself demographically at the forefront
of those leaving the church since the 1960s – yet *en masse*, those same 'forerunners' enjoy
a game deeply steeped in various religious traditions.

Alternative Creeds

At this point, we should briefly take pause and note two things. Firstly, that there is reli-
gion outside of 'going to church' and identifying with an (organised) world religion. Sec-
ondly, that *Assassin's Creed* is not exactly a game about **being** religious, or going to church
– unless it is, as players do in *AC2* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009), to assassinate the Pope. In-
deed, some would argue that religion did not necessarily 'disappear' from the West: it
just changed to either (1) beliefs and practices not organised through a church, or (2) a
nostalgic and mysterious thing we see on screens. Let us start with the first one.

Writing on the difference between "believing" and "belonging," Grace Davie shows that while fewer (young) people indeed consider themselves as belonging to classical religious organisations; they nonetheless may *believe* in the existence of things such as God, hell, heaven and so on (1990). Whereas Davie surveys Europeans and Brits about such traditional religious concepts as 'God,' another sociologist – Thomas Luckmann (1967) – argued instead that entirely non-traditional beliefs and practices emerge outside of churches. According to Luckmann, the decline of church religion in the West gives way to a more privatised "invisible religion" (ibid: 103). That is: religion and spirituality appear privately through "bricolage," or the kind of hand-picked DIY set of religious elements from various traditions, which we might recognise in contemporary spirituality, New Age, self-help, mindfulness and other ways of meaning-making (ibid.). These individually customised forms of religion are typically theorised as a shift from 'religion' to 'spirituality,' often identifying the latter with esoteric traditions or New Age, and conceiving it as "post-Christian," "alternative" or "holistic" (cf. Houtman/Aupers 2007; Partridge 2004; Woodhead/Heelas 2005).

Secondly, religion persists in a third way that is not "believing" nor "belonging" (Davie 1990): it engages us through popular culture without ever doing either. Religion's appearance in media proves to be an enduring form of religious tradition transformed into entertainment – especially when it presents itself as 'esoteric,' i.e., as mysterious and unique rather than the everydayness of regular religious practice. In this light, Christopher Partridge (2004: 40) observes a "re-enchantment of the West" through film, television and popular music, in particular paying attention to such pop-cultural influences as George Harrison and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997), which popularise spirituality, the occult and other esoteric alternatives to institutionalised religion: a "return to a form of magical culture" through popular media (Partridge 2004: 40). Indeed, just as popular music of the 1970s introduced tropes from oriental spirituality, so did television in the late 1990s introduced a preoccupation with esoteric traditions such as Occultism, Gnosticism, Yoga and so on, continuing well into the 21st century. Further examples for Partridge would be hit series of the 1990s and 2000s such as *Charmed* (Burge 1998), *True Blood* (Ball 2008) or *Vampire Diaries* (Williamson/Plec 2009).

We may see the same kind of use of esotericism, or what Partridge (2004) calls 'occulture,' in the popular books and films of Dan Brown or the *Assassin's Creed* videogames – the latter of which came out at the top of Dan Brown's rising popularity. Both engage in speculative fictions that suggest more is going on beneath the surface of our own societies' history by using the mystery of the Catholic church to unearth all types of plots and conspiracies in Jerusalem, the Vatican and old French churches that reveal the magical, mysterious secrets of Opus Dei or the Templars. Lynn Schofield Clark documented ethnographically how teens deal with such interweaving of the supernatural and religion in fiction (2005), and found that teens' engagement with series like *Angel* (Whedon/Greenwalt 1999), *Buffy* or *The X-Files* (Carter 1993) leads them often to reconsider their religious stance against (or sometimes back in line with) organised religion, while speculating about the place of magic and the supernatural in their own belief systems (Clark 2005).

Thus, the situation is threefold: there is simultaneously (1) an apparent retreat from organised religion (secularisation); (2) a change from religion into privatised bricolage

(invisible religion as per Luckmann 1967); and (3) a persistence of religion in entertainment media (a kind of 'visible religion') – especially in esoteric, mysterious, occult forms. There remains, in other words, a certain desire – or at least a market – for those who leave the church to engage in other meaning-making practices. As said, this is especially so when those practices are esoteric or, as I use the umbrella term 'esotericism' here: non-institutionalised practices of meaning-making that are often formulated in small groups and touted as giving access to (mystical, spiritual, occult) knowledge by tying together eclectic traditions including science, traditional religion, and historical secrets.

What role does such visible religion play in the postsecular religious marketplace? More specifically in this case, **how** does the *Assassin's Creed* series present religion to an audience that does not belong to an organised religion, but nonetheless buys into it?

How Will I Address This Question?

I will address this question based on one primary method (content analysis) and two adjacent forms of data (developer and player interviews). I am here mainly interested in 'how' *Assassin's Creed* presents religion – although I will state my answer in accordance with both developer intention and player reception. If my main method is content analysis, my main dataset is the *AC* franchise itself, including its non-game sources. As stated above, these data include the twelve 'main' games until 2020's *Valhalla* (see again Table 1), twelve spin-off games released until then, a feature-length movie, a symphonic orchestra tour, three short films, 13 graphic novels, ten novels, a board game, and three editions of an encyclopedia.

This will be supplemented where possible by 22 developer interviews, which I conducted between July and September of 2019 in Montreal (with the exception of one initial interview conducted in June 2016, when I ran into Ubisoft's head historian at the time, Maxime Durand). Additionally, I draw on interviews with eight players, conducted between March 2016 and September 2016 (initially part of a larger dataset not tied to this specific franchise). Both datasets consist of semi-structured interviews of between one and two hours long, focusing respectively on **why** the developers included religion and **what** meanings players took from that within the context of their own (non-)religious identities. More importantly, both are a way of triangulation with the main dataset (cf. Carter et al. 2014), rather than the main source of data for my current argument. For more elaborate methodologies **and** analyses isolating these interview-based datasets, I refer to previous publications instead for brevity's sake (cf. de Wildt 2020; de Wildt/Aupers 2019; 2020; 2021).

How Does *AC* Present Religion?

Based on the method presented above, I answer the question (how does the *AC* franchise present religion to an overwhelmingly secular audience), by arguing three things. First, that *AC* presents religion as perennial: i.e., according to the perspective that underneath the differences between the religious traditions of historically and geographically divided

cultures, there is a universal underlying mystery (Huxley 1945; Schmitt 1966). The franchise presents a pan-historical and global religious conflict of which "the historical context only shapes which form the universal conflict takes" (Amancio, Creative Director, *Unity*; qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 15).

Second, that this perennialism is presented esoterically: i.e., that it depends on players actively making connections between occult and technological knowledge, from mystical and scientific sources alike (Faivre/Needleman 1993; Hammer 2001; Hanegraaff 1996), and that they do so within a transmedial context. That is, fans need to actively pull together all the hints or 'dots' from its many games, novels, and other media to reveal the explanations that *AC* promises. In the words of long-time Brand Content Manager Jean Guesdon: "we needed to maximise the opportunities for connections, links, echoes from one creation to another [...] This is *esotérie*" (qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 17).

Third, this paper concludes that by doing so, *AC* not only furthers spirituality's commodification and co-optation into the marketplace (Aupers/Houtman 2006); but additionally uses the structure of videogames to lead the believer-consumer of *Assassin's Creed* to actively construct meaning through bricolage (Luckmann 1967); as well as spend a whole lot of money.

Perennially

Religion in *Assassin's Creed* is perennial. That is to say: the rituals and beliefs that drive the series' main characters, narratives and mechanics are continually recurring throughout history in only slightly different forms. There will always be a conflict between two parties, which were named from *AC1* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) and throughout most of the series the (titular) Assassins and the Templars. While much has been written about *AC*'s relation to these groups' historical roots (Bosman 2016; de Wildt 2019; El Nasr et al. 2008; Mukherjee 2016), it is important to note that the name and appearance of these groups change according to the geographical and historical context of each game, novel, and other media. Thus, the Templars may appear as the 'Order of the Ancients' in the franchise's Ancient Egyptian and Greek settings; as Abstergo Industries and Abstergo Entertainment – closely modelled after the game's real-life developer Ubisoft – in the contemporary settings; as the 'Red Hand' organisation in its Danelaw settings; as Yeluohe (曳落河) or the Golden Turtles (金龟袋) in the Chinese manhua/novels; and so on. Similarly, what was called the Brotherhood of Assassins in the first game's setting (the 12th century Holy Land) appears in different times, settings and media as the Medjay, Babylonian Brotherhood, Artabanus' group, the People's Will (*Наро́дная во́ля*), and a plethora of other names.

While their name and historical context may differ, the conflict is always the same: between a highly organised cult or church insisting on authoritarian control of the general population (the Templars); and an anarchist network resisting such control (the Assassins). Similarly, their appearance (cloaks vs robes), methods (stealth vs mass manipulation), and rituals (initiations, speech acts, assassinations – for which cf. Bosman 2018), vary only slightly between each of *AC*'s media objects and, furthermore, increasingly become similar as the two organisations evolve throughout the franchise.

Appearing thus in differently-religious historical and geographical settings, these globe-and time-spanning organisations and their beliefs adapt to fit the setting. Whether appearing as the papal Borgia versus Florentine nobility in Renaissance Italy, or differently in ancient Greece, the Crusader Era, 16th century Constantinople; and even in secular settings such as revolutionary France and communist Russia: their underlying belief system is always the same.

Such an understanding of belief is sometimes referred to as perennialism: namely that all religions have the same mysterious root, even though specific beliefs and practices may appear and be organised and practiced in different ways throughout history. The modern idea that a perennial philosophy underlies all religious traditions stems mainly from Renaissance-era, neo-Platonist theologians such as Marsilio Ficino (incl. Ficino 1482) – a Plato translator and, later, humanist philosopher – Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (esp. Pico della Mirandola 1486), and Agostino Steuco (spec. Steuco 1542). They all argued that religions appear like other Platonic Forms: as (imperfect) manifestations of an eternal, universal Idea (cf. Plato 514): the perennial philosophy. Thus, in the words of Steuco, for example, underlying all religions and philosophies, there is "one principle of all things, of which there has always been one and the same knowledge among all peoples" (1542; qtd. in Schmitt 1966: 517). Famous author and mysticist Aldous Huxley, inspired by psychedelic drug use, argued that the "rudiments of the perennial philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions" (1945: 1). What exactly those rudiments are, or indeed what the perennial truth **is**, will be inevitably unknown or contested. Historian of Philosophy Charles Schmitt shows that while "*the* key theme [of] what perennial philosophy is," (1966: 517 [original emphasis]) is an assumed agreement of what Steuco claimed to be "one and the same knowledge among all peoples" (Schmitt 1966:517) – while "such a universal agreement is not at all obvious" (ibid.). Nonetheless, this perennial truth – regardless of what it actually is and whether we could ever articulate the Idea absolutely – is what presumably underlies and ties together scholasticism, Platonism, mysticism, positivism, naturalism, Catholicism, Western, and Eastern philosophy. Listing these, Schmitt fittingly adds that "[t]his is but a partial list! I have not yet seen scepticism referred to as philosophia perennis, but I expect to any day" (1966: 505–506).

The point is this: while the underlying perennial truth itself will be contested, the expectation is always that there **is** an underlying truth which is both universal and absolute – just as the creeds of both the Assassins and Templars insist. For this reason, they can appear throughout history and take on historically and geographically fitting Forms without compromising their underlying (universal, absolute) Ideas.

All of which is good news for players of *Assassin's Creed*: no matter what you (do not) believe and no matter where you are from, all the franchise's periods and settings in history apply to you! In the words of one anonymised level designer who worked on three *AC* titles, "using it [religion] for a game is so perfect, whether it is a Gregorian chant, something Byzantine or Indian, *players everywhere* will go 'oh this is mystical, something fantastic'" (Anonymized level designer, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 15 [emphasis added]). The traditions are presented almost interchangeably: whether it is 9th-10th century Catholic chanting; 16th century Byzantine; or 'Indian' – which could mean a whole

lot of things, to be frank – the point is to draw a 'mystical,' 'fantastic' atmosphere from them that appeals to anyone. In the words of Amancio – who directed the Byzantine-era *Revelations* (Ubisoft Montreal 2010) as well as *Unity*'s (Ubisoft Montreal 2014) French Revolution setting – it is not mainly about the specificity of the setting, but about creating a generalised atmosphere of religious aesthetics that anyone can relate to, saying:

> the aesthetics of candles, of stone, of hoods… these are universal things that have existed for a long time. So they have a certain—they radiate a certain sense of awe and mystery. […] So we played on that. That there's something to be said about the flickering orange light, right, it speaks to something that's inside us all. That's very, very ancient right? (Amancio, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 14–15)

Players seem to agree. When I asked several players who were theoretically selected for different religious backgrounds, how they relate to religion in videogames; religious and non-religious players alike indicated how much they related to the generality of historical religious settings, and many of them unsurprisingly mentioned *AC*. A Catholic player told me

> they did a pretty good job of [portraying Islam] in the first *Assassin's Creed*, you know, you hear the call to prayer quite a bit during the game, and you see Muslims praying, there's – you go through mosques a couple of times and whatnot, so and it seemed based on my experiences with Muslim friends and colleagues, it seemed a very accurate portrayal of you know what 99 percent of practising Muslims go through on a regular basis. So that was pretty accurate. I haven't seen that much of it in other games. (Catholic, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2019: 876)

Now, regardless of whether this player's recollection of playing *AC* is correct – there are calls to prayers and mosques in *Revelations*, but not so much in the first game – the memory is one of a Catholic player from Boston relating to a 12th century Muslim context. Players across culture and religion feel this transposition to the setting and identification with the character. A Hindu player recalled "you forget who you are, you forget what you have to do in the next few hours […] I become the character, I think like the character. *I* fought the post-Renaissance missionaries in France, the British, the Arabs I guess. [Although] one game I haven't played is the *AC* that takes place in India [*Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India* (Climax Studios 2016)]" (Hindu).

Others echoed this: especially when the setting is not their own, they can relate to it because it seems to represent something 'shared:' Ubisoft allows them to tap into a (perhaps superficial) sense that whatever setting they are presented with is speaking to some underlying commonality. To cite one more, an agnostic player shared that "just because I don't believe in this thing [religion] doesn't mean that I can't spend a day in someone else's shoes […] I relish the opportunity to role-play, to actually identify with the role of my character" (Agnostic, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2019: 875).

Esoterically

Religion in *Assassin's Creed* is furthermore esoteric. What I mean by this is that *AC* invites players from all sorts of backgrounds – Agnostic, Hindu, Catholic, and so on – into its own secret perennial philosophy, by involving players themselves in the process. As I wrote above, I operationalize the umbrella term 'esotericism' here as any non-institutionalised practice of meaning-making that ties together eclectic traditions including science, traditional religion, and historical secrets. As I will argue below, *AC* does exactly this. Briefly put, *AC* presents religion as not only perennial: it is furthermore dependent on actively tying together eclectic traditions (including science, religion, mythologies and religion, in a way that only good players (and readers, and viewers) of all its media objects can do. The good players, readers, and viewers being: those who buy and complete all the games.

This special access – reserved for 'good' consumers – to the underlying mysteries of history is central to *AC*, which Nicolas Guérin (a Level Design Director on four *AC* games) called "a cabbalistic approach of finding hidden meaning in religion across history, creating this sort of tertiary reading of things," (qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 16) and which Jean Guesdon called the brand's strategy to "ta[p] into this rampant culture of religious symbolism, of esotericism" (ibid.). This constitutes a

> conspiracy theory of religions: people can dive into it, put themselves into it, can invest, can build it themselves. That's the beauty of *ésoterie*. You just give them some dots to connect, and people will create the links […] the franchise became super strong because we managed transmedia, so you can consume games on its own but every single creation is also a dot [within the whole franchise], and people, players, readers, watchers who consume several games, films and so on make the connections [and] they feel smart about it, saying 'Holy Shit. I understand so much now!' (Guesdon, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 16)

This 'aha'-moment of being let into the grand underlying secrets of history and religion is central to not just the individual *AC* games but, more importantly, as Guesdon states, to the brand's entire strategy as a franchise.

Only the Assassins and Templars (and, thus, the player) can learn about this underlying perennial truth below history. It is a continuous thread of truth that runs back to 'Those Who Came Before,' or the 'First Civilization' of 'Isu:' essentially three different terms for a civilisation of super-intelligent superhumans with names like Minerva, Juno and Jupiter. What might be regarded by non-players of *AC* – or those outside of its diegesis – as disparate gods and mythologies is tied together into a narrative that explains everything: Minerva, Juno and Jupiter weren't gods, they were just superior beings to us. In the words of Ezio and Minerva in *AC2*:

> **Ezio**: "You are… gods."
> **Minerva**: "No. Not gods. We simply came… before." (Ubisoft Montreal 2009: n.p.)

So, the Roman gods, the Biblical Nephilim, the Scandinavian *Æsir* (Thor, Odin,), the Buddha, Egyptian gods, Hindu gods, and others were real all this time, but in a slightly profane way. They were just part of a civilisation that originally inhabited the Earth before us, who created us humans as a race of inferior slaves to be controlled. They were not 'divine,' just technologically advanced. The Biblical Apple of Eden? A very fancy mind control device to keep humans enslaved. The Shroud of Turin? A neurotransmitting healing device. Excalibur and the sword of Damokles? Powerful swords made by the Isu Hephaistos (a god of blacksmithing in Greek and Roman mythology) that happened to fall into human hands.

This knowledge is esoteric because it connects the dots between religions, mythologies, science, and all the mysteries of history, and more importantly: only very few have access to it. Many, but not even all, of *AC*'s protagonists, will be a rare individuals in history to understand a little bit of this perennial, esoteric truth. The only one who can piece it **all** together is the contemporary player who has access to each of these protagonists: intradiegetically, this is done through the Animus (a device that accesses historical people's memories stored in DNA); extradiegetically, this is done by playing (or otherwise consuming) *Assassin's Creed* products.

Conclusion: Franchised Perennial Esotericism

Religion in *Assassin's Creed* thus becomes franchised, in the sense that it only provides meaning if all of its products are consumed in order to make sense. Under the logic of Ubisoft's transmedial franchise, each *AC* product – main games, DLCs, mobile games, novels, encyclopediae, comic books, movies, miniseries – distributes the brand's trademarked version of perennial, esoteric religion, along its many products. This form of religion – which I have in another context called "marketable religion," (de Wildt/Aupers 2021) based on how the developers have shaped it – functions in two ways when we look at the content of the *AC* franchise and its various media objects (again: whether those be games, films, or whatever). Firstly, **individual media objects** provide esoteric knowledge – or sometimes just hints – of how all the world's religions are perennially connected, which can only be made fully understandable if consumers learn more about the Isu and their technology across all its products. Secondly, the **franchise as a whole** draws the consumer into buying the next media object to gain access to further explanation. The way in which this esoteric knowledge is disseminated is always partial for individual media objects in the *AC* universe: the mystery of the Isu is never the focus of the main plot of any single game, book (etc.). Although some cutscenes involve the Isu, most of *AC*'s underlying truth is distributed across the franchise as a whole. Players must actively piece together this underlying truth through optional puzzles, collectable objects, hidden e-mails, side-stories, and so on. Notably, again, this extends beyond single media objects: only by playing, reading, viewing and otherwise consuming and buying as many *AC* products as possible can we understand how things **really** work.

Importantly, this knowledge is never complete. While Patrice Désilets and Corey May originally intended to make this a self-enclosed trilogy,[1] the franchise was made into a Brand by Jean Guesdon, who replaced Désilets under the new title of 'Brand Creative Director' (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2021). In the context of this chapter, the consequence is that the mystery will likely never be fully explained: there must be more for future *AC* products to divulge.

Even more importantly, the theoretical consequence of this is that the consumer becomes an active constructor of meaning by being tasked to piece together the esoteric knowledge spread across the franchise. In this way, the idealised 'believer-consumer' of *AC* actively reconstructs *AC*'s perennial, esoteric religion in the same way that Thomas Luckmann (1967) describes the act of 'bricolage' that I briefly introduced at the start of this chapter. To reiterate, by "bricolage" Luckmann meant the individualised 'DIY' process of "invisible religion" through which religion has survived the de-institutionalisation of religion of the 1960s – a decrease in church membership and religious "belonging" that some had mistaken for a disappearance of religion altogether (1967). Bricolage thus entails a picking and choosing of elements of religions in a presumed "marketplace" of religion and spirituality, where individuals can pick and choose religious elements, in what by those after Luckmann has variously been called "do-it-yourself-religion" (Baerveldt 1996), "pick-and mix religion" (Hamilton 2000), "religious consumption à la carte" (Possamai 2003), or a "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon 2000; cf. Aupers/Houtman 2006).

There is, of course, one major difference between what such sociologists describe as bricolage in a marketplace of religion; versus the bricolage performed by players of *AC*. There is really not much of a choice as to which religious elements can be 'picked and mixed:' players may only reconstruct what Ubisoft left for them to build with. It is essentially akin to confusing 'DIY' with IKEA. That does not mean the effort by players is trivial, and they still get the joy of reconstructing *AC*'s (perennial, esoteric) take on religion; but the work has been prepared by *AC* developers' handpicking from all kinds of religions to make a 'marketable' religion that offends nobody. This contributes to what I have elsewhere called a "commodification" of religion on top of the 'market-ification' already identified by Luckmann and others (de Wildt/Aupers 2021). That is, as a commodity, religion is stripped of its social, cultural, political meaning in order to be reduced to its use value for exchange: as a background setting to a game, say, or an atmosphere of general mystery.

Thus, to conclude, while *AC*'s audience is at the forefront of secularisation, the *AC* franchise presents this audience with a perennial, esoteric representation of religion,

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1   This original plan was pieced together based on interviews by me with *AC*'s original creator Patrice Désilets and *AC3*'s creative director Alex Hutchinson (although I was unable to contact writer Corey May). It has been echoed by others in the industry and was publicly hinted at by voice actor Nolan North on a panel at Metrocon 2015. Briefly put, the third game would end with a resolution of the conflict in the present day, with Desmond Miles – voiced by North – taking down Abstergo using the combined knowledge and skills of all his ancestors, including *AC1*'s Altaïr and *AC2*'s Ezio. Also, it is the end of the world in 2012, and Desmond Miles and Lucy are starting a new civilization somewhere else – as Adam and Eve. "That's why she's called Lucy, after the Australopithecus afarensis" (Désilets). Where are they? To quote Désilets "*Boum! It's a freaking spaceship!*"

and does so in a commodified way, using the logic of esotericism to sell its 'marketable' religion across various transmedial media objects. Let me unpack those claims once more, step by step. Who plays *Assassin's Creed*, and what is likely to be their religious position? From what we can plausibly gather, this audience consists mainly of the exact demographic at the forefront of secularisation – Western, male, young, and educated. Yet those same 'forerunners' enjoy a game deeply steeped in various religious traditions. How does *AC* represent religion for this largely secular audience? As perennial – i.e., that there is one underlying truth common to all religious and philosophical traditions – and esoteric – i.e., that religion can be made understandable through the combined, rare knowledge that only a select few have access to.

What is the consequence of this? *AC*'s representation of religion follows the same market logic that spirituality and New Age religion have taken outside of the church, particularly since the 1960s: a picking and mixing of religious elements from any tradition at hand. What's more, this handpicked assemblage presents a "marketable" religion that will offend nobody and that anyone can identify with (de Wildt/Aupers 2021). Rather than perform individual bricolage, however, consumers of *AC* are invited to reconstruct meanings that have already been laid out by the franchise: a commodified, enjoyable puzzle that promises the answer to understanding all of history's mysteries. This logic of esotericism – of piecing together scientific, historical, mysterious and religious knowledge – is at the centre of *AC* as a franchise. Every media object – *AC*'s many games, books, and other transmedia products – offers a piece of this puzzle that only the 'true' fan has access to. It offers the joy of understanding the 'real' truth behind everything, without having to believe in anything at all.

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Part IIIc – Videogames: From the East

Ex Anankes

Cultural Syncretism and the Experience of Necessitation in *Saint Seiya: The Hades*' Gameplay

Graziana Ciola and Francesca Samà

Introduction

The present study explores how some gameplay peculiarities of the PS2 game *Saint Seiya: The Hades* (Dimps Corporation 2006) are the features of a particularly thorough and in-depth adaptation of the game's source material, i.e., *Saint Seiya*, a worldwide successful manga by Masami Kurumada (1986). *Saint Seiya* is a systematically syncretic work, intermingling narrative structures and cultural references from distant cultures; besides the expected Japanese cultural and narrative references, Ancient Greek culture is *Saint Seiya*'s deepest and most evident influence. Here, we argue that *Saint Seiya: The Hades*' gameplay both instantiates and allows for a direct performative experience of the core notion of *Ananke* or Necessity (Ἀνάγκη), which rests at the core of Ancient Greek spirituality and understanding of the world.

In particular, we argue that the type of gaming experience in *Saint Seiya: The Hades* is religious in a strong sense that is deeply rooted into the game's narrative content. Resting on a complex intertextual, multicultural and syncretic background, *Saint Seiya: The Hades* throws the player into the core of the Greek spiritual experience of the world and, in doing so, manages to adapt the spirit of its source material.

Saint Seiya (聖闘士星矢, セイントセイヤ, *Seinto Seiya*), i.e., *Seiya, the Holy Warrior* [referred to as *StS*], is a *shōnen manga* (少年漫画, i.e., a comic book intended for a young male audience) by Masami Kurumada. *StS* had its original run between the late-1980s and the early-1990s (1 January 1986 – 19 November 1990) as a serialization in the renowned magazine *Shūkan Shōnen Jump* (週刊少年ジャンプ) (Weekly Shonen Jump 1986–1990). *StS* was not Kurumada's first hit (Kurumada 1977–1981), but it certainly turned out to be his most innovative and globally impactful work, particularly in Asia, Europe, and Latin America ("Introduction to Saint Seiya" 2009).

As fairly typical of the *shōnen* genre, *StS* is a coming-of-age tale centering around five teenage protagonists who reach maturity by defeating adversity against all odds through the power of friendship and obstinate hard work.[1] *StS*'s young protagonists are mystical warriors at the service of the Greek goddess Athena – who has been conveniently reincarnated as Saori Kido, a thirteen-year-old heiress in late-20th-century Japan. Athena and her Saints face a series of superhuman or straightforwardly divine adversaries in several holy wars fought to protect the Earth from the evil designs of other Olympians.[2] These divine antagonists, who either seek to punish humanity for its *hubris* (Poseidon) or to completely eradicate it (Hades), are ultimately defeated by our human heroes, albeit with Athena's help and by unleashing superhuman powers through great effort and personal sacrifice. While *StS* kicks off as an urban fantasy packed with action and one-on-one fights, the setting quickly morphs into an almost timeless space made of classical temples and ancient ruins still inhabited by gods and heroes; there, every fight cannot but be a knightly duel straight out of a traditional epic tale.

In other words, *StS* systematically revisits the classical myths and founding literary models of the Western tradition. However, it does so in a Japanese format and from a Japanese point of view, by reinterpreting those Western models in an eclectically original elaboration. The resulting *mélange* of cultural and literary traditions, with partly overlapping themes, ended up being both a commercial success and a pop-cultural reference for a whole generation, especially in those pockets of the world whose educational systems emphasize the Greco-Roman roots of Western culture.

On the one hand, a major component of *StS*'s enormous and long-lived pop-cultural influence has certainly been the extraordinary popularity of its anime adaptation, animated feature films, sequels, prequels, and spinoffs, not to mention the commercial success of the various lines of collectible merchandise and games (Bandai Catalogue 2023).

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1   *The power of friendship* is a quite popular trope in both Eastern and Western literature. In the West, Alexandre Dumas's *Les trois Mousquetaires* (serialized between 1844–48) is perhaps the best-known example iterating this trope. In Japanese literature, the trope is related to the dramatic figure of Minamoto no Yoshitsune and his loyal friends, Shizuka Gozen and the warrior monk Benkei. Their adventures are depicted in *Gikeiki* (義経記) (1911), the "The Chronicle of Yoshitsune" (*Nanboku-chō* period, 1333–1392). Cf. "Friendship Tropes" (2022).

2   Across *StS*'s expanded narrative — comprehensive of the manga, its anime adaptations and four animated films – not only does Saori/Athena fight her divine relatives (Poseidon, Eris, Apollo, and Hades), but she also wages war against iconic members of other pantheons. For example, the anime "filler" series *Odin and the Nibelungen Ring* (1987), the movie *Saint Seiya: The Heated Battle of the Gods* (1988), and the later *Soul of Gold* (2015) take place in Kurumada's version of Asgard, where Athena and her Saints fight Odin's misled warriors, Balder and Loki respectively. In the 1989 animated film *Warriors of the Final Holy War*, the main adversary is borrowed from the Christian lore, being none other than Lucifer himself. While not being a part of the original manga narrative, the Odin's arc, through its inclusion in the anime adaptation (*Saint Seiya*, Toei Animation, 1986–1989, ep. 74–99; and *Saint Seiya: Soul of Gold*, Toei Animation, 2015), has become part of the mainstream *StS*'s narrative and, as such, has been included in some game adaptations – e.g., *Saint Seiya: Soldiers' Soul* (Dimps 2015); *Saint Seiya: Cosmo Slottle* (Bandai Namco Entertainment 2014); *Saint Seiya: Shining Soldiers* (Bandai Namco Entertainment 2020); *Saint Seiya: Cosmo Fantasy* (Namco Bandai 2016–2019).

On the other hand, these marketing strategies – that, for over thirty years, have ensured the prolonged international success of the *StS* franchise – rely on the intrinsic appeal of Kurumada's *opus magnum*. This holds especially true of the broad transcultural appeal of its subject matter and its key notions, beginning with *StS*'s multilayered and overarching syncretism. *StS*'s most poignant feature is its essentially syncretic approach, characterizing its narrative features, guiding themes, and religious and cultural references.

In the present contribution, we focus on some of *StS*'s syncretic core features that bring together Japanese and Classical Greek notions, mythologies, values, and narrative models. In particular, we examine how these syncretic elements are paradigmatically expressed in the somewhat unusual gameplay of one of the many *StS*-based videogames.

Since the late 1980s a plethora of such games, following different formats (RPG, beat 'em up, and hybrid fighting games), have been released for various platforms ("List of *Saint Seiya* Videogames" 2021). Here we focus on *Saint Seiya: The Hades* [referred to as: *StSH*], a 3D fighting game for PlayStation2 developed by Dimps and released by Namco Bandai Games in 2006. We limit our analysis to *StSH's* story-mode, which follows faithfully the anime adaptation of *StS's* final story arc (Kurumada 2002–08), defined by its ultimate antagonist: the God of the Underworld, Hades. *StSH*'s faithfulness to the source material goes as far as including a series of cut scenes and side storylines that the player is free to explore,[3] but it still stands as a defining pillar for the gameplay itself and it has interesting implications for the very meaning of the gaming experience. Namely, in *StSH* the source story must be played out as it is written, no matter what. Put otherwise, while the player's performance is essential for the game to progress – trivially, the game cannot advance if the player does not beat the progressive levels by winning each level's assigned duels – the player's free choices (e.g., the PC selection) are ultimately irrelevant and get automatically overturned if at any point any previous choices have become incompatible with the canon version of the unfolding plot. In contrast with the narrative structure of most games, which offer a multidirectional plethora of alternative storylines to pursue depending on the player's choices at any given crucial moment in the game, *StSH* remains a fundamentally linear and highly necessitated narrative.

Our key claim is the following: either intentionally or by a fortunate accident, the peculiarities of the gameplay in *StSH* both instantiate and allow for a direct, pragmatic, and performative experience of the abstract notion of *Ananke* or Necessity (Ἀνάγκη). This Necessity is a crucial notion both in *StS*'s core matter – i.e., the Greek Myth and the Ancient Greek religious experience accompanying it – and in the literary genre constituting one of *StS*'s main sources of inspiration and points of reference, i.e., Greco-Roman classical epic.

In the present study, we argue that *StS* can and should be considered a syncretic narrative of the sacred, underlining how *StS*'s syncretism is grounded on the commonalities between Ancient Greek and traditional Japanese polytheistic cultures. We, thus, outline

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3   Saint Seiya: *The Hades* offers the following game modes: 'Hades' (story mode); '1000 Days' (versus mode); 'Legend' (arcade mode); 'Infinite Clash' (survival mode); 'Flash Clash' (time mode); 'Zodiac Holidays' (a section that shows myth-clothes models, characters in 3D graphic, videos, and audio tracks).

the relationship between *StS* and its main literary genres of reference. We do so by analyzing the narrative functions of *StS*'s main characters and the intrinsic emphasis on the role of predestination that is built into *StS*'s literary and cultural references. With this background and contextualization in place, finally we focus on *StSH* as a cross-media adaptation. In particular, we examine how *StSH* captures and enacts *StS*'s core notion of *necessity*, allowing the player to experience it performatively both through its narrative content and its unusually rigid gameplay constraints.

Saint Seiya as a Syncretic Narrative of the Sacred Between Greece and Japan

While the line between mythological and religious narratives has long been defined and redefined, it often remains blurred.[4] Broadly, both the myths that are transmitted in epical or cosmological authoritative tales, and the religious narratives that are objects of active belief share an analogous twofold nature. On the one hand, they express the underlying system of values embraced by a culture at its roots;[5] and, on the other hand, they constitute a culture's foundational models for storytelling.[6]

As a reformulation of ancient Greek values, religious views, and narrative models within a modern Japanese cultural framework, *StS* is undeniably anachronistic – in both the sense of timelessness and unfaithfulness to historical facts. Since *StS* takes Greek mythology as its main world-building material and assumes the relationship between humanity, divinity, and anything in between as one of its thematic guidelines, it could be described as a highly intertextual epic narrative of the sacred.

This is evident even at first sight, just glancing at the title. Kurumada's choice of the English title term "**Saint**" to label Seiya, his four fellow co-protagonists and their comrades immediately catches the eye. Far from being a mere marketing strategy banking on a widespread taste for the exotic,[7] the term "Saint" is significant and informative: it unambiguously defines the main characters' *raison d'être* and narrative role, and it sheds light on the nature of *StS*'s narrative as a whole.

The term "Saint" derives from the Latin *sanctus*, i.e., the past participle of the verb *sancire* – whose primary meaning is "to remove", "to separate" and, thus, in virtue of that separation, to consecrate. "Sanctitude", then, is what marks and separates the domain of *sacer*, narrowly construed (i.e., that which belongs to an absolutely otherworldly do-

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4   Useful board overviews, even if dated, remain Rahner (1957) and Daniélou (1966).

5   In his work *On the Gods and the Cosmos (Περὶ θεῶν καὶ κόσμου)*, Sallustius (2000) describes the various forms of the myths: theological, physical, animistic, material, and mixed.

6   For example, there is a sense in which nearly all Western narratives are in a large measure a crossover fanfic between Homer and the Bible, the quintessential "Book".

7   English synonyms of Japanese words are often chosen to mark similarities between Eastern and Western culture. English is a tool used to add an exotic taste, to act like an actual "**limen**" between reality and manga/anime reality. Kurumada's use of English terms often implies a pronunciation based on some play on words: e.g., "**Cloth**" (the western style armor, opposed to the Japanese style *yoroi*), pronounced by a Japanese speaker, sounds very similar to "**Cross**".

main), from the space of all human affairs.[8] As such, "Saints" function as *limina*, borders between the earthly and the otherworldly domains. As most limens, they work as connections as much as dividers. Kurumada's Saints are liminal holy warriors of this kind. Being consecrated to the goddess Athena, Kurumada's Saints fight in her name and on her behalf in order to protect the goddess herself, peace on Earth, the innocent, humanity in general and everything nice, as proper *shōnen* heroes ought to do. A Saint fights exclusively with his body and the "cloth" protecting it. These "cloths" are a total of 88 holy armors forged by Hephaestus on Athena's request during the mythical age, each in the image of and in correspondence with a constellation.[9] As expected of a *shōnen* manga, these young warriors could only manage to conquer their destined "cloth" after years of extreme and inhumane training culminating in a rite of passage (be it a duel against another contender, the killing of the father-*sensei* [Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 17–19, 40 and 59] or another form of initiation trial [Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 1 and 41]) granting access to the power of the universe within us (**cosmos**).[10]

Even from such a fast-paced overview of the *StS*'s premise, it is indisputable that Kurumada's *magnum opus* is conceived and construed as a proper syncretic **epos**. Notably *StS* brings together concepts and suggestions from different cultures across time and space. *StS*'s universe is populated by Greek gods walking the Earth along with Buddhas and bodhisattvas (Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 3).[11] But *StS*'s universe is also a world where the human protagonists' superpowers stem both from a loose interpretation of contemporary atomic physics and from the notion of **sympathy** resonating between a macrocosm and

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8   Just like these liminal functions demark the space of the sacred, a similar separation occurs in the demarcation of the ludic space *per se*, as per Huizinga (1972:10): "All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."

9   In the *StS*'s mythos, Athena herself claims that the 88 constellations are embodied into the Cloths. This claim implies a generous dose of anachronism, matching the above-mentioned syncretically freestyle approach to cultures and religions. The number of constellations became 88 in 1930, quite a bit after the Mythical Time when the cloths were forged upon Athena's request. Not to mention the insertion of modern constellations that fit poorly both with the cloths' mythical origin as well as with the internal chronology of *StS*'s spin offs. For example, in Shiori Teshirogi's *Saint Seiya: The Lost Canvas* (2006–11) and its anime adaptation (set during the first half of the 18th century) the constellations are already 88, including Puppis, Carina, and Vela – despite these having come to be only after Nicolas-Louis Lacaille's dismembering of Navis Argo in 1763 (Lacaille 1763). Cf. Kurumada/Teshirogi (2009–11), episode 19; Kurumada/Teshirogi (2006–2011), vol. 9; Kurumada (1986–90) chap. 4.

10 "**Cosmos**" is an inner spiritual essence originated in the Big Bang. Every human being has a cosmos inside their body, but only a Saint can burn it, like one burns gasoline, and use this preternatural fuel to fight. Cf. Kurumada (1986–90), chap. 1.

11 For instance, Virgo Shaka is called "the man who is almost a god". The name Shaka derives from Shaka Nyorai, which is one of the ten honorific tiles of the Shakyamuni Buddha – i.e., Shakyamuni who has come from the realm of truth.

a microcosm – a notion typically crucial in late- medieval and Renaissance Western natural philosophy (e.g., Allers 1944: 319–407; Boas 1969: 212–38; Conger 1967 [1922]; Dales 1977: 557–72; Finckh 1999; Guthrie 1967: 56–73). Conceptions and ideas so far apart from each other should not be able to coexist coherently in a single narrative universe, and yet they do surprisingly smoothly.

Overall, this multifaceted syncretism shaping Kurumada's epic is grounded on the common polytheistic roots shared both by *Shinto* animism, i.e., the still practiced native religion of Japan, and Ancient Greek religiosity, whose Pantheon represents the full expression of polytheistic religious views in Western culture (Sabbatucci 1999: 91). In a sense, polytheism is primarily a *forma mentis* and a worldview. First and foremost, polytheism is a cultural way of thinking and interpreting the world through the personifications of natural elements and phenomena (e.g., the Sun, the Moon, the Sea, Lightening, but also this or that river, etc.), as well as those anthropological functions and practices (e.g., Love, War, Metallurgy, etc.) that a culture perceives as foundational (ibid.). Despite being two geographically and chronologically very distant worldviews, just like the world conceptualized by Thales of Miletus (DK 11 A 22)[12] and early Greek philosophy is full of gods in every corner (θεοί or δαίμονες),[13] so the *Shinto* world pullulates with *kami*.[14]

Not only are Greek polytheism and Japanese *Shinto* animism heavily naturalistic, but they also seem to share close similarities in their myths and mythologies – similarities which have been long and repeatedly underlined by many scholars (e.g., Matsumoto 1928; Matsumura 1958 [1954]; Sioris 1987; Kárpáti 1993: 9–21). Besides, both ancient Greek culture – particularly in the archaic period that finds its narrative formulation in the Homeric poems – and traditional Japanese culture have been described as "shame civilizations" placing great emphasis on the notions of honor, duty and individual responsibility to the collective.[15] While such an assessment is, in both cases, somewhat of an overgeneralization, it nonetheless points the finger to a recognizably analogous substratum of social and ethical values. In principle, then, this (at least apparent) proximity of cultural coordinates – and especially the proximity of their respective archetypes on the nature of the sacred and its narrative formulation – is an effective starting point for the cultural *pastiche* that gives *StS* its peculiar allure suspended between what is foreign and what is familiar. Evidently this is an allure resonating in the same way and in opposite directions with both *StS*'s intended Japanese readership and its Western audience.

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12   This claim is transmitted by Aristotle in *De Anima* (1989 [1933]: 411 a7-8): "Θαλῆς ᾠήθη πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι".

13   δαίμων, -ονος: from δαίω (to divide), is a god characterized by their own field of action; θεός is how humans call a god by their name (Sabbatucci 1999: 214). See for example Homer 1919: 3, 27–28: "ἄλλα δὲ καὶ δαίμων ὑποθήσεται: οὐ γὰρ ὀίω/οὔ σε θεῶν ἀέκητι γενέσθαι τε τραφέμεν τε";ibid: 6, 171–172: "τόφρα δέ μ᾽ αἰεὶ κῦμ᾽ ἐφόρει κραιπναί τε θύελλαι/νήσου ἀπ᾽ Ὠγυγίης. νῦν δ᾽ ἐνθάδε κάββαλε δαίμων"; Homer 1920: 15, 418: "οὔθ᾽ ὃ τὸν ἂψ ὤσασθαι, ἐπεί ῥ᾽ ἐπέλασσέ γε δαίμων".

14   According to Motoori's definition, "[...] any being whatsoever which possesses some eminent quality out of the ordinary, and is awe- inspiring, is called Kami" – quoted in Gall (1999: 63–74).

15   Notoriously, the category of "shame culture" is applied to Japanese culture in Benedict (1946). The most impactful analysis of Ancient Greek culture and thought in terms of shame vs guilt culture remains, to our knowledge, Dodds (1951).

Nonetheless, the very possibility of creating such a homogeneous shared narrative space partly depends on the very nature of polytheism itself. In contrast with monotheistic "close-ended" theologies, polytheism's inclusive or "open-ended" structures tend to allow for the easy addition of new deities to a preexisting pantheon, as well as for the relatively unproblematic coexistence of divinities with disparate origins – even when these gods preside over the same element or function. Then, it should not be surprising that Athena can stroll along with the reincarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni (*sic!*) through an Underworld closely resembling a bastardized version of Dante's Inferno, with elements borrowed from Egyptian mythology[16] and Germanic folklore among other traditions.[17]

Epic, Myths, Fairy Tales, and *Bildungsromane*

As we have seen, *StS* is a narrative of the sacred whose syncretic approach is rooted both in the type of sacrality it narrates and the analogy between its referenced cultural contexts – i.e., Classical Greek and Japanese cultures. *StS* has been poignantly described as a modern retelling of a Classical epic, as it is immediately evident given its elevated subject matter dealing with gods, heroes and their high-stakes struggles (Malavasi 2010); in many ways, it is exactly that. Nonetheless, as both a modern and trans-culturally syncretic retelling, *StS* brings a series of further elements to the table, doing so on several levels and, thus, becoming a veritable *pastiche* of different literary genres and traditions.

Obviously, the manga format, being an entirely different medium that relies on a combination of words and images as its integral parts, will diverge from any classical epical literary sources in its stylistic structure. Besides, given the *shōnen* manga intended audience (i.e., pre-teens and teenage boys), with a few exceptions[18] *StS*'s stylistic register is most definitely not the high style typical of classical to Renaissance epic literature.[19] Other major features of divergence from *StS*'s classical epic model are clearly identifiable

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16   For example, one of the underlings of Hades is a warrior called "Pharaoh of Sphinx", whose special move consists in subjecting the souls of the dead to the trial of Ma'at. Cf. Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 87.

17   *StS*'s melting-pot inclinations are evident in the figures of the Three Judges. Following the Western tradition, the Judges of the Underworld are Rhadamantys, who wears the cloth of Wyvern; Aeacus, who wears the cloth of Garuda, the divine eagle-like sun-bird, as well the king of birds, in Hindu mythology; and Minos, who wears the cloth of Griffon. There is also a character, Rune, one of Minos' underlings, who wears the cloth of Balrog, from J.R.R.Tolkien's Middle Earth mythology.

18   According to the translators of the Italian edition, Stefano Cerioni and Tiziana Tosolini, *StS* ended up becoming a hybrid between a proper *shōnen* and an Arthurian novel. Due to the lack of clarity of the anime scripts, the dubbing director, Enrico Carabelli, chose to give an Arthurian allure to the whole saga, since, in Western literature, those characters who wear armors are automatically considered to be Knights. Despite the knightly allure that this series has received through the French edition (*Les chevaliers du Zodiaque*) and the very loose Italian adaptation, in Kurumada's manga Seiya and his comrades talk like average teenagers of the 1980s. Cf. Cerioni (2009) and "Gli Adattamenti della Serie" (2016).

19   The kanji chosen for Cosmos [小宇宙] means "little space", easily translated as "microcosm". Kurumada's Cosmos is like Carl Sagan's star-stuff: "The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself" (Sagan/Druyan/Soter 1980). This Cosmos is just a fragment of the Big Bang inside everybody's body, and it yearns for the stars. We could consider

both in the definition of the characters and, consequently, in the type of narrative goals that *StS* aims to achieve. Nonetheless, *StS* maintains several central undoubtedly Homeric conceptual elements that remain overarching, unifying, and that will translate to the *StSH* gaming experience in peculiar ways.

Of Gods and Men, Their Narrative Functions, and Their Syncretic Features

StS's multilayered syncretism goes beyond its cultural contents and their sources, permeating instead both the construction of its characters and the articulation of its narrative structures.

StS's main characters are five thirteen-to-fifteen-year-old boys who, despite carrying important features of individual characterizations, instantiate fundamentally archetypical functions. Both aspects – i.e., the identification of five protagonists and their fundamentally archetypical characterizations – are typical of the *shōnen* manga genre in general and are recurring staples in both classical Asian literature and philosophy. The individuation of exactly five basic principles is common in traditional Eastern narratives and philosophical theories.[20] In a typical story, the main characters are usually five[21], just like the fundamental elements composing all things are five according to the widespread *Wu Xing* (Chinese: 五行, lit. "Five elements", "phases" or "agents") metaphysical, epistemological, and natural-philosophical theory (Wang/Bao/Guan 2020: 211–20). In this instance, *StS*'s five protagonists individually symbolize and incarnate five typified personalities and their underlying dispositions – namely: devotion and perseverance (Seiya); wisdom (Shiryu); everyone's innermost emotional vulnerabilities that need to be faced in order to grow up (Hyoga); kindness, empathy and selflessness (Shun); and the Stoic reliability that saves the day in times of dire need (Ikki). While these characters are endowed with superhuman powers and undergo almost impossible trials that unarguably fall beyond any ordinary experience, their typified characterizations, both as individual characters and complementary parts of a collective unit, make them into relatable symbolic representations of the human experience. Then, the extraordinary circumstances within which these characters are set and act belong to the same order of things encompassing the extraordinary settings typical of myths and fairytales. Even the heroic supererogation[22] that *StS* takes to be the most desirable behavioral standard

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it just like a Japanese version of Star Wars' Force crossbred with Plotinus' amoeba. Cf. Kurumada (1986).

20   In Japanese literature, this trope was consolidated and popularized during the Edo period, when the *kusazoshi* (草双紙), illustrated books, started a series for children called *kurohon* (黒本), i.e., black book, because of their covers. The most popular *kurohon* were the stories about Minamoto no Yorimitsu, also known as Minamoto no Raiko, and his four samurai companions (the *Shitenno*). (cf. Kornicki 2005:502–5).

21   Tatsuo Yoshida is considered the father of the *Kurohon* Renaissance, from his first work, the manga *Shonen Ninja Butai Gekko* (1963) to the anime *Kagaku Ninjatai Gatchaman* (1972). Other major titles that portrayed a group of five elements are *Hokuto no Ken* (1983); *Yoroiden Samurai Troopers* (1988); *Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon* (1992); *ONEPIECE* (1997); and the infinite series of *tokusatsu* (live actions): *Ultraman* (1966), *Kamen Rider* (1971–73), *Himitsu Sentai Goranger* (1975).

22   We talk about "supererogation" very much in the sense analyzed in Urmson (1958: 192–216).

carries the same type of idealized exemplars and cautionary tales typical of fairy tales (Bettelheim 1976). Above all, *StS*'s epic materials are reshaped and adapted into a hybrid narrative structure that – besides its obvious analogies to Eastern and Western classical epics – holds a close family resemblance to the structure of fairy tales.[23]

Most structuralist actantial analyses of fairy tales can, then, be applied to *StS* without many issues and yield enlightening results, particularly insofar as the characters and their roles are concerned. For example, referring to a hermeneutical model like Propp's (1928), the Hero's function is clearly split and spread over the five main characters, for the reasons and in the ways mentioned above. But such an analysis is even more interesting if applied to Athena's character. For Athena, *StS* implements a stacking of roles and functions that perfectly exemplifies its overarching syncretic approach in both narrative paradigms and cultural references, causing the final product to shift from its source materials. The Athena of the classical myth is the Goddess of Tactics and Wisdom. She was born fully formed from the head of her father Zeus (Hesiod 1914: 886–91) and fought against the Giants (Hero), at some point actively intervening in the Trojan War (Homer 1920: Book V-VI) and lending a helping hand to Ulysses through his misadventures, as any proper hands-on hero and helper should (Homer 1919: 3.27). Even a passing mention of Athena's deeds suffices to show that, overall, the mythical Athena is eminently characterized both as a Hero and as a Magical Helper of the Hero's Journey (Campbell 1949). This holds partly true for Kurumada's Athena as well. On the one hand, Athena herself dresses for the part of the Hero in *StS*'s concluding arc, finally wielding her own divine armor for the first time throughout the story, in order to fight her uncle Hades. On the other hand, Athena still serves as the main Magical Helper throughout *StS*, giving hope and strength to Seiya and his comrades through her divine cosmos. Yet, more often than not, Kurumada's Athena ends up being a Melusine-like Princess, i.e., the damsel in distress for the heroes to save (Harf-Lancner 1984).

Both characterizations, despite appearing to be somewhat contradictory, coexist in *StS*'s Athena and make her into a seemingly odd hybrid. However, this is neither at odds with *StS*'s encompassing syncretism, nor is it the only compiling of diverse elements into Athena's figure – as is clear from the Christological features of this Goddess who is incarnated through a veritable parthenogenesis (Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 44) and walks amongst men to bleed and suffer beside them, both helping them and being saved by them. Then, Athena's twofold characterization does not seem to be particularly incoherent when considering the character's narrative role with respect to the story's protagonists. Both as Damsel in Distress and Magical Helper, making the protagonists into actual heroes is Athena's primary function. There are no heroes without heroic deeds. As a Princess in need of saving, Athena provides the final goal at the end of the quest that the protagonists need to undertake in order to call themselves heroes (Isaac 2016: 361). As a Magical Helper, Athena is the Goddess through whose mediation the heroes can

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23   This is particularly true if we consider fairy tales to be somewhat refined and erudite literary products, as some scholars have claimed. For example, as Ute Heidmann convincingly claimed (2010: 113–52; 2020: 1–14), a well-known fairytale such as Bluebeard, is a complex foiled retelling of Dido's story from Virgil's *Aeneid*.

access the higher granted power[24] that allows them to surpass their human limitations and accomplish truly superhuman deeds (Thompson 1958 [1932]: 96–97, 100–1, 105–6, 106–9,108-2, 116–7). Reconciling divinity and humanity, the damsel in distress and the powerful helper, the savior and the saved in one figure, Athena occupies the same liminal narrative space in which *StS* itself is set. As the personification of a threshold herself, Athena makes it possible for the heroes to cross that border and surpass that limit between human and superhuman, thus becoming Saints in the most authentic sense.

Non Plus Ultra? On Limits and Liminality

Surpassing one's limits, in order to fulfill and fully actualize one's true potential, is a recurring pillar of coming-of-age stories and, *a fortiori*, of the *shōnen* genre itself. This is particularly evident in *StS*, to the point of constituting an essential narrative feature for its plot structure. It would not be far-fetched to claim that in *StS* all the narrative elements directly borrowed from classical epic, traditional literature, and fairytales are brought together in the overarching structure of a (graphic) Bildungsroman. This would not be particularly surprising, since the surpassing of one's limits through some sort of rite of passage, in order to access a higher state of being (be it that of an élite holy warrior, the "Seventh" and the "Eight Sense"[25], or just becoming a better version of oneself), characterizes most Bildungsromane as a major structural and conceptual aspect.

StS's young protagonists need to surpass their limits again and again throughout the story, first and foremost by facing and surpassing their own masters. *StS*'s *sensei*[26] are greater-than-life father figures who – as most parental figures in the *shōnen* genre – have the twofold function of friends and foes, falling both under the category of the Helper aiding the hero's journey and of the adversary to be defeated.[27] Just like Athena, the *sensei* embody a limit, albeit of a different kind. These characters are themselves a *limen*, a threshold (and, oftentimes, a dead body) over which the hero must pass. Analogously to what happens with Athena's characterization, the apparent contradiction in the *sensei*'s double nature is easily reconciled through their narrative role. *StS*'s *sensei* are able to fully carry out their function as Magical Helpers only insofar as they are obstacles on the Heroes' path: their contribution to the Hero's Journey lies exactly in their being the enemies whom the heroes need to defeat in order to progress. Following the honor

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24   In geek culture the definition of "**granted power**" is interlaced with the DnD RPG system developed by Gary Gygax and Dave Anderson (1974). The idea behind the abilities of the Priest character class (nowadays most commonly known as Cleric) was the notion that it is a deity who provides the power to cast spells or heal. In the first module, *Greyhawk* (1975:14), Gygax was forced to create and customize a specific deity so that Priest characters could receive their powers. In a similar fashion, Athena lends a spark of her own Cosmos to her Saints in dire need.

25   Kurumada (1986–1990), chap. 29; Kurumada (1986–89), ep. 42.

26   *Sensei* (先生 born before = elder) is an honorific title used to address persons of authority or to show respect to someone who has achieved a certain level of mastery in an art form or some other skillful enterprise – e.g., musicians, artists, novelists, martial artists. *Sensei* has the same meaning as the Sanskrit term *guru* (गुरु). In martial arts, a sensei is a father figure that shares his wisdom with his pupils, like a father with his children. Cf. Goldsbury (2010).

27   A notorious example is the relationship between Cygnus Hyoga and his teacher, Aquarius Camus. Cf. Kurumada (1986–1990), chap. 21 and 40.

code and the logic typical of both the epical chivalric tradition and Japanese *bushido*,[28] genuine pride and affection remain on the *sensei*'s part in their own defeat, since such defeat provides their pupil with their final teachings and the skills necessary for a hero to continue on his journey.

The increasingly more overpowered adversaries that the protagonists face through a series of knightly duels constitute *limina* of a similar kind, causing and marking the heroes' progression in power. On the one hand, when these adversaries happen to be just as honorable and resolute in their convictions as the heroes are, a duel to the death becomes, more often than not, the beginning of a beautiful friendship[29]. On the other hand, not only is the heroes' progression an effective advancement through the ranks of their superhuman military élite,[30] but it makes the distinction between humanity and divinity increasingly more blurred – to the point that a human can mortally wound a god, therefore effectively voiding the distinction itself of any real relevance (Kurumada 1986–1990, chap. 110). In Kurumada's fictional universe, gods can be killed and humans can overpower them. The distinction between humans and gods effectively is quantitative rather than qualitative, ultimately amounting to a matter of degree – and degrees can be climbed (Kurumada 1988). But, overall, this seamless passage between humanity and divinity simply symbolizes and dramatizes, on a mythical and epic scale, the passage from childhood to adulthood, which constitutes the core of the Bildungsroman as a genre (Iversen 2010).

In summary, limits, borders, and their surpassing recur in many forms throughout *StS*, where they play an essential role. Namely, as we have seen, limits constitute a core element for defining either the essential function or the narrative progression of most primary and supporting characters; however, limits are also the basic building blocks for articulating and advancing the story itself through the series of duels that the heroes must win – thus crossing the limits encountered on their path and overcoming

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28   Loosely related to the Western notion of "**chivalry**", the *Bushido* (武士道, literally: "the Path of the warrior") is the summa of all the codes, practices, philosophies, and principles of samurai culture, which ruled Japan during the Shogunate Period (1181–1868). The term was used for the first time in the *Kōyō Gunkan* (甲陽軍鑑), in 1616 (Kasaya 2014: 7). The most complete and well-known dissertation about *Bushido* was provided in *Hagakure Kikigai* (葉隠聞書) by Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1906 [1700 ca.]). Japanese author Mishima (1987 [1967]) wrote an introduction to *Hagakure*.

29   This trope has its roots in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Jastrow/Clay 1920). Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends after Gilgamesh defeats Enkidu in a fight. The trope occurs, for example, in Arthurian romans, in the legend of Robin Hood, and in the fourth and fifth chapters of Alexandre Dumas's *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, when D'Artagnan challenges Athos, Porthos and Aramis to a duel behind the Carmelites' monastery at noon.

30   The Hero's journey starts when he conquers his cloth. The hero (and his rank accordingly) grows fight after fight, thus advancing in his formative journey. Despite Pegasus Seiya being the core hero of *StS*, Dragon Shiryu's progression is the epitome of this scheme. Shiryu initially obtains the Dragon Cloth. After a series of fights and establishing a bond of friendship with the other main characters, he defeats the Silver Saint Perseus Algol, but can only do so by losing his sight. Having later acquired the Seventh Sense and having managed to defeat a couple of Gold Saints for good measure, Shiryu overcomes his own limits battle after battle, growing to be able to stand against the gods themselves (Poseidon and Hades). Cf., e.g., Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 27, 32, 35, 39, 54, 78 and 105.

their own. While this kind of narrative structure might result in a somewhat repetitive manga/anime format, it lends itself to be easily adapted, with very few changes, into a heavily story-reliant fighting game.

In general, then, not only are the vast majority of *StS*'s Helpers and Antagonists complexly liminal characters, but *StS* itself appears to be an intrinsically liminal work under several respects, first and foremost in its literary genre. The substantial presence of core features characterizing epics, fairytales and coming-of-age literature – both as genre categories and source-materials – makes *StS* into a veritable literary *pastiche* situated on the border between classical epic and the modern Bildungsroman, in a timeless fairytale-like atmosphere.

Overall, *StS*'s mostly epical main threads are tightly woven into the materials, structures, narrative devices, and frameworks that, as we have seen, characterize both fairytales and coming-of-age novels. While classical epics provide most of *StS*'s explicit references and content materials, the final result, with its liminal nature and overarching syncretic features, is something quite closer to the medieval and early modern chivalric romance and *chanson de geste* tradition (Meneghetti 1994). Whereas epics create a tale about the world producing a collective and social response, romances and novels aim for a purely individual response. Epic heroes satisfy the collective need to glorify a particular historical moment, creating a mythical account of those historical facts that are collectively perceived as foundational. Chivalric romances and novels instead focus on the reader's private experience – be it emotional, educational, escapist, and so on.

StS undoubtedly stages content straight out of classical epics; however, any historical reality is thoroughly removed from the spotlight, even merely as a prime matter to be reshaped through the mythical mold. The resulting atmosphere and moral outlook are arguably closer to those of a fairytale rather than of the *Iliad* (Homer 1920); the framing and emphasis on moral themes and coming-of-age experiences certainly underline how much of a Bildungsroman *StS* ultimately is. While *StS* begins as an urban fantasy showing some aspects of everyday life that would be mundane for a modern reader, it soon shifts into a rather atemporal and almost abstract chivalric tale that leaves no room whatsoever for the mundane. Even the small slices of daily life presented to the reader are transported into a timeless and quite unrealistic setting, where they become functional as symbolizing universal human emotions, phenomena, and values (e.g., familial and romantic love, loyalty, devotion, justice, etc.). When ancient gods walk the Earth and clash against each other due to ancestral grudges and irreconcilable differences on general principles (e.g., the relationship between humanity and divinity, the existence of free will and its implications, etc.), the few slices of life remaining can only be those greater than life itself. By the Hades-Sanctuary arc, we do not get to see much of Saori Kido the heiress, as we used to earlier on in the story; instead, only the goddess Athena is left. Until the very end, Kurumada's gods remain odd creatures who – much like the gods of the Greek Pantheon – are ruled by their passions, bleed, suffer, eat, sleep, and can even die. However, while in the first few chapters we follow Athena through her relatively mundane daily life, by the beginning of the Hades–Sanctuary arc we still see her sleeping, but now on a stone altar in a temple rather than in a certainly more comfortable bed. The same progressive removal from the mundane holds true for the heroes, whose "normal" life – by the end – revolves around one epic battle after another, all against increasingly pow-

erful adversaries and, ultimately, against the god of Death himself (Jauss 1981). After all, in Kurumada's narrative universe, the limen between humans and gods is a mere matter of degree, rather than an insurmountable qualitative distinction, and is there ultimately to be crossed.

Adventures, Chance, Destiny, and Necessity

All types of epics (including classical and chivalric epic), along with fairy tales and – albeit in a different measure and different ways – even *Bildungsomane*, include some kind of hero's adventure as a narrative backbone. Quests, battles, or facing some form of radical otherness, only to make it through to the other side, are all fairly structured examples of the typical heroic adventure recurring across these types of narratives, and preeminently in epic texts (Miller 2000).

Looking at the common meanings that can be found in a dictionary lemma, one of the oldest uses of the term "adventure" is the one referring to "(1.a) a chance occurrence or event, an accident" (Oxford English Dictionary 1989 [1884–1928]: "adventure"). It would not be far-fetched to claim that this is the underlying meaning to the other most common uses of the word, i.e., those denoting respectively any extraordinary, marvelous, or unexpected events, as well as any audacious, perilous or novel endeavor and experience (ibid.) The etymology of "adventure" is even more revealing, deriving ultimately from the Latin verb *advenio, advenis, adveni, adventum, advenire*, which means "to come (to), arrive (at)", "reach", "come from outside", "be brought at", "develop", "supervene", oftentimes "with emphasis on attendant circumstances" (Glare 2012 [1968]: 55). An adventure is therefore a happening that is somewhat built into the circumstances: we see it coming. In other words, an adventure is something that **will** arrive or happen to the hero – and the hero should be expecting it. Almost a century ago, Eberwein (1933) had already drawn a tight relationship between adventure, *evenio/eventus* ("event", "occurrence", "outcome", implying a reference to a transcendental power), and *advenio/adventus*, underlying how adventure and *advenio/adventus* soon acquired a religious connotation and came to signify something that **must** happen.

In *StS*, the main 'advent' – in this layered literal sense – is Hades' coming. The god of the Underworld is scheduled to rise and fight Athena once every couple of centuries, give or take a few years, in the quintessential Holy War in *StS*'s universe (Kurumada 1986–1990, chap. 68). The whole connotation of Hades' umpteenth coming and its resulting Holy War has a pervasive prophetic tone. There is a clear sense of fatalistic determination in the circumstances required for the war to begin, just as there are undeniable elements of predestination in determining who will be the holy warriors chosen to fight that war. Therefore – despite the number of personal sacrifices, blood, tears and almost inhuman effort still required to become Saints – *StS*'s heroes, ultimately, end up embodying the paradigm of the Chosen One. The Chosen are those who are destined by a higher power to face whatever threat moves the narrative in order to overcome it and finally restore the initial (and somewhat idealized) status quo.

The bond between themes of predestination goes well beyond matters of semantics or etymology and is both explicit and well rooted within the history of the adventure literary genres, sometimes determining their development. A reference to fate and destiny

has been included in the notion of *adventure* at least since 1040, when it occurs explicitly in *The Life of Saint Alexis* (e.g., Anonymous 1974 [1872]: vv. 441–442). At this stage, the notion of destiny or fatalistic determination does not concern just a single character, but a whole collective. The collective heroism that is at the root of the knightly outlook typical of the *chanson de geste* frames adventures as an inexplicable but not disturbing destiny, i.e., an element of chance that is thrown into the great scheme of things and is tackled by a social group as a whole. This underlying outlook changes when, around the turn between the first and second feudal ages (Bloch 1949: 75), the narrative paradigm shifts from group combats to individual duels. Then the term "adventure" assumes a new connotation, coming to mean primarily something befalling one individual rather than a whole collective (ibid.). At this point, an adventure does not have much to do with chance anymore, but rather with a change disrupting the status quo, whose restoration has now become a hero's duty. By the mid-12th century, Benoît de Sainte-Maure overtly associates "*avenire*" (i.e., the future or, more precisely, a future happening) and "*aventure*", confirming that the military feats performed by an exceptional man are both those knightly feats determining a battle's outcome and a sign of the favor that destiny itself bestows upon the hero (Köhler 1985[1956]: 93).

Overall, in a chivalric epic, not only is the experiencing of adventures a necessary condition for being a knight, but it is first and foremost a condition that a knight is necessarily destined to satisfy. Analogously, the election of Athena's Saints in *StS* relies on a similar component of predestination, which contributes to emphasizing the Saints' liminal role as borders between the human and the divine. Both in *StS* and medieval chivalric epics, the predestined inclusion of the hero within the élite chosen to serve a divinity or a righteous cause is influenced by the development of soteriological theories of election in Western thought. Nonetheless, the notions of destiny and necessitation are cardinal concepts in ancient Greek thought and, therefore, in the classical epic tradition as well. Through the mediation of classical epic as a major literary and conceptual source, destiny and necessitation turn out to be essential core notions in *StS*'s conceptual framework.

The Ancient Greek language employs two distinct terms to describe destiny, thus distinguishing two separate entities with two distinct and opposite connotations: *Tyche* (Τύχη) and *Ananke* (Ἀνάγκη). *Tyche*, equivalent to the Latin *fortuna*, belongs to the same semantic field as the verb τυγχάνω (*tunkhánō*, "to happen") and primarily translates roughly as "luck", both as a cause beyond human control – thus with a layered connotation of chance, providence, fate – and either as a divine or even a human act along with its resulting outcomes (Liddell/Scott 1940: τύχη). The deity Tyche – i.e., the personification of this "chance" – deals with contingencies, namely those things that may or may not happen in all their apparent randomness, thus presiding mostly to the fates of individuals and socio-political entities (e.g., Politt 1994). *Ananke* (ἀνάγκη), on the contrary, has nothing to do with randomness or contingency. The noun likely has a semantic connection to ἤνεγκον (*énenkon*), aorist of φέρω (*phérō*, "to carry" and, consequently, "to drag"), thus inheriting the connotation of an absolute and inescapable pull. *Ananke* is a necessity that leaves no room for recourse. *Ananke* is an all-encompassing force, an irresistible compulsion or an unbreakable tie (Liddell/Scott 1940: ἀνάγκη). *Ananke* is the necessity of the laws governing the cosmos, the laws of physics and the laws of logic. As the personification of this all-ruling necessity, Ananke is one of the primordial deities in An-

cient Greek cosmogonical myths.[31] When, in orphic and orphic-influenced mythology, Ananke and her brother-spouse Chronos (i.e., Father Time) come into being (often by self-generation), the primordial **chaos** (χάος) gives way to the ordered cosmos ruled by the progressive unfolding of changes that is regulated and determined by necessary laws. However, Ananke's rule does not only apply to the deterministic world of natural phenomena, mathematical truths and the like, but extends its reach to the sphere of human life as well. Indeed, Ananke becomes the Mother of the Moirai (Μοῖραι, i.e., the Greek counterpart to the Latin *Parcae*), who oversee the thread of individual human lives from the beginning to the end (Plato 1903a).[32] Overall, then, the notions of *tyche* and *ananke* capture and map two opposite sides of extrinsic determination: one is completely open to any contingency and does not allow for the outcome to be easily known beforehand; the other is an absolute predetermination in virtue of which a different outcome – be it the conclusion in a logical argument from given premises, a physical phenomenon being the effect of a given cause, or the action of an agent – would be impossible.

When Homer uses ἀναγκαίη in the *Iliad* (1920: 4.300) or ἥ μιν ἀνάγκη in the *Odyssey* (1919: 4.557), he is referring to this type of absolute necessity and inescapable force (e.g., Aristotle 1984: 37a, 16: "τὸ γὰρ μὴ ἐνδέχεσθαι μηδενὶ διχῶς λέγεται, τὸ μὲν εἰ ἐξ ἀνάγκης τινὶ") that is and will remain a ubiquitous notion throughout archaic, classical, and post classical Greek culture as an integral part of the Greek way of thinking. *Ananke* is both one of the grounding principles of the universe (e.g., Plato 1903, 48a: "οὖν ἡ τοῦδε τοῦ κόσμου γένεσις ἐξ ἀνάγκης τε καὶ νοῦ συστάσεως ἐγεννήθη") and the inevitable destiny that rules individual existences (e.g., Xenophon 1971, 1.1.11: "τίσιν ἀνάγκαις ἕκαστα γίγνεται τῶν οὐρανίων"). Most importantly, even the gods cannot fight this necessity and are subject to it (e.g., Simonides 1962, fr. 542: "Ἀνάγκᾳ/δ' οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται"). So, ultimately, the notion of *ananke* rests at the roots of Greek religion and permeates the particular religiosity expressing Greek polytheism. In Kurumada's syncretic approach, *ananke* comes to be explicitly associated and overlapped with a partly overlapping notion that is widespread in South and East Asian cultures, i.e., the Buddhist notion of *karma* (par. 3).

Overall, this absolute necessity and unavoidable necessitation is pervasive throughout *StS*'s conceptual framework, as can be expected given its crucial role in *StS*'s cultural references and literary influences. Nonetheless, despite the weight of predestination becoming increasingly heavier with the progression of the story and the heroes' journey, the underlying *ananke* permeating and moving *StS's* universe remains for the most part a subtextual presence.

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31   The inclusion of the personification of *ananke* among the deities of the beginning is not universal: for example, Ananke is not a character in Hesiod's *Theogony*, but it is most common in orphic literature (West 1983; Meisner 2018).

32   For instance, Plato 1903a: 617c: "θυγατέρας τῆς ἀνάγκης, Μοίρας, λευχειμονούσας, στέμματα ἐπὶ τῶν κεφαλῶν ἐχούσας, Λάχεσίν τε καὶ Κλωθὼ καὶ Ἄτροπον, ὑμνεῖν πρὸς τὴν τῶν Σειρήνων ἁρμονίαν, Λάχεσιν μὲν τὰ γεγονότα, Κλωθὼ δὲ τὰ ὄντα, Ἄτροπον δὲ τὰ μέλλοντα."

Even Buddha Must Die: Narratives, Gameplay and Syncretic Necessities

It is in *StSH* that *ananke* comes to the foreground as an explicit and appropriately un-avoidable driving force directly experienced in the gameplay – besides its obvious presence in the narrative content, which the game inherited from *StS*. This overwhelming necessitation is pervasive in a measure that goes well beyond the expected narrative constraints of *StSH*'s genre, throughout the game structure itself and ultimately overrules most of the player's choices.

StSH is, overall, a pretty straightforward brawler game, conceived as the follow-up chapter to the previously released *Saint Seiya: The Sanctuary* (Dimps 2005). In the featured story mode, the progression of the game quite faithfully follows the unfolding of *StS*'s plot. In a sense, the game's actual and consistent goal is recreating or reenacting *StS*'s narrative, since most other intermediate goals shift along with the progression of the story, in conformity with the source material. Throughout the different phases of the gameplay, the explicitly stated end-goals change, as does the player's character – which is automatically assigned by the AI, accordingly to the plot requirements at each stage of the story or level of the game. The game can be divided into two main phases, the first taking place at Athena's Sanctuary and the second in the Underworld. At the beginning, when Hades' troops invade Athena's Sanctuary, the player, as one of the Saints, must defeat the invaders in order to save Athena's life. Going through the levels, the player's character is automatically reassigned – e.g., independently from which character the player has chosen up to that point, the battle at the Sixth Temple against three undead "traitors" can only be fought as the guardian of the Sixth Temple, Shaka. At the end of the first part, Athena ends up killing herself anyway – thus throwing to the wind the game's initial goal – in order to go and fight her uncle on his home turf; but, alas, she fails to bring her own Cloth, which her faithful Saints (i.e., the player) now need to deliver. Consequently, in the second stage, the main action moves from Athena's Sanctuary to Hades' domain, the Underworld. The invaded has now become the invader. The player must defeat Hades' defenders in order to advance through the *Meikai* (冥界) and find Athena, ultimately coming face to face with the god of Death himself (cf. Malavasi 2010). Initially intended to have a sequel, *StSH* does not adapt the entirety of *StS*'s "Hades Arc", but the game ends with Andromeda Shun becoming Hades himself, thus fulfilling his destiny to become the living body for Hades' soul and divine cosmos (Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 89).

StSH is as much of a plot-driven narrative as its manga and anime sources: external events and circumstances drive the progression of the story, determining the characters' actions and reactions. Action-stories are paradigmatic examples of plot-driven narratives. These tend to be high-paced and leave little to no room for character introspection and digressions, which makes them particularly suitable for videogame adaptations. In the vast majority of instances, videogames themselves are plot-driven narratives with different degrees of interference. There are games that could be considered character- rather than plot-driven – for example, some puzzle, simulation, and harem games. Character-driven games are those where the player's choices determine the game's outcome with little external interference beyond the game premises and parameters. On the contrary, in plot-driven videogames, the narrative progresses at a high pace within a relatively tightly set frame and "on rails", i.e., developing from binding premises and

pursuing stated objectives by completing the tasks or intermediate levels required to reach them in a precise sequence, like a train on a track. This, on the one hand, allows for a highly immersive game-play experience through the player's selected character; but, on the other hand, it tends to restrict the array of possible choices left open to contingency.

It is true that story trees or multi-linear narratives (i.e., those "choose-your-own-adventure" narratives allowing for possible different developments and outcomes) are frequently expressed in videogames, as is the case with those games allowing for alternate storylines or equally successful endings. This is normally the case for most game-play modes of a given game, including the versus or the story mode in a brawler game. Nonetheless, even with relatively open-structured multi-linear games, such as open-world RPGs, the narrative is far from being completely open-ended – trivially, because otherwise the game would not have a definite conclusion; and, less trivially, because the finite number of possible winning choices can only yield a finite number of possible successful outcomes. Most beat 'em up games are just as multilinear, opening different narrative lines – oftentimes veritable alternate histories – depending on the character selection and the player's choices.[33] While the game progresses along the established narrative flow by overcoming a similar sequence of adversaries and completing the same tasks, usually there are major differences among the narrative interludes, backstories unlocked and final rewards.

Neither *StSH* nor its predecessor, *Sanctuary*, allow anything like that. In both cases, the story mode seems to be as close to a mono-linear narrative as one could get: the narrative is set and established beforehand, depriving the player of any freedom of movement or choice. In *Sanctuary*, once the whole story mode arc proper had been completed, it was possible to access different ending mini-narratives (*omake* [お負け], literally: "extras") that were roughly equivalent to different possible after-credit scenes in a movie. Like an after-credit scene, *Sanctuary*'s *omake* have no impact on the main story. *StSH*, however, does not include anything like that. Once *StSH*'s story mode has been successfully completed, the player unlocks three further levels (*Kanon's Last Fight*, *Ikki Strikes Back* and *Fierce Fighting! Road to Giudecca*) that are accessible in sequence rather than through any deliberate choice to select one rather than the other. These further levels are thematically in continuity with the story mode's main narrative and reenact events in the manga that are either synchronic to the gameplay storyline or are meant to bridge the previous narrative to the intended sequel game, never realized.

In *StSH*, the pinnacle of the player's freedom is being able to select different possible answers throughout (some of) their character's interactions; however, the player's choices make no difference whatsoever for the unfolding of the plot or the progression of the story. Overall, in StS*H*, the player's choices are completely overdetermined by the necessities imposed by the plot and implemented in a faithful reenactment of *StS*'s own narrative. The resulting gaming experience is, therefore, at least doubly performative: first, it maintains the performativity intrinsic to any gaming experience (Bosman 2019); and, second, it makes the player perform a series of roles following a rigidly established

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33   Striking examples in this sense are the *Tekken* games (Namco 1994), *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games 1992) and, in a measure, *King of Fighters* (SNK 1994), among others.

script, exactly in the same way an actor would perform. In a sense, the player gets to be the Chosen One – chosen, that is, by the AI – over and over again, switching character depending on which one is crucial for the progression of the story at any given stage. The script (i.e., *StS*'s plot) is binding. The player's actions can either only succeed in fulfilling the requirements for advancing to the next stage in the same way in which within *StS*'s narrative the heroes advance to the next stage and the next adversary – or fail to do so, thus interrupting the progression of the story and ultimately losing the game.

As we mentioned above, the plot and narrative structure of a highly sequential coming-of-age epic adventure make *StS* particularly suitable for a videogame adaptation. The plot-driven and action-packed series of duels between the five protagonists and their foils of the moment is a ready-made sequential structure, already articulated in progressive levels. While *StS*'s pathos and moral dilemmas, which fill out page after page of Kurumada's manga emphasizing its chivalric atmosphere, are not rendered as part of *StSH*'s gameplay per se, they have been adapted as CG cutscenes and thus removed from the player's direct sphere of action. In this instance the player goes back to being a spectator, making it evident that the frame of mind underlying *StSH* remains exactly that of *StS*, without any meaningful shifts in the narrative approach despite the different medium.

One could argue that, at the end of the day, *StSH* is simply a mediocre game, full of missed opportunities and wasted potential. From a certain point of view, it would not be a wrong assessment. However, what *StSH* lacks in entertainment value it makes up for in philosophical relevance as a cross-media adaptation that genuinely captures the spirit of its source material. The apparent structural weaknesses in *StSH*'s gameplay are also *StSH*'s peculiar features of authentic conceptual interest, since they faithfully and performatively render the essence of *StS*'s syncretic ethos, by enacting both the typical features of *StS*'s narrative genres and its overwhelming necessitation as fully integrated elements of the gameplay.

In *StSH*, *ananke* is enacted and, *a fortiori*, enforced by the characteristics of the gameplay. The full spectrum of the game's features forces the player to experience the overruling necessity that is so central in Ancient Greek culture and, therefore, permeates *StS* to its very roots. One of the most immediately evident examples of this necessitation throughout *StSH* is, of course, the above-mentioned automated selection of the player's characters, which is reiterated at the various stages of the game in order to match the narrative of the manga without any exceptions. But this is far from being the only or even the principal iteration of *ananke* in *StSH*'s gameplay and in the game specific narrative content. We shall now focus our attention on an emblematic case that exemplifies how a particularly syncretic instance of *ananke, via* the cognate Buddhist notion of karma, is at play at a pivotal point in *StS* and faithfully adapted in *StSH*. Then we shall draw some general considerations on the gameplay's big picture.

In its most general strokes, the theory of karma (Sanskrit: कर्म , literally: "action") holds that there is a relation between actions and what comes to fruition through or as a consequence of those actions (फल, *phala,* literally "fruits" or "effects"). In turn, the effects of one's actions determine that individual's future actions, in a complexly situational and circular setting, that ordinarily is unbreakable. In its basic form, then, the principle of karma appears to be a kind of overruling law of causation permeating the

whole domain of action and its evaluation, for every agent and across the cycle of re-births (cf. Sideritis 2019, par. 4). In many ways, Buddhist *karma* and Greek *ananke* have a similar connotation as overwhelming causal forces, exercising a similar action and similar functions on a similarly global scale. In a work like *StS*, the superimposition between the two, resting on an actual overlap, is only natural and morphs into an almost-identification. This almost-identification colors *ananke* with *karma*'s moral connotation and an emphasis on moral evaluation, which is not foreign to Western views of cosmic necessitation – think of the Stoic maxim, *fata volentem ducunt, nolentem trahunt* – and it fits perfectly with the staples of *StS*'s literary references.

In both *StS* and *StSH*, the above-mentioned battle of the Sixth Temple is the best example of this syncretic interpenetration between *karma* and *ananke*. For instance, karma and *ananke* are now overtly brought together in a character-relevant and plot-functional fashion, while showcasing the peculiarities of *StSH*'s gameplay as well. While this battle is one of the highest narrative and moral moments in the manga, in *StSH* it is the turning point that marks the culmination of the first part of the game. The assigned player's character here is Virgo Shaka, whom we briefly encountered above: Kurumada, playing fast and loose with some tenets of Buddhist thought, makes Shaka into the reincarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni, i.e., Siddhārtha Gautama. Shaka's battle is fought against three adversaries at the same time and takes place in a secret garden accessible through the Virgo Temple. The player immediately recognizes that this is a crucial place and the set for a crucial moment in the game. The petals shed by the two *sala* trees in the garden are (unsurprisingly and quite unrealistically) reminiscent of *sakura* petals and have been a leitmotif throughout the game up to this point, beginning with the game's opening screen. Besides the aesthetic taste bringing a flare of Japan into Greece and even more so into the heavily Indian inspired setting of the Sixth Temple, the s*akura/sala* petals in the opening and throughout *StSH* are deliberately evocative of the *Heike Monogatari*[34] which is one of the most iconic literary representations of *mujō (*無常*)* — i.e. the Zen notion of impermanence (Hull 1998). The garden behind the Sixth Temple is not just any garden, but **the** Twin Sala Garden, i.e., Siddhārtha's place of death – somehow transported to Greece by the power of manga logic and, appropriately, plot necessities. The reader with even a basic familiarity with the Buddhist tradition will immediately know that Shaka will die here. And die he must, but not without having defeated his three adversaries first. Shaka's death is plot functional, since he realizes that, in order to win the holy war against Hades once and for all, one must fight it offensively rather than defensively, i.e., the fight needs to be taken to the Underworld. By letting himself die, Shaka leads the way for Athena's army and Athena herself, after having left a message for his goddess written

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34   Cf. *The Tale of the Heike* (1988), chapter 1.1: "祇園精舎の鐘の声，諸行無常の響きあり。娑羅双樹の花の色，盛者必衰の理をあらわす。おごれる人も久しからず，唯春の夜の夢のごとし。たけき者も遂にはほろびぬ，偏に風の前の塵に同じ。 (The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind)." The passage is one of those well-known and widely quoted literary references, making an appearance even in Takashi Miike's movie, *Sukiyaki Western Django* (Miike, 2007, 0:01:59).

in blood on the Sala petals: *arayashiki.* The Japanese term *arayashiki* (阿頼耶識) translates the Sanskrit term *ālayavijñāna* (आलयविज्ञान), literally 'store-consciousness'. This is a key notion for the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna philosophy and aims to address the problem of the continuity of personal identity raised by the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (अनात्मन्, "absence of self") (Schmithausen 2007). Kurumada is closely inspired by the Yogācāra tradition in his theory of the senses. Indeed, in *StS* the Eight Sense is explicitly the Yogācāra Eight Consciousness, i.e., the *ālayavijñāna* or *arayashiki.* More precisely, Kurumada's Eight Sense is the stage of consciousness where all the individual's awareness and agency (and therefore their karma) are preserved, consenting Athena and her Saints to even defy death and descend to the Underworld remaining, for all intents and purposes, alive or something very much like it.

These few lines provide a sufficient idea of how philosophically and dramatically dense the Battle at the Sixth Temple is and how Shaka, after having beaten Camus, Saga and Shura within an inch of their (not quite)[35] lives, chooses to die anyway, because he must. In *StSH*, the player must go through the same process. Usually, in most beat 'em up games, the resolution of a given conflict is achieved through the victory of the player's character over their adversaries, at which point the player's character can advance victorious to the next level and to the next brawl. This is not the case in *StSH*: the player must win Shaka's fight for the game to continue, but the plot overrules everything else and Shaka dies anyway. The player's victory is required for the plot to move forward but does not affect the content and the development of the plot in one direction rather than another: the plot is set, it is predetermined, and there's nothing that the player can do to change it. The usual cathartic value of the gaming experience, especially in a **beat 'em up**, is accompanied by an overwhelming sense of frustration at the player's ultimate irrelevance. In a sense, winning *StSH* – i.e., defeating the adversaries and successfully completing all the levels – means experiencing a series of losses in the narrative content: Shaka dies; Athena, instead of being saved, kills herself; Shun, the player's character at the descent to the Underworld, ends up becoming Hades and embodying the main antagonist. In *StSH*, winning the game does not mean winning the war. The player cannot do anything but accept it. In the light of *StS*'s cultural and literary references, this is the core of *StSH*'s syncretic "Greekness" allowing the player to directly experience the ultimate tenet of Greek spirituality and religiosity: no one, not even the gods, can fight necessity. In this world of gods that can die and heroes that can defeat them, everyone – the gods, the heroes, the player – must still bend to an overdetermining necessitation, an *ananke* that pervades the narrative content and is built into *StSH*'s gameplay itself.

Closing Remarks

Throughout the present study, we have shown that *StS* should be considered a syncretic narrative where the sphere of the sacred plays a central role. We have done so, in the first place, by underlying how *StS*'s syncretism rests on the commonalities between Ancient

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35   Aquarius Camus, Gemini Saga and Capricorn Shura are some of Athena's Gold Saints who died in the 'Sanctuary' arc and are now temporarily revived by Hades' power.

Greek and traditional Japanese polytheistic cultures. In the second place, we have examined the interpenetration of different literary traditions and genres making up the backbone and flesh of Kurumada's *opus magnum*. In particular, we have analyzed the narrative functions of *StS*'s main characters, focusing our attention on the intrinsic emphasis on their liminal role and on the centrality of the notions of predestination and necessitation. This centrality is built into *StS*'s literary and cultural references, as well as consequently in its narrative structure and content. Finally, within this syncretic and multi-cultural framework, we have taken under consideration *StSH*'s as a cross-media adaptation. In particular, we have examined how *StSH* captures and enacts *StS's* core notion of necessity, allowing the player to experience it performatively both through its narrative content and its unusually rigid gameplay constraints.

Frank Bosman extensively and convincingly argued that "[t]he act of playing particular games can, in some specific cases, be interpreted as a religious act in itself" (2019: 8). Certainly, a more general claim could be put forward in the wake of Aristotle, albeit with some modern re-contextualisation: while there is a cathartic value in the artistic experience, the same could be said about experiencing various forms of entertainment in general. For example, not many would disagree with the claim that few things are as cleansing for the soul as crushing the attack button in a good ol' fashioned beat 'em up. That the Aristotelian catharsis has a social and religious connotation is an old and well-established interpretation in the sociology of religion, dating back at least to Émile Durkheim (1912). Therefore, playing any game or experiencing a form of entertainment that produces a kind of catharsis would qualify as a religious experience.

Nonetheless, the type of experience that the player goes through in *StSH* is religious in a much stronger and more rooted sense than that. Resting on a complex intertextual, multicultural, and syncretic background, *StSH* throws the player into the core of the Greek spiritual experience of the world, by subjecting them to an enacted and performed necessitation. *StSH*'s necessitation is both *ananke* and *karma*, Western and Eastern, put forward by the narrative and structural content of the gameplay, pervasive and universal. In this way, *StSH* manages to adapt *StS*'s spirit along with its letter, making it performative in a different medium. The resulting product might be a mediocre game, but what makes it mediocre is also what ultimately makes it one of those games that Bosman qualified as a genuine space for authentically religious acts – and rightfully so.

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"At the Same Time … Both Truth and Fiction"

Interrelation(s) of Psychology, Faith, and the Esotericism of the JRPG

David Stevenson

Keywords: *esotericism; Final Fantasy; JRPG; Nier; psychology; spirituality; Xenogears*

Of all of Japan's many contributions to the videogame industry, it is perhaps the 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' genre (hence 'JRPG') that remains its most definitive landmark. The *Dragon Quest* series (Square Enix since 2003) is arguably the definitive example of what would later be understood as the JRPG, whose systems, design and theming were highly influential on the game industry as a whole, in which a young hero embarks on a 'grail quest' vanquishing multitudes of bandits, warlocks and dragons in order to save the kingdom. Here we see the benign references to religion; Churches are the trademark 'save point' throughout the series where the player can heal their wounds, purge debilitating illnesses and resurrect fallen comrades by interacting with the local priest; in fact, the anglophone translations of *Dragon Quest* parse saving the game as 'confessing [your] sins'. This action implies that the priest is alleviating some of the burden from the player (in that saving the game state allows the player to return at a more convenient time), but the player also receives a benediction as confirmation that the state is saved, and the console can now be turned off. Though this remains an innocuous stirring of religious parallel in the Japanese videogame, it will be seen that this dynamic between religious practice and gameplay becomes staggeringly complex.

Prior to further writing, it is important to lay out a functional definition of the JRPG. At best, this term is slippery given it is typically applied post-hoc to a genre of Japanese games by its Western fans and is not defined by strict formal conditions. Fundamentally, the term 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' implies that games within the subgenre satisfy the condition of originating in Japan and that the player determines the actions of a given protagonist. The term 'Role Playing' itself might produce some explicit notion that the player possesses a great deal of control over their player character; in reality, none of the games in this chapter present narrative divergences based on player choice beyond the three possible endings typical to the *Shin Megami Tensei* series (Atlus since 1987), discussed later in this chapter. Instead, this role-playing element is understood as mechanically

driven i.e. the task of managing equipment, spells and skills in a manner akin to a traditional pen-and-paper roleplaying systems seen in *Dungeons and Dragons* (TSR 1974), *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium 1981), *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf 1991), and so on. However, there are shared aspects across *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997 [referred to as *FFVII*]), *Xenogears* (Square 1998) and the *Shin Megami* series that define them as JRPGs. Combat is typically 'turn-based', e.g., the player and enemy unit take turns in combat to deal out attacks, as opposed to the battle occurring within real time. The proficiency of each character in combat is determined by statistics (or 'stats'), where a higher-value number attached to strength, for instance, would cause the character to inflict a higher (numerical) damage value to an opponent. JRPGs tend to prioritize world-building where the player canvasses an entire world through the course of their playtime; the world of *FFVII* is organized over an entire world map which the player can traverse, while the plot trajectory of *Xenogears* moves from small parochial villages to ancient, colony-sized starships – the ever-expanding scale of the JRPG is a common defining trait, pairing both with the typical monomyth structure (unlikely hero on a grail quest), and a significant time-investment produced by the player in order to complete the game. As an example, players could expect the task of bringing *FFVII* to completion would take roughly 40 hours, with likely well over 60 hours required to access every secret and item that the game has to offer. This culmination of extensive playtime, expansive setting and (typically) turn-based focus leads the JRPG to have a considerably above-average focus on narrative development. The story of an RPG is typically produced through interactive text sequences through which the player will press a button on their controller to advance from one dialogue box to the next, thus simulating an exchange of words between characters that progresses according to the player's behest. Many of the games examined within this chapter also make use of FMV ('Full Motion Video') animated sequences that are much more cinematic in production quality; effectively a prestige moment within the play experience wherein the player is treated to an event unfolding in greater visual detail; *FFVII* makes particular use of this in the opening moments of the game, where Cloud, the protagonist, is shown to leap off the side of a 3D-rendered speeding train to arrive at his rendezvous site. This spectacle is heightened by this transition from high-quality animated graphics into the game-space proper, accentuating the game's high-calibre of graphic production seen throughout the title. Other forms of narrative development are found in the expanded mechanical and traversal options that the player discovers as the game progresses. The acquisition of an 'airship' or other floating craft towards the denouement is common, opening up the player's access to the game world significantly; a development that parallels the time-investment and mastery necessary for the player to reach this point in the game. Thus, the JRPG is structured to reward persistence and growth on both a systemic and narrative level; arguably a major reason for the enduring nature of the genre.

In terms of gameplay, success in the JRPG is determined by making prudent choices during combat, and tailoring the characters beforehand through allocated equipment and an increasing suite of additional combat abilities. In a broader case, the appeal of a JRPG is that it presents a grand narrative that incorporates exploration, combat and expanding play mechanics within an epic narrative form. Progress for the player is rewarded both by the continuation of the story and new places to see, as well as the capacity

to chart the increasing combat proficiency of characters with ever-growing stat values. Of the games discussed in this chapter, *FFVII*, *Xenogears* and the *Shin Megami Tensei* series fulfill the ludic expectations of the JRPG in this regard. It should be stressed that, as text-heavy games, the player's continuing interest in the game is contingent on identifying with both the sprawling storyline and navigating the ludic obstacles the player must overcome to reach them.

The success of the JRPG form has led to diversions from the high-fantasy rubric of the epochal *Dragon Quest* series. This divergence is most explicitly seen in the later *Shin Megami Tensei* series. Whilst the series mirrors many aspects of gameplay seen in *Dragon Quest*; beating monsters, gathering increasingly powerful equipment, and saving the world from evil, the games are (by an overwhelming majority) set in modern-day Tokyo in the wake of a Biblical apocalypse. In *Shin Megami Tensei II* (Atlus 1992), there is a 'secret' boss encounter with Hecate which is almost entirely possible to miss, as it requires the player to be present in Yesod, within Yetzirah, during a full moon[1]. Kaneko, the lead artist for the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, was asked years later in an interview about this easily missed event, specifying that "that's because she is a three-faced god" and, as the goddess of liminal spaces, could therefore plausibly be connected within the chambered dimensions of the Kabbalah (*d*1994). While only a fleeting example of religious aptitude in the *Shin Megami* series, it indicates the level of care and attention given to 'remixing' religious figures and spaces within a distinctly Japanese idiom, beyond the superficial inclusion of religious imagery seen prior in *Dragon Quest*. This trend becomes increasingly popular from the mid-1990s onward, with *Neon Genesis Evangelion* ([referred to as *Evangelion*] 1995–1996) frequently referred to as a cornerstone of modern anime, in which troubled teens in biomechanical **mecha** combat 'angels' prophesied in an in-lore version of the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Evangelion* is unquestionably a landmark anime given its continued cultural impact, with a feature-length animated finale producing a definitive close for the series in 2021 (Anno). However, *Evangelion* departs significantly from the **mecha** subgenre in that the experience of occupying a mech is far from empowerment, and more a source of profound trauma for the show's protagonist, Shinji, who remains a malleable pawn in conspiracy (driven by his own father) to enact a man-made rapture in which humanity is erased to become a singular, incorporeal consciousness. Where a totalizing summary of the events of *Evangelion* remain out of the remit of this chapter, it is reasonable to assert that the show's successful fusion of existential philosophy, psychology and cosmic horror would produce the thematic basis of several games subsequent. *Final Fantasy VII* and *Xenogears*, two Squaresoft properties released only a few years after *Evangelion*, most notably carry the influence of their anime predecessor by virtue of their (oftentimes) nihilistic reflections on the hubris of man.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the extent to which Esotericism is used within the JRPG, and its increasing integration within complex videogame narratives, and provide a more definitive account of how the JRPG, in particular, tends to formally mirror the occult complexity of non-mainstream (or non-canonical) religious texts as a

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1   Yesod and Yetzirah are both territories within the Tree of Life as described in the Kabbalah. Yesod is the foundation of the material world as made by God; Yetzirah is the 'World of Formation', in which matter is given form, often considered symbolic of the manifestation of consciousness.

form of repurposed religious experience. Necessary to this account is the inclusion of multiple videogames that demonstrate a conceptual tie between esotericism and character psychology. *Final Fantasy VII* is particularly useful here as a popular and (comparatively) well-documented title, in which Cloud Strife, the protagonist, must first reckon with his self-delusion to save the world from an extraterrestrial lifeform posing as a messiah. *Xenogears* is a useful and timely comparison, released only months after *FFVII*, which echoes a similar link between character psyche and a cosmic battle, albeit on a more blatantly mythical scale. Following this is the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, which has defined itself in appropriating and recontextualising religious, mythical, and folkloric figures into a consistent (and **local** mythos), where the protagonists pick through the remains of a post-apocalyptic Tokyo in order to battle opponents, demonic and divine, in order to rebuild the universe according to the player's decisions. The final videogame is the more recent title *Nier: Automata* (Square Enix 2018) which offers a distinct divergence from the other titles as a third-person 'Action RPG' that utilizes major works of philosophy and an unraveling story structure to form a treatise on 'positive nihilism', in which the game's android cast must confront the purpose of their existence in a world where their human creators no longer exist.

Where readings differ on the precise constituents of a JRPG, Schules presents a distinctive reading of the genre as construed more through media interrelation than ludology, stating that:

> [...] One way to understand the Japanese qualifier of JRPGs is through its position in a larger framework of creative media brought together under the aegis of soft power. Despite soft political discourse to the contrary, JRPGs are Japanese not because of any intrinsic quality they possess; rather, they are Japanese by virtue of their relation to other creative media. (2015: 71)

Schule's interpretation of the JRPG as a component of a broader media landscape suggests that Roquet's (2014) approach is similarly applicable to a wider context, given that Japanese media forms are more loosely parsed 'by proxy' than through the formal properties of production. The argument would then follow that the JRPG responds to similar cultural influence and economic incentives offered in anime production; at the very least, it is evident that *FFVII* and *Xenogears* both draw considerably from the narrative and thematic framework laid out in *Evangelion* years prior. In terms of historical influence, there is a body of research to support periods of renewed interest and engagement with religious cults in Japan. The most sensational reference point of this will be the sarin gas attacks perpetuated in 1993 by members of the cult movement *Aum Shinrikyo*, an event which prompted serious academic research in the aftermath, particularly in determining the complicity of the religious movement in coordinating and executing the attack. Ian Reader has provided perhaps the most substantive account of *Aum Shinrikyo* to date, with *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyo* (2000) examining beyond the apocalyptic sensationalism of the cult itself towards providing for individ-

ual motives, testimonies and social pressures that caused *Aum* to be succeed both at its genesis, and in the years following the notorious subway attacks[2].

In terms of providing a scholarly basis for unravelling this distinctive link between player-character, psychology, and esotericism within the JRPG, Roquet's (2014) paper on what he defines as 'cosmic subjectivity' has provided a detailed firmament. In writing on *Night on Galactic Railroad (Sugii 1985)*, Roquet notes that cosmic subjectivity proposes:

> A form of self-understanding drawn not through social frames, but by reflecting one-self against the backdrop of the larger galaxy. (2014: 124)

Through this research, Roquet asserts that there is a generational shift in anime production studios (and their audience) that is marked by a cosmos interlinked with the protagonist's psyche (2014: 126). The consequence of this approach is that anime from this period detached from the familiar narrative structure of interpersonal relationships/interdependency and instead focused on the production of a wholly other universe that their intended audience could be immersed within, effectively liberated from the notional idea of media as reflective of pre-existing social realities (2014: 127). Where Roquet develops the concept of cosmic subjectivity in-step with a reading of *Night on Galactic Railroad*, a particularly haunting and elegiac adaptation of a Miyazawa short story, he presents a schema of potential influences; cultural, historic, and economic – that had a direct impact on this transformation of audience taste and similarly relates to the mythical, unreal approach to storytelling taken by Japanese game studios years later.

The academic reflections on Japanese media production, shifts in audience demographic, and the cultural relevance of cult religious practice culminates with the idea that the JRPG embodied these tensions during Japan's 'lost decades'[3]. The *Shin Megami Tensei* series, in particular, is organized around competing religious ideologies in mankind's End of Days. The research produced in relation to religion and the videogame has been beneficial, where the recent interest in this present, yet overlooked concept is mounting. Primarily, this chapter considers the manner and extent to which the JRPG incorporates the motifs of Esotericism. This research constitutes an initial attempt to coordinate the diverse and emergent work produced by this topic in recent years, and deliver an account of the many methodological approach(es) used in relation to religious motifs in the JRPG. Finally, this chapter posits what could be further uncovered by the unique convergence of theological and literary hermeneutics in application to the videogame.

The most simple introduction to this is offered by the introduction of character psychology seen in *FFVII*. Rather than ascend to the role of a legendary hero, Cloud is positioned as an exceptional (yet begrudging) mercenary until the inconsistencies in his story, and eventual accusations of being nothing more than a failed clone, produces an intense emotional breakdown that renders Cloud catatonic towards the close of the second act. What liberates Cloud is not the recovery of a hidden inner strength, but instead the acceptance of his own weakness. Cloud's weakness refers both to his literal lack of

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2   Reader revised the original 1991 publication in a new edition (2000) after the subway attack, and has revisited the subject extensively throughout his academic career.

3   'Lost decade' is a rough anglicism of the Japanese term, *Ushinawareta Jūnen*.

physical strength in childhood, but more aptly refers to his urge to be 'noticed' by others, providing an explanation to how easily he succumbs to the illusory narrative that he is a failed clone of the legendary soldier and key antagonist, Sephiroth. The events revealed in Cloud's coma scene radically alter the perception of the narrative; the original hero-villain duality between Cloud and Sephiroth is now one momentarily displaced to that of Zack[4] and Sephiroth, where Cloud has been displaced by the motives that have guided him thus far.

Cloud's gesture of self-acceptance sets an optimistic tone as the game moves towards its concluding hours; that having no destined place within *FFVII's* grand narrative is reason to persevere. In this sense, the narrative forgoes the typical moral dualism of heroic conflict, opting instead to place the awakened Cloud as an outsider, clearing up the residue of events which occurred seven years before the game's beginning. This awakening marks a significant shift in *FFVII* as the narrative escalates to a mythic level as the party travels through to the center of the planet to confront Jenova; a fight that culminates in a confrontation with the final, angelic incarnation of Sephiroth.

This restructuring of the classic heroic narrative is indebted to the implementation of dialogue in-game. Greg Smith's (2002) formalist analysis of *FFVII's* 'cinematic dialogue' explores how text within the game first appropriates cinematic form, then diverts from it. Much like a filmic narrative, *FFVII* sets up the motivations and goals of its key character (Cloud), at the outset, but the interactive nature of the game's combat serves the narrative function often left to film dialogue. Thus, *FFVII's* dialogue performs another task, as Smith notes that "many of the key lines of *FFVII* are there to fill us in on the past, not to point us toward the future" (2002: n.p.). Smith's (2002) study demonstrates that *FFVII's* preoccupation with the past is a definitive example of game dialogue serving a function beyond the emulation of film dialogue; however, this interrogation of the past also suggests a desire to reconcile modernity to myth. The events of *FFVII* readily parallel numerous contemporary crises in Japan's recent history; a colossal natural disaster, roving cultists, political corruption, militarization and financial depression[5]. References to these motifs are abundant in other media in Japan, but *FFVII* takes a particular approach to weave these disparate and terrible conditions into a singular, explicable narrative. The extent of these storied and terrible occurrences imply a formative approach with the production of *FFVII's* narrative in which both natural and man-made tragedies become uni-

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4   The character of Zack remains an enigma throughout the duration of *FFVII*. Zack is an elite soldier on whom a confused Cloud has adopted his personality in the wake of medical experiments conducted on him prior to the game's events. Cloud uses Zack's sword in combat and is styled almost exactly like him; their singular separating difference is in hair colour; blond (Cloud) and black (Zack). Zack is dead by the beginning of *FFVII*, but the 'residue' of his life is often addressed by Aeris and Tifa, both of whom recognize Cloud as his double.

5   The devastating Great Hanshin Earthquake (1995), the Tokyo Subway attack (1995). Japan's 'lost decade' of 1991–2001, and the significant tensions concerning the introduction of PKO law (1992), the latter of which is explored in detail in Mamoru Oshii's *Patlabor 2* (1993). Political corruption is a likely parallel to the so-called 'Recruit Scandal' (1989), which implicated the then-current (and previous) Prime Minister(s) in an insider trading ring, whose investigation was ongoing through the 1990s (Johnson, 2000).

form symptoms of one malevolent force – Jenova – that seeks to consume the lifeforce of Gaia's inhabitants.

Similar to the anxiety of angelic beings expressed in *Evangelion*, Sephiroth's ultimate, ascended form taken in *FFVII*'s final battle is deliberately angelic, clad in wing and halo; beyond this, he is also capable of attacking the party using the entire cosmos[6]. Tellingly, the game *Xenogears* (Square Product 1998), released after *FFVII*, culminates with the protagonist and his accomplices destroying a cruel and unfair god in order to liberate the surviving humans from an oppressive angelic regime. *Xenogears* was created from a story initially proposed by Tetsuya Takahashi and Kaori Tanaka as the basis for *FFVII*, but turned into a new and separate IP, allegedly deemed "too dark and complicated" for one of Square's mainline titles (Yip 2010: Page Number or n.p.). Soraya Saga, a freelance writer, illustrator, and partner to Takahashi, concedes that the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Jung in particular were influential in the writing of *Xenogears*, posing that the game responds to the inherent questions of humanity: "where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?"(Yip 2010). The motif of recollecting the self plainly reappears in *Xenogears*; the protagonist, Fei Fong Wong, is a construct of a 'monster', a 'coward', and the false persona of 'Fei'. Fei's bifurcated identity neatly overlays with Freud's model of the psyche (his monstrous self is literally named 'Id'), while the imagined persona of 'Fei' shields him from the truth – that he is, in fact, the reincarnation of a deity known as Abel. This particular synthesis between character interiority and cosmic horror, mediated through psychology and spiritual intertext, is a congruent element seen across *FFVII*, *Xenogears* and *Evangelion*.

In this sense, *FFVII* exists in a gulf where it mirrors the religious anxieties of *Evangelion*, develops the continuity of the *Final Fantasy* series, and establishes the major theme of identity then explored with the release of *Xenogears*. All of these texts engage in the miniaturization of humanity through an ever-increasing scale. This structural shift reorients the hero narrative from the horizontal conflict of hero and villain towards a 'vertical' narrative in which humanity lingers at the bottom rung of a totalizing mythic order. As stated above, Cloud's psychological growth is significant on a narrative level, and arguably gratifying to the player, but it remains that the outcome of the hero's success (in destroying Sephiroth/Jenova) is ambiguous with regards to humanity's long-term survival. The motifs of apocalypse and destruction is a common and long-running motif of Japanese media, but *FFVII* builds these elements into a narrative in which the hero must first remember himself before passing through the crucible.

Xenogears provides an intriguing contrast to *FFVII* given their approximate development time and release, both under the aegis of Squaresoft. Where *FFVII* was fundamentally designed as a blockbuster title slated for global release, *Xenogears* is a comparatively niche title, only released outside of Japan in North America. *Xenogears* has also long faced accusations of being 'unfinished', as the second disc is effectively an exposition-

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6   This attack in particular was altered to look much more spectacular for the Western release of *FFVII*. This version was eventually relaunched in Japan as '*Final Fantasy VII: International*', in October 1997.

heavy slideshow that terminates with a boss fight and epilogue[7]. Despite these difficulties, *Xenogears* maintains an explicit focus on religious myth, interspersed with psychological conceits in which the protagonist, Fei Wong Wong, is awakened to his complicity in the world's strife. *Xenogears'* commentary is notoriously explicit, given the conclusion of the game where Fei and his party destroy God/Deus, a hybrid bio-organic AI revered as a deity. The defeat of God then prompts the revelation that he is not in fact a deity, but an ancient automaton merely operating as a conduit for an interdimensional entity known only as 'The Wave Existence'. The fusion of the being known as Wave Existence and Deus was mediated by the Zohar (or Zohar Modifier), an energy source that trapped the Wave inside the body of Deus. Where the story of *Xenogears* is already conceptually complex, Fei's role in the story is more significant than it first appears. Fei begins the game as a humble painter in a small agrarian community, yet it is revealed that he is the conduit for the (benevolent) Wave Existence which he encountered in his original form as a child, thousands of years ago. Thus, the story of *Xenogears* is a totalising narrative in which Fei is the accidental progenitor of a cruel and apocalyptic universe, but also its savior. 'Fei' has been reincarnated countless times to achieve the final goal of liberating the Wave Existence – and mankind – from technological slavery. Given the nature of *Xenogear's* mystic narrative, the opening quote of "I am the Alpha and Omega", appears particularly apt[8].

In this way, *Xenogears* adopts a great deal of religious and psychoanalytic terminology. This approach helpfully tethers the remote cosmic narrative to identifiable concepts, but also presents a world where technological advancement and deification are indistinguishable from one another. Of particular note is the use of Zohar to describe a sophisticated power source. In the real world, the *Sefer ha-Zohar* is a foundational text of the Kabbalah, an exegesis on the Torah that formed the basis of Kabbalistic theology, at once revered and disputed in theological criticism (Huss 2015). Huss notes that the *Zohar* was a particular point of resistance to the *maskilim* in the eighteenth century as part of a "…struggle against traditional Jewish circles, especially the hasidic movement in eastern Europe" (2015: 9). Yisraeli has also commented on the unique nature of the Zohar as an exegesis:

> The Zoharic exegete makes a great effort to settle enigmas and difficulties regarding the early aggadah yet does not adopt any visibly forced hermeneutic or theological agenda. What is not always clear, however, is the degree of authority these sources possess in the author's eyes. Or, to formulate this more acutely, to what extent a particular author permits himself to ignore earlier talmudic sources or gives his own teaching greater weight. (2013: 130).

Given the descriptions offered by Huss and Yisraeli, the *Zohar* represents a text whose value is determined by the reader; both in terms of recognizing the validity of the text,

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7   Tetsuya Takahashi, director of *Xenogears*, elaborated on the game's 'unfinished' state, attributing it to the inflexible 2-year development cycle, and the cadre of inexperienced personnel on the project who were struggling to implement (then-new) 3D graphics. The decision to make the second disc text-heavy permitted *Xenogears* to be released on-time and within budget.

8   The quotation is Rev 22:13 (KJV) verbatim, albeit with the order altered to read '…the beginning and the end, the first and the last.'

and in interpreting the authority that it holds in contrast to other Talmudic texts. That the Zohar in *Xenogears* integrates a being of manifest consciousness into a deified shell thus comports with the so-called mysticism of the *Zoharic* texts; an attempt to bridge the boundaries of body and soul, and, more importantly, as a site of intersection between a fearsome material god and the transcendent consciousness unwillingly harbored within.

There are further references to Kabbalah in *Xenogears*. Razael, a supercomputer used to store the sum total of human knowledge comports in name and purpose with Raziel, the angel of god "who stands behind the curtain and listens to all that is decreed in heaven and proclaims it" (in Gaster 143). The Merkavah (Merkabah), the flaming chariot of God described by Ezekiel, exists in *Xenogears* as the transportation system for Deus. Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar, the 'three wise men' that journey to visit Christ, appear in *Xenogears* as sages who pass on their wisdom to Fei. In particular, Balthasar relates to Fei the story of mankind's expulsion from paradise, with the addendum that:

> Bitter at having been driven out of paradise, humans used the wisdom they had to make giants. With these giants, they planned to challenge God himself. But God poured his wrath down on them. All who defied God were destroyed. But God himself did not escape unharmed. Taking paradise with him, the wounded God buried himself deep beneath the ocean to sleep for eons. Before going to sleep, God used his remaining power to create right-hearted humans to live on this planet. (Square Product Development Division 3 1998: n.p.)

Thus, the story of *Xenogears* directly incorporates Judeo-Christian motifs into the framework of its narrative, and is viewed in continuity with the religious prophecies and exegesis that have, in the case of *Xenogears*, dispensed apocalyptic visions that were accurate portents of the world to come. This necessarily situates the player between the pillars of the Judeo-Christian mythos of the past, and that mythos in future continuity, with modern experience effectively a forgotten lull between apocalyptic states. The utilization of myth in *Xenogears* is part of its mystical exploration of humanity, where truth is found in myth, and the age of reason is rendered inscrutable.

Xenogears introduces further mystification through its stylistic implementation of Jungian psychology where Fei's ego, superego, and 'shadow' become external, physical manifestations with their own identities. This parallels a similar narrative approach seen in *FFVII*, where Cloud's interior revelations about himself, and the unclouded view of childhood experience, renews him with the self-determination necessary to destroy the malignant god of Jenova. *Xenogears* similarly has Fei reckon with his subconscious, albeit as external manifestations of his earlier selves. Fei's Id conglomerates into 'Id' after a dissociative event, a repressed and destructive entity sealed away into Fei's consciousness. Representation is also given to ego and superego. The antagonist known as 'Grahf' is similarly born from Fei, as the power-hungry remnant from a failed pre-incarnation (notably named Lacan). Grahf continually urges Fei to awaken to power like him, which would allow Grahf to possess Fei's body and obliterate existence. Similarly, 'Coward' acts as Fei's ego; the original version of Fei that encountered Zohar, preserved within Fei. Much like how *Xenosaga*'s cosmic narrative is maintained by adhesion to Judeo-Christian concepts, the psychological element adds another interpretative construct that dis-

rupts the linear narrative, where Fei operates as both protagonist and antagonist. Fei is effectively a construct that harbors multiple identities (or aspects), and his journey is one that confronts him with the myths of the past; now necessary in determining his future. Through this complex narrative the player is similarly tasked to unpack and successfully navigate a narrative that affords no simple victories; like the player, Fei is an extra-diegetic entity. Where they differ is that Fei's archetypes or *selves* produce complications beyond a conflict of good and evil. Since the Zohar is enshrined as the supreme and secretive force controlling the universe of *Xenogears*, it would seem that *gnosis*, in particular Fei's self-knowledge, will restore a collapsing reality once attained.

It is interesting to note that, where *FFVII* and *Xenogears* both present personal revelation as a necessary awakening to their purpose, their representation differs significantly. *FFVII* features a more internalized approach where Cloud's understanding adopts a more Jungian model; Tifa's presence as a living spectator to Cloud's memories lend this narrative sequence is reminiscent of dramatized talking therapy; particularly in how Tifa's externalized role causes her to prompt Cloud to retell his defining experiences, successfully bringing on his catharsis that his authentic self is more than the culmination of his false memories. Meanwhile, *Xenogears* pitches Fei against the manifestations of his former and present selves, where the fate of the universe is contingent on the aspect of 'Fei' to persevere and finally destroy Deus, while preserving the existence of humanity. What is evident in considering Square's parallel RPG titles is that human psychology and religious myth present an intertextual mode from which to interpret the game. *FFVII*, in particular, has invited a variety of academic approaches towards the topics covered within it; as an environmental parable, as corporate critique, and as the embodied anxieties of Japanese culture towards the end of the Lost Decade. Both *FFVII* and *Xenogears* adopt the approach of highly complex structures that cause the narrative to gesture outward to wider cosmic motifs which at times cause the causal aspects of the story to become mystified. This could be perceived as a consequence of long-form storytelling, as both games require significant time investment to complete, necessitating a horizontal expansion of story elements to present the player with a greater degree of narrative milestones. The inclusion of spiritual and psychological intertext also serve to present a modernised myth that incorporates internal (psychology) and external (cosmos) motifs that both minitaturizes human experience and yet enshrines the triumph of the individual; their interiority and catharsis.

Perhaps the most distinctive and long-lived model of spiritual intertext is seen in the *Shin Megami Tensei* [referred to as *SMT*] series. *SMT* has held a consistent presence in the Japanese market since the release of *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei*, which was released originally on the MSX in July 1987. A Famicom version followed in September of that year. Both versions were co-developed by ATLUS and Telenet Japan, though the Famicom version adopted a familiar turn-based JRPG formula, differing from the original's more action-focused entry, and the version that debuted on Famicom systems would become the model for the series going forward. Both titles were an adaptation of the same source texts; Aya Nishitani's *Digital Devil Story* trilogy (1986–1988)[9]. Henceforth, the series would

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9   The novel trilogy was also adapted into an OVA (Nishikubo 1987), part-financed by Tokuma Shoten, the publisher of the original books.

form an extensive media landscape consisting of anime productions, manga, music albums, live stage shows, TV series, and numerous spin-off games. Most notable of the spin-off titles is the *Persona* series (Atlus since 1996), which debuted on the PSX in 1996, and in recent years has largely eclipsed the original series in popularity in USA/European territories, particularly with the release of *Persona 5* (Atlus 2016) and its own subsequent spin-offs and remasters from its initial release date in 2016. It would be reasonable to conclude from these observations that the *SMT* series has had a long-lived cultural impact in Japan, but that, beyond *Persona*, has only begun to gain substantive traction in the West. This is partially due to the breakout success of *Persona*, which has prompted the re-release *SMT: Nocturne/Lucifer's Call* and the recent release of *SMT V* (Atlus 2021), the latter of which was widely advertised and celebrated with a 'premium edition' version that includes the game alongside stickers, a soundtrack CD, and other ephemera for series fans[10].

Arguably, the appeal of *SMT* lies in its high degree of cultural specificity. The series is almost entirely set in some variation of Tokyo that the player can explore. Much of Tokyo's particular landmark structures (Tokyo tower, the Diet building, Shibuya Crossing) remain distinctly intact even in apocalyptic conditions, and lend a sense of place and cultural nuance to the world that the player explores, beyond the more idyllic fantasy world of *Dragon Quest*, or the poly-cultural dwellings seen in *Final Fantasy VII*. *SMT* can be credited for a number of distinct innovations in gameplay and narrative design. A prominent feature of the series is the 'negotiation' system, in which the player-character can utilise a 'talk' command to speak directly to a demon opponent and convince them to give the player an item, cease their attack, or, ideally, join their party as a friendly combatant. The ability to recruit demons, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, predates the better-known combat system seen in the *Pokemon* series (Game Freak since 1996), and likely produced the blueprint for this 'monster collecting' gameplay model. *SMT* has collectively over 750 'demons' across the series and provide a highly global collection of deities from Judeo-Christian lore, Celtic fables, Hinduism, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Egyptian, all manner of apocryphal religious figures (Lilith, Mithras, Yaldabaoth), and even North American cryptids (Mad Gasser, Mothman). By all accounts, *SMT* is one of the most detailed compendiums of religious figures, demons, and deities to date.

A significant narrative aspect of the *SMT* series is that the games typically have three possible endings, referred to as the 'Law', 'Chaos', and 'Neutral' paths, respectively. The nature of these endings each represent a player-led 'alignment' based on specific dialogue choices they have made, and actions they have taken in-game. The 'Law' ending is reconciliation with God; the world is restored back to the Garden of Eden before the fall, and mankind is welcomed into paradise. However, this comes at the cost of human autonomy, and human experience ceases to experience any self-determination or free will. Chaos is antinomianism in practice, where the influence of the divine is purged from Earth. The world thus returns towards 'Might Makes Right', a world determined by the whims of the strongest, whether human or demon. The neutral ending is an intriguing

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10   *SMT: Nocturne* was originally released on the PS2 in 2001. A titular 'HD Remaster' edition was released in 2020 for the PS4, NS, and PC.

middle-ground, in which mankind emancipates itself both from the divine and the infernal, separating humanity from the interference of deities altogether. This ending is, in gameplay terms, typically much harder to obtain than either capitulation to the divine or allegiance to Lucifer, requiring both precision and patience on the player's part to prevail with logical and partisan decisions made consistently through the course of the game.

The original *Shin Megami Tensei* (Atlus 1992) establishes the narrative blueprint for the series onward and is worth relaying in detail[11]. The player controls the protagonist in modern Tokyo who receives an email from 'Stephen' containing a supposed demon-summoning computer program[12]. It is not long after this point that Tokyo becomes invaded by demons; a number of failed experiments at teleportation technology have opened a rift to the Abyss, and war breaks out. The US military, stationed in Tokyo, impose martial law and launch an offensive on the invading demonic forces. A Japanese militia force led by Gotou, an SDF General, emerges in response to US intervention, parsing demons as ancient, native spirits destined to usher the world into a utopia. A third faction, led by the 'Heroine', strives to prevent the clash of US/Japanese armed forces as a means of protecting Tokyo, the site in the middle of this struggle. At this stage, the player is able to support any of these three factions, but this support is moot as the US General reveals himself to be the disguised form of Thor and sets off a nuclear holocaust that exterminates nearly all human life from earth. The protagonist and supporting cast survive this event thanks to the sacrifice of the Heroine and return to the world thirty years later. The remaining US and insurgent forces now denote themselves as 'The Messian Order' and 'The Ring of Gaea', respectively, marking humanity's return to religious fanaticism. The Messians have appointed themselves as the human representatives of God's will, tasked with ushering the remnants of humanity towards the 'Thousand Year Kingdom' as described in Revelations. The Gaeans refuse the diktat of the Messians and seek to summon Lucifer to engineer a world in which the strong can determine their own fate. The player now faces a choice in which they can support the cause of the Messians led by the angel Aniel (Anael), aid Echidna in liberating Lucifer, or slay both figureheads to assert their own freedom in reshaping the world. The game concludes at the top of the Messian-built cathedral, perched above the clouds. In supporting the Messian cause, God appears to the protagonist and bids him to preach His word for mankind's salvation. Following the Gaeans causes Lucifer to appear before the protagonist, welcoming him to a 'golden age' of freedom. If both sides of the conflict are defied, the player is instead greeted by Taishang Laojun, the revered founder of Taoism, who urges the protagonist to build a

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11   The original games, titled *Megami Tensei I* (1987) and *II* (1990), were superseded by *Shin Megami Tensei* (SFC, 1993). 'Shin' (meaning 'True' or 'Extended') is typically used in Japanese media franchises in a manner analogous to what would be termed as a reboot; a new beginning based on a pre-existing IP.

12   The *SMT* series protagonists are typically player-named. However, supplemental texts have each provided a name for the *SMT1* protagonist including Sho, Kazuya, and Futsuo. The latter name is particularly interesting as Futsuo can be interpreted as 'Ordinary Man' and 'Contact of Buddha', respectively. It should be noted that the openness of interpretation is due to character names being represented (initially) in Kanji, then transliterated to Katakana. Rather than considering this a definitive interpretation of the names, it is indicative of the ambiguities, intentional or otherwise, that recur throughout the *SMT* series.

new world "…built by neither reliance on God nor demons, but by the hands of people themselves" (Atlus 1992: n.p.).

In totality, *SMT* appears to embed modern and systemic anxieties into a fiction of the apocalypse. In the first instance, the emergence of demons into the modern world again exclaims the unspoken divisions of US-Japan relations; the US military imposes martial law to fight back the tide of demonic invaders, which prompts an immediate and reactionary movement on behalf of Japan's national defence force, the JSDF. Gotoh and his allies identify with demons as the ephemera of Japan's collective past; as spirits seeking to take revenge on a conflicted and compromised nation. The chaos of this otherworld invasion is only inflamed by the drawing of battle lines between two national forces and prompts such a loss of control that the earth itself is brought to the very brink of oblivion. The intrinsic difference of opinion of what 'demons' represent are contingent on the cultural framework of their observer, and consequently the demons themselves can be interpreted as inert beings that instead provoke humanity to rediscover their impulse for tribalism and war. That this conflict between American and Japanese interpretation continues beyond the point where these national indicators no longer have any meaning suggests that mankind's destructive nature is endemic; even the afterlife is at peril.

The 'neutral' alignment similarly ratifies this interpretation, as the presence of a Taoist deity simultaneously sidesteps the Western perception of individual moral reckoning as good versus evil (or angels versus demons), and instead that clarity is brought from the acceptance of these aspects embedded in human consciousness. Laojun's statement that the protagonist is "part of [the universe], yet also all of it […] it includes law and chaos within it, too" (Atlus, 1991) suggests that this is a preferable moral viewpoint in that it is both conciliatory and presents the individual as part of a greater universal fabric. By extension, Laojun represents spiritual ascendancy beyond the binaristic Judeo-Christian values represented within *Shin Megami Tensei* and reasserts the value of Eastern philosophy in the serene acceptance of life as an experience of continuous change. By contrast, the Messian and Gaean faiths that dwell in the ruins of Tokyo seek to evade this state of 'being', through deference to God's Thousand Year Kingdom, or inviting Lucifer as the architect of an uninhibited world of *hylics*[13].

This dichotomy between Eastern and Western religious perspectives within Japanese games has been articulated by several scholars within recent years. Returning to the subject of the *Zelda* series (Nintendo EAD 1986–2013; Nintendo EPD since 2015), Hemman notes that where the games superficially present classical aspects of Judeo-Christian narrative tropes, there are nonetheless distinctly Buddhist archetypes present within the series, particularly in the nemesis of Ganon:

> The necessity of an apocalyptic catalyst for rebirth and renewal is connected to a worldview inspired by Japanese Buddhist traditions, which are referenced in the Japanese text associated with Ganon, Demise, and Ganondorf, including the ways in which these characters speak and refer to themselves. Far from being a collection of

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13   The *hylic* is considered the lowest form of human life within the Gnostic faith. The hylic is defined by a preoccupation (or spiritual bond) to the material world, a being thus incapable of divine experience.

one-dimensional villains who mindlessly strive for power and control, the various permutations of Ganon in the Zelda series add cultural depth to the games, thus endowing the conflicts underlying their narratives with a greater sense of literary complexity. (2021: 17)

Of particular note in Hemman's argument is the citation of the term *monen* which refers to Ganon's obsession with the continued apocalypse(s) he visits upon the world of Hyrule, both as a misplaced desire in being attached to the world, and a refusal of the ephemeral nature of living (2021: 11)[14]. Despite Ganon's flawed impulse to repeatedly incarnate and devastate Hyrule, the subsequent apocalyptic landscape can be as beautiful as it is deadly. This is particularly evident in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD 2017) in which the environment is populated with winding rivers, lush valleys, and snow-capped mountains alongside monster dwellings. That the apocalypse itself is rendered in such morally ambivalent terms parallels the position of *Shin Megami Tensei*, where even the end of human history presents divergent options in forging a future.

It would be remiss not to note the extent to which YHVH's representation within *SMT* mirrors Gnostic eschatology, in which YHVH has 'adopted' the role of divine authority in the (present) absence of any higher power. Several distinct Gnostic figures are accounted for within *SMT* such as Sophia, Satanael, Yaldabaoth (Ialdabaoth) and the Demiurge. In *Shin Megami Tensei NINE* (Atlus 2002), Sophia appears initially as a human, working in a flower shop. It is later revealed that she has been incarnated in mortal form as punishment for the creation of Yaldabaoth, who is himself the form taken by YHVH to plot the annihilation of humanity. The Demiurge similarly reflects Gnostic biblical exegesis, depicted as the creator of the material world yet spiritually ignorant, and as another aspect of YHVH. This appraisal is largely consistent with the Sethian cosmogony, in which the 'creator' is the demiurge, and man's expulsion from Eden is a step towards liberation from the material universe.

An additional complication to the reading of *SMT* is the increasing significance of Jehovah (YHVH) in the overarching continuity of the series. *SMT II* (Atlus 1994) begins where the prior game's 'neutral' ending left off. The Messian cathedral is destroyed, but Messians have remained, transformed into an angelic race that now runs the 'Tokyo Millenium', the lavish above-world civilization built on the ruins of the previous apocalypse. The new protagonist in *SMT II* is Aleph, a bio-engineered messiah fabricated to summon YHVH and bring the world to order. Aleph encounters YHVH for the first time (along either the chaos or neutral path) if they destroy Satan before he expunges all life from earth; an act assisted by the use of the 'Meggido Ark', a powerful laser weapon. YHVH regards killing Satan as defiance of His will, having created both Satan and Lucifer as executors of divine judgement and temptation, respectively. The three 'alignment' endings presented for the game all produce the result of banishing YHVH and His power over earth. In the chaos and neutral endings, this is achieved through the act of deicide. YHVH's parting proclamations differ in the ending where the earth will become a 'confused' world

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14   In general, Link's nemesis in the *Zelda* series is commonly either Ganon or Ganondorf. Ganondorf is the original human incarnation of the deific Ganon. Ganondorf appears in the form of a human, where Ganon is a porcine bipedal beast.

(Chaos), that mankind is fundamentally too weak to exist without God (Neutral), or that Aleph will now rule the world with divine authority in His absence until he is returned to being by 'The Great Will'. That YHVH's reincarnation is subject to another higher power displaces the notion that YHVH has sole universal authority within the theological landscape of *SMT*. This is expounded on once YHVH returns in *SMT IV* (Atlus 2013) and *SMT IV: Apocalypse* (Atlus 2016b), a direct continuation of the former. Adding to the complex inter-factional disputes that have defined the *SMT* series are 'The White'. Described in the supplemental artbook as "the embodiment of the ancient races destroyed by the angels" (ATLUS, 2013, n.p.)[15]. The White claim that they are the creators of YHVH and the architects of the endless and inter-dimensional conflict. This is explained to Flynn, the protagonist of *SMT IV*, in the hope that he will assist them in their goal of breaking the continuous cycle of conflict through the total obliteration of existence. The alternative, as The White see it, is an eternal proxy war between Lucifer and Merkabah, who superficially appear to be in total opposition to one another, but are, in reality, merely pawns of YHVH to ensure His unquestioned authority as mankind's creator. It is evident that the complexity of *SMT*'s master narrative has increased as it has continued, with significant vertical expansion that incorporates several competing ideologies about the value of faith, life, and humanity's place within the cosmos.

As *SMT* has continued, the spiritual horizon of its meta-narrative has faced considerable expansion. The canonicity of the 'neutral' path in the majority of the series suggests that the humanistic path of self-determination is a morally preferable outcome than obedience to either the organizing forces of the cosmos or its rejection. The neutral path represents a middle-line devised in the margins of theological binarism, but it does not offer any conclusion to the riddle of humanity's purpose within the spiritual world, as, indeed, later entries in the series demonstrate that neutrality banishes these deific interlopers for a time, but are soon to return.

The very nature of the *SMT* series is a religious myth of its own with resultant *lacunae*, expositions, unreliable narrators (and, in English, potential translation errors) that invite extensive commentary from seasoned fans of the *SMT* continuity. Western fans of the series are numerous enough to maintain an active fan presence online, where systems of morality, canonical endings, and the roles of token characters are open to frequent debate. An intriguing outcome of *SMT* is the attempts to organize the titles into a definitive continuity.

The 'Amala Multiverse', a fan image produced by 'LouieSiffer' (2021), was posted to Reddit's SMT board, where it has been subject to continuous refinement and vocal feedback. The sprawling image is itself a fan-made esoteric artifact that unifies disparate source texts – mainline and 'spin-off' SMT titles, novels, manga, and anime – into a summative timeline of SMT's known universe. This attempt to produce a coherent continuity relies on interpretation based on the various endings (Law/Chaos/Neutral) of preceding games. This exercise, though speculative, suggests a meta-narrative wherein all SMT properties exist within a continuously looping multiverse in which the destruction and

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15   The *SMT IV* "Strategy & Design Book" was included with the 'Collector's Edition' of the game released in 2013.

recreation of the universe has (at least up to this point in the series) continued indefinitely. Where the series implicitly enshrines the humanistic values of the neutral alignment path, the notionally 'ideal' alignment is left up to the player, given the often ambiguous resolutions offered at the conclusion of each game; the moral dimensions of the alignment continue in online discussion boards and forums, and has certainly aided the relevance of the series in internet discourse. In any case, it would appear that the neutral ending(s) seen in the SMT series do little to dislodge the divine order that sees humanity struggle against supernatural intervention in perpetuity.

Where the production of elaborate mythical structures appears largely relegated to the JRPG genre, *Nier: Automata* appears to 'evolve' the apocalyptic narrative in terms of both the density of its philosophical *nous* and embedded within gameplay design itself. *Nier: Automata* is ostensibly an action-RPG (or ARPG) concerning a long-lived proxy war between androids and alien 'machines' on earth, from which humanity is wholly absent. The story begins from the perspective of the androids, with the player initially beginning the game as 2B, tasked with invading earth to establish a transportation route for further invasions. The purpose of the androids is ostensibly to exterminate machines (robots) in order to make the world safe and habitable for the return of humans; the androids are told that humans reside bunkered on the moon until the earth is secured.

Familiar to the structures of the aforementioned games, this relatively simple conflict between two forces is significantly complicated as the story progresses. 2B and her partner, 9S, discover that the alien machines, long abandoned, have begun to emulate human societal structures and behaviors. This is evident in a number of locations in-game, such as a carnival in which they endlessly parade amongst themselves, and a forest grove where the machines practice a Middle Ages form of monarchy, in service to an infant king that will never grow. This establishes a dichotomy early on between android and machine response to existence. Machines are shown to have very little capacity to learn but strive to overcome this impairment through external and endless repetition of mundane tasks. The pathos of this implicitly futile and eternal endeavor is sealed with the design of the machines, who have squat proportions and childlike features that indicate a helpless and fragile demeanor. In game, they typically pose very little threat to 2B as enemies, and in gameplay terms are neither threatening, nor difficult to dispatch. Androids are considerably more advanced than the machines both in appearance and ability. As the last remnant of a human-organized military faction known as YoRHa, the androids are capable of traveling from their orbital base to Earth with ease, and are demonstrably stronger and more individuated from machines. They also inhabit idealized feminine figures, dressed in Victorian-esque clothing reminiscent of the Japanese subgenre of 'Gothic Lolita' apparel, which produces an uncanny contrast when placed against the derelict earth they explore[16]. Despite their personal individuation and sentience, the player's initial protagonist, 2B, demonstrates little understanding of the world beyond the parameters of her mission, and YoRHa's preoccupation with the 'survival' of humanity appears largely misplaced. Where the machines mimic human behavior through external action, the androids are inherently idealized facsimiles of humans that remain perpetually ignorant

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16   To clarify: 9S is the only male android in service to YoRHa, and is both slight and androgynous in comparison to his gynomorphic peers.

of their lost cause. The fate of mankind is revealed much later into the game, when it is made clear that humanity has been extinct for thousands of years, and that the admittance of this foregone conclusion would collectively rob YoRHa of purpose. In the end, it is machines that can more comfortably exist in a world where they no longer need to serve the purpose they were assembled for.

Once more, the thematic issue of *gnosis* is articulated with reference to a significant number of scholars, and notably includes both an Adam and Eve as powerful antagonists[17]. Adam and Eve parallel closely to their biblical counterparts, despite the fact that they are male siblings. 2B and 9S observe Adam's birth from an artificial machine womb and attempt to kill him. As a newborn, Adam does not retaliate initially as the player fights him, but eventually adapts to the situation and begins to fight back. Adam is seemingly killed after 2B and 9S impale him through the stomach with their swords, but instead Eve is born from Adam's wounds and carries his injured brother to safety, paralleling the biblical Eve's creation from Adam's rib. Where Adam and Eve are nude in their first encounter with 2B and 9S, they are later shown to be clothed as a means to both mask their nudity and emulate typical human mores further. While ostensibly 'machines', Adam and Eve more closely resemble the android protagonists (white-haired and beautiful), signaling that machines may have finally produced a close equivalent to human beings in their efforts. Adam, in particular, is fixated on learning human concepts and is particularly fascinated by death, a state which is seemingly only temporary for both siblings. Thus, Adam and Eve pose as a 'Genesis' for machines, as the production of the brothers enables the machines to break the stalemate of their physical inferiority to androids, and bring about an era of machine rule, free of android intervention. Ultimately, however, this path to ascendency is fraught; the androids continue to impede this growth, while machines grow increasingly frantic to inspire humanity in themselves; as later towards the game, a cadre of machines assemble in a murderous cult to 'become as gods', where their deaths, and the deaths of others, are thought to bring them closest towards this definitive aspect of human experience.

The androids are similarly trapped, as YoRHa are not, in fact, in service to a supposed 'Council of Humanity'. YoRHa contrived a false narrative of the survival of humanity as a means of preventing a hopeless existence – to ensure that this plan was successful, the machines were permitted to invade YoRHa headquarters and destroy all traces of information barring the story of humanity's survival, thus erasing the truth and enabling androids to exist in eternal conflict with machines in the hope of one day rescuing their human masters. This endless loop is in-part achieved by the efforts of 2B: her 'B' suffix denotes that she is a 'battler' android unit, but her true designation is later revealed as '2E'; an executioner who specialises in killing other androids. Thus, it is revealed that her true task is to execute her inquisitive partner 9S when he gets too close to the truth of the android's situation. This plan appears to parallel monotheistic spiritual practice, in which the androids of *Nier: Automata* work tirelessly to salvage the residue of a god that, for them, no longer exists. Any moment at which 9S might gather evidence in support of

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17   Many characters in *Nier: Automata* are named in reference to known philosophers: Jean-Paul (Sartre), Simone (de Bouvoir), Pascal, Immanuel (Kant), Marx, Engels, Grün, Hegel, Ro-Shi (Laozhi), and Ko-Shi (*Kongzi*/Confucius), among others.

the latter is met with a swift execution by his combat 'partner', 2B. This desperation for spiritual truth is mirrored by the machines that dwell on earth. Their mantra in the later stages of the game, a plea to 'become as gods', marks the first stirrings of an authentic and **original** proto-religion conceived by droids that were, millenia ago, manufactured for the sole purpose of menial labour. The collective formation of an expressible and ubiquitous *shibboleth* represents the first light of robotized divinity; with terrible consequences to follow. Comparatively, humanity has achieved divinity in their passing – they are never to be seen again, but the structures and machines now rust in their wake, left for 2B and 9S to learn from. The moral of *Nier: Automata*, if one is to be found, is that the struggle for spiritual independence comes from a reckoning with the strictures of the past without adherence to those values.

This cyclical structure seen in *Nier: Automata* is enabled by its replayable structure and multiple endings; 26, in total (Endings A-Z). The endings available can come from comically poor decisions made by the player (i.e., perishing from attempting to eat a fish, manually removing 2B's internal BIOS, abandoning an important battle), but the endings provided also account for the diversity of ways in which 2B's story has come to a close. Given that androids are continually re-assembled on death, there is a suggestion that each ending has occurred as a canonical endpoint of this cyclical struggle. The task of a complete narrative of the events of *Nier: Automata* is also left largely to the player's intervention. Much of the backstory is presented through a pseudo-epistolary collection of transcripts, logs, recorded memories and server data. Beyond this, there are 'weapon stories' which are only fully available once the player has completely upgraded the weapon in question. These 'weapon stories' all tell parables of an ancient era, many of which refer to unnamed characters grappling with emptiness and despair, affirming the core themes of the text. It is also possible for the player to prematurely discover the extinction of humanity, if they locate the 'shipping records' document, a manifest that describes resources ostensibly being sent to survivors on the moon – revealing that the pods are sent to their destination empty. *Nier: Automata* shares many thematic characteristics of the preceding games covered, but the narrative is more open-ended through the combination of multiple endings, multiple playable characters, and a vast quantity of supporting texts found within the game world. Further to this, *Nier: Automata* can be seen as a distillation of the cosmic anxieties of *SMT/Xenogears/FFVII* by its through-line of nihilism, where neither machine or android can claim to know themselves, or their creator. The consistent allusion to modern philosophy, as well as the religious 'remix' of Adam and Eve into male siblings, produce a modern myth that considers the role of a religious awakening in a world beyond enlightenment, and beyond history.

There is one final ludic surprise in *Nier: Automata* which is important to consider in the wake of this desolate theme. In Ending E, the player is asked to delete all of their save data in order to save both 2B and 9S. This is no small request, as dozens of hours of gameplay are necessitated to reach this point of the game. The player is directly queried on the logic of deleting their data, prompted with a series of questions that seem intentionally organized to have the player contemplate the task of playing the game itself[18].

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18   Questions include "Do you have any interest in helping the weak?" (Taro 2017: n.p.), "This person, who cries out for help, even as we speak, may be someone you intensely dislike. Do you still wish to

The outcome of deleting the save data is only clear later, as the player is tasked to survive a *shmup*-style credit sequence in which they pilot a simple triangular spaceship (reminiscent of *Asteroids* (Atari Inc. 1979)) and shoot down enemies tagged with names of *Nier: Automata*'s development team[19]. This sequence is intentionally difficult, and, if the player dies enough times, they will be asked if they wish for help. Then, the player's ship will be joined by other ships; each representing a comrade that sacrificed their save data in what is otherwise a wholly single-player game. This meta-gameplay suggests that existential despair is something bested by self-sacrifice and serving the needs of others, while the task of completing this difficult hurdle leads to the reconstruction of 2B and 9S. It is clearly stated that the narrative experienced by the player might play out again, but that it is all towards the 'possibility' of a different future. The game closes with the concluding phrase: "a future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself" (2017: n.p.). *Nier: Automata* presents a clearer moral invective at its close than the preceding games, and predominantly tasks the player to decide for themselves the meaning, if any, taken from the experience. In any case, *Nier: Automata* appears to detail a similar spiritual journey as its forebears but integrates a redemptive meta-narrative through interactions presented directly to the player.

In total, the games under analysis in this chapter have each presented an attempt to place the notional aspects of individuality – ethics, philosophy, psychology – within a wider context of religious myth. An important facet shared between these titles is the experience of time and history as cyclical events. In *Xenogears* and *Nier: Automata*, the protagonists wander a wasteland left thousands of years ago from a lost civilization of technologically advanced humans. In *SMT*, the quest for humanity's liberation from deific interference travels across time and space, towards parallel and multi-tiered realms of existence.

An omission from this is *FFVII*, which gives an ambiguous ending where mankind appears to be saved from the immediate threat of an extinction-level event (via meteor), but the epilogue set 500 years into the future shows the leonine Red XIII accompanied by pups who pause to overlook an overgrown and desolate Midgar, with no living bodies in sight. An intriguing addition to this is the recent *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* ([referred to as *Remake*] Square Enix Business Division 1 2020), which has numerous narrative diversions from the original game. The term 'remake', in videogame terminology, typically implies that the game has received a graphical update, reworked gameplay systems and/or additional content. Where *Remake* lavishly recreates the opening of *FFVII*'s raid on Reactor 1, the events of the original narrative are quickly disturbed by 'Whispers'; a conglomeration of cloaked, ghostly figures, who directly intervene at any point of narrative divergence in *Remake*. The Whispers are described in-game as "arbiters of fate" that manifest when "someone tries to alter destiny's course" (Square Enix: Business Division 1 2020: n.p.).

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help?" (ibid.), "You may not receive thanks for your efforts […] that your efforts are purely for show. Do you still wish to help?"

19   'Shmup' is a common contraction of 'shoot 'em up', a game genre where the player commonly pilots a small craft and shoots numerous enemy units. The differentiation of 'Vertical' and 'Horizontal' shmup is used as a prefix for the orientation of the scrolling field of play.

This would lend credence to the idea that the Whispers are an unsubtle reference to players familiar with the previous iteration of events, particularly as these regulators of fate are vanquished at the end of the game, leaving the story to freely divert from the original blueprint of *FFVII*. That such a distinct narrative contrivance is embodied in *Remake* means that the original game is no longer a discrete entity, but part of a larger canon of an *FFVII* 'universe', as much as the series has seen expansion into books, films, spin-off games and character cameos in other SQUARESOFT titles[20]. This would also apply accordingly that *Remake* is not a direct retelling of the original *FFVII*, but an alternate series of events in a parallel world. Thus, the exception of *FFVII* from cyclical time is redressed with the release of its remake.

The interpretation of narrative in the JRPG remains to be problematized by the presence of cyclical time, their typically contrived (or **mystifying**) narratives, and, to parallel scholarly theology, the question of canonicity surrounding each text. A distinguishing feature of Japanese gaming is the notion of a 'Player's Guide'. In Western parlance, a Player's Guide is akin to what would be commonly understood as a 'Walkthrough' or 'Guide Book', either an authorised or unofficial supplementary text that advises new players on optimal choices, secrets, boss combat strategies, and other such information. In Japan, guidebooks can often be a source of additional (canonical) information that provides context to in-game events. *Xenogears*, in particular, is supported by *Xenogears: Perfect Works* (Squaresoft 2000), which provides a detailed history of events set prior to the beginning of the game and adds considerable historical context beyond the narrative remit of the game itself. Similarly, the official art book for *Shin Megami IV* (Atlus 2013) provides a number of elaborations and clear definitions of some nebulous figures within the game; particularly that of The White and their objectives. Therefore, specific interpretations of each title can be contingent both on the player's familiarity with other games within the same series, and their knowledge of information that exists externally from the games themselves.

This question of canonicity has direct ramifications on how one should reflect on the JRPG, with the crucial issue of whether a game within a larger series should be considered solely, or as part of a wider continuity. As illustrated within this chapter, *SMT* is shown that where individual game events are repetitious (i.e. surviving a post-apocalyptic Japan via the command of demons), the deific order attempting to manifest control on humankind is continuously in flux. For instance, the spin-off title *Devil Survivor: Soul Hackers* ([referred to as *Soul Hackers*] Atlus 1997), Recontains the same core gameplay facets and setting of *SMT*, but is set within the more localised space of a **fictional** harbour town rather than the familiar prefectures and special wards unique to Tokyo. This smaller scale is reflected in the cosmology of *Soul Hackers*, which focuses more expressly on Native American spiritualism. This is introduced early in the game as the player-named protagonist is befriended by the Mi'kmaq spirit of Kinap who provides the player with limited prescience. This takes the form of 'vision quests' in which the protagonist possesses the body and final memories of a deceased character. The mechanical function of this vision

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20   Cloud cameos in *Ehrgeiz: God Bless the Ring* (PSX, 1998), *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (NS, 2017), and the *Kingdom Hearts* series (PS2, 2002-), a Squaresoft-Disney IP collaboration, in which he plays a significant role.

quest is to preview the powerful new demons and new areas that the player will invariably retrace later in the game. Through the enlightenment provided by Kinap, the player is suitably armed to wage combat against the Manitou, poisoned by its lingering contact with mankind. As is typical of the series' transformation of religious themes, the ubiquitous Manitou has been divided into two opposing forces; the destructive antagonist recalls the Alongquian manifestation described as *Otshee Monetoo* ('bad spirit') that strives for the end of humanity. Thus, *Soul Hackers* evidently mirrors much of the content and context of its *SMT* forebears, but its position as a 'spin-off' title permits an exploration beyond the often Abrahamic meta-structure seen in the mainline series.

Where *SMT* explicitly plays out in parallel/alternate universes, or what we may now comfortably label a 'multiverse', the *Xeno* series (Square/Monolith Soft since 1998) of games; *Xenogears, Xenosaga* (Monolith Soft since 2006) and *Xenoblade Chronicles* (Monolith Soft since 2010) appear to occur within a linear timeline, albeit not reflected in the chronology of the titles released. *Xenosaga* provides considerable exposition on the events that lead to *Xenogears*, with particular reference to 'Lost Jerusalem' (Earth), in which Jesus Christ, Mary, and the Apostles produce the sacred words known (in-game) as the Lemegeton, and the faith known as 'Ormus' produced in the wake of Christ's crucifixion. Anyone who could recite the words of the Lemegeton would be granted access to the advanced control system of the Zohar, while the Ormus exists as a religious organization that zealously protects the Lemegeton; with which they maintain exclusive control of universal power. That the faith of the Ormus is represented by the iconography of an inverted Cross of St. Peter creates an unsubtle and sceptical form of Christianity whose outward evangelism masks the fundamental principle of control. Where these elements are not broadly at-play within *Xenogears* (Lost Jerusalem is referred to as an 'inviolable region' without further explanation), it can be seen the later titles provide further historical exposition on the original title, and continue to introduce greater degrees of complexity in its interpretation. *Xenogears*, in the tradition of a JRPG, is already a mysterious and multi-layered text, and the context provided by additional titles appear to only mystify its text further. The question of whether games should be subject to theological exegesis can be said to expand beyond the boundaries of JRPGs with openly religious themes. One might expect the *Kingdom Hearts* series (Square since 2002), a 'crossover' game in which *Final Fantasy* and Disney characters coexist in relative harmony, to be a simple affair. Instead, each volume in the series abounds with the tropes of the esoteric; the separation (and manifestation) of mind, body and heart; the fall; trinity; sacrifice, death, and resurrection. The *Kingdom Hearts* series certainly demonstrates the fascinating continuation of the motifs articulated within this chapter and suggests its suitability for a theological reading, even if two parts of this Trinity contains both Goofy and Donald Duck.

Taken collectively, the JRPGs examined here present a unique retelling of creation myths, imagine a world beyond the apocalypse, and rally the heroes against the supposedly unconquerable force of destiny. These fantasies are enmeshed with a postmodern sensibility. In the original *Shin Megami Tensei*, not even a nuclear apocalypse thaws the strained relationship between American and Japanese armed forces. In *Nier: Automata*, the characters pick through the philosophies left by an extinct society as they reclaim their own sense of belonging on a lost Earth. In *Xenogears*, the Holy Ghost must be freed

from its harbour in God's shell, while Fei must find *gnosis* in bringing his fractured consciousness back into being. At all levels, the individual is brought up against the unrecognizable will of the cosmos to discover themselves.

The resultant conclusion reached through this analysis is complex. What can be definitively established is that many JRPGS are fundamentally syncretic texts. Where it may be possible to discount this as purely functional; a 'necessary evil' for long-form or multi-volume JRPG series, the level of consideration to the cosmogeny of *SMT*, the quest for *gnosis* in *Xenogears*, and the earnestness of *Nier: Automata*'s characters in the wake of human extinction seem to collectively represent the desire for these games to grapple with the complex spiritual dynamic of human life. Even *FFVII*'s cadre of false gods and mythic creatures exist to relate a story rich in contemporary parallels; reconciling with the calamities of the present through its alien obverse. Whether parsed as palliative to those that play them, or an effort towards the product of spiritual reflection, the JRPG serves as a distinctive modern conduit of religious expression.

From an examination of these works alone, it is clear that the JRPG has incubated the myths that have been uttered from humanity's beginning, now infused with the complexities of modernity. Then, finally, to understand them is to scrutinize the *logos* that brought faith into being.

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Religion and Spirituality in *NieR: Automata*

Marco Seregni and Francesco Toniolo

Introduction

> At the 2011 Game Design Challenge, an event taking place during the Game Design Conference in which video game designers compete to present the best game about a specific theme, Jason Rohrer premiered a *Chain World*, which won him the first prize. The theme of that year's competition was "Bigger Than Jesus," a slogan that inspired designers to imagine games that would tackle issues of religion and spirituality. In his presentation Rohrer explained how *Chain World* was inspired by one of his main beliefs, namely that "we become like gods to those who come after us." Rohrer's game embeds this assumption into its very nature, since it is a *Minecraft* mod installed on a custom-designed USB stick of which only one copy exists in the world. The player of *Chain World* can modify the world of the game at will, but is supposed to follow what Rohrer defined as the game's canon, a set of rules that limit the behavior of the player possessing the USB stick. (Fassone 2017: 135)

The case of *Chain World* (Jason Rohrer 2011) is useful to anticipate some elements of *NieR: Automata* (Platinum Games 2017) – the most famous videogame made by Yokō Tarō – about spirituality and the passage of data between players. At the same time, *Chain World* demonstrates the wide variety of religion in videogames, with a wide array of religious situations emerging beyond the mere inclusion of deities and religious symbols in a product such as in the connection with Tolkien's subcreation (Wolf 2012; Hemminger 2014), the use of religion as a playful mechanic in medieval-themed videogames (Pitruzzello 2013), the parareligious lore related to the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* event (Mallory 2014), and the archaeology of gamified religious practices in predigital contexts (Fuchs 2014). A complex and differentiated list of spiritual practice or feeling.

The interest for these practices begins in the early history of the videogame medium. A good starting point is an article titled *The Theology of Pac-Man* (McFarland 1982). It's not an academic analysis, but it shows an early interest in the relationship between videogames and spirituality. However, a stable reflection only developed later.

Among the first monographic studies on these themes there are the works of Detweiler (2010) and Bainbridge (2013), followed by Campbell and Grieve (2014), Bosman (2019) and by the monographic issue of "Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet" edited by Heidbrink and Knoll (2014).

Several contributions, in the form of articles and book chapters, like Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007), Plate (2010), Oldenburg (2011), Kücklich (2012), Geraci (2012), Wagner (2012; 2013), and others, highlight a rapidly growing interest of the field.

During the same period, a more specific kind of research on single videogames or sagas emerged, as for example with Walls' book (2011) about *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD 1986), or Mitropoulos' (2009) about *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) and Hutchinson's (2019, 47–69) on *Ōkami* (Clover Studio 2006).

Another focus of research became the so called 'god games' (Meneghelli 2007; Cogburn/Silcox 2009: 73–90): "a god game is one that gives the user an omnipotent and, in some cases, an omnipresent perspective on the world they are engaging" (Ferdig 2014: 75). It is a videogame genre and should not be confused with the 'god mode', which "often refers to a cheat code or limited-time supernatural power that makes the user invincible" (ibid.). A game mode that also inspired the bizarro fiction novel *The Cheat Code for God Mode* (De Fonseca 2013).

Considering the connection between the (spiritual) sublime and horror (Krzywinska 2009: 278), a peculiar union of these elements was found in the connections between horror (especially gothic-derived) videogames and religion, as stated by the essays by Pruett (2010), Walter (2014), Marak (2015), Hoedt (2019) and others.

These representations can also be linked to the specific case of *Resistance: Fall of Man* (Insomniac Games 2006), a videogame that ended up in a controversy for staging a bloody battle in Manchester Cathedral. The debate provoked more than one reflection and "demonstrates a growing awareness, even among the severest critics of video games, of their social and spiritual relevance" (Brown 2008: 101). If the digital desecration of a place of worship may appear to be a blasphemous act, then even a digital prayer could have the value of one in the real world[1]. However, this was not the first example of religious moral panic linked to videogames. There is a long tradition of cases, back to tabletop games (Laycock 2015).

However, *Resistance: Fall of Man* was not the only videogame that has sparked religious controversy. A complete list would be long, but it is worth to remember at least some of them, like the videogames of La Molleindustria *Operation: Pedopriest* (La Molleindustria 2007) and *Faith Fighter* (La Molleindustria 2008), or *Nun Attack* (Frima 2012), less political and controversial, but still considered a source of potential direct offenses (Morelli 2014: 79–84), as could be the gunslinger exorcist Father Paul Rawlings of *Clive Barker's Jericho* (MercurySteam 2007).

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1   It should also be noted that it was not the first videogame to propose a fight inside a church. Even leaving out the numerous examples in fantasy contexts (for example *Hexen II* (Raven Software 1997)) there is at least the precedent of *TimeSplitters 2* (Free Radical Design 2002), in which the player has to fight zombies, skeletons and a giant ogre inside Notre Dame of Paris. Such cases, however, do not seem to have aroused particular debates.

Another element that shows the difference between humanity as we see it in the game with what we classically view as divine can be found in evangelical propaganda videogames, such as *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (Inspired Media Entertainment 2006), which proposes a conflict between the distinct forces of good and evil (Wagner 2013: 251) and which has raised various criticisms and perplexities, especially because of the religious guerrilla on which it is based (Brown 2008: 105–7).

The present paper introduces *NieR: Automata* within this debate on spirituality in videogames, in which it has only been mentioned marginally so far (Bosman 2019: 101–4). *NieR: Automata* is a case of particular interest for its explicit philosophical and religious elements[2]. But, also, because it represents a reflection on the way in which videogames represent themselves (Jaćević 2017).

The story is set in a distant future, where planet Earth is dominated by Machine lifeforms[3], mechanical entities created by invading Aliens. The last humans live on the moon and send combat Androids to the planet from their orbital base. The main characters of the videogame are three of these Androids, playable in three different game sessions, which progressively add further details to the story. The player takes control of 2B, 9S and A2, in order. These are three meaningful names, because the way in which they are pronounced evokes, respectively, the Shakespearean '**to be**', the Latin '*non esse*' and the expression '*et tu*' which Caesar would have pronounced when addressing Brutus and which is used by Shakespeare in the tragedy of the same name (act III, scene I, Shakespeare 2014: 604). These names constitute three references to the history and the personality of these Androids (A2, for example, is a traitorous Android, who rebelled against her commanders).

Progressively, numerous overturnings take place: first, with the discovery of peaceful Machine lifeforms, like Pascal; later, with the discovery that all Machine lifeforms feel emotions, fears and desires. There is, in particular, a short sequence in which a Machine is controlled by the player. It only lasts a few minutes, but it's quite important:

> Before the player controls 9S, they are given over to Friedrich, a small machine who is retrieving oil in order to revive his clearly irreparable "brother." Despite the fact that the player has been killing machines like Friedrich until this point, the switch from the agile, lightning-fast 2B to the slow, shuffling robot fosters a sympathy for his helplessness, which deepens into an empathetic frustration when, burdened by the bucket, the player inevitably trips over one of the seemingly inconspicuous pipes that litter the ground. (Gerrish 2018: 3)

As the game progresses, further overturnings and changes of perspective take place. Both humans and invading Aliens are long gone, completely extinct. Therefore, Androids and Machines are fighting an eternal war without meaning and purpose. Finally, at the 'ending E', the player is asked to clear all game data. A similar choice was already used in one of the endings of the previous *NieR* (Cavia 2010) and, for this choice, Yokō Tarō had been

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2   Among the principal critical contributions about *NieR: Automata* there are Jaćević (2017), Gerrish (2018), Turcev (2018) and Paquet (2021).

3   Sometimes they are simply called 'Machines'.

acclaimed as a genius by some players and pointed out as a sadistic megalomaniac by others (Turcev 2018).

In ending E, the player has to fight the credits of the game, shooting at the names of its creators. Here, in an extremely critical moment, the videogame suggests the player to admit that there is no meaning in this world, that everything is pointless. However, a moment later, messages of hope and encouragement from other players appear, and it's possible to get their help. The battle against the credits goes on, but now with the help of what remains of other people's game data. And so, it's possible to defeat the 'authors' of *NieR: Automata*. Meanwhile, the words of the song *Weight of the World* (Okabe 2017) underline the need to continue the fight, even if everything seems meaningless.

After this battle the PODs – the small support robots that accompanied the three Androids during their long journey – reappear. And, with some minor changes, reappears also the sentence that 2B had pronounced at the beginning of the game: "Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death. Is this a curse? Or some kind of punishment?" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). It is perhaps the moment of the game in which the influences of Nietzsche's thought appear most clearly (Jaćević 2017). The PODs ponder on a state of eternal recurrence: even starting everything from scratch (the reconstruction, but also the videogame itself) somewhere else, it's possible that the same conclusions will be reached again. That's a possibility, but they also recognize that, maybe some change is still possible.

After this cutscene, the player is asked if wants to clear all of the game data to help 'someone somewhere in the world', just as she or he has been helped before. A strongly empathic but very difficult gift, since it involves the sacrifice of hours and hours of play. An empathic sacrifice which, however, could be the only thing capable of restoring some meaning to a path that seems to have lost any significance and any practical usefulness.

This is also what the aforementioned song *The Weight of the World* seems to suggest: "Cause we're going to shout it loud/Even if our words seem meaningless/It's like I'm carrying the weight of the world/I wish that someway, somehow/That I could save every one of us" (Okabe 2017: n.p.).

The Role of Divinity: A Narrative Frame

In *NieR: Automata* we don't have any real god. The only time the word 'god' is used in a classical sense[4] is in the stage of the game in which the Machine Pascal and the Android

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4   Term 'god' occurs in a generic sense at the beginning of the game ("I often think about the god who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle and wonder if we'll ever have the chance to kill him" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.)) and at the end of route B when Commander unfold the truth to 9S (humanity is extinct) and explain that she invented the Council of Humanity lie because "we [scil. Androids] need a god worth dying for" (ibid.); the term also returns in the song *The Weight of the World*, where the singer wonders about the sense of life and relationship with God: "Tell me God, are you punishing me?/Is this the price I'm paying for my past mistakes?/This is my redemption song/I need you more than ever right now/Can you hear me now?" (Okabe 2017: n.p.).

2B come into contact with a real sect of Machines that worship their leader as a god[5]. However, this does not mean that the weight of deity is not felt. This happens in several ways.

The most apparent way it occurs is with the idealization of Humanity, as shown by the Council of Humanity that inhabits the Moon. In fact, since the early stages of the game, the meaning of the existence of the playable character has been clearly explained to the player: fighting for humanity; or better: "for the Glory of Mankind" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). If from a strictly diegetic point of view the purpose of every action would seem to be to allow humans to return to Earth, from a deeper point of view what characterizes the actions of Androids is the desire to glorify humanity in exile. No sacrifice is excessive to fulfill this sacred purpose. In a sense, this desire to please mankind, which is seen as if it was a deity to satisfy, is the engine that moves everything. This is consistent, *mutatis mutandis*, with some of the more traditional visions of the divine, from Aristotle with the concept of motionless motor (in turn taken up by Dante, "La Gloria di Colui che tutto move" *Par.* I: 1; "l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle", Par. XXXIII: 145 in Petrocchi 1994) to Saint Augustine for which true freedom consists in complying with the divine will[6]. From this point of view, therefore, Humanity fully satisfies the requirements of divinity.

Another element that links Humanity as we see it in the game with what we classically view as divine is its spatial and figurative location. In fact, the Council of Humanity resides on the Moon, a 'heavenly' place, very distant from the player's actions, that take place almost entirely on Earth. In this aspect the comparisons would be innumerable, by simply looking at the Greek world we find both the concept of the Olympus (classical mythology) and that of Hyperuranium[7]. The location of the deity in a celestial place does not only imply 'superiority' but also the distance par excellence: the sky is that limit beyond which one can't go, the unbridgeable distance that metaphorically expresses a basic ontological difference. After all, there are moments in which the Androids find themselves having to ascertain that they are not humans[8]. The distance of the divine world from the human one also implies two other aspects, which are closely interconnected. First of all, the human attempt to reach divinity, e.g. with prayers and sacrifices, which are echoed in the videogame by the missiles launched to the moon with supplies.

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5   At a certain point in the game Pascal is invited by a group of Machines who have created a religious pacific society and want to ally themselves with Pascal's Village. Pascal decides to go and meet this group together with 2B but after a while they discover that this group is planning a collective suicide. Cf. Bosman 2019: 231–4.

6   This topic is dealt with across the board in many of St. Augustine's works (e.g., *De Civitate Dei* XXII,30; *In Psalmum 67* 13; *De dono perseverantiae* I, 13; *Epistula 101* 2; *De gratia et libero arbitrio*; all in Mayer 2000). Cf. Paulinus of Nola, *Epistola 8*, 3, 33–34: *Haec bona libertas Christo servire et in ipso Omnibus esse supra* (translated in English in Walsh 1966: 78).

7   Plato, *Phaedrus* 246 c-e. In any case it must be remembered that Hyperuranium is a location *sui generis*; according to Reale it is a *place not-place* ("Il termine onsi ὑπερουράνιον è stato onsiderate dalla cultura occidentale come emblematico e recepito come tale. […] Si tenga presente che col cielo termina il luogo fisico, e, per conseguenza, il sopra-cielo è *luogo al di là del luogo*, ossia *luogo non-luogo*, vale a dire la dimensione metafisica d'll'intelligibilità", Plato 2006: 228 note 98).

8   For example, when operator 21O confides to 9S that she would have a family like humans do.

Secondly, the lack of communication, expressed with the deity's silence or with its cryptic answers[9]; the Council of Humanity, in parallel, does not speak directly with the Androids, it uses the figure of the Commander just as in most religions' ministers communicate the will of god(s) to the faithful (and when gods communicate directly it is never a dialogic relationship but a simple declaration to be accepted as it is, and no worshippers would dare to question it). This distance or absence[10] is in turn connected to the sense of precariousness of the creatures (human beings in religions and Androids in the game) and of their life, but we will return to this at the end.

Progressing in the game, however, the player discovers that the Council of Humanity does not actually exist: it is a staging designed by the Commander to give meaning to the lives of the Androids and convince them to carry on the war against the Machines. Impossible not to hear the echoes of Marx that screams against religion, "the opium of the people'" ("*Die Religion ist das Opium des Volkes*" Marx 1844: 72.) that serves to control the masses. In any case, while with Marx this revelation must serve as a stimulus for the human being to reappropriate his own life otherwise alienated by religion, in the videogame this announcement of the **death of God** scorches the Earth and leaves the Androids without any purpose. In the fictional narrative this **impasse** is overcome by 9S thanks to the affection he feels for 2B and that pushes him to continue his tasks as if he had never discovered the truth. However, once 2B is dead, 9S has no reason to live and goes completely insane. Therefore, while in contemporary philosophers the liberation from the idea of God serves as a springboard for a reappropriation of one's own life[11], in *NieR: Automata* it reveals the nonsense of life, its precariousness and its tragicomic nature – this is perhaps the true thread of Yokō Tarō's videogame.

Opposed to humans are, ideally, the Aliens, the creators of the Machines. Again, the actual existence of the Aliens is a lie: they died several centuries before the events took place. Despite this, the 'Aliens → Machines' and 'Humans → Androids' parallelism mirrors one of the typical ways of thinking the religious phenomenon, namely that of radical/absolute dualism[12]: on one side the positive deity (humans) and on the other the negative deity (Aliens); in the middle, lower rank beings who support one of the two sides and who fight among themselves in place of the deities. Of course, this is an extreme simplification, as not all dualisms are realised in this way, but it is perhaps one of the ways that has been most influential in videogames and fiction based on dualistic schemes[13].

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9   See Psalm 22 (cf. Benedictus XVI 2011).

10   The absence of divinity often causes a response anger and not infrequently both 9S and, above all, 2B manifest this emotion (in one of the first phases of the game 2B is clearly disturbed by the fact that 9S has lost his memories and her fists are visibly clenched as it is usually done when angry).

11   Nietzsche (1882: Aph. 125, 343; 1885).

12   The perfect example is that of Zoroastrianism/Mazdayasna, a ditheism in which Spenta Mainyu ('the good spirit' simplifying) and Angra Mainyu ('the evil spirit', as known as Ahriman) are engaged in a cosmic struggle and human beings have to choice sides. This ditheism should not be confused with duotheism where the two gods or principles are complementary and not counter, like Yin and Yang in Taoism.

13   We can cite *Prince of Persia: Prodigy* (Ubisoft Montreal 2008), based on Zoroastrianism/Mazdayasna and its radical dualism, or *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD 1986) (and in all series), in which we have Link and Ganondorf eternally opposed like Good and Evil. In a different way, the dualism is

The Difficult Relationship with the Divine: Betrayals and Imitations

However, this elementary scheme is disturbed by several factors, at least three of which can be framed within the perspective of the religious phenomenon of betrayal, albeit in a very different and peculiar way.

The first type of betrayal is what we might call 'of rebellion', 'of rage', and is mainly carried out by the Android A2. As already mentioned, by the way, that the pronunciation of A2 is very similar to the pronunciation of the Latin '*et tu*' with which Caesar refers to Brutus in the Shakespearian play. This type of betrayal arises from the torment experienced, not only because the deity didn't try to reduce it, but the deity itself is the actual cause of it. In the videogame this translates into the fact that all A2's sacrifices and efforts only lead to further pain, which in turn pushes the Android to rebel against the system that has imposed all this on her. In the final moments of the game, we will also see that the pain of 9S culminates in contempt for the system that deceived him and for life itself. These feelings are thus closely related to the theme of the absence of the divine that we anticipated earlier. It would not be wrong to say that this betrayal is actually an understandable response to the betrayal suffered. Particularly interesting for comparison is the biblical episode of Job, where the patriarch's misfortunes, though caused by Satan, occur with God's consent. However, in the biblical episode, the saint does not give into the temptation to be angry with God but continues to praise him. Job thus assumes the role of a model in the face of the feeling of being abandoned by God, to educate believers not to be drawn into the feeling of revenge against God who apparently punishes the righteous. On the other hand, as Jung (1952) observed, Job's story, despite its conclusion, cannot fail to bring out a criticism of an immoderate God who treats his own children as pawns, just as the Androids are pawns in the chessboard of the war against the Machines.

A second type of betrayal is that of the Machine Pascal and the entire village he manages. Pascal is a defector in all respects, who wants to escape the logic of war and therefore tries to create a micro-world based on his pacifist principles. In a way, this betrayal could be considered as more serious than the previous one. In fact, while before the relationship implied a critical tension towards the divine, now the center of gravity is shifted elsewhere and the traitor tries, in his own way, to be in turn a divinity that creates its own space. Pascal therefore enters in direct competition with the two deities identified (the Council of Humanity and the Aliens); however, this sin of ὕβις (**hybris**)[14] cannot go unpunished and at the end of the game even Pascal's world will be brutally wiped out. Like every other glimmer of hope throughout the entire game. Pascal is a Machine, but his message of peace reaches Machines and Androids alike; it reaches B2 and 9S, it reaches some members of the resistance[15], it reaches defecting Androids seeking shelter in his

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developed in the *Fable* (Lionhead Studios since 2004) and *Black&Whyte* (Lionhead Studios since 2001) series where the player has to constantly choose between doing good or evil actions.

14   in ancient Greece, the term ὕβις (**hybris**) denotes a serious sinful action toward the deity; literally, it can be translated as *tracotance*.

15   Resistance is a group of old models of Androids that lives on Heart created before project YoRHa; Ameonna, their leader, became friends with Pascal and they started to collaborate often giving each other a hand.

village[16], and it even reaches A2. The universality of his message may evoke the openness of the message of universal religions, which extend toward all humans regardless of their origin. Thus this 'betrayal' towards an imposed system goes beyond mere individual confrontation and evokes the system of proselytizing.

As a counterbalance to Pascal's ecumenicality there is the sect of the Machines of the factory[17]. The attempt to imitate the religious systems to which we are accustomed and their rituality is obvious:

> When Pascal and 2B enter the facility, they are greeted by an oddly dressed machine-man: "You enter the domain of God. Down this corridor if you would". The machine man is identified by the game as 'priest'. The 'priest' is dressed in a garment not unlike a Roman Catholic priest or Protestant minister: a purple cloak with a white-and-purple embroidered collar. [...] Pascal and B2 [...] enter a long corridor lit by the torches of two rows of machine priests, all identically dressed. [...] In the middle of the room, positioned on a platform, 'His Grace' appears to be sitting on his throne made of scrap metal, surrounded by torch-carrying machine priests. He wears the same cloak and collar, but on his perfectly round ball-shaped head (a characteristic of almost all machine-men) is a head, also in purple and white, with the same geometrical patterns. Qua-shaped, the head holds the middle between a papal tiara. (Bosman 2019: 231)

At first, despite the occasionally eerie setting, the gamer gets the impression that this religious group sincerely wants to pursue peace like Pascal. At a certain point, however, the situation plummets, the Machine worshipped as a god literally loses its head that comes off and rolls on the ground and is given to all the order to commit suicide and kill each other to become all gods: "You also must die and become gods! [...] Let us die and become gods together! [...] We shall become gods. We shall" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). If from a certain point of view this may seem to be a reference to the theme of the **folly of the cross**[18], on the other hand it clearly recalls the sad events of well-known sects, first of all that of the People's Temple[19]. It is interesting to note, however, that although this sect could not aim to expand for obvious reasons, the message promulgated is also in the perspective of universality, even more than that of Pascal, going to include even humans, in fact now extinct: "Machine! People! Androids! Every one of them, a god!" (ibid.).

The third type of betrayal is that of Adam, a Human/Android-looking Machine who, with his brother Eve, is the main enemy of the A/B narrative arcs. Adam, as a Machine, should continue the war against the Androids in the name of the Aliens. However, at the first useful opportunity, he reveals the truth about the Aliens (i.e., that they died centuries ago) and shows no interest in them or in the war itself. It is clear from every action

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16   Two Androids, tired of fighting in the resistance, decided to run away to escape the war. After several side quests related to these characters 2B and 9S will discover that the male Android is in love with the female one but she only pretends to reciprocate the feeling for her own interests.

17   See note 5 above.

18   In Christianity, this term refers to the notion that God's actions may appear incomprehensible to reason (e.g. the fact that Christ had to sacrifice himself on the cross). Cf. Paul *Corinthians* 1, I, 20–25.

19   Much emphasis is placed on the importance of doing the deed all together: "The moment we've planned for is here. Let us all go together" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.).

and word of Adam that his only purpose is to satisfy his own curiosity about humans and to want to feel like them. It is no accident that the name recalls the first man of the biblical creation, whose sin was to eat the forbidden fruit in order to attain the knowledge of God. In the biblical myth, in fact, the Serpent instigates in Adam the desire to place himself on the same level as God and only the awareness of evil, hitherto ignored, seems to be able to bridge that distance (*Genesis* 3:6). Similarly, the Machine Adam, after reading several books about human beings, decides to put in place a series of behaviors that will lead him to understand what it means to be a human. He decides to detach himself from the collective network of Machines, in search of a kind of uniqueness that traces the uniqueness of human life: doing so, however, he also renounces the immortality of his data (in a similar way this will happen with 9S). During the fatal clash with 2B herself, in a sort of macabre reconstruction of a city still inhabited by humans, Adam will use every means necessary to live an authentic human experience rather than to pursue victory. Finally, all this allows him to feel the human experience par excellence: death. From a certain point of view all this traces what we said about the sect of Machines, although in a profoundly different sense. There, death was seen as the necessary act to overcome the condition of precarious existence, to overcome the nonsense of existence to which the Machines are condemned; in a certain sense, the sartrian drama of being condemned to be free is taken to its extreme consequences[20]. Death is thus tied to an escape from the hic et nunc[21]. Here, in the case of Adam, death is not an attempt to escape from life, it is the very fulfillment of life, it is its greatest exaltation. Adam betrays the cause for which he was created and wants to become to all intents and purposes like the god of the opposite faction, accepting the consequences till the end. If the biblical man Adam, seeking to equal his god, goes to meet the experience of death[22], the Machine Adam, seeking the experience of death, manages to equal his chosen god, the human being.

Redemption and Sacrifice: The Self and the Other

In addition to these three types of betrayal, there is another episode that, from a certain point of view, could be analyzed through the filter of betrayal. At a certain point in the game, 2B and 9S discover that Engels, one of the Machines they had previously fought

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20   It should be noted that one of the Machines in Pascal's Village is called Jean-Paul – an obvious reference to Jean-Paul Sartre – and explicitly questions the meaning of life. However, the theme is constant in all the Machines; just to mention a few: Father Servo, the wise Machines, the Machine that challenges the Androids in a speed race, the actress Machines... all Machines that, once the events with which they try to distract themselves are over (a sort of videogame transposition of the theory of **divertissement** of the Pascal philosopher), find no other solution than suicide, sometimes striking and almost artistic (e.g. the actress Machines who end the theatrical performance with their death), at other times relegated and humble (e.g. the last wise Machine who, having reached the conclusion that without someone's love life has no meaning, without too many frills throws herself from a building and smashes to the ground).

21   Perhaps Yokō Tarō wanted to echo Schopenhauer (1819).

22   "*Propterea, sicut per unum hominem peccatum in hunc mundum intravit, et per peccatum mors, et ita in omnes homines mors pertransiit, eo quod omnes peccaverunt*". Saint Paul, *Romanos* 5,15; cf. also *Concilium Tridentinum*, 5a canone 2: DS 1512.

with, is still alive, albeit badly damaged. Despite 2B's initial distrust, 9S convinces the friend to search for the necessary parts to gradually repair Engels. At the end of this secondary mission Engels reveals that he has understood the suffering caused to the Androids and that he is repentant; for this reason, he will decide to sacrifice himself by donating some components extracted from his circuits to help 2B and 9S in their mission.

In this case we can see simultaneously two types of betrayal, but also redemption. In the first instance 2B and 9S betray their cause when they decide to help Engels, who was their enemy and could become one again because of the help given to him. In a specular way Engels too, when he finally sacrifices himself to help 2B and 9S, makes a betrayal, donating useful objects to the Android faction. These two acts of betrayal towards their respective 'deities' for whom they should fight (Aliens and Humans), are actually an act of redemption towards individuals of the opposite faction: 2B and 9S help the same Machine that they tried to eliminate earlier in the game; Engels at this point will try to help his destroyers – now redeemed – in order to redeem himself from the pain he caused[23].

As the game progresses, the scheme initially presented (Aliens & Machines VS Humans & Androids) is slowly but steadily dismantled and, **de facto**, overturned: Machines and Androids versus their 'gods', Aliens and Humans.

This feeling of commonality between Machines and Androids continuously emerges during the game; for example, in the initial phases of 9S's adventure, the player finds himself having to command a Machine remotely controlled by 9S; later this will be repeated in the Factory and in the secondary mission of the tournament where it is necessary to take control Machines. After these experiences – which are experienced during the second story arc of the game (B) – we can finally understand why at the end of the final A (first story arc) 9S calmly accepts the fact that his consciousness is still present in the Machine network. Slowly it is discovered that 9S's hacking ability does not consist solely of remotely controlling the hardware of the Machines, the different software also intermingles with each other. This becomes clear with the side mission of the wise Machines, when, after the third hack, 9S's hardware undergoes changes due to the feeling of distress felt by the hacked Machine's software.

A very curious aspect of the empathy between Machines and Androids is the contrast between the different levels of openness it manifests itself. As the game progresses, in fact, it will be noticed that the Machines tend to have a consistent and 'self-stereotyped' behavior: when their empathy is shown, it is oriented towards the whole category and not just towards the single individual they are empathetic with. Pascal and the villagers are pacifists towards all Androids, not just a few; Engels, repentant, sympathizes with the whole 'species' of Androids; the Machines' sect is open to all Machines and all Androids, not just to Pascal and 2B. This collective dimension of reality is not limited to retracing

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23   The act of donating one's own body for redemptive purposes is typical of Christian doctrine and constitutes its fundamental act, as is still recalled with the celebration of the Eucharist and the phenomenon of transubstantiation. However, we must not think that the sacrifice of Engels necessarily refers back to the Christian religion. The use of Engels' pieces by the Androids may recall various religious practices linked to cannibalism, for example those in use by the Aztecs (Duverger 2005: 83–93); for a general overview of ritual cannibalism see Bataille (2009: 69–70, 78–81,88-90).

the Judaic[24]-Christian-Muslim universalism, but tends to level out and nullify the distinctiveness of the individual, as it happens for example in the pantheistic and especially in the gnostic religious views where the individual is destined to reunite with the divine by merging into it[25]. This already happens partially with Machines that are constantly connected to each other. It is legitimate to think that, living their existence as a collective **unicum**, they are therefore led to look at the Androids with the same filter. Pascal himself is not exempt from this logic, so much so that in the final stages of the game, after seeing his village destroyed, he can no longer find a meaning to his life without a collective world to refer to. The only significant exception is represented by Adam who, as it has been seen, pursues a completely different goal from the other Machines and voluntarily separates himself from the network to try to achieve human individuality[26]. His own death, as already mentioned, serves as the crowning achievement of this quest: death sets out a limit to the expansion of our range of possibilities and, as such, gives value to each of our choices and the self-determination of our individual selves.[27]

On the other hand, there are the Androids in the completely opposite situation: each one of them selectively chooses the behaviors to have with other Androids and with the single Machines. Therefore, friendship and love stories are possible, as it emerges more or less clearly depending on the cases. Such behavior is of obvious human origin, like in a sort of creation *ad imaginem et similitudinem*[28]. The importance of the Androids' individuality emerges clearly in several contexts: for example at the end of the secondary mission of the wandering couple[29]; with the interactions that 2B and 9S have with their respective reference points on board the orbiting station where the command of the YoRHa unit is based; with the mission about the Android who decides to 'adopt' another Android even though he was expressly forbidden to do so; or with the fact that the Androids show empathy with single Machines in their individuality (or, at most, with small and circum-

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24   Judaism is a *sui generis* case because it expresses characteristics typical of universal religions and national religions; (cf. Sfameni 2011: 130, 148–9).

25   It happens especially in Valentinians view (cf. Chiapparini 2012: 373, 378).

26   On closer inspection there are other cases in which a tendency towards individualism can be observed, but these are episodes that are for their own sake and not detailed enough to be analysed in depth; for example we recall the secondary mission in which a child Machine lost in the desert has to be recovered, the secondary mission of the letters to Jean-Paul, the secondary mission of the child Machine that locks itself inside the house and the story of the king Machine in the forest. In all these cases, however, there is a constant element, namely the presence of an affective feeling that places a 'specific other' in a privileged position compared to 'all the others'. From the same point of view we can understand Eve's behavior that puts his brother Adam in a privileged position compared to any other Machine.

27   Heidegger (1927: §§ 50, §§ 52,§§ 53); cf. Toni (2011). About the relationship between freedom and death in videogames see Seregni (2020: 52–56).

28   *Genesis* 1:26.

29   At the end of this secondary mission, the player discovers that the male Machine is ready to do anything for his beloved, even to give up his memories, i.e., his own self; on the other hand, the female Machine exploits this love for her own benefit; in both cases, although diametrically opposed, a single individual is at the center of everything.

scribed groups, for example Pascal's village or the peaceful Machines of Luna Park[30]) or with single Androids with whom they establish special affective relationships.

The theme of the uniqueness of each Android is inextricably intertwined with another theme typical of many religious movements, namely that of corporeality. In one of the initial phases of the game, the player must help one of the resistance merchants who cannot move because of a damage to his left leg; 9S, intrigued, asks the merchant why he doesn't repair his leg, since he has the necessary spare parts. The merchant's answer is that that leg is the only thing he has never replaced of his original body: if he changed it, he would no longer be what he was originally. The uniqueness of his own body seems to clash with what the game had conveyed shortly before, when 2B and 9S had blown themselves up, aware that their memories, copied in the central server, would continue to revive in new bodies identical to the previous one. This dichotomy between software and hardware seems to follow exactly the dichotomy between soul and body present in various religions. The same concept of body is continually questioned in *NieR: Automata* in various contexts, thanks to the mechanics for which, once the character dies, all the items he has equipped are lost and the only way to get them back is to find your body in time and recover them[31]. It is clear that to continue the game from the diegetic point of view does not mean to continue 'as if you had not died', but to continue with a new body different from the previous one that has died. It would seem that memory is the fundamental thing, which is the soul's counterpart and, like it, is immortal. This would seem to be confirmed also by the fact that 2B gets fiercely angry when, just after her and 9S' sacrifice at the factory, she discovers that 9S has lost most of his own memories. On the other hand, just before the sacrifice, 9S jeopardizes the mission itself to give time to 2B to upload his memories. However, all of this is called into question as the plot progresses. First of all, as already anticipated, with the merchant's reflections; then with the reflections and stories of other NPCs[32] such as Devola and Popola[33]; finally, with the sacrifice of 9S at the end of the parallel A/B narrative arcs. At this point 9S, thanks to his Android scanner skills, hacks the Machine Eve, but in doing so his own software is damaged irreparably. Thus, 2B must accept that the new 9S will have to use the data of the previous backup, giving up the memory of the last events: the 9S in front of her will die forever.

> **9S**: I must have been corrupted when Eve detached from the network [...] I can always reload my backup data from the Bunker.

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30   In an old, abandoned amusement park there are peaceful Machines celebrating with each other instead of fighting with Androids.

31   The same mechanism occurs in other games, e.g., *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2001); instead in other games (e.g., *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware & SCE Japan Studio 2015)) the player has to go to the place where her/his character is dead to retrieve unspent experience points.

32   **Non-Player Character**, i.e., characters with whom you interact but who are controlled by the program and not by other players.

33   Devola and Popola's story is related to the prequel of *NieR: Automata*, i.e., *NieR* (Cavia 2010) (as known as *NieR: Gestalt* or *NieR: Replicant*, depending on the reference market), and to the starting series *Drakengard* (Cavia 2003; 2005; 2013), where the soul/body dichotomy theme is central to the development of the story.

> **2B**: But you'll lose you. The you that exists at this very moment. (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.)

In any case, not even limited backup data's immortality is guaranteed. This becomes tragically evident when the Bunker's entire backup server is attacked by a virus through a backdoor and 2B herself must accept death in a definitive manner[34].

The theme of the extreme sacrifice, that of life, is thus presented on a double level: that of contingency, with the loss of the single individual identifiable with a precise body (e.g., the repeated sacrifice of the Androids to destroy too powerful enemies with the explosion of their 'black boxes', explicitly provided as a mode of attack as demonstrated by the 'self-destruction' function that can be activated through the prolonged and joint pressure of certain buttons[35]), and the absolute one, with the loss of the backup data that serves as a matrix for the continuous replicability of the Androids. At the end of all the narrative arcs, the player will be asked to try to live this same experience: he will be asked to permanently delete all the game data. We will come back to this choice later, but it is worth noting right now that the deep message that Yokō Tarō wants to send to the player about the precariousness of human life compared to the whole cosmos is typical of different religious sensitivities in the East; just think, for example, of the tradition of the Sand Mandala practiced by Tibetan monks.

A special attention must be dedicated to Emil, a bizarre character who hides behind a mask of light-heartedness that has one of the saddest stories of the whole game. He is a life form *sui generis*: he was created as a weapon centuries before the events of *NieR: Automata* and fought directly against the Aliens. However, being alone, he had no chance of victory. For this reason, he began to 'split and double' an incalculable number of times, in order to create a real army. At each duplication, however, each copy found itself with gaps in its memory. At the end of the countless duplications the memory of the original Emil was completely lost; only with the help of 2B and 9S Emil will be able to recover part of his memories, but these will throw him into a deep anguish, so that at the end the player will have to fight with Emil and kill him before he destroys himself by destroying the entire planet. In the unfolding of the plot of *NieR: Automata* Emil has no role; however, the slow discovery of his story makes it clear how important his sacrifice in the previous events was. Emil's sacrifice does not consist in a renunciation of his life in the strict sense (as in the case of Engels), but in the loss of memory that, as we have seen, constitutes the fundamental core of the lives of the characters in *NieR: Automata*. Emil's fate is even more terrible than death, it is a condemnation to an eternal existence without any connection to reality, it is the complete loss of self. The complete alienation of the character is well

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34   Actually, in the real last game sequences it will be discovered that an intact backup of some of the game's characters (including Adam and Eve) has been preserved and sent to space.

35   It should be highlighted that this function must first be manually enabled by Androids although they are formally obliged to have it always active; in the early stages of the game 9S clearly explains it to 2B, but equally clearly admits that he will not spy if 2B decides not to activate it. This behavior could be one of the cases already analyzed of 'rebellious' betrayal: an innate sense of survival – a Spinozian *conatus*, which is present in the Androids that, in accordance with what has been said so far, try to preserve their individual identity – pushes to put a limit beyond which the will of the creator, human being, cannot go.

rendered by the childish and circus music that accompanies him in the middle of a scenario made of death, destruction and loneliness: the jarring dissonance evokes the tragic nature of his story.

Restore Humanity: Beyond Illusions

The theme of sacrifice and the relationship with other people deserve a further analysis, related to the videogame's ending.

> And yet, through the poetic lens of defamiliarization and renewal, we understand that this repetition is constructive, and that the "final antagonist" is instead our automatized perception of games and what they can achieve—and by extension, what *humanity* can achieve. (Gerrish 2018: 7)

In this vision of the world and humanity, there is a fluctuation between nihilism and hope, and it seems possible to grasp a parallelism with certain positions of Giacomo Leopardi[36]. *NieR: Automata* doesn't mention the poet from Recanati. Rather, it refers to Nietzsche on several occasions, from the very start of the videogame. However, the philosophical al poetical vision of Leopardi helps too, to understand the thoughts of the characters of *NieR: Automata*, considering the similarities between Nietzsche and Leopardi on themes like the search for truth and the illusions, to the point of a definition of pre-Nietzschean Leopardi (Otto 1963; Negri 1994; Carrera 1999).

One example is the *Dialogo di Cristoforo Colombo e di Pietro Gutierrez* (Leopardi 2008). Gutierrez accuses Columbus of putting the lives of all the expedition at risk following a simple speculation (ibid.). The answer of Columbus is quite interesting. He says that their journey is meaningful precisely because they are risking something, because it's not sure that they will find a land beyond the ocean (ibid.). If they had only followed established certainties, then they would never have left home, but without any risk there's also no love for life. As some commentators have pointed out, Christopher Columbus's answer seems to draw on Pascal's thought (Savoca 1999; Biancu 2004).

Almost all of the characters in *NieR: Automata* try to escape the nonsense of this eternal war. However, it's difficult to set a new goal, outside of the conflict. Many Machine lifeforms (such as Father Servo and the sprinter Machine) persistently pursue a certain goal and, once achieved, self-destruct. Others (the factory's religious Machine lifeforms) commit suicide **en masse** to ascend to divinity.

Progressing in the game gradually destroys illusions, for both the characters and the player. However, no single and definitive 'True' is reached. Even in the ending E, the two PODs wonder about what would happen if we started all over again, elsewhere: will everything be repeated, or will something change?

The same question is found in the choices made by the Machine Pascal. Teaching baby Machines about feelings is what ends up destroying them. The children, in fact, commit

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36   The quoted translations of his *Zibaldone* are those of Kathleen Baldwin et al. in Leopardi (2013). The numbers in the text do not indicate the page number, but the internal numbering of the *Zibaldone*.

suicide, terrified, when they are under attack. But without those feelings would Machine lifeforms be 'alive' and 'human'?

What the Machine Pascal does is teach emotions and notions that destroy the illusions of baby Machines.

> Each day we lose something; that is, some illusions, which are all we have, perish or wane. Experience and truth daily deprive us of some portion of our possessions. We do not live except by losing. Man is born rich in everything, and as he grows, he gets poorer, until in old age he finds himself with almost nothing. (Leopardi 2013: 636)

The Machine Pascal seems obsessed with knowledge, research and transmission of information. Similarly, the Machine lifeforms Adam and Eve appear obsessed in their search for understanding of human beings. In the end, all searches for truth turn out to be destructive and deceptive. Not because they lead to falsehood, but because there does not seem to be an actual truth.

There's a point in *NieR: Automata* where the Machine Adam and the Android 2B face off. On that occasion, Adam says that he understood the truth about human beings: "the core of humanity … is conflict. They fight. Steal. Kill. THIS is humanity in its purest form" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). 2B replies that he knows nothing about humans.

Up to a certain point, in the game, it would seem possible that one of their two positions is correct, that is 'right'. Yet, as already said, both are ultimately overcome. They are not false, but neither are they true. No antithesis between true and false, but only different degrees of illusion (Carrera 1999: 87).

This position, experienced by almost every character of *NieR: Automata*, also concerns the players. At the end of the game, in the 'true ending', when they have to decide whether to sacrifice their save files, a rational approach to the 'right' choice does not seem to work. More precisely: it's implicitly asked to renounce to the videogame fictionality, and to face a decision – marginally, but truly – impacting.

To be certain, one should remain within the perimeters of the playful experience. But this final connection with other players requires something different. A leap of faith and optimism towards the sacrifice of someone's time (all the hours spent playing) to help a stranger, maybe even a despicable and hateful person. As long as one remains in the purely playful dimension, truths are progressively revealed to the characters, but for the player the videogame itself performs a function similar to poetic language. Or rather, it would be if that condition had not been irremediably lost. But a faint resemblance is perhaps possible.

> And in actual fact the first sages were the poets, or rather the first sages made use of poetry, and the first truths were announced in verses, not, I believe, with the express intention of veiling them and making them barely intelligible, but because they presented themselves. (Leopardi 2013: 2940)

It's the truth dressed in the language of the imagination (D'Intino 2009: 160–1). It's not a trick or a deception.

NieR: Automata presents many biblical and Christological references, but its spirituality is always closer to paganism. And, precisely for this reason, it's able to better veil the truth, for characters and players.

> And I venture to say that the happiness promised by paganism (and in the same way also by other religions), as paltry and scant as it is, must have appeared much more desirable, especially to an utterly unhappy and unfortunate man, and the hope of it must have been much better able to console and quieten, because it is a happiness that is conceivable and material. (Leopardi 2013: 3506)

Back to the characters:

> But the modern truth, the third truth? As formulated by Nietzsche, it says that little men have killed God, that no one has taken the place of the disappeared gods, and that therefore we continue to live as if a divine instance were still there, in a conscious collective lie. As formulated by Leopardi, the modern truth is that modern man, unable even to hate himself because he no longer knows how to feel a strong love for himself, lives in a sort of indifferent languor, in which sense, desire and passions are now extinguished. (Carrera 1999: 92)

NieR: Automata offers both. On the one hand – as already mentioned above – there is languor, boredom, indifference, which reaches the point of self-destruction if the purpose that had been set is exhausted.

On the other hand, there are the 'little men' who have taken the place of the vanished gods. Androids and Machine lifeforms play at being the humans they killed. They partly adore the (extinct) humanity, distant and unreachable, almost like a divinity. And partly they adore themselves, but they are also made in the image of human beings. It should be remembered that androids are human-like robots, so they are quite similar to their creators. This enforces the connection between the distant humans, adored like a divinity, and the Christian God, who created mankind in his own image.

There's a point, towards the beginning of the game, where 2B and 9S see Machine lifeforms that mimic the behaviors and expressions of human beings in the desert. According to Android 9S, those Machines are not aware of what they are doing: they are just mechanically reproducing things they don't understand.

> However, if that is true, if the machine-men are not conscious of their own existence, what does that tell us about the deeper motivations of 2B's and 9S's behavior? Are the two Androids, and all their fellow YoRHa members, self-aware or not? If the machine-men are just imitating their Alien creators and/or the humans they have encountered, then the Androids are doing exactly the same (although on a far more sophisticated level): imitating their human masters in whose appearance they were created. (Bosman 2019: 102)

Conclusion

It has been said, albeit as a probable joke, that if killing in videogames is a sin, then saving digital lives is also a good deed (Morelli 2014: 87). Joke or not, one would wonder about that emphatic chain, that "*Social catena*" (*La Ginestra*, v. 149 in *Leopardi* 1991), in which *NieR: Automata* players huddle, as they sacrifice their save files and their playing time to help each other, without even knowing who will be the beneficiary of such actions.

There is an alliance against a greater obstacle, which oppresses everyone without distinction. Both in *NieR: Automata* and in Leopardi's last canto. As underlined by Leopardi himself (2013: 4428), in *La Ginestra* he expresses a philosophical thought that wants to unite men against their common enemy, nature. His poetry is an appeal to social solidarity (Binni 1973). *NieR: Automata* is a call for factual actions. It's a videogame that reflects on the videogame experience.

Marie- Laure Ryan called Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercises* (Ganss 1992) a foreshadowing of virtual reality (2001: 115–9). Her position was then expanded by the Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, who says that:

> The most authentic destination of Ignatius's text is not mere reading but, precisely, the spiritual exercise that affects life and action. Reading video games would be like consulting a train timetable: it's useful for those who travel, but it is boring and useless for those who remain stationary. (2008: 158)

Whoever plays a videogame is not simply the judging spectator of another's actions. The videogame interaction conducted through the avatar with NPCs can easily lead to empathizing with them.

In *NieR: Automata* it's possible to empathize towards enemies who are considered objects (even more than the protagonists themselves, whose bodies are only expendable and rebuildable shells, as long as they manage to preserve the memory of their black box). It's possible to empathize not only with what is not human, but also with materiality itself, with entities that would not actually appear 'alive'. Therefore, empathy, as defined here, also extends beyond the human and animal kingdoms. "At the center of empathy and compassionate understanding lies the ability to see the other as a true peer, to recognize intelligence and communication in all forms, no matter how unlike ourselves these forms might be" (Hogan/Metzger/Peterson 1998: XIV).

Even more, this call to an empathic 'doing' in the end, towards other real and unknown people, can really be like the *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola: an invitation to actively **do** what it's written. There's a strong connection here between the sacrifice of the game files and the sacrifice of the androids (with their memory loss), so there's a further link between players and characters.

The aforementioned song *Weight of the World*, probably the best known and most characteristic part of the *NieR: Automata* soundtrack, repeats twice "Tell me God, are you punishing me?/Is this the price I'm paying for my past mistakes?/This is my redemption song/ I need you more than ever right now/Can you hear me now?" (Okabe 2017). The God of *NieR: Automata*, unlike the Christian God of Ignatius of Loyola, is not there, and if there is, he does not respond. Yet, even in this case, like the "*lenta ginestra*" (*La Ginestra*), the

invitation is not to surrender to nonsense, following at least a 'secularly spirituality', empathic.

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Part IIId – Videogames:
The Case Study of *Dragon Age*

Negotiating Spiritual Uncertainty through the Lens of Videogames

Individual and Societal Struggles with Belief Systems in the *Dragon Age* and *Hate* Series

Sarah Faber

Keywords: *BioWare; confucianism; indie game; mythopoeia; RPG; spiritual doubt; visual novel*

Introduction

One way of looking at the relationship between videogames and spirituality would be to broadly identify two trends: Some embrace the potential of speculative fiction to emphatically confirm the existence of higher powers and explore how that impacts a diverse range of fictional societies as well as game mechanisms – bringing forth concepts from divine magic to entire professions such as miracle-working clerics and paladins, to the appearance of physical avatars of the gods. Meanwhile, the second group of games use the backdrop of fictional settings to mirror our contemporary uncertainties, doubts and questions about religion and spirituality much more closely, leaving the existence of higher powers suspended in perpetual doubt. This chapter takes a look at the second group and explores the functions and outcomes of asking spiritual questions that are extremely pertinent to us today in interactive fictional narratives which remove those questions from their usual context.

Videogames are well-suited to the exploration of spiritual doubt, in particular, because they are ever only an assortment of options and possibilities without the player's input. Thus, they can forcefully convey the weight of spiritual doubts and the difficulty of having to make a decision anyway: If the player does not decide what their stance on the matter in question is – and the consequences can be wide-reaching in some games – the game simply will not continue. Anyone who has ever played an RPG knows the tyranny of a blinking cursor, waiting for you to make a decision you feel extremely torn about.[1]

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1   'You' in this case consciously conflates the player and the player character. Players may, of course, make in-game choices reflecting what they think the player character would or should do, rather than their own, real stance on an issue. However, the distinction is largely irrelevant with regard

Thus, I argue that videogames are indeed an extremely fitting medium to explore difficult ethical questions and issues of spiritual uncertainty.

To this end, the present chapter conducts an analysis of the treatment of spirituality in two very different game series: BioWare's triple-A high-fantasy *Dragon Age* series (since 2009) on the one hand, and, on the other, indie developer Christine Love's critically acclaimed but comparatively much smaller, lesser-known sci-fi visual novel series consisting of *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012) and its sequel *Hate Plus* (2013). Both series are excellent examples of how "digital games often rely on important cultural and religious content to drive both the narrative and gameplay, utilizing these modes as unique forms of cultural communication and valence" (Campbell/Grieve 2014: 2). *Dragon Age* and Christine Loves' *Hate* games engage with postmodern fears and doubts surrounding the potential absence of a higher power and the practical difficulties of using religion as a moral compass, as well as the potential alternatives for finding guiding principles to ethical living. The two games doing so in extremely different contexts – regarding narrative genre, type of game, and even production budget – promises to provide a more well-rounded and nuanced answer to the question, 'How do videogames portray spiritual doubts?'.

Both the *Dragon Age* series and the *Hate* games portray societies that are deeply conflicted in their relationship to spirituality, and are trying to work out what the implications of their spiritual uncertainty should be for some of their most pressing moral issues. These issues, though at first glance highly specific to the two fictional societies, actually drive very directly at spiritual doubts and moral problems that are either highly relevant in the real world today, or timeless concerns. As this chapter is going to show, the important contribution science fiction and fantasy (SF&F) videogames can make to the debate around these topics is twofold: (1) They remove these issues from their usual context just enough to allow us to see them with new eyes, unencumbered by firmly entrenched positions, age-old arguments, and biases. This could be said of SF&F stories in any medium, of course, but this narrative strategy can be applied with unusual force in games, because (2) games insistently prompt the player to actively engage with and take a position in these debates, since the game simply does not continue without the player's input.

Games as a medium are so particularly suited to producing engagement with difficult issues because they are, in Eric Zimmerman's terms (2004: 158), explicitly interactive. Unlike novels or films, which feature cognitive and functional interactivity, but exist as complete works independently of their audience, games exhibit explicit interactivity, i.e., they only work and fully take shape if players interact with them, and require "Participation with Designed Choices and Procedures" (ibid.). Spiritual doubt integrates fruitfully into this environment, as doubt already implies the great difficulty in choosing one of multiple options; making the player choose anyway can be a powerful way to make them consider their own position in debates to which they may have otherwise remained undecided spectators.

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to the particular concerns of this chapter, since the player (unless they pick an option at random) still has to engage with the issue and make a decision on what they consider a justifiable position, whether for themselves or for their main character – and indeed, if the two differ, this friction can deepen their engagement with the topic.

Knowable Divinity

In order to explore the dynamic of spiritual doubt and choice in videogames, it is necessary to make a brief detour and first take a look at some firmly established tropes and well-known clichés relating to spiritual certainty in videogames, before then delving into the analysis of how *Dragon Age* and the *Hate* games subvert these familiar narratives.

Many games associated with the narrative genre of high fantasy, and especially many role-playing games (RPGs) – including the various subsets such as tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) –, have developed, over several decades, a familiar trope of 'knowable divinity'. This is only one aspect of why, as Stef Aupers points out, "there is often an affinity between play on the one hand and spirituality on the other" (2015: 76). In this context, what 'knowable divinity' means is, quite simply, that divinity in many high-fantasy settings is a matter of not necessarily believing so much as knowing.

The mythopoeic environment of high-fantasy storyworlds in general lends itself to the inclusion of the divine among its many incarnations of the mythological, otherworldly and supernatural (cf. ibid: 78–79). Gods and divine beings tend to feature heavily in the lore and background stories of such fictional worlds. Often, the most pious inhabitants of these worlds are imbued with magical powers in return for their service to the gods. From games in the *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition, to many contemporary bestsellers such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), players are familiar with the concept of divine magic: High-fantasy storyworlds that involve both organised religion and magic often include the possibility for clerics and other devoted believers (priests, paladins, shamans, druids, etc.) to channel spiritual energy in palpable manifestations to heal, cause damage, transform objects or work other miracles.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to games, but appears in many high-fantasy texts across different media. What is special about the representation of this type of reliable divine intervention in interactive environments is that players can actually explore divinity by applying the scientific method. For example, by repeatedly performing actions such as prayers or spells depending on divine magic within the game, players can empirically answer the question whether there really is a higher power in that storyworld in a fairly straightforward manner – after all, there is objectively perceptible, reliably repeatable proof that the gods interact with the daily lives of ordinary mortals in well-ordered, predictable patterns. If a cleric's prayer for healing is answered swiftly and effectively, every time, the existence of a divine power is all but proven.

The gods in these storyworlds are real and knowable. Their steadfast divine support conveys a comforting sense of confirmation, a feeling that one's prayers are heard and perhaps even answered, but the extent to which divine intervention is predictable and recreatable in these games also reduces miracles to a mundane, mechanical process which quickly becomes devoid of spiritual meaning. Players certainly do not rejoice and praise the gods every time a healer casts a spell. If the gods dispense blessings like a bubble gum machine, they lose much of their mysticism and dignity. 'Having faith', in the sense of persevering in one's religious belief even in the face of adversity, is no longer

necessary. The gods in these fictional worlds are knowable to an extent where belief becomes obsolete.[2]

A complete loss of mysticism is rather at odds with the internal logic of belief. If believing is no longer necessary, what distinguishes a deity from a natural law? High-fantasy RPGs in general are quite good at prompting this realisation, though few engage further with it.

Religious Uncertainty in the *Dragon Age* Series

In terms of Jason Anthony's typology of religious games, the *Dragon Age* series falls into the category of 'allomythic games', i.e., "[g]ames that explore nonexistent traditions […], providing a first-person way to step into these traditions and practice them." (Anthony 2014: 39). The series is a rather typical representative of this category, given that Anthony observes that "the deepest examples of these [allomythic games] belong to longer fantasy and sci-fi RPG environments, where deep narrative is key to gameplay" (ibid.). However, *Dragon Age* also breaks with some of the standard ways for fantasy RPGs to portray religion – outlined above –, even though it seems, in many regards, like a typical high-fantasy setting at first glance.

Applying the high-fantasy repertoire (cf. Iser 1978: 69) and the rule of minimum departure – audiences assuming that a storyworld works either like the real world or, "[i]n the case of fantastic texts [… like a] landscape constructed on the basis of other texts" (Ryan 2014: 45), i.e., using the repertoire to make assumptions about the storyworld that are not explicitly stated or contradicted in the text – new players may at first think that some of the familiar rules around spirituality in fantasy settings apply here. Drawing on general knowledge about these types of settings, it seems natural, when the Chantry is first introduced as a major organised religion in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), to assume that it reveres a very real deity (referred to as 'the Maker') and that this religion's most important prophet, Andraste, is to be taken at face value. However, *Dragon Age* soon begins to undercut this familiar pattern.

The first grain of doubt is, arguably quite elegantly, integrated into the game mechanics. The only characters in the game who can gain access to healing abilities are 'spirit mages', whose abilities explicitly come from bonding with a benign otherworldly spirit. Spirits are considered definitely non-divine and potentially dangerous beings. Their reality is beyond question, however, given that the appearance of (malignant) spirits is a common problem which shapes much of the storyworld's power dynamics. Representatives of the Chantry may take care of the sick and wounded, but they do so by means of regular medicine, not by working miracles. There is no playable cleric class, and when a former Chantry sister, Leliana, joins the protagonist's group, her skillset has nothing to do with her faith, although it is made clear more than once that her belief remains strong. There is even a possible outcome in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* ([referred to as *Inquisition*] BioWare 2014), the third part of the series, in which Leliana becomes the new Divine,

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2   This is not a value judgement, but merely an observation on the way game-mechanical representations of divinity interact with the logic of belief.

the highest spiritual leader of the Andrastian Chantry. Even in that capacity, however, Leliana is shown as a shrewd politician, informed by her past as a rogue and spymaster (that being her skillset in terms of the games' rules), not a devout miracle worker.

Building on these slightly suspicious incidents, part three of the series, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* goes into greater detail regarding the Chantry and questions of faith, as the protagonist themselves stumbles into a position of spiritual leadership. The protagonist has a vision at the start of the game and is left with a magical mark on their hand as a result, which several characters interpret as a sign of divine favour. Consequently, the protagonist is thrust into the role of a prophet, 'the Herald of Andraste', and later becomes the Inquisitor. In dialogues throughout the game, the protagonist is repeatedly prompted to express their opinion on whether they are indeed touched by the Maker, or whether they are a sceptic, rejecting the religious explanations projected onto their experiences by devout Andrastians. The player is confronted with a religious legitimisation of the protagonist's quickly growing political power and has to decide not only what they (or their player character) think of the matter, but also whether and how much to exploit other characters' beliefs in order to attain goals that are pragmatic rather than religious in nature. The game thus turns a very personal question – 'Do you have faith?' – into an unavoidable political issue.

Doubt about the straightforward existence of the Maker is reinforced when, much later in the game, the vision and the mark are indeed explained by events other than divine intervention, and the villain of the game, Corypheus, goes so far as to boldly claim that he has found proof on his travels into the Fade (the realm of spirits and magic) that the gods do not exist: "I have seen the throne of the gods, and it was empty." (BioWare 2014: 'In Your Heart Shall Burn') The protagonist is repeatedly given the opportunity (and sometimes obligated) to explore their interpretation of these developments in conversation with other characters. Further interest is added to the ongoing back-and-forth about the legitimacy of the protagonist's position as spiritual leader by a minor character named Mother Giselle, a Chantry priest who repeatedly presents counter-narratives to the potential disillusionment the protagonist encounters through Corypheus and the revelations about the vision and mark. She points out that Corypheus might have reason to misrepresent his experiences in the Fade, and that mundane explanations for certain events do not preclude the possibility that these events are also expressions of a divine will (BioWare 2014: dialogue at Skyhold). The game never delivers a definitive answer to these issues, leaving all possibilities open and the player suspended in uncertainty, having to make up their own mind about whom to believe.

Thus, *Dragon Age*'s superficially standard high-fantasy representation of religion actually turns out to contain much more uncertainty than usual, more closely resembling faith and religion as we know them in our own world: Religion plays a big role in some people's lives, but it remains up to the interpretations of the individual whether we see the events around us as expressions of a divine will, natural laws, or coincidence and chaos. The characters in the *Dragon Age* series increasingly negotiate crises of faith strongly resembling our real-world uncertainties. The Maker cannot be proven, but in the end, his existence is not conclusively disproven either. Faith here remains faith in the sense of believing without knowing.

The series takes a slightly different approach, exploring another nuance of spiritual doubt, in its portrayal of the culture and religion of the elves. By the end of *Inquisition*, it becomes clear that several of the game's characters, notably Flemeth and Solas, are actually figures from elven lore who have been wandering the world for thousands of years. In dialogue, they refer to more such figures, more or less proving those characters' historical existence, too. However, even this apparently straightforward revelation that some of the elven gods and other beings of legend are real, physical presences within the storyworld raises more questions than it answers. Instead of engaging with the fundamental uncertainty of whether or not there is a Maker, the elven gods represent questions about the nuances of divinity. It is confirmed beyond a doubt that there is a factual basis for the elves' religious lore, but the feeling of security that dogma can provide is dissolved by the finer details of that confirmation – both in the exact nature of the historical basis of the myths and in the characters of Solas as Flemeth themselves, who blatantly subvert expectations (the audience's and the storyworld participants') of what gods might be like.

Aside from their magical powers, Solas and Flemeth first appear as fairly plain characters of limited means. Flemeth turns out to be able to shift into a dragon if the player decides to fight her in *Dragon Age: Origins*, but her human appearance is that of a rather unkempt older woman living in a swamp, and Solas appears as a plainly-dressed lone traveller, an elf with nothing more to his name than the clothes on his back. Once their true identities are revealed in *Inquisition*, however, both of them appear in more elaborate, stately clothing and, in Flemeth's case, with clean and regally dressed hair. Their behaviour to each other and the fragments of ancient elven history Solas reveals to the player (if his approval rating is high enough) express a highly contested concept of divinity. In their final confrontation at the end of the *Trespasser* DLC, Solas tells the protagonist:

> **Solas:** Your legends are half-right. We [the elves] were immortal. It was not the arrival of humans that caused us to begin aging. It was me. [...]
> **Main Character**: The Evanuris were elven mages? How did they come to be remembered as gods?
> **Solas:** Slowly. It started with a war. War breeds fear. Fear breeds a desire for simplicity. Good and evil. Right and wrong. Chains of command. After the war ended, generals became respected elders, then kings, and finally gods. The Evanuris.
> (BioWare 2014: 'Trespasser')

So the conceptual arc of elven religion in the games goes from uncertainty, followed by seeming confirmation of the gods' existence as Solas' true identity is revealed, to that revelation being quickly undercut by a relativisation of history: The figures of the legends did exist, and they were powerful immortals. But does that make them gods? At the time, all elves were immortal and connected to magic. Accordingly, Solas questions the Evanuris' claim to divinity and repeatedly refers to them as "false gods" and "would-be gods" (ibid.).

This raises questions about the exact nature of divinity. What traits qualify a being as a god? Are power and immortality sufficient characteristics, or just habitually associated? How important is a fundamental difference between ordinary people and a di-

vine being, and does that add an additional dimension in which divinity is essentially dependant on context (i.e., because all elves used to be immortal, would gods, for them, have to be something more, whereas immortality is sufficiently different and grand to the understanding of humans)? Can an ordinary being become divine, through the acquisition of power or through their historiographic portrayal? Should divinity be understood as quasi-axiomatic, without a point of origin, or might it be relative? Can the Evanuris' claim to divinity be considered retroactively validated, given that they appear very much like gods at the time the story takes place, when the elves have become mortal and their connection to the Fade, the source of all magic, has been weakened? And how should we gauge the significance of Solas confirming parts of elven lore as historical fact – does this strengthen the respective religion, or is a confirmed basis in historical fact fundamentally at odds with the nature of religious belief, because solid facts dissolve the need for believing?

There are no definite answers to any of these questions. They are a matter of perspective and philosophical outlook; accordingly, it seems appropriate that the game raises these questions without answering them, leaving it up to the players to engage with these issues and find individual answers. The series simply provides a fictional context for questions we would, perhaps, be more reluctant or might not even think to ask when the same issues arise in more familiar settings, such as the question what the probable reality of Jesus as a historical figure means for Christianity.

Overall, it can be found that the *Dragon Age* series incorporates some rather meaningful and wide-reaching reflections on spirituality and religious doubt in what is also a highly entertaining mass-media product. The games largely leave it up to the player whether or not – and how – to more deeply engage with this spiritual, theological and philosophical material, but reflecting on these issues is one dimension of engagement being very clearly offered and prompted by these games.

Spirituality and Society in *Analogue: A Hate Story* and *Hate Plus*

Indie developer Christine Love, creator of *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012) and its sequel *Hate Plus* (2013), takes a very different approach to exploring questions of spirituality in a videogame series. While *Dragon Age* shows religion as definitely relevant to the power dynamics across nations and societies, but focusses on the individual's response to spiritual questions and uncertainties, the *Hate* games emphasise the societal impact of spirituality. These games engage with spirituality as it interacts with ethical and political concerns, following the power shifts and eventual destruction of the society inhabiting a generation spaceship, the *Mugunghwa*. Rather than concerning themselves with more philosophical questions about the existence and exact nature of higher powers, the *Hate* games take an interest in the direct effects belief systems have on the everyday lives of people in a society increasingly shaped by spiritual concepts, and critically reflect on the relation between spirituality, morality, and politics. Spiritual uncertainty is, in a sense, not an individual question here, but a societal one: Which values can we build a 'good' society on? Which spiritual aspects feature into that decision, i.e., how can (and should) our shared beliefs inform collective ethics, the definition of 'normal' behaviour, and laws?

How does waning belief interact with political dissent? And what may happen when a society superimposes a new system of beliefs and values on the existing population for political purposes?

Over the course of the two games, the player slowly pieces together the history of the now-dead generation spaceship, taking on the role of a somewhat nebulous investigator[3] who is being paid by a historical society to explore the fate of the lost ship (according to the intro screen). To players not particularly informed about Confucianism, the society of the fictional spaceship may seem secular enough at first glance; there is little to no mention of deities, prayer, or priests. However, there is a pervasive emphasis on tradition and ritual, which are revered and followed with a decidedly dogmatic air, and the occasional but emphatic mention of 'the ancestors', leaving a sense of perhaps not a religious, but very much a spiritual society.

This makes more sense when you learn in the second game, *Hate Plus*, that the social system aboard the ship has a real-world model: It is very intentionally created, after a failed rebellion, as "a new dynasty founded on Confucian principles", based on the historical Korean Joseon Dynasty (Love 2013: 'Declaration of a New Dynasty'). Confucianism is not quite adequately described by Western ideas of religion, as it inhabits a more complex position somewhere at the intersection of philosophy, scholarship, and religious practice (cf. Yao 2000: 30–46). However, it qualifies as a spiritual practice in the broad sense of the term[4]: Xinzhong Yao succinctly states that "[w]hether or not Confucianism is religious is a question of debate [but a working baseline is that] Confucianism is a tradition open to religious values" (ibid: 10–11).

Confucianism is an old and very influential school of thought, which developed a multitude of variations depending on the era and region it was practised in (cf. ibid: 4–9). The Confucianism of the Korean Joseon era referred to in the *Hate* games is thus, on the one hand, already a quite specific subset of Confucianism, but on the other, still a fairly broad template for Love's fictionalised version of Joseon Confucianism in space, given that the Joseon era spanned over 500 years (1392–1910).[5] In terms of Anthony's typology, this means that the *Hate* games occupy a somewhat liminal space between allomythic games – "explor[ing] nonexistent traditions" (2014: 39) – and didactic games which "directly or indirectly educate players about a specific [religious] tradition" (ibid: 35). Given that the *Mugunghwa*'s society is based on a real-world spiritual and cultural system, but portrays a fictionalised derivate thereof, it is arguable which of the two categories is more appropriate. Anthony himself includes games like *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games 2010) –

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3   The investigator never visually appears on-screen and is characterised mainly through the dialogue options the player chooses.

4   If there is one thing scholars of spirituality agree on, it is how very broad, malleable, dependent on individual interpretation and hard to clearly define 'spirituality' is (cf. Callahan 2017: 49–51; Sulmasy 2009: 1635). However, they tend to find that religion and spirituality are "related constructs" which "inform each other" (Callahan 2017: 44). In the context of this chapter, a highly condensed way of describing the main distinction between the two is that religion is theistic, whereas spirituality is a broader term, encompassing theistic as well as other meaning-making practices that are supported by a set of beliefs or views about the unknowable.

5   Confucianism itself recognises the spiritual dimension of games and play, to a degree, given that "the venerable game of Go held a place in Confucian practice" (Anthony 2014: 25).

a rather liberal interpretation of Christianity, twice-removed from its subject as the game is based on a medieval poem (Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*) based on Christian ideas – under the broad umbrella of didactic digital games (Anthony 2014: 35), which seems to provide a precedent for viewing the *Hate* games as part of that category, too. (Whether it is didactically sound – or culturally sensitive – to educate players about real cultures and religions via fictionalised versions thereof is a different question.)

Love's representation of this fictional but historically rooted Confucian spirituality is a very critical one. The societal system created aboard the ship in the aftermath of the rebellion is frequently aligned with cruelty, oppression, ignorance, and the loss of advanced knowledge in science and the arts. What remains is a society more interested in looking back – far back – than looking towards the future, and which in the end reaps a fate consistent with this lack of care, culminating in the deaths of everyone on board. In order to analyse how these games portray spirituality (or lack thereof) and its implications for society, I am going to particularly look into the role the collective of ancestors plays as a spiritually relevant entity in this setting, supported by considerations of the dynamic between spirituality and worldly knowledge, and the portrayed relationship between spirituality, gender and class in the *Hate* games.

Instead of focussing on divinity and what a potential higher power might want from humans, the more concrete spirituality represented in these games is concerned with two main objects: (1) striving towards the ideal self as an aspiration that gives life meaning – bringing to mind the loosely associated concepts of spiritual enlightenment and ascension, even though they are not directly mentioned – and (2) honouring the ancestors, whose approval is understood as synonymous with a clear indicator of moral correctness. In this sense, the collective of ancestors in this fictional society takes a place loosely equivalent to a deity – they are a higher power, imperceptible in the material world, and believers in the concept arrange their lives according to a set of rules this higher power supposedly approves of. The ancestors also have shrines (cf. Love 2012: 'Brought home') and temples (cf. Love 2013: 'Royal Wedding'), one of the clearer markers of religiosity in this fictional society.

There are a few interesting problems with how this concept is portrayed in the games, in terms of logic and consistency[6]. Because the post-rebellion leadership of the *Mugunghwa* has established a political system hinging on spiritual justifications, these logical gaps in the spiritual foundation work to suggest and reinforce some of the points of criticism against the social system that different characters in the games raise. The narrative thus utilises inconsistencies in the spiritual system (which are, as belief systems go, not an entirely uncommon occurrence) in order to undermine the moral and political systems which the *Mughungwha*'s leaders are supposedly basing on spiritual premises. There are several ways in which these inconsistencies relate to the fictional society's political discourse.

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6   To be quite clear: What I am discussing in the following is exclusively the portrayal of ancestor worship in these two games. I am not making any statements about ancestor worship as a real-world spiritual practise, but only its fictionalised representation in this very specific setting.

First, the ship's political leaders are fond of contrasting the supposedly morally corrupt society before the rebellion with the older, 'good' society of the Joseon era. In his address to the people in the aftermath of the rebellion, the newly minted Emperor states:

> We have become a society dominated by power-lust, greed, and promiscuity. It's time to stop living in the moment, time to stop worrying about politics, and instead worry about being better people.
>
> We must build a society that would make our ancestors proud. […] Let's make society right this time. Let's forget all those things that modern society has falsely said are important and remember that family, loyalty, compassion, and stability matter above all else. Our society today pales in comparison to our glorious past […] but perhaps we could look back to them and learn from their traditions that we've eschewed. […] Let us be filial and just, and understand what that truly means.
>
> Instead of pursuing money, let us dedicate ourselves to becoming better people. Instead of being promiscuous, let us dedicate ourselves to being parents. […] [L]et us devote ourselves to creating a society that will make our ancestors proud again!(Love 2013: 'Declaration of a New Dynasty')

As this excerpt shows, there is some very clear black-and-white thinking in the Emperor's rhetoric. The way he speaks of the moral failings of a past society strikes some familiar dystopian chords, most notably in the demonisation of modern society and in the transparent attempt to paint "worrying about politics" (ibid.) as opposed to a moral life. The recent past is presented as a clear example of moral corruption, deceitful and wrong, and binary comparisons between the status quo and the moral ideal are consistently drawn throughout the speech. The presented solution is to look further back, to a time before moral corruption, "our glorious past" (ibid.).

This rhetorical strategy blatantly disregards the fact that, for following generations, the people who supported the rebellion will also become ancestors. Ancestors who clearly, violently opposed the Emperor and the political and ethical system he considers right. This seems to imply that the spiritual practice of ancestor worship is a mere fig leaf to the ruling class of the *Mugunghwa*, instrumentalised to justify the status quo, practised without much inherent consistency or, apparently, sincerity. The spiritual practise is used to externalise the wishes of the ship's leadership and give these wishes an aura of objectivity and legitimacy that fades when examined more closely. Consequently, it only makes sense to discourage people from "worrying about politics" too much (ibid.).

The Emperor chiding people for being politically-minded or "constantly grasping for more power" (ibid.) is an obvious attempt to quell dissent. Another rebellion becomes less likely when people focus on bettering themselves in the smaller sphere of their own influence, rather than in a societal context. Confucian texts provide a basis for justifying this stance, if one is inclined to interpret them that way. The teachings of Confucius in the *Lunyu* include the sentiment that "[s]imply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers, a man can exert an influence upon government", and that, consequently, one need not necessarily get more directly involved (*Lunyu* (1980) 2: 21, cited in Yao 2000: 24).

Less congruent with Confucian ideals is the antagonistic relationship between spirituality and knowledge in the *Mugunghwa*'s society. This cultural dynamic is most clearly expressed through Hyun-ae, one of the main characters. She is put into cryostasis as a

teen because she suffers from a yet incurable illness, long before the rebellion that becomes such a turning point for her society. Hyun-ae is awakened by her family's descendants generations later, only to find that, far from having achieved the scientific progress that would allow her illness to be cured, these descendants have lost much of the knowledge Hyun-ae's contemporaries held, and now "everyone is so stupid" (Love 2012: 'Broken Promise'). Her stasis pod is no longer even recognised as such and is understood as an "egg", and the Korean writing system of *hangeul* is no longer in use, replaced by Chinese characters, making texts from Hyun-ae's time indecipherable (Love 2012: 'At least use my real name!'). In *Hate Plus*, it is revealed that during the rebellion, much of the ship's digital archive was deleted, and the emerging leadership consciously changed the writing system to sever all connections to the 'corrupted' past. Overall, it becomes increasingly clear that the new rulers chose to base their system and their legitimacy on a spiritual foundation, and that they perceive education, critical thinking, and scientific knowledge as a threat to that system. This perceived binary of knowledge versus spirituality actually goes against certain aspects of Confucianism itself, which is a highly scholarly tradition (Yao 2000: 17–20). Thus, to be precise, the *Hate* games can be read not necessarily as criticising Confucianism itself, but the ways it has been used as a political tool to oppress and silence people.[7]

Many other symbols and physical embodiments of knowledge and learning are also purged or lost during the rebellion. Oh Eun-a, president of *Mugunghwa* University before the rebellion, sides with the reactionary faction to help bring about the new, neo-Confucian order, trading away her position as head of an intellectual organisation to become the new Emperor's wife and champion the message that women should concern themselves with domestic affairs and be kept from having an education.

Women's knowledge and experiences, in particular, are routinely erased by the new system. The AI guiding the player character through the ship's logs explains:

> [... I]t's traditional for women's letters to be deleted after being read, so the disk space can be reallocated. Women weren't really supposed to read or write. Certainly, the nobles did! It's just the idea was that spending time on education got in the way of the important virtues for women, which was serving her husband. So in practice... even if a woman was literate, she could at least excuse it by destroying her words afterwards. It's less pretentious if at least the writing wasn't permanent.
> (Love 2012: *Hyun-ae's commentary on 'Insufferable child')

This passage not only encapsulates the repressive and misogynist nature of the neo-Joseon social order on the ship, but also very neatly illustrates the crucial difference between morality in theory and in practise. Just because women are not 'supposed to read or write' does not mean that none of them do; it is merely a taboo subject and

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7   Whether it might be problematic that a white Western game developer portrays Korean history with these very strong implied judgements, is a different question – one that comes down to walking the fine line between cultural relativism on the one side and universally standing up for human rights on the other, to hopefully arrive at a reasonable and respectful balance. Trying to settle this sensitive and complex issue is not the objective of this chapter, but it is worth noting.

covered up accordingly. While that may seem obvious when put in these terms, the distinction actually shows an important depth of insight, on Love's part, into the nuances of historical moral systems. Scholars of real-world historical morality sometimes struggle with the fact that officially published and hence more widely available sources, such as conduct books, tend to discuss ideals, but to find out how people really incorporated (or rejected) those ideals in their daily lives, one must look into more personal sources such as diary entries and letters, which is exactly the storytelling perspective the *Hate* games rely on.

Consistently with the disdain for women's perspectives that is expressed in deleting their letters, "[o]fficial genealogies don't list women normally. Wives are noted by their family names, and daughters are omitted entirely" (Love 2012: 'Kim family tree'). They are simply not important enough to be recorded in any capacity other than wife and mother, and even then, it is their function, not their individual merits that matter to this society. In a similar vein, the Emperor's address to the people at the beginning of his reign implies that he is speaking exclusively to the men aboard the ship: "we must be better husbands and fathers, be more devoted sons, be more respectful brothers" (Love 2013: 'Declaration of a New Dynasty'). Women are thus excluded from politics not only by preventing them from taking any official office, but, it is strongly implied, they are not supposed to be taking even a more passive interest in the shape of following political speeches – if they do, they will find clear indicators that the speaker is not talking to them. Given that Emperor Ryu makes this address shortly after the failed rebellion, as the new system is being instated and women will, in fact, not yet be used to their new role as subservient and domestic creatures, their exclusion from the emperor's speech is not the casual by-product of a long-standing tradition that simply fails to think of women, but a new, pointed exclusion, clearly intended to show women their place. What measures such as this rhetoric, the deletion of letters and the omission of women's names in genealogies do is create a more and more impermeable barrier which prevents knowledge about women's lives and experiences from reaching wider society or history, and prevents women from accessing knowledge about society – especially women of the lower classes, who, it is implied, are less likely to (be able to) break the taboo of women's literacy than noblewomen are (cf. Love 2012: *Hyun-ae's commentary on 'Insufferable child'), and thus have no means of interacting with the ship's written communication systems.

In short, *Analogue* and *Hate Plus* explore a historical spiritual system by projecting its revival into the distant future. Spirituality is interwoven with moral and political issues in this society, and the three cannot always be clearly distinguished. Christine Love presents a science fiction setting that is different enough from our lived reality to allow us to see its issues and challenges with new eyes, but many of the moral and spiritual topics explored by the game are actually familiar – issues like arranged marriage, gender inequality, the suppression of literacy or censorship. The spiritual uncertainty that is explored in the *Hate* games focusses not on the existence or exact nature of the gods, but on how to lead a good life. This is, as this analysis has shown, a spiritual question in the context of a society that elates self-improvement and equates appropriate behaviour with pleasing the ancestors. Spiritual uncertainty also arises out of the way spirituality aboard the *Mugunghwa* is not a self-reliant system, but subjugated to and amalgamated

with political purposes – so to doubt the political system is to doubt the spiritual system, and vice versa.

Conclusion

As the present comparison and analysis has shown, two of the general directions engagement with fictional practices of spirituality and spiritual doubt in videogames can take are (1) exploring philosophical questions about the existence and nature of higher powers, and how the individual relates to these fundamental unknowables – as in the case of the *Dragon Age* series – and (2) reflecting on the impact belief systems can have on ethics and politics, and thus shape political structures as well as the more mundane aspects of daily life – as in Christine Love's *Hate* games.

Dragon Age: Inquisition utilises a superficially quite typical high-fantasy setting, but, unusually for high fantasy and the group of allomythic games, rejects the commonly associated concept of divine magic, and even introduces a villain who flatly claims to have proof that the Maker does not exist. The protagonist must negotiate the spiritual expectations of the people around them and explore their own status as a spiritual leader in conversation with the game's NPCs. Complicating this debate on the doubtful existence of a higher power, the game's narrative about the long-lost culture of the elves raises additional questions about the meaning of divinity: Even if the gods are (or were) real, what exactly makes them gods, as opposed to simply powerful people? The game thus explores two very fundamental spiritual doubts that contemporary audiences might very well relate to.

In contrast, Christine Love's *Hate* games engage with spiritual doubt not so much on an individual level, but in an intensely political context. These games are concerned less with questions about the existence of higher powers, but with how supposing they exist can shape human societies, considering topics such as philosophy and morality, ethics, and (pseudo-)spiritual justifications for hierarchies and political systems. The games effectively show how blurring the lines between these concepts can make political and spiritual doubt difficult to distinguish, thus indirectly also reflecting on the potential merits of secularising the state.

As this selective analysis shows, videogames certainly have the potential to engage quite deeply with questions about spiritual uncertainty that are meaningful far beyond the screen. The opportunity to interact with and reflect on such topics is presented in-game in many shapes and forms (cf. Anthony 2014: 34–44); in the end, it depends on the player whether, as Leopoldina Fortunati says, we treat games "as a new opium of the people", or whether we engage with their "offer [to be] a field of experimentation" (2015: 293) and recognise their potential as "an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture" (Campbell/Grieve 201: 2). The unique mediality of videogames definitely supports this reflective potential, as the continuation of any game depends on the player taking action. A novel or film may show a character's deep emotion as they grapple with spiritual doubt, but a game, putting the player more directly into the protagonist's shoes, asking them to make the protagonist's choices, can make you feel it.

Games provide us with a safe environment to explore moral and spiritual issues, while also forcing us to confront questions that may seem entirely too large and intimidating in the real world. Is there really a higher power guiding your life, or is it all chaos and coincidence? Is basing your politics on a spiritual system a clever or a terrible idea? Only you can tell – and, in the context of these games, you really rather have to.

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Religion According to Bioware
Religious Dimensions of Chantry in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

Leonid Moyzhes

This article presents analyses of the way videogame *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware 2014) constructs the image of main religion in the fictional world of Thedas – the Chantry. I propose to use a theory of dimensions of religion introduced by Ninian Smart, encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall and concepts of **protostory** and **affordances** from game studies to present the architecture of internal relations between different aspects of this (imagined) religion. I claim that, despite positioning the protagonist as a member of religious organization, the game mostly relies upon external view of religion, natural for secular society. It is also worth noting that, while Chantry is aesthetically influenced by Middle Age Christianity, its construction of religious dimensions reminds mostly of American Protestantism.

Videogames and Reality

Videogames have complex relationships with the real world. Thomas Apperley in his book "Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global" introduces the concept of **resonance** to describe different intersections between a global context of the game and local contexts of players (Apperley 2010: 21).

Apperley, citing number of different works, claims that such intersections can take a variety of forms. For example, players can recognize in a game a familiar cultural imagery, visuals or narratives previously seen in movies, literature or history books, as described by King and Krzywinska (2006: 75). On the other hand, Galloway asserted that the gaming process itself must resonate with the social reality a player lives in, providing a sense of 'social realism' (2006: 83).

Games are also capable of illustrating ideologies, reenacting notions about the inner workings of different systems, both technical and social, encoded in our culture. This also refers to Sebastian Möring's (2015) idea about games as simulations of metaphors,

developed regarding independent project *Marriage* (Rod Humble 2007). Möring's (2015) draws attention to the fact that despite *Marriage's* (Rod Humble 2007) developer claim that his game is a statement about his personal experience of a married life, its gameplay serve as a procedural metaphor for popular narrative of married life in general (Möring 2015).

The idea that games simulate not real objects, but different texts representing real objects in a broadest possible sense, allows for much better understanding of this medium. It would be appropriate to recall the definition of **resonance** given by Adam Chapman based on Apperley's works: "*resonance* describes the sensation of interpreting a representation of the game as relating to something other than only the game's rules, as referring to something not entirely contained within the game itself and of the everyday world in which we live" (Chapman 2016: 36). We should keep in mind that this definition includes ability of games to refer not only to our day-to-day life, but also to books we read, TV-shows we watch, news we hear, and general the discourse in which we speak, socialize, live, and think.

A good example would be global strategy games, that Chapman views as an attempt to create interactive history books or, more accurately, interactive historical narratives (2016: 231–265). According to him, those games resonate not with the real-world events themselves, which are always more complex than any simple simulation, but with different texts and set of texts on corresponding subjects (ibid: 36). This is akin to how fantasy games such as *Dragon Age* series (BioWare since 2009) resonate with the whole body of works in genre of literature fantasy. For example, the motive of elves losing immortality and striving to gain it back, that apparently is going to be the base of the central conflict in the future fourth part of the *Dragon Age* franchise, refers back to works of J. R. R. Tolkien, which laid the foundation for modern understanding of this imaginary race in popular culture.

This, however, does not prevent videogames in practical terms from making statements about real objects, and statements they make could often be pretty convincing, as Ian Bogost pointed out in this book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007). A game is always training a player, and if it happens in an environment that reminds the player of real-world objects, concepts or situations, such as war or state, this training becomes a rhetorical statement (ibid.). And it is all the more convincing because it creates a sense of neutral conservation and experimentation, letting players to feel that they understood principles of a system or phenomena by themselves, without outside influence (ibid.).

However, since players are not exposed to the logic of the real phenomenon, but to the logic of the texts, the need for ideological analysis and critique of videogames and is obvious and urgent. It would be appropriate to recall the writings of Frasca, who described videogames as simulations, defining simulations in such a way: "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system" (2003:223.). The most interesting part here seems to be "maintains to somebody" (ibid).

A game would always be a simplification of reality and even of a retelling of reality. If that is the case, how does the game, a secondary, simulating, system, codify its similarities with the primary, simulated, system? At what point the level of the simplification

would become too much to hinder the recognition? Games, scholars and journalists often comment on the ways different games represent different phenomena, but how exactly the game create the idea that it represents a particular object or the system from the real world, and maintains it across thousands, sometimes – millions of games from around the world?

Möring's research demonstrates that just the name of the game and color-coding of its elements could be enough to make it a simulation, in this case a simulation of relationship of partners in marriage (2015). This, in turn, implies that gamers take it upon themselves the to maintain the similarity. They do not just passible consume the cybertext of videogame, but actively, of not always consciously, look for different signs (like the game's title) signaling its supposed interpretation. But how exactly those signs work? Moreover, how do the games simulate different primary systems that are close to each other? How does the game become the simulation of a tragic war story? Or a heroic one?

That brings us to the main issue of this research: how do developers codify religion? What elements of real religions, mediated in turn by our broader culture, seems to be necessary for the players to recognize a spiritual tradition in a simulating system? And what elements could be excluded or relegated to the background? Developers inevitably, although often implicitly, build a hierarchy of objects and phenomena inside a major system, represented in a game; an analysis of such hierarchies, especially in commercially successful projects, could help us to understand the modern perception of simulated phenomenon.

Videogames and Religion

Videogames are full of elements, resonating with different religions, and they exist at many different levels.

In shooter games, horror games, arcade games and action games players often must oppose monsters, inspired by religious mythology (*DOOM* (id Sodtware since 1993) and *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio since 2005) franchises), or followers of aggressive religious teachings (*Outlast* 2 (Red Barrels 2015). Sometimes plots of such games refer to real-world religious conflicts (*Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (Danger Close Games 2012)), at other times they make fantastic assumptions to elucidate some social problem connected with religion (*Bioshock: Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montreal 2018)). And yet, at other times they try to distance themselves from modern agenda, using 'cults' simply as a way to dehumanise antagonists and make their extermination morally acceptable (*Metro: Exodus* (4A Games 2019), *Blasphemous* (The Game Kitchen 2019)).

In global strategies players often must take upon themselves the role of a religious leader (*Europa Universalis IV* (Paradox Development Studio 2013)), a religious reformer (*Crusader Kings III* (Paradox Development Studio 2020)) or a secular ruler, who have to interact with spiritual leaders and confront religious beliefs of his people (*Total War* franchise (Creative Assembly since 2000)). Surprisingly we can see the similar motive in the spin-off of the famous *Sims* series – *Sims Medieval* (Maxis 2011). Such games give developers a lot of room to make procedural statements about religions and believers, often

initiating a whole procedural discussion about traits of different religions and possible ways their history could (and could not) have gone.

Real-time strategies offer a more simplistic scheme, using simulations of religious institutes and building as a source of specific in-game bonuses (*Age of Empire* franchise (Ensemble Studios since 1997), or explicitly trying to make a statement in support of some religious tradition (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (Inspired Media Entertainment 2006), *Quraish* (Afkar media 2005)). It would be appropriate to remember, that the rise of modern real-time strategies is closely tied with so-called 'god games', such as *Populous* (Bullfrog Productions 1989), that allowed a player to try themselves in a role of a deity.

At the same time, we can see a lot of indie games allowing a player to become a leader of a religious community (*Cultist Simulator* (Weather Factory 2018), *Shrouded Isle* (Kitfox Games 2017)) or rethinking religious narratives (*Binding of Isaac* (McMillen/Himsl 2011), *Never Alone* (Upper One Games 2014)). Such projects, sometimes explicitly provocative or educational, but usually aiming simply to entertain the gamers, refer to aspect and forms of religion often overlooked by mainstream games, providing different optics.

Finally, almost all of these elements in one way or another are present in RPG genre, where we can find antagonists inspired by religion, as well as opportunities to play as a religious person, a mythical hero or even a demigod, and particular mechanics and game situations simulating miracles, conversion or theological debates. RPGs create the feeling that modern videogames industry readily appropriates almost every aspect of religions, existing or historical, from myths and particular practices to religious ethics or philosophy.

This raises the question whether we could, and should, look at the player as at the specific type of a religious scholar as similar to the way that multitude of games about history makes players all over the world to become, as Chapman called them, players-historians (2016: 22). The article by De Wildt and Aupers address this notion by proposing the idea of appropriated pop-theology produced by gamer community itself (2019.). The industry, knowingly or accidentally, created a vast and rich space for discussion, verbal and procedural, about religions, spirituality and related topics.

How should religious scholar approach this situation? It is obviously necessary to analyze what image of religion as whole and particular religious teachings are created by the industry, and that task requires new methods. This discussion already inspired a number of works, for example, the anthology *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* and *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, three issues of Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet (Heidbrink/Knoll 2014; 2015; 2016), individual monographs like Bainbridge's *EGods* (Bainbridge 2013) and articles like Vit Sislser's work on about orientalism and Islam in video ames (2008). I specifically want to mention Geraci's analysis of videogames from a phenomenological perspective using works of Ninian Smart (2012: 101–14).

This article is not a debate, but a continuation of aforementioned emerging tradition. I propose to dissect the image of religion in videogames using the concept of religious dimensions by Ninian Smart (1996), while analyzing the games themselves with the help of encoding/decoding by Stuart Hall (1991), adapted for videogames by Arianna Shaw's (2017), the concept of **protostory** from Koenitz's *Narrative in Video Games* (2018) and the concept of **affordances** appropriated by Jonas Linderoth (2011) from James Gibson's (1986) works on ecological psychology.

While this article focuses on a single imagined religious tradition in a single, though relatively big, game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), its main purpose is to provide and illustrate a method of research that could be applied to other projects that includes some sort of simulation of religion. There are three main research questions: what hierarchy of religious dimension does the game create? What perception of the religious sphere is this pushing the player towards? And what ideological schemes and spiritual traditions does this resemble?

Dragon Age: Inquisition

Dragon Age: Inquisition is an RPG from BioWare studio, widely known for their role-playing games. It is a third installation of the *Dragon Age* series, started in 2009 with *Dragon Age: Origins*. This is a role-playing game in a fantasy world, built around a long tradition of transferring into games an imagery originating from the books of J.R.R. Tolkien and mostly American sword-and-sorcery novels. That tradition itself started with tabletop role-playing games such as the *Dungeons and Dragons [referred to as DnD]*, created in 1974, which was, in turn, transferred into a digital format, laying a foundation for modern RPG genre. *DnD* influence on it was extremely important for quite some time: events of one of the earliest Bioware's projects, the very popular *Baldure's Gate* series (since 1998)), took place in one of the official *DnD* settings and used a simplified set of *DnD* rules.

But the events of *Dragon Age* games take place in their own world, Thedas (an acronym from The *Dragon Age* Setting (Gose 2022)), created by the game developers themselves, although with multiple elements borrowed from a well-known set of fantasy genre tropes. In each part of the series, a player must create a new protagonist and encounter a new plot and a central conflict. Nevertheless, many elements of game world, NPCs and even consequences of player's decisions were transferred from one game to another, in order to create a sense of consistent history of the game world. In addition, several themes unite the entire franchise, being mentioned in every installment. One of them is religion and its place in society.

Each new protagonist goes down in Thedas' history under a title, associated with their deeds and achievements, allowing the developers to maintain the illusion of a shared universe while providing the player with opportunity to name their character, by avoiding mentioning of a name, a race or a gender of heroes in later games. The player's character in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) was called The Grey Warden and in *Dragon Age II* (BioWare 2011) – The Champion of Kirkwall. The protagonist of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is called The Inquisitor or The Herald of Andraste, the prophetess and founder of the main monotheistic religion in Thedas.

Customary to the genre, a player can change a character in accordance to their own taste. The game offers three character classes (mage, warrior and rogue), two genders (male and female) and four races (elf, dwarf, human and giant-qunari) to choose from. Different combinations of race and class produce a different specific origin story, but all explain why before the start of the game, main character came to the Conclave. It is the meeting between representatives of two opposing sides in a civil war, Templars and mages, whose conflict engulfed several countries in Thedas.

This conflict broke out around the issue of magic: Templars, a radical religious order, advocated a strict control over mages, up to complete submission or extermination, while mages as a political force called for softening or removing the restrictions. This problem in turn provoked a crisis in the dominant religious organization in Thedas, the Chantry, which led to religious leaders calling for peace talks at the Conclave.

Whatever origin story a player chooses, the Conclave breaks down because of a magical explosion that kills all attendants except for the main character, who gains the ability to close the Breaches, gates between the material world and the spirit world, the Fade, that starts to open all over Thedas. Because of this power, the protagonist soon becomes a member and then the leader of the Inquisition, a religious organization striving to reform the Chantry and resolve many ongoing conflicts, including the one between mages and Templars.

The game offers limited relative freedom of action, allowing a player to create their own unique story of the Inquisitor, for example, making their main character more liberal or more conservative in different walkthroughs. This is achieved mainly through two game mechanics: a dialogue system which allows a player to choose the stance of the Herald of Andraste on specific issues, and the decision system, demanding decisions on how the Inquisition as an organization approaches different situations.

Both mechanics revolves around picking one among limited number of given options. In some cases, those options are encoded as a possibly right or wrong, thus creating a feeling that the player may make a mistake, for example, while deciding what type of agents to send on a mission. In other cases, like when someone asks the main character about personal religious views, there are no clear indication that it is possibly to choose wrong in a strict sense. Instead, those choices serve as a way to establish the image of the Inquisitor. Those choices still can have procedural consequences, often improving or lowering relationships with companions, but the game positions such consequences as symmetrical to each other, in order not to restrict a player's freedom.

I chose *Dragon Age: Inquisition* for my analysis for multiple reasons. First, this is a commercially successful project from a well-known studio, a part of a big multimedia franchise aimed at a wide audience. All this makes this game a representative example in terms of discussing the modern videogames industry. Secondly, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* includes many separate elements resonating with religion at different levels of the game. The main character is a religious figure, accompanied by religious companions, representing different spiritual traditions of Thedas. A special status of the protagonist is founded upon their unique religious position, and the main story of the game develops around a confrontation with a mythological figure, Corypheus, one of the ancient rulers of Tevinter Imperium, who have committed an analog of Abrahamic Original sin.

Thirdly, the RPG genre has a long history of representation of religion in different ways, from the images of enemies and companions of main characters to mechanics simulating miracle workers and plots revolving around mythologies or a religious conflict. There are so many examples, that we can talk about the full-fledged tradition of representation of religion in Western RPGs, and an important pillar of this tradition is Bioware, studio that created *Dragon Age: Inquisition.*

This leads to the fourth reason: the *Dragon Age* series and *Inquisition* in particular attempt to break with the established approaches of portraying religion in RPGs. Specifi-

cally, it offers a new way to look at the divine, which was analyzed in detail in my article *Dragon Age: Inquisition: Christian Message in a Post-Secular World* (cf. Moyzhes 2020). However, while acknowledging a unique trait of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, we must admit that its logic of portraying a religion is closer to previous projects, which can be established by analyzing the game through Smart's theories. But before that, it is necessary to understand another important issue in discussing religion videogames: how does the player interact with the game's narrative?

The Masks of the Player

Videogames as medium offer players a lot of ways to interact with them, and each of them begs for its own research. A player can act as a sportsperson, as a consumer of content, as an operator of a technical device, as a creator. Different games highlight certain "masks" of the player, sometimes, as in esports, aiming at one specific aspect, while sometimes trying to produce many different niches, aiming to support as many 'masks' as possible.

In case of a representation of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* it's necessary to discuss three of such 'masks': explorer, director and reader.

Player as an Explorer

The best way to understand this player's position is through the concept of **affordances**, suggested by Jonas Linderoth (2011) and based upon ecological psychology of James Gibson (1986). Gibson defines **affordances** as such: "The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill." (1986: 127) From the point of view of ecological psychology chapmoned by James Gibson and his wife Eleanor, our perception is based not around enriching different discrete elements of the environment with meanings, but around detaching of objects, tied to specific actions, from an uninterrupted continuity of the world around us (Gibson/Pick 2000: n.p.). A person who sees an apple, understands that it is an **affordance** to satisfy their hunger. Stones provides an affordance to throw them, a tree is an **affordance** to hide behind it and so on.

Gibson sees great importance in a process of learning which he conceptualises as a process of adapting to an environment that endows a subject with the ability to perceive specific objects and potential actions associated with them – the **affordances** (ibid: 127). For example, an acquired ability of a skilled climber to see ledges in seemingly smooth mountain surface provides an **affordance** to ascend, or an ability of the gamer to recognize the symbol of their favorite game on a stranger's T-shirt inside the crowd provides an **affordance** to start a conversation.

It is necessary to emphasize that **affordances** exist neither in an environment itself, passively waiting to be found nor in the mind of a subject, who is free to impose them on the outside world around them but in a 'dialogue' between those two systems. This is highlighted by using the word 'offered' in a definition above. Individual who is better adapted to the environment sees more possibilities for different interaction and uses them to achieve their goals more efficiently. This, in turn, can affect further inter-

actions between a subject and an environment, often serving as a way to create more **affordances**.

Developing the ideas of ecological psychology, Linderoth suggests considering a videogame as a digital environment that a player gradually explores, uncovering its secrets (2011: 8). From his article, "gameplay is to perceive, act on and transform the *affordances* that are related to a game system or other players in a game" (ibid.). A game teaches us to play it, adapting our perception to a digital environment it creates. Such view reminds the concept of procedural rhetoric by Ian Bogost, that is founded upon an understanding of a videogame as a system training a player to act in the specific logic dictated by a digital world (2007:28), and the ideas proposed by Apperley, who suggested that a videogame adapts a player to itself (2010: 25–70).

Metaphorically, a process of searching for **affordances** could be presented as a simplified version of acquiring scientific knowledge. This is especially true for videogames, where the time between an action and its result is often shortened, and specific reasons for success or failure are highlighted. The gaming process in such a model could be presented as a series of 'hypotheses' and 'experiments' proving or disproving those hypotheses.

For example, in a shooter a player can formulate a hypothesis that adding a telescopic sight to a weapon will allow them to kill an enemy at a greater distance and then try it out during walkthrough. Experimenting in such a way with every or most of the weapons, a player builds a hierarchy of ways to murder virtual enemies offered by the game, with each step walking closer toward a unified theory about which weapons are the best for different in-game situations. Each combat encounter serves as a way to use a previously accumulated knowledge in practice and, also, as another 'experiment', proving, disapproving or clarifying previously formulated hypotheses.

Search for **affordances** is often only part of a task and should be supplemented with realization of an **affordance** found; this could depend on additional factors, for example physical or mental capabilities of a subject. Linderoth cites the example of a football game: both a player, a trainer and a devoted fan could see an **affordance** to score a goal, but only a player is fit and skilled enough to realize this **affordance** (2011: 6–8).

The same dynamics could be often seen in videogames. Global strategies usually focus on searching for **affordances**, successful combinations of different in-game mechanics, while their realization is mostly reduced to pushing a few buttons. Meanwhile, platform games focus on realization of **affordances**: most of the time players do not need much experience to see an **affordance** for an action leading to victory, but to act out on this perception is often a test of coordination reaction. Finally, some games, like fighting, require both a skill to find **affordances**, mentally adapting to a digital environment, noticing hitboxes and remembering opponent's scheme of attack, and a fast enough reaction to implement this knowledge.

The duality of searching for and realizing **affordances** highlights their inherently subjective nature that is obvious in an example with a hypothetical search for an ideal weapon. Some players, especially professional esports players, would try to collect data that could at least pretend to be objective in terms of which weapon is better or worse, in order to ground their assessment on numerical indicators of damage, rate of fire and so on. However, many other players during their 'research' would be looking for a weapon

best suited for them personally based on a combination of different, often irrational, factors, depending on their preferred mode of playing a game. This mode in turn could depend not only on a game itself, but on a multitude of different factors, including previous gaming experience and capabilities of a device on which a game is played. Nevertheless, in this case player still behaves as an explorer uncovering secrets of a videogame.

Player as a Director

The concept of **affordances** also allows us to consider how videogames produce meaning or, more specifically, how they provide players with an environment, a scene of some sort to make their own statements. This process could be described through the cycle of perception and interaction. Specific elements of the game **resonate** with a player, reminding of the objects and concepts that exist outside a game. For example, a character with a certain aspect would be associated with a pop-cultural image of a medieval priest.

Such elements work as 'myths' as described by Rolan Barthes (1976), especially in having a quality of impressiveness, that allows them to evoke a lot of associations immediately, without additional 'decoding' (Page Number). This is especially noticeable in mainstream videogames since many visual, audial, procedural, and narrative elements of them belong to what Danielle Kirby called the **fantastic milieu** (2013). This concept, based upon the Campbell's **cultic milieu** (1972: 120), describes a speculative fusion of a multitude of fantastic text and specific tropes, characters and aesthetic conventions, shared throughout the entire Western (mostly US) pop-culture (Kirby 2013: 2–3.).

The fantastic milieu and the process of recognition are fundamental for all modern entertainment media. But videogames add one more dimension to it – the actions of players themselves. Because of an interactive nature of games, many objects evoke association with the possible ways a player can interact with them. Thus, initial resonance not only creates expectation of what player is going to see or hear, but also what kind of situation player would be able to create.

These expectations initiate a process of searching for **affordances**, realization of which can work toward the creation of such situations. For example, after being given a control of the character, whose image resonates with that of a religious figure, a player could form an expectation that they would also be given **affordances** to perform rituals, convert other characters into their character's religion or fight heretics. It is easy to see that those expectations are already deeply ideological and subjective, closely tied with both player's personality and wider cultural context. Fantastic milieu here serves as a way to ensure the predictability of local context for products developed by global corporations.

Apperley propose a term for the type of **resonance** that could be evoked by an in-game situation created by the player itself in order to experience the recognition – a **configurative resonance** (Date: Page Number). It includes, for example, an approach to playing out romantic relationships between the main character and their companion in RPGs in a way that reminds player of ideal relationships in their eyes, creating a situation that "corrects" the outcome of a specific historical event in global strategy game. For example, if the player tries to repel the Mongol's attack on Baghdad in *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox Development Studio 2012) not only because of in-game concerns of maximizing the re-

sources, but also because of the out-of-the-game concerns, a **resonance** between a situation created by the player and the images of Mongols retreating from Baghdad it is a **configurative resonance** situation.

It should be noted that a **configurative resonance**, in turn, works as a **resonance**, evoking a new set of expectations, which player seek to satisfy through another set of **affordances**. If this cycle continues throughout the game, it creates the feeling of freedom and consistency, while breakage of the cycle may cause frustration. For different players specific details of such a cycle would also differ, reflecting their particular local context, but while a game as a whole is able to satisfy the expectation for **configurative resonance** created by it, players can interpret away individual episodes where this does not happen. Such development of a videogame from one point of **resonance** to another is especially noticeable in projects that Gonzalo Frasca calls *paidia*, which focuses on evoking a sense of freedom (2003: 228). This type of games includes such examples as *Sim City* (Maxis 1989), *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) and to a lesser extent, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Linear games use the same principle to make their story more convincing, to mask an absence of specific ludic opportunities and as a way of training and adapting a player to a new digital environment. For example, in survival horror games the monsters' design and cinematic effects of their appearance are supposed to **resonate** with something we must escape from – and a game offers a lot of **affordances** to do that. Because of that, a player is less likely to make a ludic mistake of trying to simulate a conversation with the monsters and does not feel frustrated by the absence of such game mechanic, since all interactions with different opponents they encounter are limited to fight or flight.

This logic frames a player as a 'theatrical director'. Developers provide them with a 'play', containing a potential for different interpretations, and resources to realize them. However, as with a director in a theatre, a player does not have absolute freedom. Hartmut Koenitz and his collegues calls the totality of all the stories, inherent in a game on a level of technical **affordances** for player's actions, a **protostory** (Roth et all: 99). Specific stories, in turn, are instantiated by a player during each particular walkthrough with game helping to create some stories while hindering, or outright forbidding creation of others.

A **protostory** does not include all the stories that could theoretically happen with the characters and circumstances provided by a game. Even projects promising a maximum freedom, such as global strategy games like *Crusader Kings III*, constructor games like *Minecraft*, colony simulation games *Dwarf Fortress* (Bay 12 Games, 2006) or even game openly presented by their creators as story generator (Sylverster 2019), like *RimWorld* (Ludeon Studios 2013) could not include all resources that would allow a creation of all stories that seems logical to each player, for obvious technical reasons. The best proof of this restriction is the abundance of modes created by players to give themselves as a community more creative freedom.

Furthermore, stories that are potentially included in a **protostory** usually form a hierarchy of difficulty in terms of creation. For example, in RPGs like *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003) or *Arcanum* (Troika Games 2001) the **affordances** to tell a story resonating with the image of a triumph of Good over Evil are much easier to find and realize than the **affordances** to tell a story resonating with the victory of Evil over Good. At the same time, in many global strategy games it is easier to play in capitalistic and colonial logic,

than in any other, even if **affordances** for alternative approaches to state building and economy are technically included in a **protostory**.

This hierarchy of stories from easiest to more and more difficult and, in the end, to impossible, lays a foundation for analyzing videogames as a means of expression. But such analysis would be impossible without considering the ability of a player not only to modify an in-game situation, but to confer on it their own meaning.

Player as a Reader

Mikhail Fiadotau (2017) in his article "Phenomenological Hermeneutics as a Bridge between Video Games and Religio-Aesthetics" draws attention to the dual nature of a player. Inspired by Karhulahti's works (2015) he writes: "We both interpret games, as we would a novel or a theater play, as expressive sequences of symbols and, concurrently, 'perform' them based on our interpretation of their mechanics and rule system" (Fiadotau 2017: 166). In the end, every story in a game is instantiated not on screen but in a player's mind. It applies to all types of videogame's narratives, whether embedded or emergent (Salen/Zimmerman 2003). Without devaluing the differences between those two categories, it is important to notice that both of them apply only to a set of events on screen, which creates a potential for interpretation and completion of the story by a player.

It is not always easy to perform such an interpretation. Just as games teach us to interact with a digital environment, they teach us to read it correctly, to turn pixels into narratives. Radde-Antweller noticed that during a research involving interviews with a group of player who played *Bioshock Infinite* and described their own perception of its religious symbolism, some people without previous experience in playing videogames struggled to see any coherence in events happening on screen that could be compared with and analyzed as they could have analyzed a film or a book (2017: 84–85).

We are taught to understand which elements of the videogame are a part of UI and exist only for the player (diegetic) and which are real in a game world (extradiegetic); which actions of our avatar should be perceived as a part of a bigger narrative about them as a main character of the story; and which serve as a procedural game convention, related to genre specifics or technical constraints. At the end, we build a line of events, consistent in time, ignoring all instances of a character's death and loading from saves, although it should be mentioned that some games, especially Japanese, are making efforts to include these instances into a game's narrative.

This gaming literacy could be conceptualized through the idea of **affordances**. But to do this we have to add to practical or **in-game affordances**, presented inside a game system as objectively existing technical possibilities to change a digital configuration in some way, another category – **interpretative affordances**. I use this term to signify opportunities provided by a game to interpret events happening inside it in specific ways. Every walkthrough and even every in-game situation are not in themselves instantiated stories, but just fleeting cultural artifacts requiring additional, though, often, miniscule, effort to 'read' and interpret them.

Some interpretations are without a doubt easier to come to than others, just as it may be easier to create one sequence of in-game events than others. Moreover, these two

levels of **affordances** often overlap: an increase in practical difficulty to create some configuration hinders an acceptance of the interpretation that leads to the desire to create this configuration as the right one.

It is much easier to complete *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* while attempting to create a **configurative resonance** between this game and the narratives from books and movies idolizing American soldiers. It is also easy to interpret the game as a statement in support of the US military, extolling their role in maintaining world peace and calling for sympathy toward the toll it takes on their families. But, in principle, it is possible to search and find both the potential technical **affordances** for another courses of action, like beating the game with minimum violence, as well as **interpretative affordances** for another reading of a story we create – for example, as a statement against American militarism, exposing problems of modern USA foreign policy. It would be harder, but it is still possible.

In many cases our cultural background suggests particular interpretations of in-game objects and narratives, and these interpretations in turn already contain in themselves intended courses of actions. Therefore, we would search for corresponding in-game **affordances**, as was discussed in the previous section. However even if we are unable to find possibilities to create **configurative resonance** that would support our initial interpretation of the game as a correct one, a game can still provide us with interpretative possibilities to maintain our first interpretation, dismissing only specific parts of it and not declaring it false as a whole.

In this way, a player can turn a heroic story into a tragic one based around pragmatic impossibility of ethical victory. The initial **resonance** some extremely pacifistic players may feel between imagery of *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* and anti-war narratives would still be maintained, with each failure to complete a level in pacifist way related to lack of **affordances** for pacifist walkthrough not disproving, but confirming a pacifist reading, although with a tragic overtone.

Thus, a **protostory** expands even more, and now includes not only hypothetical totality of all technically possible in-game situations, but all totality of their possible interpretation. At the same time, it maintains both inner hierarchy and strict limitations. This polyphony could be understood through the concept of encoding/decoding, suggested by Stuart Hall: creators of media product encode messages into their work, that in turn are decoded by an audience, using culturally determined clues, signifying which possible readings are 'right' and which are not (1991 n.p.).

But alongside those clues, videogames leave **interpretative** and sometimes even in-game **affordances** for alternate readings. Depending on the loyalty of a player-interpreter to game's clues, every reading could be referred to either dominant, oppositional, polemicizing with dominant, or negotiated, which exists between those two extremes. And this, unsurprisingly, leads us back to the idea of **affordances**; in this case, **affordances** to decode media product in different ways. We should once again remember that **affordances** do not exist in an environment by themselves but are introduced there in a negotiation between an environment (videogame) and a subject (player) who can create their own imaginary **affordances** for actions as well as interpretations, as described by Adrianna Shaw (2017).

In the end a game cannot impose any reading on a player-interpreter, it can only signify a dominant reading, that experienced players-interpreters can bypass, using their skill as player as well as interpreters. This process is clearly demonstrated in the article *Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic*, where Kristian Bjørkelo (2020) examines how American nationalists from the Stormfront forum interpret the game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), appropriating walkthrough on a side of Stormcloaks as a statement in support of their ideology (Bjørkelo 2020).

But in a full accordance with the concept of **affordances** a game isn't just a clean slate open to all possible interpretations. It can in particular put a player in different contexts. We can see in Stormcloaks, Thalmor and Empire metaphors of different political powers and have different opinions about whether they are right, but the existence of such opposition itself puts the *Skyrim* in context of politic – at least politic of the fictional world of Tamriel. And that context continues to exist as part of Skyrim, although some especially stubborn players may choose to ignore corresponding bunch of quests, they could do so only consciously, thus accepting the fact that political themes are present in *Skyrim's* **protostory**.

Other plots and mechanics presented in this game in turn create **affordances** to interpret it as a statement about ecology or about achieving personal happiness despite a raging war. At the same time the game gives a lot less **affordances** for any statements in context of discussion about artificial life forms, prospects of space exploration or pros and contras of planned economy. Its **protostory** doesn't contain neither nor **interpretative affordances** to touch those themes.

I propose to use this optics on representation of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and consider, how exactly this game constructs a religious context itself. Starting from the name, the game explicitly encodes its sensitivity to religious themes, and its main plot reinforces this feeling again and again, repeatedly offering, and even forcing player character to participate in religious debates, conflicts and practices. Most decodings of the game, both dominant and oppositional, would include some interpretation of religion presented there, first of all – the Chantry, and through it, some interpretation of religion as a singular phenomenon.

As a religious scholar, I understand that the traces of religion could be found in every aspect of human culture and in any work of art in particular, even if it does not contain explicit references to existing or fictional religious traditions. For example, Irizarry and Irizarry (2014) in their article "The Lord is My Shepard" demonstrate that the very image of Commander Shephard from *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), another popular videogame series from Bioware, has clear messianic connotations (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014), and Fiadotau (2017) in his article mentioned above draws attention to the influence of Buddhists religious philosophy and aesthetics on the design of Japanese visual novels. But it would be much harder to put these games in a context of discussion about religion than *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

And this raises a question: how games encode the religious context? What elements of religion have to be included in a game so that its **protostory** could be used to make stories about religion? What elements are signified as most important and what elements do not even deserve to be mentioned? In their game, BioWare, unwitting religion scholars-developers, implicitly answered such question as what the main components of the reli-

gion are. And to illuminate these answers I'll use the concept of religious dimensions of Ninian Smart.

Niniam Smart's Dimensions of Religion

Ninian Smart is a Scottish-born British theologian and religious scholar who worked in the second half of the 20th century. In his works, Smart consistently fought against the dominant Christian-centrism in the study of religion in British science of his time, and, more broadly, against any form of essentialism in religious studies. Fitzgerald notes fear of reductionism was a constant in Smart's works (2000: 66–67) The implicit, but important goal of his work was to overcome the desire of religious scholars in the first half of the 20th century to search for the fundamental core of religion as a separate sphere.

Throughout history different researchers suggested that a religion is based upon social relations (Durkheim 2008), a special type of human experience (Otto 1958), a structure of human psychology (Jung 1971), an idea that the world is divided into a profane sphere and a secular sphere (Eliade 1987). But most often this tendency for reductionism manifested in the idea that religion fundamentally revolves around relationships with a God or, more broadly, with the supernatural, expressed, for example, by Tylor (2012) who defined religion as a "belief in spiritual beings". Western philosophy of religion, deeply rooted in theology, often gravitated toward this optic, even as it was trying to offer more complex definitions. Smart, who came into religious studies through his research of Chinese and Indian texts, could not agree with such an interpretation of religion, since they transformed inherently European ideas of 'natural' and 'supernatural' in strictly European understanding into universal categories.

The problem Western research face trying to conceptualize Eastern spiritual traditions was commented by a number of researchers, for example, Storm (cf. Storm 2012). For the purpose of this article the alternative philosophy of religion suggested by Smart seems more important. From his point of view, this sphere of knowledge should be preoccupied bot with the search for the one true definition of religion, but with ways to organize and systemize our knowledge of the field. For this purpose, Smart suggested the concept of seven religious dimensions, which he described as different mechanisms for preservation of religious experience.

Smart hoped that an analysis of religion through the prism of these layers, lacking any semantic or chronological hierarchy, would help scholars to escape the confines of Christian-centered paradigm and find balance between historical and non-historical parts of religious traditions. Most importantly for the purpose of this article, Smart attempted to abandon the question of 'what religion is' in favour of question 'what religions there are?' Smart thought that religion studies should always concentrate on particular traditions, churches, movements and congregations, and his sevenfold scheme was supposed to be used as a tool for such historical analysis built from the ground up.

Smart (1974) claimed that these dimensions are present in any religion and even in any ideology, for example, in Maoism. However, in different traditions, and even in dif-

ferent communities, specific layers may dominate or stay at rudimentary level, and form completely different relations with each other (ibid.).

Here is the seven dimensions of religion suggested by Smart:

(1) Doctrinal dimension – intellectually coherent expression of the main ideas of a specific religion. It includes theology and religious philosophy, intellectual speculation on the about the nature of the world, the human and the divine, if a religion in question has such a category at all.

(2) Mythological or, more broadly, narrative dimension contains religious stories. It is very important sphere in many religions, from polytheistic tradition with their rich mythology to Christianity, Islam and Judaism, whose adherents give great importance to mythic origin story of their respective religions. At the same time in some Eastern teachings, like Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, mythological dimension may be less noticeable and universal, with particular stories varying greatly from one smaller school of thought and even single community to another, varying greatly from one congregation to another.

(3) Ethical dimension – a totality of traditionally prescribed norms of behavior, including a stance on what actions are considered good or part in terms of morality, as well as specific religious laws and restrictions.

(4) Ritual dimension, which can also be called practical, includes all actions performed or, on the contrary, avoided by followers of a religion as a part of a religious practice. It includes prayers and ascesis, wearing of specific clothes and other forms of control over a person's appearance and practical prohibitions without broader ethical or legal basing.

(5) Experiential or emotional dimension describes states of a psyche, especially intense and saturated with religious content. In different congregations, the experience of such states by ordinary believers could be encouraged and even proclaimed as fundamental for religious life or they can be framed as extraordinary. Another important difference is whether those states are supposed to be reached during a communal ritual practice, or individually, thus relegating them to the domain of private life and religiosity.

(6) Social dimension is an external manifestation of religion in social systems and interpersonal relationships. This sphere contains the ways religion functions as a society: an organization of congregations, church hierarchy and relationships between mentors and their students. It also encompasses the way broader society and religion influence each other.

(7) Material dimension was proposed by Smart in 1989 (Smart 1989), to describe a domain of material artifacts, created by a religion or endowed with certain meaning by it. This dimension consists of religious buildings, images, venerated natural objects, relics and tombs of significant people, personal material symbols of religion (like a cross) and so on.

Finally, in some of his latest work (1996:10), Smart proposed an eighth dimension associated with political and economic spheres of religious traditions, but in this article we would focus on seven dimensions, most often mentioned in the context of his theories.

It is not hard to notice that specific phenomena, practices and objects may belong to different dimensions. For example, many rituals depend on the use of material objects and are dedicated to induce a certain state of mind. Depending on the personality of believers, fasts and similar practices could be seen as a part of ritual, ethical or social dimension. And many religious stories and myths become a subject of research of theologians as symbolic descriptions of religious doctrines. To sum up, there are many interactions between dimensions, which only confirm Smart's anti-essentialists idea: if we cannot draw boundaries between specific spheres inside a religion, how can we discuss its origins from one specific source?

It may seem that the use of the anti-essentialist model to analyze videogames is counterintuitive. Videogame is always essentialist, since by its very nature it must endow objects inside itself with unambiguous properties, first, for technical reasons, and secondly, to endow a specific a predictable **resonance**.

But **resonance** lays in the center of this analysis, in this case, a **resonance** between a set of ludic and narrative elements of the game world and a very **idea** of religion. Using Smart's methodology, we can look at religions presented in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, first of all – at the Chantry, and see how game priorities certain religious dimensions to create a situation of interaction with a (fictional) religion. Based on that we can conclude what understanding of religion as whole determines the image of this phenomenon in this videogame.

Both Smart's anti-essentialism and a videogame essentialism should be taken into account here. When games include elements resonating with religious practices, buildings, narratives or experiences, they inevitably build clear distinctions between them, encoding, which actions relate to the ritual dimension and which to ethical, where the debate is about social issues and where it is determined by doctrinal dilemmas. Even when there are multiple dimensions present, create an **affordance** to simulate, for example, satiation of making doctrinal decisions because of socio-political or personal reasons, this intersection is very clearly marked. All of this allows scholars to observe which dimensions of religion are at the forefront of religion in general.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that, as in any other case of game interpretation, players could introduce their own meanings in a **protostory**. For example, by experiencing **resonance** between specific episodes of the game and dimensions of religion that were not encoded in these elements of the game, like in case of playing out or just imagining religious emotional experience of a character conducting an elven ritual that was supposed to serve purely practical reasons of opening a door.

Thus, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* serves as a set of **affordances** to interact with different aspects of religion. Among these **affordances** are both **in-game affordances**, allowing to create specific digital configurations, and **interpretative affordances**, allowing to perceive these configurations and particular elements of the game, such as characters or quests, as a way to interact a specific religious dimension. Both types of **affordances** could be called the **affordances to engage**, and serve as means provided by the game to include elements, serving as simulations of a specific religious dimension, in particular story instantiated from **protostory**.

Based on how easy it is to find and realize **affordances** to interact with them I propose to distinguish two categories of religious dimensions of the Chantry: core and pe-

ripheral. Core dimensions are those, interactions with which are explicitly included in the **protostory** of the game: it is hard or even impossible to avoid them both in practical sense and in interpretative, 'reading' them as something not resonating with religion. In turn, interactions with peripheral dimensions depend on specific actions of a player, acting as a director or as a reader, and could easily be absent in a specific story. This distinction allows highlighting dimensions that game use as a way to encode religiousness.

Realization of all **affordances to engage** could be mediated by a protagonist of the game, mainly through mechanics of dialogues and political decisions which game uses to simulate engagement between Herald of Andraste and different religious dimensions. The Head of the Inquisition can often make important decisions, express their opinion on variety of topics and ask religious character questions about their beliefs. But such mediation is not a necessity. The act of reading myths and theological texts of the Chantry by players themselves is an instance of a realization of **affordances** to interact with corresponding religious dimensions without mediation by the player's avatar. Although such action could be easily interpreted as extradiegetic, i.e., not belonging to the game world.

Extradiegetic nature of such interactions makes them easier to ignore, so dimensions engagement primarily through such **affordances** fall into the peripheral category. At the same time, obtaining such information could provide a player with **interpretative affordances** to construct a story or even encourage making certain in-game decisions when present with a choice, even if options offered do not refer to religious elements directly.

Religious Dimensions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

The Social Dimension

The social dimension is at the center of the depiction of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The main character is constantly addressed by their title, the Herald of Andraste or the Inquisitor, reflecting their social status within the Chantry, despite the fact that according to game narrative those titles were created from scratch or borrowed from historical chronicles of Thedas on an **ad hoc** basis. A noticeable part of the game revolves around a protagonist's attempts to legitimize their organization and themselves as its leader in the eyes of the rest of the Chantry and the leaders of the most powerful states in the region.

Alongside partaking in the main plot and fighting Corypheus, a main character also determines who among would assume the position of the Divine, the leader of the Church similar to Catholic Pope in terms of political power, since the previous Divine, Justinia, died at the Conclave at the very beginning of the story. Possible candidates are closest allies of the Inquisitor: their right hand in the Inquisition Cassandra Pentaghast, the leader of its spies Leliana and another companion – the mage Vivienne. Depending on who among them would gain the position, and Inquisitor's answers in dialogue, especially in the course of fulfilling their personal quests, at the end of the game players are told informed how Chantry policies changed in accordance to the views of the new Divine.

The very mechanics of this election reflect an ambiguity of social processes: by making certain decisions, a player fills in a hidden scale of support for each candidate, not knowing whose chances they raise and how much. While it is still relatively easy to predict which candidate would win by the end of the walkthrough, a player still must constantly face a simulation of social processes that stays true to itself until the very end. The game does not allow to access information on the likely winner directly, or to influence the outcome of the elections, for example, by simple investing of resources, thus emphasizing importance of social aspect of religion.

This reflects the increased focus on the social dimension of religion, which characterize the entire game. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* provides **affordances to engage** with both parts of this dimension: religion as a society (through the elections of the Divine, debates inside the Chantry and attempts to legitimize a new religious organization) and religion inside the wider society (through negotiations with nobles and rulers and Inquisition's participation in resolving political conflicts). Most importantly, the game demonstrates an inextricable connection between these parts of the social dimension. The decisions made during 'external' negotiations affects chances of the specific characters to become the Divine and, more broadly, relationships between characters inside a religious organization. Allying the Inquisition with a particular group could lead to conflicts and stating a position on major social issues of Thedas, such as the conflict between mages and templars or the rights of elves, provokes reaction not only from secular rulers but also from other members of the Chantry and the Inquisition itself.

The **protostory** of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* offers a lot of **affordances** to interact with the social dimension of religion, both mediated by a protagonist and game mechanics, and addressing player directly by providing them with information about the structure of the Chantry. Any non-opposition reading of the game would support the idea that a religion is a form of social relations, closely tied with a society it exists in. Such approach easily fits into the tradition of Western RPGs, invariably demonstrating social and political sides of religion. Still, even among them *Dragon Age: Inquisition* stand out because of the scale of attention paid to this dimension as well as the quantity of **affordances** to create different configuration in this sphere offered by the game. This nuanced approach greatly distinguish *Dragon Age: Inquisition* from most of the games in the same genre, where the social dimension of religion is often reduced to a conflict between conservatives and liberals inside religious organizations.

The Mythological Dimension

The second dimension, which without a doubt could be called a core one, is the dimension of religious narratives. RPGs usually pay much attention to myths of their fictional universes, creating plots and central conflicts around confrontation between gods and their enemies and often referring to ancient histories or long-forgotten prophecies from specific religions. Videogames such as *Arcanum*, first two parts of *Baldure's Gate* series (BioWare since 1998), *The Elder Scrolls III-V* (Bethesda 2002; 2006; 2011), *Divinity: Original Sin* (Larian Studios 2014) revolves around continuation or reimagining myths of fictional religions. Even a main character of post-apocalyptic *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios 1998)

owes their status of the Chosen One to the myth about their ancestor – a protagonist of the first part of the series. And *Dragon Age* as a series maintains this tendency.

In the first part of the series, the central conflict, that between sentient races of Thedas and underground Darkspawns, is explained by one of the main legends of the Chantry: a story about the magisters of the ancient Tevinter Imperium, who tried to enter the Golden City, the abode of the Maker. As the result of this sacrilege, clearly resonating with the story of The Tower of Babel, magisters turned into first of so-called Darkspawns, monsters dwelling underground, while the Golden City itself was desecrated. After this, the Maker decided not to contact mortals again, deeming them 'unworthy'.

This myth is repeatedly mentioned in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*: Corypheus, the main antagonist of the game, is one of those magisters and he offers his own version of events, stating that the Golden City was already empty at the time of his arrival. Even more frequently, the game mentions another narrative: the origins of the Chantry. Many years after the failed experiment of the magisters, Andraste, the wife of a chieftain of Alamarri tribe, enslaved by the same Tevinter Imperium, with her song attracted the attention of the Maker to the world for the first time in many centuries. He promised to give mortals one more chance and ordered the woman, who received the title of the Prophet, to spread his teachings. In the sacred book of the Chantry, the Chant of Light, this is recalled as follows:

> For you, song-weaver, once more I will try.
> To My children venture, carrying wisdom,
> If they but listen, I shall return. (BioWare 2014: n.p.)

These words became the foundation of a new religion, and under its banner humans and elves enslaved by Tevinter rebelled and after a long war achieved freedom, creating their own countries. But Andraste herself died before that. Her husband, Maferath, betrayed her and doomed the Prophet to death. However, her disciples continued her work and eventually converted most of the humans and many elves into her teaching.

The game includes a lot of **affordances to engage** with the mythological dimension of the Chantry's teachings. A player is introduced to relevant stories through dialogues with the participants of said events, like Corypheus, who express their own opinions about them, and through reading their retelling in game's codex. In some dialogues, protagonist may present their own opinion on fundamental stories of the Chantry. At the same time, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* differs from many other RPGs in the way it uses the mythological dimension of religion not only as a retelling of events happened but as a separate narrative. It is encoded as developing inside the game world in accordance with the laws of its genre: different characters offer their own interpretation of its stories and mention how the Chant of Light has changed over the centuries. For example, the Canticle of Shartan, describing the role of elves in Andraste's revolt was excluded later to justify a human invasion of elven lands. And the restoration of these passages into canonic text made by one of the possibly Divines at the end of the game is encoded as a major political victory in the struggle against the oppression of elves.

Another layer of interacting with mythological dimension in the game is the myth of the main character themselves. According to the game, their legitimacy as a leader of Inquisition stems from the idea that they were saved and gained special powers at the behest of Andraste. And when this explanation turns out to be untrue, at least literary, a player has to choose how to interpret the situation and whether their character should reveal the truth or maintain their myth for the sake of collective good or personal political power.

It is also worth mentioning that the game use different approaches to mythology to encode principal differences between religions. Spiritual traditions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are differentiated not only by objects of worship per se, as, for example, religions in *DnD*, but more fundamentally by the nature of their central myths. Elven pantheon is revealed through stories resonating with traditional polytheistic myths, lacking clear ethics and taking place in mythic time. Qun doesn't have a clear myth, which allows it to resonate with the popular notion of Eastern religions as being more of a "philosophical tradition". And fundamental myths of the Chantry are pronouncedly placed in the history of the fictional world, resonating with myths of Abrahamic traditions.

Interestingly, while discussing specifically narrative religious dimensions, it is hard not to notice the similarities between the main myth of the Chantry and the central narrative of Islam: Andraste reaches the Maker 'from below' as his Prophet, whom he called upon after her own prayers, not as the messenger he sent. She ruled her followers personally as a big community, even a tribe, to the point that she led them into battles. And, finally, her widespread title is literally the Prophet. But aesthetic similarities between the Chantry and Christian imagery, as well as the death of Andraste because of the betrayal, masks that resemblance for many players.

In any case, the game sets mythological dimension as an important part of a religion that influences all other dimensions: change of myths indicates the change of political landscape, rituals, and ethics and so on. It also implies a close attention to the dimension from players themselves: a complete interpretation of the game's plot is impossible without considering Chantry's myths.

The Ethical Dimension

The ethical dimension of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is somewhat controversial. On one hand, the game repeatedly draws attention toward two ethical issues of the Chantry's doctrine: the position of mages and the status of elves. One of the main tenets of this religion, repeated several times in dialogues and texts, goes as this:

> Magic exists to serve man,
> and never to rule over him.
> Foul and corrupt are they
> Who have taken His gift
> And turned it against His children.
> They shall be named Maleficar, accursed ones.
> They shall find no rest in this world
> Or beyond. (BioWare 2014: n.p.)

The importance of this tenet is strengthened by practical concerns: every mage can potentially contact demons of the Fade and turn into a monstrous Abomination. In accordance with this tenet, mages across all regions of Thedas under the Chantry's rule were controlled through a special institution of Circles, magic towers, places under supervision of the Order of Templars, humans, trained to fight mages. However, abuse of power and extreme zeal of Templars in the second installment of the franchise led to the beginning of a civil war between them and rebel mages, and one of the goals of the Inquisition in the third game is to end this conflict and, more broadly, to determine the future policy of the Chantry towards mages.

Similarly, a player is introduced to the religious basis for elves oppression. While long ago some of them were helping to establish the Chantry, in time a conflict broke out between this mainly human religion and its former allies, ending in so called Exalted March, a military campaign that put an end to the last elven state. After that, elves were made to live in a subjugated position, and the question of morality of this state of things, particularly in the light of a historical part these people played in the foundation of the Chantry, is also raised throughout the game.

Both issues create a lot of **affordances to engage** with the ethical dimension of religion. The Inquisitor discusses opinions of different characters, who assess the position of mages and elves in the light of theology or political expediency. Also, through dialogues players are presented with different views on magic specific to different cultures of Thedas, and their character can express their own ideas on these issues, both personal, influencing only their relationship with the closest companions, and political, determining the outcome of the whole civil war and transforming the Chantry's doctrine.

At the same time, a player almost never faces any other sides of the Chantry's ethics: its views on murder, private property, state, supposed virtues and vices not concerning magic. Even the text of The Commandments of the Maker that could be found and read in the previous two parts of the series is not included as a whole in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, although specific characters cite fragments of it, mainly the mentioned above passage concerning magic. The game not only offers little in-game **affordances to engage** with other sides of Chantry's ethics in dialogues, but also little **interpretative affordances** to attribute specific decisions of a player to fulfilling or deliberately violating ethical norms of the Chantry, because they are practically absent from the game. Of course, the previous part of the series and the **resonance** between the Chantry and Abrahamic religions provides a general idea of the values promoted by this religion, but the drawing so much attention to certain questions while completely ignoring others is worth mentioning.

Clearly, no game, even an educational one, could provide **affordances to engage** with a full spectrum of ethical teachings of such a big and intellectually diverse religion as is simulated in *Dragon Age* in the form of the Chantry. Nevertheless, it is important that the ethical issues that the game highlights are the ones mostly tied to other dimensions of religion: social and mythological. That constitutes religious ethics as something on one hand important, but on the other hand secondary to the interpretation of sacred texts and to the socio-political situation.

The Doctrinal Dimension

The doctrinal dimension of the Chantry revolves around relations between the material world of Thedas and the spirit world of the Fade. Any mortal being is tied to both realms: their body belongs to Thedas and their soul provides the connection with the Fade. The Fade in turn is always imitating the material world, feeding on emotions and thoughts. That's why its creatures, spirits and demons, are tied to different conceptions, encoded as negative (sloth, rage, fear) or positive (Justice, Faith). Fade is also the space where, according to the teachings of the Chantry, the souls of sleeping mortals go and form where the energy, allowing mages to control reality, comes. That is why mages are susceptible to manipulations by evil denizens of the Fade – the demons, who can provide them with more power. In the center of the Fade lies the abandoned Black City – a former abode of the Maker. The deity himself according to the Chantry's teachings left his creation, but the souls of the dead travel through Fade to rest by his side.

A distinctive feature of the doctrinal dimension of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, uniting it with other RPGs, is its inextricable ties with mythology. Ontology, cosmology, and anthropology of the Chantry are deeply rooted in its mythology and the specific actions of the Maker. The Fade is the first world created by him, but since spirits inhabiting it, as it turned out, were incapable to created anything lasting, the disappointed Maker created a new world, Thedas, and inhabited it with creatures combining spiritual and material nature, that allows them to create: humans, elves, and dwarves. Spirits envied mortals, and that lead to the appearance of the first demons – another story resonating with Islam, and, to the lesser extent, with other Abrahamic religions, in which rebellious spirits are often viewed as fallen angels, not initially morally neutral jinns. At the same time, the notion of afterlife connects with the motive of the Maker leaving the world after the transgression of the magisters. Mythology mediates different parts of the doctrine, combining it into a coherent structure, rarely encountered in real world religions.

This approach is largely due to the fact that religious doctrine in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* often serves as a literal description of the world: the Herald of Andraste enters the Fade in the flesh, battles demons and sees spirits. It also serves as a way to give a player an **affordance** to criticize the Chantry's beliefs: inside the game world, there are a set of characters denying or at least questioning the Chantry's doctrine, sometimes, like in a case of elven mage Solas or embodied spirit Cole, by their mere existence. This in turn raises doubts about the variety of mythological stories as well.

As a result, the doctrinal dimension in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* has an ambiguous position. The main character is often involved in dialogues and events, which can be connected with the Chantry's doctrine, but these interactions are not built into in-game religious discourse. Journey to the Fade and interactions with demons are introduced as a part of usual game process, lacking direct religious connotations, although a player obviously has **interpretative affordances** to read them accordingly on their own volition.

In fact, the most obvious **affordances to engage** with the doctrinal dimensions that allow its attribution to core dimensions are provided by scenes of a doubt, episodes where a player is faced with necessity to agree or disagree with a character denying one of the doctrine's elements, like the very existence of the Maker. Still, there are no **affordances** to influence the doctrine of the Chantry as it is through those dialogues, unlike with mytho-

logical, social and ethical dimensions. Chantry doctrine will remain the same after the end of the game even if a main character would personally express doubt in its specific claims.

Therefore, while *Dragon Age: Inquisition* recognizes the importance of doctrinal dimension of religion, it portrays Chantry philosophy as something excluded from other contexts. As a result, doctrinal dimensions are depicted as a most conservative part of religion, where any deviation from official teaching not only plunges into heresy, but risks to withdraw the speaker from religious context altogether, turning them into a sort of fantasy natural philosophers. The association of doctrinal dimension in the fame with a parallel reality, forbidden for most people and available only to initiates, seems symptomatic.

The Emotional Dimension

The sphere of emotion in videogames is problematic: although such projects as *Sims* series (Maxis since 2000) or indie games like *Haven* (The Game Bakers 2020), *RimWorld* or *Cultist Simulators* demonstrate that a simulation of feelings and even complex emotional stories is quite possible, those games can still be considered an exceptions. Consequently, the representation of the emotional dimension of religion in videogames is often very limited, and in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* it is one of the peripheral dimensions.

The game pays little attention to the emotional experience of believers and does not include any mentions that followers of the Chantry are seeking to achieve some specific psychological state, such as a mediation or a religious ecstasy. In full accordance with the social orientation of the Chantry, this religion directs a believer 'outside', to a surrounding world that they should change according to the teaching of Andraste, not toward their own psyche.

At the same time the game still includes several episodes, potentially providing **affordances to engage** with the emotional or psychological side of religion, although such interaction is possible more through interpretation than through the game mechanics directly. At the end of the first chapter, Corypheus attacks the initial base of the Inquisition, Haven, forcing heroes and ordinary members of the organization to escape into cold mountains. During the following cutscene of the impromptu council of the survivors, conflicts between the main character's companions established earlier escalate, encoding the scene itself as a desperate moment heralding the end of the Inquisition.

Then of the NPCs, Mother Giselle, raises spirits of her comrades by singing one of the Chantry's hymns: 'The dawn will come'. She is joined by almost all characters, which resonates very well with similar scenes from movies and literature and could, potentially, be interpreted as an example of believers reaching a specific emotional state through ritual, especially since the characters who did not join in the song are not members of the Chantry.

In addition, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* stands out among many other RPGs because it includes elements, simulating a religious faith: in certain scenes, the Herald is asked by their companions whether they believe in having a divine mission or in the existence of the Maker. Such dialogue happens after a disclosure of some important information of mythological or doctrinal nature and provides the player with a freedom to choose from

multiple options without clear indication which one is the 'correct' one, or even if there is a correct answer to the question. This ambivalence is confirmed by the end of the game, since during the entire walkthrough the player is never told the truth about the Maker's existence or his role in Thedas. That provides an opportunity to play as a character, moved by the faith in an Abrahamic sense, who maintains it even in face of the facts that might put it in question.

The very phenomenon of a religious faith in real world religions is rarely considered as a part of the emotional dimension, but in the context of videogames even such fleeting interest in a psyche of believers can be seen so rarely that it deserves a special mention. However, it should be noted that both in dialogues about faith, and in the cut-scene with Mother Giselle's song, the emotional dimension could be introduced only by a player themself, who might as well interpret such episodes in another way. For example, as a simple moment of inspiration, lacking direct religious connotations, or as intellectual debate without any emotional investment. Because of this, the emotional dimension of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* stays among peripheral ones.

The Material Dimension

The material dimension of religion in the game is strictly peripheral. At first glance, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* includes a lot of **affordances to engage** with this side of religion if the players already interested in it. There are specific designs of clothing for priests, Templars' uniforms, religious buildings, in one of which a main character spends a lot of their time, sacred images, artifacts and locations important for the Chantry.

But it doesn't take a lot of effort to ignore this sphere neither in terms of in-game actions, nor in terms of interpretation. The player does not learn anything about traditions and specifics of Chantry architecture, has no influence on the design of clergy's vestments or even understanding what it signifies. There are no quests in the game directly addressing the material side of religion: resources and wealth of the Inquisition is spent on relief efforts and its own military force and spies net while stemming from donations by powerful rulers and factions made, again, for political reasons. The player does not face problems such as protection of pilgrims, building or rebuilding temples or other issues that could have concerned a character in their position.

This could be explained by the fact that, in the end, the material dimension of religion in the game serves, primarily, as a tribute to neomedievalistic aesthetics, traditional to the genre of fantasy role-playing games. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* includes elements of the material side of religion necessary to visually encode the Chantry as reimagining of Medieval Christianity despite the fact that its mythological, doctrinal and other dimensions could have easily resonated with other religions. Such connection between the material dimension and recognition hinders the creation of **affordances to engage** it more closely, promoting the portrayal of this side of the Chantry as something inherent, unchanging and unimportant.

The Ritual Dimension

The ritual dimension also falls into the peripheral category. Despite the fact that the main character could position themselves as a religious leader and is always surrounded by a number of deeply religious characters, Chantry's rituals are almost absent from the game. The whole Dragon Age: Inquisition mentions only two rituals.

First, there are funerals, performed through cremation in memory of Andraste's death in fire. It becomes a focus of the side quest **Homecoming**, during which the main character must find bodies of people, drowned during the flood, and provide them with proper burial. But funerals themselves are conducted by an NPC-priestess, and a protagonist couldn't even attend them, so the exact nature of this ritual remains unknown to a player.

Second, there are prayers, depicted in the game several times. In a chapel located in the Inquisition's citadel a player can overhear prayers of ordinary clergy serving in their organization. During certain dialogues with two important characters Leliana and Callen, they can be seen in the midst of a prayer. Finally, the Inquisitor themselves could cite the Chantry's prayers in specific scenes, for example, when they are told that they are considered the Herald of Andraste.

While such episodes create **affordances to engage** with the ritual dimension, they are obviously disproportionally rare if we consider the fact that the game itself revolves around religious organization. Funeral rites are referred in a side quest, praying Callen could be seen only if he is in romantic relationships with a protagonist, and the Inquisitor themself could easily refrain from citing any ritual formulas. A player could easily finish the game without ever encountering or paying attention toward rituals of the Chantry.

The ritual dimension as well as the material serves more as a neomedievalistic sign. Prayers additionally highlight the already established religiousness of specific characters and serve as a shibboleth in case of the Inquisitor's own remarks, providing a player with an **affordance** to signify their beliefs. It is also interesting that the ritual dimension is depicted as being a deeply personal part of religion. Scenes of prayers serve as a way to emphasize corresponding character's confusion and their trust toward the Herald, and in **Homecoming** an introduction of a ritual in the game is justified through a natural disaster that brought a personal issue of death into a social sphere. At the same time ordinary social rituals are nonexistent, which is especially noticeable because of the great importance of the social dimension of religion in the game.

Conclusion

Geraci suggested that we should not expect any videogame to include all seven dimensions of religion. However, precisely because of that the question of which dimensions and what relations between them would end up in a **protostory** is of particular interest. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* highlights social and mythological dimensions, depicting doctrinal and ethical as derivatives from them, and other three as less important and more personal sides of religion.

Such a view of religion is a view of an external observer, looking at it from the outside. The Chantry is considered to be first of all a big social structure inextricably tied with political issues in which it is driven by interpretations of a limited number of texts: it's not hard to notice, that this view of religion bear similarity to secular discourse, provided in particular by media or school curriculum in history.

A protagonist of the game is at least a nominal member and even a leader of a religious organization, and there are **affordances** to create an image of a main character resonating with an image of a believer. However, a day-to-day religious life does not get a lot of attention, which is facilitated by the peripheral positioning of ritual and emotional dimensions and the politicization of the ethical dimension. To be religious in Thedas means to maintain and promote a specific political agenda, concerning not only members of the Chantry but also a lot of people outside it, in particular, elves and mages. Religious debates are political debates are not mediated by ritual or some other dimensions.

Moreover, while the Chantry is encoded, mostly through the material dimension, as similar to Medieval Christianity, the scheme of religious dimensions elucidates the influence of American Protestant tradition on construction of this imagined religion. Chantry is depicted as a strict hierarchy of dimensions where an interpretation of sacred text produces doctrine and ethics, in turn demanding to reorganize a society in accordance with a specific ideal. Emotional, ritual and material dimensions in this scheme is of secondary concern, they don't have any value in themselves and serve only as a means to fixate other spheres of religion, a way to remember the heroic deed of the religion's founder or to demonstrate your personal religious affiliation publicly.

Ultimately the image of the Chantry is consistent with the logic of popular discourse "religion vs spirituality" (for example Hanegraaff, 2000), elements of which often find their way into videogames. Still, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is unique because in this game 'religion' is not encoded as an undoubtedly wrong side in this speculative opposition. The game's **protostory** includes **affordances** to create a story of the Chantry as an organization capable of admitting and fixing its mistakes and acting as a positive force for change, addressing social and humanitarian problems.

Still, the main purpose of this article is to provide an illustrative example of a usage of the methodology described above to analyze a particular game. The value of the concept of religious dimensions by Ninian Smart, combined with the idea of **affordances** as applied to the research of videogames, is that it allows considering a player's agency while also addressing implicit and unconscious ideological attitudes of a game itself, which provides a player with resources to make statements and to interpret. In this particular case, we can see how modern notions of secularism and American-centric Protestant view on religion define the image of the neomedievalistic Chantry in the fictional world of Thedas.

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Light, Blood, Stone, and Order
The Religious Beliefs and Systems of *Dragon Age*

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Keywords: *immersion; narrative; perception; religion; role-playing; videogames; world building*

Games with a focus on narrative often build rich worlds with intricate information about social, political, and cultural dynamics. This can include information about the role and influence of religion in the game world. This lore creates circumstances that can make the game world feel more fleshed out and realistic for games with an emphasis on story-driven play. Research on the place of religion in videogames is a relatively new and growing field of interest. This area of study investigates the narrative possibilities presented through the use of religious lore and the creation of religious beliefs and practices within games. Videogames can feature religion through characters, narratives, and even play mechanics (Ferdig 2014: 73–76). Although games that explore and teach about physical world religious belief are available (Anthony 2014: 29–39), narratives often present fictional religions that can sometimes function as critiques of physical world belief systems and institutions (Tuckett/Robertson 2014: 94–99). This can also be an opportunity for designers to incorporate social dynamics by establishing 'others' through religious difference and narrative events (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2019).

Videogames range in narrative content, from those with relatively little to those with rich lore and stories. For games in this latter category, there is often a great deal of world-building that highlights possible social structures and dynamics (cf. Tuckett/Robertson 2014). These narrative elements mesh with issues of player agency (Wagner 2012: 120–1) and even self-perceptions in the context of play. In games that are narrative-heavy, this gives religion unique meanings and importance, as players can use these in-game systems of belief to evaluate their place in the game world, as well as the characters that they encounter. What part, then, do fictional religions have in the relationship between game content and players' perceptions and experiences, particularly in the context of role-playing?

This study considers religion in *Dragon Age*, a role-playing game (RPG) series from the development company BioWare, and its narrative influence on both worldbuilding and player experience (2009; 2011; 2014). Using qualitative methods, the inclusion of religion

in videogames is explored in two main ways: The first centres on the position of religion within the game world and game narrative. The second examines how players engage with religion as part of the game though an analysis of online forum data, which has been anonymised to protect user privacy. Following Ferdig's (2014) framework on religion in videogames, the project emphasizes game context (73–74) and player capital (76–77), or the knowledge the player possesses. The study considers both the representations of religion as part of the narrative and audience interpretations and use of these elements. In this game series, fictional religions provide grounding for many story events and characters, but they also shape players' perceptions and experiences with the game. Ultimately, while religion creates a game world that feels more socially familiar and real, players often incorporate in-game religion into a player capital internal to the game that allows them to use religion as a tool to influence narrative directions and outcomes.

Religion, Influence, and Society

Religion clearly has a large influence historically and socially. As videogames try to emulate society and social circumstances, religion is an obvious choice for a narrative addition. Beyond game content, however, it is useful to consider the forms and functions of religion in quotidian social life. Durkheim understood the existence and separation of the sacred and profane as defined by cultural elements that are set apart and protected – the sacred – and those that are mundane – the profane (cf. Durkheim 1961). In this sense, the profane is juxtaposed to and the sacred is necessarily linked to practices of "devotion" (Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014: 110). Despite the ability to arrange social meaning around religion in such a way, the actual forms that religious expressions and beliefs take are choices and, ultimately, become understood as preferences (Berger 2007: 23).

Early work on the topic of religion has emphasized the tendency to discuss religious belief in terms of one true belief system versus incorrect alternatives (cf. Radcliffe- Brown 1945). With changes in culture and the structure of society – namely with the increase of heterogeneity in belief – religion's social and political positions shift substantially. Religious homogeneity of practice and belief allows religion to become central as a social influence and is assumed as part of a standard identity (Banchoff 2007: 14). With changes in social demographics and the proliferation of diverse religious belief, this assumption becomes more difficult.

This can also link to social and political tensions as part of globalization and becoming exposed to more religious ideas. Pluralism in a society can be a part of a democratic political process but also serves as a site for political and social tensions (Wuthnow 2007: 161–2). Religious marketplaces develop, placing religious groups in direct competition with one another (Berger/Hefner 2003: 5). Outside of broader social influence, there has also been a focus on and interest in influences of religion on individuals, including promoting prosocial behaviour. The relationship between belief and action is complex. For those who do not subscribe to religious beliefs, there is a tendency toward utilitarian approaches, while religious belief pulls people toward emphasizing set rules and authority as part of their motivation (Shariff 2015: 108).

Religion and the Religious in Games

Religion's social importance unsurprisingly translates to its inclusion in media. Although religion has also been featured to varying degrees in videogames, religious elements of videogames have often been overlooked in research (Campbell/Grieve 2014: 3–5). The work that has been done on this topic covers a broad range of applications, uses, and appearances of religion in gaming contexts (Bosman 2016: 28–29). While some games incorporate religious belief as a means of conveying physical world religious meaning and knowledge, others use religion in games more metaphorically or symbolically (Anthony 2014: 29–39). There is also a tendency of game narratives to critique religion by highlighting negative elements, as seen in game series like *Fallout* (Interplay Entertainment since 1997) or *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks 1994–1998; Bethesda Game Studios since 2002) (Tuckett/Robertson 2014: 94–99). Although there are some positive examples of religiously coded groups in the *Fallout* game series, the player frequently encounters groups in the post- apocalyptic landscape of the game that are represented as aggressive, misguided, or blinded by faith toward dangerous behaviours (ibid: 96). The *Elder Scrolls* series, while much more forgiving, grounds religious deities in the game's fantasy- based reality and often uses religion as a source of conflict and social division (ibid: 97–98).

On the other hand, fictitious religions in games can emphasize the social dynamics of religion and feature rich lore and ritual, with examples of ceremonies and religious practice (cf. Tuckett/Robertson 2014). *Mass Effect* (BioWare since 2007) has been a particularly salient and popular series to study in this context (Knoll 2015: 208–9). As allomythic games, the examples that take this approach pay particular attention to the possibilities of fictional worldbuilding offered by religious practice for narrative- focused games (Anthony 2014: 39–41; Bosman 2016: 34). In these cases, the religions and religious traditions represented in the game are entirely fictionalized and specific to the game world (ibid.). Some of these games, including the *Mass Effect* trilogy, have been discussed as serving as metaphors for physical world belief, despite focusing on stories removed from physical world reality. In this example, the protagonist character illustrates a story that resembles a Christian narrative, although the game world hosts a variety of religious beliefs and practices (cf. Irizarry/Irizarry 2014). Part of *Mass Effect*'s approach involves setting the player's character up as a saviour for the galaxy – and, in particular, humanity – in the context of a widescale galactic threat. The player is expected and has opportunities to fill the role of "liberator and redeemer" (ibid: 238). Adding these dynamics connects to the approach of incorporating videogame design elements that make games feel more familiar and comfortable, therefore increasing a player's sense of presence (Tamborini/Skalski 2006: 225–30). Virtual realms can be made more familiar by using religious signifiers as a worldbuilding tool (Gregory 2014: 137, 149–51).

Religion also plays a role in contributing to the agency that players experience with gameplay. Players can explore game content in unexpected ways as a result of the influence that they can have. This emergent play happens within the restrictions of the game and may produce unanticipated or unexpected results (Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 158; Schut 2014: 267–9). Representations of religion in videogames – as systems themselves – may offer similar experiences of emergent play and meaning making (Schut 2014:

268–70). In some cases, however, religion can become mechanized as part of the game design and development process, restricting religion to something more procedural than influential (ibid: 256). As a result, mechanics in a game can limit and dilute the impact of many moral questions.

Alternatively, games that provide more agency in this context can present players with opportunities to act or play as god-like figures, able to oversee the design and outcome of games or tap into powers that can otherwise alter the game world immensely (cf. Schut 2014). Players can explore and experiment with issues and experiences of morality in the context of religious codes as defined by understandings from the physical world or the digital world in which the game takes place (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014: 232–3; Waltemathe 2014: 239). The company behind both the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games series, BioWare, typically highlights player choice as a mainstay of its games and puts players in a position where they must engage with struggles of morality (cf. Knoll 2015). In this context, players express agency through influence on the game's narrative and trajectory (cf. Murray 1997).

The decisions that players make in videogames that incorporate religious codes can sometimes influence the personality or in-game perceptions of the player's character. In examples like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), players are judged by the religious rules of the Jedi, allowing the disposition and recognition of their character to change based on the decisions that they have made (Waltemathe 2014: 250). Although discussions of one's character's religion may be of interest to players (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014: 231), this is not always clearly or explicitly included in the game. While religion is not included as part of the character creation process in *Mass Effect* (ibid.) or *Dragon Age*, the latter series often invokes belief for players as part of the role-play process and defines belief as part of the game-specific ethnic backgrounds that players can choose.

Beyond content relating to religion in videogames, there are also considerations of knowledge, ritual, and interpretations of sacred objects or places. Building on the idea of the 'magic circle', Wagner (2012) notes that the events within games are set apart from everyday experience in ways that allow players to engage in behaviours that would otherwise be unacceptable (132–4). Videogames and religion both produce experiences that are outside of what may be deemed mundane or everyday, but the ways that these events are viewed can be influenced by game contexts as well as player capital (Ferdig 2014: 73–74, 76–77). Using violence in a cathedral in a game, for example, can be read as a temporary challenge to authority and perhaps an expression of dissatisfaction (Wagner 2012: 130). Arguments ensue about whether or not spaces and places sacred to many in the physical world should also be deemed sacred in digital ones (ibid.).

Emotional Entanglements and Experiences with Games

Although they are not always related directly to religious content, the emotional dynamics and experiences related to playing videogames are also important to consider as part of this landscape. Videogames can sometimes surprise players with the morality-related questions that they ask and the introspection that they can inspire (Knoll 2015: 218–20). There are a variety of game elements that players become motivated and emotionally influenced by in the process of playing videogames. These attachments and concerns can

extend to in-game items and belongings (cf. Watkins/Molesworth 2012) as well as the connection that players feel to their character or avatar (Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014: 113).

These emotional bonds also extend to the game's story. In narrative-based games, players often want what is best for their character in the context of the story (Tomlinson 2021: 723–5). There is also an investment in the growth and development of their character, watching them gain skills and traverse the challenges of the game (Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014: 115). Morality and character reputation also become important parts of players' experiences in shaping and influencing a particular narrative. To achieve these outcomes, players may emphasize specific kinds of decisions over others (Knoll 2015: 220). In some ways, this becomes a means of making the avatar an idealized – and sacred – version of oneself (cf. Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014). Indeed, players feel inclined to be a force of good in the game world, trying to avoid negatively influencing the characters around them (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85).

These emotional investments and experiences are also shaped by the influence that a player has in the game. Videogames are inherently interactive and highlight the possibility of player choice within a system that includes some narrative and strategy elements (Ryan 2006: 203; Bosman 2016: 33). This sets videogames apart from other forms of media because of the agency extended to players (Wagner 2012: 121). Agency is complicated when it comes to videogames, however. While interactivity is a hallmark of games (Shinkle 2008: 907–9), agency is defined within the parameters of the game's design and requires balance with game mechanics and goals (Knoll 2015: 218–20).

This can produce a kind of enjoyable 'bounded agency' for players as they explore a videogame within the narrative parameters afforded by the developers (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012: 394, 401). This is a similar enjoyment to that of reading a predetermined story, where players can enjoy the experience based primarily on the story itself, rather than their participation in or influence on it (cf. Tanenbaum 2011). Players are in charge of shaping the world in many narrative-heavy RPGs, including games like *Mass Effect* (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012; Irizarry/Irizarry 2014) and, as the focus of this study, *Dragon Age*. Players are able to mould both their character and the narrative based on the decisions that they make, which can also influence the position of religion in the game world (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014: 235–45).

Methods

This project uses qualitative methods to analyse both videogame content and player experiences. As part of the lens applied to this project, I follow Ferdig's (2014) approach to studying religion in videogames, focusing on both game context and player capital. Game context focuses on the representations of religion present in the game within the design, whether this is environmental or related to the narrative (ibid: 73–74). This can include symbols, buildings, circumstances, or interactions in the game that are influenced by religion, and in-game rules that relate to religion. Player capital refers to players' knowledge and personal experiences as they might influence gameplay and interpretations of game content (ibid: 76–77). This encompasses religious beliefs as well as broader moral outlooks on the part of videogame players. This project extends this line of inquiry by

highlighting another element of player capital, however, by taking into account the ways in which players use game context in conjunction with their physical world knowledge and beliefs to make moral determinations. These elements are differentiated as external and internal player capital.

To better understand the use and position of religion and religious belief in the *Dragon Age* game series, a close reading approach is utilized (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011; 2012). Close reading allows for an in-depth analysis of media as text, which originated in literature studies and was expanded later to research on cinema and, more recently, videogames (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011). Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum note that part of this approach requires addressing the need to redefine common conceptualizations of 'texts' to accommodate visual media formats (ibid: 295–9).

The process also requires two fundamental approaches to gameplay experience – one that allows the researcher to engage with the game as a player and another that is more objective to assess these elements outside of immersive qualities (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012: 301–4). There are, however, complications to consider in a close reading. Two individuals studying the same game may have different interpretations and experiences of the game (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011: 299). In this study, this is partly addressed by incorporating a second set of data stemming from online discussions among regular players. This aspect of the analysis will be discussed more below.

Because of the broad scope and size of many RPGs, approaching the reading and analysis through specific lenses is essential (ibid: 304–5). In this reading, the emphasis is on discussions and representations of religion and belief across the *Dragon Age* series. To achieve this, multiple playthroughs were completed for each game (ibid: 298–300) and narratives, characters, and the position of religion within these contexts were explored. Notes were taken during gameplay to assist in the analysis. The notes focused on different elements of belief, characters' relationships to belief and in-game religious institutions, the impact in the game world of these institutions, and the player character's experiences with these game elements.

The close reading aspect of this study is based on approximately 657 hours of game play in multiple playthroughs across all three current games in the *Dragon Age* series. Specifically, *Dragon Age: Origins* ([referred to as *Origins*] BioWare 2009), *Dragon Age II* ([referred to as *DA* 2] BioWare 2011), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* ([referred to as *Inquisition*] BioWare 2014) are included in the analysis. In close reading, it is important to get a full sense for how everything fits together in the game, including narrative branches and departures (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011, 2012). As with *Mass Effect*, each of the games in this series presents options to play different genders and in-game races, which means different voice actors and potentially altered story elements (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012: 396). Because of this, the multiple playthroughs also include playing as characters with different genders and backgrounds to better evaluate and situate the overall narrative context and experience.

Additionally, to explore players' choices, experiences, and assessments of these games and their narrative events, I analyse patterns and themes present in publicly available posts from online forums, including Reddit, Fextralife, and GameFAQs. Although posts are public, quotes have been deidentified and slightly reworded without changing users' meanings to protect privacy. For Reddit, partial data collection and

analysis is accomplished by using Reddit's official API through 4CAT to scrape for conversations (cf. Peeters/Hagen 2018). The computer-assisted analyses were used to establish broader patterns in discussion and illuminate the most commonly discussed terms, attributes, and concepts in the context of a religion-related conversation. This was accomplished through the use of word trees to determine associations, monthly histograms, and interactive flowcharts of terms across conversations.

For all forums, data was also collected and coded by hand to identify broad themes and patterns in discussions about religious content in these games. This approach involves identifying and highlighting patterns in conversation in terms of commonly discussed topics, ideas, approaches, and interpretations. Coding and analysis focused on player discussions of specific religions in these games, players' interpretations of their own characters' belief systems, discussions of narrative events and characters as they relate to institutions and belief systems in the game, and discussions of major choices and turning points.

For the purposes of this analysis and discussion, the primary focus is on shared major topics of discussion, rather than the most common decisions, except in the case of choosing a Divine (the new leader of the main church in the games) in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014). In this instance, there is an overwhelming trend in the approach of players and therefore this aspect will be discussed in terms of the shared choice. In all, approximately 2000 posts across these forums were hand selected and coded, while approximately 30.000 were collected and analysed with 4CAT using Reddit's API.

Findings and Analysis

Because this project assesses the religiously coded content, narratives, and experiences with three games in a videogame series, the findings focus on a relatively small portion of these games and the discussions that surround them. To understand how players use the religious elements of these games, it is important to first assess the position of religion in the overall game narratives. The games across the series focus on different elements of religion, its position within in-game societies, and its importance for individual characters. Through the narrative framing, meanings are conveyed to players about alliances, tensions, and morality. First, this section will focus on game content and the ways that religion is woven into the narrative across the series (Ferdig 2014: 73). Next, the analysis will turn to the perceptions that players have of these elements and the ways that they become tools to shape the game world. This extends discussions of player capital in the context of videogames (ibid: 76–77) to players' gained capital within the game.

Game Content

Rather than including examples of and information from physical world religions (ibid: 71–72), *Dragon Age* follows the trends of allomythic games (Anthony 2014: 39–41; Bosman 2016: 35), creating unique religious systems within a fictional reality. There are some elements of physical world religious inspiration called upon for the game content, however, and parallels can be drawn between digital and physical realities in ways that have

been similarly discussed in the context of *Mass Effect*. These in-game religious examples serve more than one purpose. In addition to adding familiar items to the game that may increase a sense of presence, this information also conveys in-game dynamics and illustrates social structures. Within these structures, the game establishes religious 'others' (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2019) by limiting the perspective and information provided. Although the religions and the individuals involved with them are fictional, they provide contexts and frameworks for moral decisions in the game (Ferdig 2014: 73–74).

The Religious Landscape of Thedas

Religion is firmly embedded into the world of *Dragon Age* (BioWare since 2009), with its prominence and importance increasing with each game in the series so far. The game world – Thedas – presents an array of religions and belief systems that often clash with one another, pose possibilities to the player, and serve to create narrative conflicts. Although the position of religion becomes more relevant and central as the games progress, characters with different backgrounds and beliefs are introduced and tensions between religious institutions and individuals in the game world are explored. In some cases, these belief systems come into competition with one another, setting a trajectory toward a kind of in-game modernity where the story allows the player to have a role in a burgeoning marketplace of belief. Although it is often difficult to completely disentangle the game context from player input and influence, the player's direct role and interpretations of religion will be discussed in more depth below.

Within the *Dragon Age* series, one religion is positioned as having the most influence and power in Thedas, while other belief systems are in positions with less political and social input. This also means that these less prominent belief systems tend to get less attention in the overall narrative across the game series. Among the religions introduced in the games, Andrastian belief and its Chantry church are tied largely to human worshippers, hold the strongest narrative presence, and are a dominant force in society. Humans are also portrayed as a largely aggressive and oppressive social force in the games. In some regards, this religion appears to mirror physical world Christianity, although it is mixed with other Abrahamic religious imageries. There is a creator figure in the Maker, a prophet – Andraste – who is also the Maker's bride, and a history of political influence alongside conquest.

In most of Thedas, the church and its adherents have the most political influence and power and the religion is broadly followed by most of the humans encountered in the story. In *Origins* (BioWare 2009), religion is present in the narrative, but in ways that are less related to player agency. Religion is also less of a central threat, catalyst, or driving force and more of a largely background element, although the player can encounter a cult-like sect of Andrastian belief. This is the beginning of a presentation of religious 'others', who are portrayed as dangerous at best and ultimately violent. This makes sense as a challenge to overcome in the game, but also presents contexts of other belief systems as potential threats. This is compounded by additional events tied to religion in the same game. The player can be responsible for a kind of movement toward modernity in the game by supporting a dwarven convert to Andrastian belief in establishing a Chantry underground in the dwarven city of Orzammar. While this decision is more ancillary to

the overall play experience, if the Andrastian dwarf is helped in his mission, it results in violent opposition to prevent the success of the newly established arm of the Chantry.

In the second game in the series (BioWare 2011), in-game religious beliefs, practices, and tensions are more heavily emphasized. Namely, the Qunari are shown more frequently and are given more detail than they had been through one primary representative character in *Origins* (BioWare 2009) but are also represented in a way that flattens (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2021) them into an essentialized characterization. The characters who represent the Qun – unless they are converts – all use the same or similar models, which are greyish toned, large humanoid creatures with horns. This design, in addition to the narrative positioning of the group in the game's setting of Kirkwall as unwelcome and discussions of their faith as confusing, represent them as 'others' in the lead up to an eventual fight against them as the act two antagonists. Approaching the battle against the Qunari, which is predicated on the theft of their sacred religious text, their leader establishes his distaste for Kirkwall and for those who do not abide by the Qun. In one exchange, he states, "Their actions are merely symptoms. Your society is the disease" (BioWare 2011: n.p.). This builds on the narrative's emphasis on characters and events that reveal the discomfort residents of the city feel toward the Qunari and, in some ways, appears to justify that discomfort by illustrating the harsh judgment felt toward those in Kirkwall. This, as with the violent reaction toward a Chantry in Orzammar, seems to convey a discomfort with religious pluralism in society.

DA 2 (BioWare 2011) also introduces a deeper assessment of the position of the Chantry in Thedas as it relates to issues of rights, access, and politics. The Chantry in this game and its influence on mages and their position in society become the narrative's climax. In this case, the Chantry could be read as the primary antagonist in the story, though the game provides evidence that the Chantry is potentially justified in aggressive and repressive actions against mages, who are frequently also encountered as dangerous, violent, and illustrative of the many fears the Chantry has instilled about mages in society.

The game poses additional questions about individuals versus institutions in the case of religion. Rather than serving as a critique of religion per se, as is seen in many games, this approach highlights the ways that individuals may interpret and use religion for their own means or with strong faith. Grand Cleric Elthina is a powerful leader in Kirkwall and tends to defer to the guidance of the Maker while avoiding taking strong political stances of her own. Petrice – first a sister, and then a mother in the Chantry – uses her position to manipulate the player and work against the Qunari based on her own desires and interests. Sebastian, on the other hand, is presented as a truly faithful believer. Only available as extra downloadable content (DLC), his character serves to provide additional insights into the Chantry, its workings, and its belief systems. He also frequently gets into arguments with other characters who are less faithful or are in direct opposition with the Chantry, serving as a mediating factor and conveyor of information. He does, however, reveal the fragility of faith when he is challenged and may, depending on the player's decisions, abandon his position with the church and potentially seek revenge.

The third game in the series, *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), builds on the more central role of religion in political and social tensions in some regards, while alleviating them in others. There is an acute focus on the teachings of the Chantry, including collections from

the Chant of Light. In this element of the game, the potential of the church for aggression is illuminated. One example of a line from this chant emphasizes the possibility of force, stating, "Those who oppose thee; Shall know the wrath of heaven" (ibid: n.p.). The church is given a more fleshed out duality. Although individuals have been shown as potentially manipulating the church and faith, here the church is revealed to be both a sanctuary and a force to be reckoned with. Their role in oppression and subjugation is also further highlighted, centring not only on their position in the now widespread fight with mages, but also the church's position in wars with the elves. These events ultimately led to the separation of elves from much of society and common clustering in dilapidated housing known as alienages in various cities.

Although other religions and belief systems are present, they remain underexplored in comparison. This is, perhaps, due to the prominence of the Chantry in terms of its scope of power and importance to the primary plot. Elven beliefs, which are more closely aligned with polytheism, are explored in more detail as the narrative stretches toward the in-progress fourth game. Elven gods are confirmed to exist and questions about the afterlife are posed. It is discovered that one can physically enter the city told to be inhabited by the Maker and elven creators. It is also revealed that the entities celebrated and upheld by the dwarven Children of the Stone, which focus on lifeforms coming directly from the earth and less on gods, may exist. This presents interesting implications for religious belief where faith is shaken by the sacred becoming more mundane but can also be read as supported by tangible evidence. The Qunari are also, to some degree, made to feel more relatable and less unfamiliar and menacing in this game. Their beliefs, including the concept of every person fulfilling a specific role in society, are explored further and in more depth. This is assisted by having a party member who can share additional information about the Qun, its followers, and its society. The Iron Bull, though physically alien and imposing, provides context for players to understand the individuality among the Qunari than has been previously implied through their lack of personal names (instead, being named in ways that reflect their role in society) or their focus on collective purpose.

Religion and Social Tension Through Narrative

The placement of the religions within the narrative also provides opportunities to examine social inequalities and other sources of discontent. To some degree, this serves as another means through which to establish realistic settings that feel more alive, but these social dynamics amplify that effect while also providing obstacles and challenges (Ferdig 2014: 74) to the player. As a result, religion makes its way to the centre of conflict and struggles between characters, whether these are relatively low stakes and meant to develop characters, as in the case of Sebastian above, or higher stakes and presenting major pressure points for large scale conflicts, as with the build-up toward the fissures in the Chantry. In this way, religion is used for the purpose of propelling the story forward as well as to address broader social problems in a fictional context.

The narrative positioning of religion also often serves to obfuscate information for the player. This aids in addressing which pieces of information a player can know and at what time to provide shocking, surprising, or compelling narrative moments. Dialogue from and between characters is used to influence the player's perceptions and actions in

the game. These conversations call motivations, realities, and circumstances into question. Characters lend credibility, instil doubt, and provide – often biased – context. Often, these perspectives are posed against one another.

In the case of *Origins* (BioWare 2009), while the player is being introduced to this world and the beliefs within it, characters who have direct experience with the Chantry under vastly different circumstances discuss their experiences. Alistair, who was given to the Chantry as a child, has more critical views than Leliana, who joined as a sister willingly. These viewpoints are also juxtaposed with those of two mages who have different experiences with the Chantry as well. Mages are required to live in Circles, which are guarded by Templar soldiers and prevent mages from contact with those outside or establishing families inside. Morrigan is deemed an apostate because she does not live in a Circle and Wynne has lived in the Circle and had her family torn apart by it. These characters present two vastly different viewpoints on the purpose and legitimacy of the Chantry's rule in this area. At the same time, the narrative also reinforces the fears instilled by the Chantry to keep mages separate from the rest of society, demonstrating possessions and the violent outcomes of magic deemed illegal by the Chantry.

Interactions and conflict between two characters of different faiths are common approaches for communicating narrative information and game lore to players. The game frequently poses possibilities to the player to allow them to make their own assessments and draw their own conclusions. It helps to position various non-player characters (NPCs) against one another in terms of viewpoint, some serving to critique and some in a position to support. While characters can share their stories and opinions directly with the player's character, they also interact with one another, providing additional context and insights. In the case of Morrigan and Leliana, they are positioned as opposing sides in debates surrounding the Chantry. One example of these exchanges is:

> **Morrigan:** It simply suits my view of the Chantry that one of their devoted sisters should turn out to be so full of hypocrisy.
> **Leliana:** There are good people in the Chantry. Many good people who are just there to help others.
> **Morrigan:** And apparently at least a few who are simply pretending to be good.
> **Leliana:** At least I was trying to be better than I was. At least I regretted the evil I'd done. Better that than be someone who has never loved anyone or anything, least of all herself. Anything but that.
> **Morrigan:** It seem that at least you got the self-righteousness part down. Well done. (BioWare 2009: n.p.)

These instances in the narrative not only provide contexts for individual characters but also support the worldbuilding that comes into play in making the social structures of a game. The tensions between characters also allow players to evaluate, assess, and make determinations about the game world surrounding them, ultimately informing their decisions and influencing the enactment of player agency, as discussed below.

These elements are further explored in *DA 2* (BioWare 2011), which amplifies these issues and brings them to a breaking point. As with the previous game, there are smaller-scale conflicts and discussions that highlight religion among characters in ways that aim

to steer the opinion and perspective of the player. This most clearly comes through with Anders' – an apostate mage – impression of and interactions with the Chantry in the lead up to taking violent action against the church. This is one of the more contentious events in the game, which will be discussed more below, but it is also one of the stronger positions taken by characters.

Companions offer their reactions to the event, with most disapproving and the player character, Hawke, reacting and giving Anders an opportunity to define his choice to attack the church. Hawke, upon seeing the destruction asks, "Anders, what have you done?" (ibid: n.p.) Anders explains and defends his actions, which are unavoidable and unchangeable in the game's narrative, as necessary when he responds, "I have removed the chance for compromise. Because there is none" (ibid.). He also, however, takes care in other scenes to delineate between religious belief and the individuals who wield it, a recurring theme throughout the series.

This goes back to the tendency for the criticisms in *Dragon Age* to focus less on belief and more on the possibility of people using belief for their own ends and interpretations. He suggests, "The oppression of mages stems from the fears of men. Not the will of the Maker" (ibid.). Anders' anger, while aimed at the Chantry as an institution, is formed from the decisions of individuals as they relate to belief, not from the belief or religion itself. In this way, it is acknowledged that much of the political and social turmoil happening in Kirkwall and across Thedas is largely separate from religion. This approach introduces an interesting narrative use of religion. Rather than a means to critique belief or religious institutions themselves, this provides a perspective which shows beneficial and detrimental sides of religious practice through the actions of individuals. This is further addressed in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014) and can even be echoed by the player character. The player's character, the Inquisitor, can say at one point, "All of this happened because of fanatics and arguments about the next world. It's time we start believing in this one" (ibid: n.p.). This is one of the few more direct challenges to belief in the game. In many ways, the statement begins to dismiss the importance of the belief that increasingly surrounds the player throughout the game, but the statement still aims to highlight the individuals at the heart of these struggles.

Characters also establish their opinions in relation to broader game contexts. They can make observations, suggestions, and try to directly sway the player. This is regularly the case in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014). As one example, many characters use their understandings of religion to define and address some companion characters. Mother Giselle, a Chantry member who joins the Inquisition, expresses a great deal of concern over the addition of Dorian. This character is from Tevinter, a region that has taken a drastic step away from Chantry teachings in their own sect of Andrastian belief where a man serves as Divine instead of a woman and magic is upheld as desirable and a positive force in society. Many characters express similar reservations toward Dorian, not due to his identity as one of few prominent gay characters, but because of the religious chasm tied to his ethnicity. This is also applied to the character Cole due to his status as seemingly manifested from a spirit. Chantry teachings malign spirits and thus Cole is determined to be a possible threat by many characters surrounding the Inquisitor.

This also extends to broader assessments of the story as it occurs around the characters. In this sense, the potential criticism arises yet again, but is still not necessarily

geared toward belief and religion directly. Instead, the emphasis continues to be on the dangers of individuals and their interpretations. As Cole considers the intensifying conflict between the Chantry and mages fighting for freedom, he observes, "It's dangerous when too many men in the same armour think they're right" (ibid: n.p.). Religion lays the groundwork for possible fear and discrimination, but largely results from shared interpretations and can differ drastically between groups.

Reflecting pre-modernity patterns in religion, players are presented with narratives that invoke senses of normalized religion within religious hierarchies, which evolves across the span of the games. Initially, much of the religious 'outside world' is unexplored by the player, while they encounter the beginnings of shifts toward religious pluralism. This shift is sometimes violent and, in conjunction with the mystery that often surrounds other beliefs in the game, can serve to further in-game religious othering. The narrative also splits in a variety of ways that can accommodate interpretations that support the social and religious status quo or follow prompts that alter the religious landscape of the game, which will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

Player Content

Although design provides the framework for the player to engage with, play is the human element that brings the potentially unexpected into the game experience (Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 158; Schut 2014: 267–9). Players take the content and context of the game and create their own experience, using play to push back against design, explore, and define their own experience. The narrative contexts discussed above become a part of player capital, in addition to the external elements as outlined by Ferdig (2014: 76–77). This encompasses players' own religious beliefs and morals and the influence that these experiences have on gameplay and interpretation. This study expands player capital to include the in-game knowledge acquired and used by players. While players use physical world knowledge of religions and morality to assess and make sense of in-game religious beliefs and practices, they are also inclined to develop moral decisions – and player capital – in conjunction with their own moral leanings, community discussions, and game contexts. Religion in the case of *Dragon Age* is interwoven in these discussions, becoming a tool that players use to create a particular moral image of the world.

Each game in this series gives players information about the in-game world and the figures and institutions that build it. This helps players develop a body of in-game knowledge that contributes to their decision-making. Players use online spaces to discuss narrative elements, character backgrounds, and dialogue and to engage in metagaming (cf. Donaldson 2016) that involves religion as a means of shaping the story. Information in the game and religious contexts within the narrative become a form of player capital and a tool to further their gaming experience.

This also affords players another avenue through which to explore morality, society, and their influence on a game's world. The majority of players in their discussions note wanting to create the best possible outcome for the narrative and the people in it. Religion, then, becomes another opportunity for players to be a positive influence on game worlds (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85). The narratives of these games, as discussed above, present players with a variety of ways to experience religion through this

environment. The character the player chooses has in-game connections to specific religious beliefs and backgrounds based on their identity. In addition to implied or prescribed beliefs and knowledge, the player is able to declare their own beliefs in many cases by choosing viewpoints to support. This provides players with a multitude of factors to consider for the avatar that they inhabit the world as. As an elf, does the player choose to express their belief in creators? As a human, do they choose to express themselves as working for the Chantry or as an atheist?

Player Capital Inside and Outside of the Game

Player capital has been discussed as largely related to knowledge and understandings from outside of the context of the game, but there are elements of player capital that also appear to stem from interactions with the game content itself. Players who are deeply engaged with the content and use online spaces to discuss it often rely on in-game contexts and circumstances to develop their interpretations and understandings of morality in the scope of the game. This does not, however, prevent them from also using their physical world understandings to evaluate and interpret game content. There is an interaction between these knowledge bases, allowing players to make decisions based on a complex mixture of morality that fits within both their physical world and game world contexts.

Players often use existing knowledge of religion and morality to explore fictional religions in *Dragon Age*. Players try to determine how physical world religions may relate to in-game examples of religion, drawing parallels between the elven pantheon and various polytheistic traditions, as one example. Consensus is often difficult to achieve in these discussions, however. When considering the Qun, players try to define the belief system within the context of various political and religious philosophies, attempting to make the system feel more familiar outside of the game context. This results in users debating the Qun as either a representation of Islam, a political philosophy, or a non-theist belief system. In part, this was sparked by comments from one of the lead writers on the game, according to these discussions. In these regards, users rely heavily on their own interpretations of physical world religions, including biases that cause some players to read both the Qun and Islam as highly repressive by nature.

While these discussions aim to better understand the game world in a more grounded context, these online spaces for discussion become sounding boards to feel out other players' decisions in the game as well. Players ask one another which choices they made, debate the best possible outcomes, and find support for their interpretations. This can allow players to reaffirm their decisions in the context of a broader moral structure among the body of players. This is illustrated in the general agreement in who to place as Divine in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014). On the other hand, there are some events that challenge personal moralities and interact with internal player capital in ways that deny the possibility of consensus. One of the largest discussion points when it comes to religion in the game is the debate about the morality of Anders' actions in *DA 2* (BioWare 2011). Players return to these discussions repeatedly, trying to make sense of the game world and their actions within it.

With the case of Anders' attack, players appeal to their senses of morality both inside and outside of the game context. External player capital is used to discuss the event from different angles. Some suggest that the oppression exerted by the church against

the rights of mages is enough to justify the attack, while others contextualize this event as a terrorist attack for which there is never a justification. On the other hand, players also form opinions based on the contexts provided by the game. They note that the Chantry has been exploitative in its political role and that Anders, being an apostate mage who has seen no good results from working within the system, is justified in his actions, particularly because they are a catalyst for a major rebellion in the next game. Some of these discussions are more nuanced in their use of internal and external player capital. In one discussion, a user mirrors many of the sentiments expressed across the forums:

> You can understand Anders' actions without supporting them. I know why he attacked the Chantry. His concerns were ignored and you can't get the attention of a violent institution without violence when you are desperate and mentally ill. But killing hundreds of people and harming even more by blowing up a building is still abhorrent. More people need to understand this distinction. (User, GameFAQs)

In this case, external capital has been used to familiarize being possessed by a spirit through the lens of mental illness to help make sense of this event. The user also incorporates internal capital through their assessment of the Chantry as a violent institution. Most discussions of this incident acknowledge the struggles between mages and the Chantry and note the wrongs committed on the part of the church, but while players use similar approaches to understand this game event, a moral consensus is difficult to achieve.

Players also use internal capital to develop religious backgrounds for their characters, even if this is not necessarily facilitated or supported by the gameplay itself. This borrows from game lore and information as well as personal interests and motivations and can involve the development of elaborate religious backgrounds for these characters. Players introduce their own interpretations of tensions for their personal characters in ways that expand beyond limitations to their agency. For example, a user outlines the background they have given their Inquisitor character, stating:

> My [elf Inquisitor] believes in elven gods and is a true believer. He is serious about his Dalish heritage. He is interested in and respects other cultures, except for the Chantry. After everything the church has done to elves, he can't respect them. If the Chantry is involved, his snark goes way up. He is also very clear that he is not the Herald of Andraste. He would be happy to sit down with any other group though and discuss culture and religion with them. He thinks it's fascinating and is a major nerd. (User, Reddit)

These discussions often extend to how the player navigated choices and the narrative as their character, trying to ensure that they embody the appropriate choices. Even in cases where players disagree on specific interpretations, arguments allow players to grapple with the complexities of belief, considering in-game history, ethnicities, and whether or not belief and support of the church are the same thing.

In many cases, while the mechanisms and motivations of discussion are similar – comparing notes, asking for advice, and exploring how different groups and beliefs fit

together in the game world – the outcomes are frequently quite divergent for players. One of the most important religious turning points in the game belongs to *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), where players must use their experience in the game (or over the series) to assess who the best Divine would be. In this case, there is largely agreement in the decisions made. For most players, they determine that Leliana is the best option, choosing to establish a church that will enact change and reduce the focus on controlling mages. These conversations, however, emphasize the ability for the choice of Divine to alter the political and social landscape of Thedas.

There are more personal ways that players use external capital to assess the game content based on their individual experiences and knowledge. In some cases, players address the religious information in the game based on their own experiences with religion. These discussions are more about making the game content familiar in a much more personal way than the approaches discussed above. As one example, a user mentions:

> I started thinking about the Chantry and I have to save that BioWare did right by religion. I'm Catholic and I noticed parallels between the Chantry and Catholic Church. There are representations of the Crusades, there is celibacy for priests and priestesses, the Divine is like their Pope, Tevinter's split from the Chantry due to Andraste sounds like the Christian and Jewish split, etc. (User, Reddit)

While often tethered to physical world information, these discussions would not be as detailed and significant to players' experiences with the game without their in-game player capital. There is a frequent blurring of the lines between player capital based in the physical world and that which exists solely based on in-game understandings.

Religion as a Tool

These narrative and player elements culminate in players finding new ways to use information to shape these stories. Players engage in a range of discussions highlighting game content, events, and contexts that centre on their position within the narrative as the main character. Players discuss their choices and opportunities but also use this to expand their player capital as it relates directly to the game. While external experiences and knowledge can have influence and bearing on how players interact with game content (Ferdig 2014: 76–77) and despite the bounded enjoyment achieved through experiencing an intended story (Tanenbaum/Tanenbaum 2010: 16), players are invested in comparing their choices and exploring narrative possibilities. This emphasizes knowledge of not only game events and outcomes but the specific inner workings of the political and religious belief structures across the societies in Thedas. In these regards, religion is viewed not only as a part of the social tapestry of the game, but also as a tool through which to shape the game world, particularly as it spans across the series.

In one exchange between users, the politics and tensions involved with belief in *Origins* are discussed (BioWare 2009). This case is regarding the potential establishment of a Chantry in Orzammar, the underground dwarven city with little religious and ethnic diversity. As an illustration of in-game player capital and assessment, the users consider:

I agree that there can be compromise and mutual respect between the Chantry and Dwarven society. It didn't turn out that way as dwarves can be defensive about their beliefs and the Chantry wants to use Brother Burkel's death to wage a crusade war. I don't think there's a good or bad guy in this case, but neither side has respect for the other. But you are right that the Chantry could do a lot to help the casteless and poor in Orzammar. It would never work unless the dwarves agree to outside influence and the Chantry doesn't have an ulterior motive. (User 1, Fextralife)

That's the issue with religious freedom. The freedom to believe one thing also means allowing different beliefs. So I helped him establish the Chantry. Anything else that happens is out of [your character's] hands. (User 2, Fextralife)

This discussion highlights common interactions across these online forums among players. There is an interest in doing things 'right' unless players are experimenting with perceived evil playthroughs where their intention is to create the worst possible world state. These experiments usually take place after a full true playthrough is complete. In the context of shaping the world and player capital, however, this discussion illustrates the interest that players have not only in shaping game events but producing a positive outcome.

This reflects previous work noting the drive that players often feel to be a positive force in game worlds (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85; Tomlinson 2021: 722–5), but also contributes to our understanding of how players engage with in-game religion as part of this approach to play. Given players' interest in influencing videogame stories and the mechanics afforded by this series of games, it is perhaps not surprising that these interpretations and conversations culminate in using religious structures in the game for the benefit of the narrative. This is true in cases where players hope to improve the game world as well as negatively influence it as a digital social experiment.

In most cases, players use the choice of the Divine as a tool to establish particular outcomes in the game's society. Players may choose from three characters that they encounter as possible companions and advisors, but the outcome is also influenced by their other actions and decisions throughout the game. This includes whether the player sides with Templars or mages early on, who they ally with throughout the game, and how they establish themselves in terms of their character's religious beliefs. A faithful Inquisitor, for example, is more likely to support the more moderate and conservative choices of Cassandra and Vivienne, respectively. An Inquisitor driven by power, vengeance, or doing what appears to be the objectively 'right' thing is more likely to lead to a potential outcome of the most progressive Divine option, a 'softened' – or more empathetic and less violent – version of Leliana.

Players discuss the paths and routes to these outcomes, share the trajectories of their own games, and assess the potential results of each option in shaping the game world. While many choices spark divisions among players, this is an area where the majority of players share opinions and lean toward the most radical and progressive option in Leliana. In these discussions, the possible narrative – and game world – outcomes are weighed against each other. As one example, a user confirms their thought process:

> I choose Leliana. She wants to fully reform the Chantry. Cassandra is too linked to the old ways. She wants improvement, but she really just wants a polished version of the old Chantry. Vivienne would just reinforce the problems from the past and things would just get back to the point they are at now. And people would not trust a mage as Divine. Why bother rebuilding the Chantry with someone who can't get support? (User, Fextralife)

Even in cases where there is dissent, this comes from an individualized understanding of the Chantry's position and influence in Thedas. Players still hope to select the best possible person for the role and use this choice as a tool to shape things and influence change for the positive. For one user who represents the less common choice of a moderate Divine:

> I have a lot of doubts about Leliana's major changes. She would cause a schism. She's too revolutionary and that won't work with a lot of people. We'll have to see what effect this has in the long run (maybe there will be none because of BioWare's illusion of choice). But I think Cassandra is the best Divine choice. Her changes will be practical, pragmatic, and sensible. She's much more likely to get things done without splitting the Chantry. (User, Reddit)

Based on the options and opportunities presented by religion in this series, players use this as another tool in their kit toward forming and influencing the story within the provided possibilities and parameters offered by the game. This approach to play encourages the expansion of knowledge and engagement online to explore which directions the narrative can travel as players make determinations that shift the story.

Conclusion

Religion can add to the complexity of a videogame narrative, particularly in cases where a fictional religious landscape grants more detail to a game world. This chapter has taken into consideration the narrative context of the *Dragon Age* game series as well as the player capital involved (Ferdig 2014: 76–77) with religious narratives in these games. *Dragon Age* takes an approach to religion that acknowledges the social dynamics observed with social homogeneity of belief and conflicts arising from increasing modernity and diversity (Berger 2007: 23). In the games, it is common for characters to assume belief in the presence of those with certain in-game ethnic backgrounds as a standard and presumed identity (Banchoff 2007: 14). This lends a degree of social realism to the game world and narrative, while also generally providing the familiar dynamics of religion, religious institutions, and religious belief.

The series focuses on just a few examples of fictional religions but emphasizes religious, social elements alongside examples of intricate lore (cf. Tuckett/Robertson 2014). To some degree, players have a level of agency that intersects with this lore in that they can use it to shape broad outcomes (Schut 2014: 256–60) although their characters are bound to specific belief systems based on their in-game ethnicity. Outside of direct player influ-

ence, the narrative covers some of the more troubling elements related to the possibility of competing for adherents and influence.

Often in cases where belief systems are encroaching on new territory, they are met with resistance and potential violence. Because the game world is on the precipice of establishing a more robust religious marketplace (Norris/Ingleheart 2007: 41), there are many social assumptions reflected in the story as well. This interacts with the social framing of religious beliefs as correct versus incorrect (cf. Radcliffe- Brown 1945). However, this is complicated by the events in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), which pull religious belief away from the sacred and into the world of the tangible or profane (cf. Durkheim 1961).

Additionally, while many games can use religious dynamics as an opportunity to critique religion and religious institutions as part of their gameplay and narratives (Tuckett/Robertson 2014: 94–99), the *Dragon Age* series uses religion as an opportunity to build the game world in familiar and realistic ways (Tamborini/Skalski 2006: 225–7) while also using it as a social critique of individuals, interpretation, and how institutions can be used to further specific goals. Even in instances where characters are vehemently or violently reacting against the Chantry, the focus on individual misuse, misinterpretation, or malfeasance is amplified in character dialogue. This is an interesting approach but makes sense in the context of the centrality of religious belief and practice in these games. Yet it also places players in a position where they, too, come to use institutions to advance their own interests and goals. This commentary is often mirrored through players' use of religious elements, like the choice of Divine, to shape their ideal view of the game world.

This yet again highlights the element of player agency involved with play (Wagner 2012: 121). While agency is an important element of a largely interactive medium (Shinkle 2008: 912), there are boundaries that ensure that play happens within prescribed options (Tanenbaum/Tanenbaum 2010: 15–16). Despite this, however, players find engaging ways to make the story their own in online discussions that form a kind of emergent play (Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 158; Schut 2014: 267–9). In these cases, players use forums to give additional context and backstory to their character, as well as compare the decisions that they made in the game.

These discussions also emphasize an important form of knowledge that is applied in the decisions that players make. The game content and context (Ferdig 2014: 71–74) provide ample information for players to learn, consider, and employ as part of their play. This creates a player capital internal to the game that players can share with one another to help move the game narratives toward the most positive or desirable possible outcome. Videogames, however, are also not wholly separate from "reality" (Campbell/Grieve 2014: 5). External capital in the form of personal morality and religious belief come into play (Ferdig 2014: 76–77), but players integrate this with their in-game knowledge and experience to assess and judge in-game events and decisions.

Because religion is incorporated to some degree as a mechanic (Schut 2014: 256) in this sense, players can use it as a tool to help them shape the game world in the image that they desire. For most players, there is a vested interest in ensuring positive outcomes for the game world (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85; Tomlinson 2021: 722–25), which tend to manifest most commonly in the form of using religion to create progressive change. Regardless of external player capital, there is an investment in engaging in prosocial behaviours (Shariff 2015: 110) in the game world. This aligns with the trends of players hop-

ing to exert a positive influence on games and the characters that inhabit these digital spaces (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85; Tomlinson 2021: 722–25).

Although this study is limited to players of *Dragon Age* specifically and RPGs more broadly, it adds to the current discussion on the possibilities related to and implications of religious belief in videogames. This expands the concept of religion as a game mechanic (Schut, 2014: 256), but indicates that players are invested beyond religion functioning as a simple button to press to achieve a limited response. It also adds to the concept of player capital, which players form based on physical world and in-game knowledge and experience. Both of these elements are explored by players in online discussions where they examine their interests, hopes, and desires for the game world and use religion as one of the ways that they can engage in and support in-game prosocial behaviour.

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Part IV – Concluding thoughts

Unlocking the Spiritual Potential of Games
Reflections and Future Directions

Michele Fanelli and Magdalena M. Strobl

The intersection of narrative, fiction, and spirituality has been a rich ground for exploration throughout history, with narrative frameworks serving as central means of expressing and engaging with spirituality, and tradition and narration serving as key components in religious expression. Narrative media and fictional spaces recurrently stimulate critical reflection on belief and morality, occasionally creating unexpected interplays between popular and sacred culture. Goethe's Faust, for instance, highlights the connection between spirituality and identity, raising questions about personal moral beliefs, distinguishing belief as a communal practice and spirituality as intimate and private. Contemporary cultural productions are no less, as they offer virtual spaces to explore new spiritual modes and expressions. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of fictional worlds as a source of spiritual solace and meditation, offering virtual environments where to seek peace and tranquillity, as exemplified by the popularity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* among individuals living under lockdown. In my personal experience (Fanelli), digital games as well as digitally repurposed Pen and Paper Role Playing Games have been shown to be effective and reliable methods of providing me with the best available proxies for social experiences, enabling me to connect with friends who I was not permitted to meet in person. Although I cannot assert that I was actively seeking a sense of transcendental belonging, it is evident that subconsciously, I was searching for a sense of tranquillity through my affiliation with the tribe. Games supported me (Strobl) in two significant ways during the lockdowns of the pandemic. First, videogames helped me by offering a way to be more present in the moment and focus on the games' storylines or the actions of my avatars. By immersing myself in a virtual world, I could take a break from the stresses and unpredictability of the real world and experience a sense of control and accomplishment during troubling and uncertain times. Second, virtual environments also allowed me to play board games during this period. This possibility connected me with friends and family safely and engagingly and thus, a feeling of belonging and community was created. Ultimately, this mindful practice of gaming and communal connection helped me cultivate a state of tranquillity and peace. This book explored the possibilities and significance of fictional spirituality and spiri-

tual expression practices. While religious themes in fictional works have been analyzed extensively, the role of spirituality in interactive art and fiction has not been extensively studied. Through a wide array of perspectives from various academic fields and practices, this anthology aims to address this gap and offer a fresh look at how narrative and fiction intersect with spirituality, providing a deeper understanding of the role of fiction in expressing and exploring our spiritual lives.

Epiphany is a Live Action Role-Playing game designed to facilitate personal transformation, exploration of spirituality, and philosophical questioning through symbolic enactment, ritual, and play. The game is fashioned as a spiritual retreat, where players are free to explore spiritualities within a community dedicated to growth and validation. Sarah Lynne Bowman has experience designing and participating in larps, and she believes that the qualities of role-playing can be applied to therapy and research as a vehicle for change. *Epiphany* is based on *Mage: The Ascension* and, as such, it features consent-based mechanics, player-driven plots, and collaborative storytelling. *Epiphany* focuses on player-generated content throughout the event involving structured workshop classes during the day, unstructured play at night, and a black box area. Two problems in incorporating spirituality into larps are cultural appropriation and the possible derailment given by a powerful magic play system, which the designer tried to prevent by designing the game to emphasize realistic, embodied play and limiting the focus on powerful magic. They also encouraged the players to avoid cultural appropriation and stereotyping by playing characters from their own cultures, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and races. Nonetheless, players were fostered to express aspects of their identity that they do not usually show society. In conclusion, *Epiphany* is a larp designed as a tool for personal transformation, exploring spirituality, and philosophical questioning through symbolic enactment, ritual, and play. The game employs built-in structures for reflection, debriefing, and processing to concretize insights gained by players. By avoiding cultural appropriation and stereotyping, the game creates a safe space for players to explore aspects of themselves outside of social norms.

Menachem Cohen shares his experience of using the RPG game *Dreamchaser* to examine existential questions and conduct spiritual direction. Through his initial engagement with role-playing games, he realized their, in his words, transformational potential. This experience prompted him to start working with RPGs and to try to understand the healing powers such games can have. Due to the role-playing aspect of RPGs, these games represent a good medium for spiritual direction as they allow players to experience introspection, discovery, and transformation in a safe and constructive space. For instance, letting their character live through experiences and process emotions they usually would not as themselves. However, creating a bond of thoughts and feelings between the players and their character is necessary to be effective. For this reason, the author adapted the game *Dreamchaser*, which can be used to work on personal questions, challenges, and goals and as a tool for therapy and spiritual direction. In this RPG, the player must write down a goal or a dream, their role, and the Milestones. Afterward, players move through each Milestone to reach the central Dream. These sessions include an organic flow of play and talk, ultimately supporting the player's growth. Even though the main focus was on *Dreamchaser*, Menachem argues that *Dungeons & Dragons* and other RPGs, such as *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* or *Polycule*, can be used for such spiritual guidance as the mechanics, rules,

and settings help in navigating the world and challenges, and therefore, support the work of spiritual discovery. He concludes by including future research interests in dungeon design and guide creations. In the end, Menachem's article displays the possibilities of RPGs and spiritual direction for personal growth.

The seeking of spiritual experiences through Live Action Role Play seems to be a recurrent and desired phenomenon, especially by non-spiritual players, despite their attachment to a rational and scientific model for interpreting the world. From Anna Milon's interviews with players of *Curious Pastimes*, a LARP game that traces its setting and rule system to modern paganism, emerges how in make-believe spiritual events, such as the funeral of a character, the mental and emotional boundaries between the character and the player fade as the emotions bleed through, making the events perceived as very close to a real-life spiritual experience. This pursuit of make-believe spirituality offers another perspective on the relationship between magical and rational thinking, i.e. not necessarily dichotomous or opposing but complementary, offering thus a richer perspective for interpreting lived experiences. While role-playing, the fantasy world is temporarily accepted as real and disbelief is suspended. Bleed, the phenomenon where feelings and thoughts from the character transcend into the player and vice versa, allows fantasy and reality to be in a complementary fashion, shifting the relation from a distinction to a conjunction. In the New Paradigm, faith and fantasy are believed to serve the same function: compensation and comfort. The rational model of thought, however, denies this comfort. Entering the Magic Circle by suspending disbelief allows the players to maintain a rational-materialist outlook in their daily lives and experience enchantment in the game space, thus acquiring the comfort of magical thinking without forsaking the rational one.

Being an application of Doris C. Rush and Andrew M. Phelps' existential and transformative game design framework, the videogame *The Witch's Way* weaves together autobiography and fiction to explore themes such as identity, meaning, purpose, and connection, making use of mythical imagery and symbolism as well as ritual enactment. The game's spiritual exploration utilizes mythical imagery and ritual enactment to promote a sense of connection and harmony with nature. Through the protagonist's journey of becoming a witch, the game emphasizes the development of magical abilities, which the authors consider supremely natural and derived from the balance and harmony with all living things encompassed in the energy web. The blossoming of these magical abilities is synonymous with authenticity and living according to one's True Nature, requiring the player to drop into wordlessness and access oneness. The game promotes a holistic and intuitive approach through creative rituals that revolve around play and creativity, meant to challenge the intellectually dominated perception of the world. Overall, this game provides an immersive and transformative experience that encourages rediscovery and personal growth while promoting a more sustainable and ecocentric worldview. *The Witch's Way* demonstrates how integrating autobiography, fiction, spirituality, and game design can be used to explore important themes in a transformative and engaging way. By emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings, and recognizing the intrinsic value of nature, the game promotes an ecocentric philosophy that contrasts anthropocentrism. The Witch's Way is an excellent example of how game design can be used to promote personal development and explore meaningful existen-

tial questions, and how fiction and metaphor can facilitate introspection and personal growth.

Live-Action Role-Playing games have the potential to help individuals emotionally prepare for life-threatening health issues, as demonstrated by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, who took advantage of his personal experience to incorporate the themes of death and dying in larp game design. He believes that the symbolic enactment of rituals in games can be a natural extension of human spiritual and religious practices. The fear of death endured immutable throughout human history and, although it has been a constant source of wonder and spiritual exploration, humans avoid even referring to it, resorting instead to idioms to describe it. Through time various cultures faced the fear of death, trying to alleviate this concern by offering versions of the afterlife or providing arguments why it shouldn't be feared. Existential death anxiety is a topic of psychology and philosophy, with various attempts at comprehending, measuring, or accepting it. When the author faced mortality during the summer of 2018, they were surprised to see that among resignation and frustration, they also felt at peace. The unexpected tranquil response is most probably due to their involvement in Nordic larp games centered on the themes of death and dying. Role-playing impacts identity, as embodying a character alters the sense of identity and the state of consciousness. Additionally, through the bleed phenomenon, it is possible to affect every part of our emotional, cognitive, and physical being. Specific subcategories of bleed can even address components of our fear of dying. Role-playing games can facilitate growth and change in how we think about and prepare ourselves for our inevitable deaths and can become powerful tools for transformation and self-development.

A. Rose Johnson examines the characteristics of the new wave of interest in witchcraft practices, which, possibly stoked by the rise of interest for witchy aesthetics and crystal collecting, makes its way among Gen Z and millennials. While a plethora of available resources are accessible to budding practitioners, each has specific advantages and disadvantages. For example, old-fashioned, racial, or inaccurate historical notions of witchcraft practices may be found in published materials in shops or libraries. A thorough treatment of Wicca, like Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft, may not be suitable for younger practitioners, and its reliance on the Gardnerian Wiccan origin story may damage his credibility. Therefore, some potential practitioners may turn to the internet, specifically TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr, for information on witchcraft practices. Tumblr stands out among these social media platforms since it is more inclusive and less strict, allowing users to learn about different traditions, sects, and secular paths. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for collective versions of witchcraft that empower practitioners to create their paths by picking and choosing the gnosis that suits them. One such gnosis is pop culture witchcraft, which combines fan practices with witchcraft practices and achieved great popularity on Tumblr. Pop culture spells are more accessible and approachable for beginners compared to published texts, using shorthands and symbolism that relate to traditional witchcraft practices, making them easier to understand. The process of sharing and reblogging content on Tumblr makes pop culture witchcraft even more accessible and customizable, allowing for conversations with authors and the addition of personal notes and suggestions. In conclusion, pop culture witchcraft offers a more accessible and customizable version of such prac-

tice that appeals to a younger generation of practitioners and provides an inclusive and collective approach to learning.

While there are multiple noteworthy linguistic, semantic and methodological parallels between ceremonial magic and immersive technology design, Maria Saridaki and Mariza Dima focus on how the two fields can be combined to create transformative, immersive experiences, and do so by proposing a framework of design pillars for mixed reality experiences. For the authors, ceremonial magic can be seen as a system for comprehending the world, allowing practitioners to navigate the varied forces that compromise and shape material creation including exploring its social and embodied aspects. Technology and magic's relationship has a rich history, which shines anew in front of the possible applications of magicians' psychological techniques to the design of mixed reality technologies such as AR glasses. The goal is to create meaningful experiences that elicit emotional responses and invite reflection. Relying on the key features of ceremonies and magic rituals, the authors propose a framework of design pillars for mixed reality experiences based on four qualities: orientation, transitions, enaction, and meaning-making. Referring to the audience, they also propose a shift from the term 'viewer' to 'participant' to acknowledge the importance of all senses and the embodied nature of the experience. The previously mentioned four qualities are essential in mixed reality experiences, whose design should balance the use of anchors and give space to the participant to achieve the goal without breaking the experience. Finally, the authors claim that their exploration is but a simple first step, and much more can be achieved with the insights from experts in both fields.

Felix Schniz believes that videogames can offer players spiritual experiences, as they offer unique and accessible approaches to engage with spiritual imaginary. Spirituality and play are intertwined, both encouraging a state of mind that transcends ordinary reality and follows its own modes of meaning-making. As such, the notion of the sacred-earnest act is explored in relation to videogames, as these offer new spaces where sacral play can be enacted by creating a virtual home for the sacred-earnest and offering hard-coded boundaries in which human interactions occur. Similarly to the objet ambigu, videogames have multiple interpretations and meanings. Players' exploration of video game worlds, which may involve spiritual engagement, can lead to introspection and a better understanding of themselves. Furthermore, videogames offer a feasible strategy for modern people who want to believe in spirituality but consider themselves too secular to do so. Another discussed topic focuses on how academic writing should not discourage the use of the first-person voice, as it is essential for expressing personal and spiritual emotions, for instance, in analyzing the contemplative aspects of walking simulators. At which the author proposes the methodology of close performing, born from the combination of the situationist approach and the literal method of close reading, and involving playing a game several times while making observations using a four-step process: immediate observations, short-term actions, long-term insights, and cascading notes. This methodology aims to balance personal observations with their abstract embedding and helps identify a game's patterns and core motifs. Finally, the author shares his experience playing the walking simulator *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, highlighting the game's immersive qualities and applying the designed methodology. Overall, Schniz concludes that

spirituality is a universal need for belonging and meaning, and videogames offer infinite potential for spiritual realization.

Frank G. Bosman discusses the complex and varied use of in-game violence within video game narratives, focusing on five narrative properties: motivation, trivialization, dehumanization, moralization, and problematization. Violence is often used in videogames to motivate the protagonist for revenge against an enemy faction, occasionally causing a dissonance between game mechanics and narrative, presenting violence as justifiable in retaliation for earlier violence, a rule usually applied only to those who win the conflict. Trivialization is a defining characteristic of in-game violence, where violence is portrayed as fun and consequence-free, creating a power fantasy for the player. This property is linked to the inconsequentiality of violence and death to the text-immanent player, with most games allowing the player to die and respawn endlessly at no or low costs. The text also discusses the property of alienation in violence in digital games, where players experience diminished perceptions of the in-game enemies' human qualities leading to their dehumanization. Many games feature dehumanized adversaries, allowing players to postpone or sidetrack any moral objections involved in the created mayhem. Reversely, in some other cases, games try to make the player reflect on the morality of the in-game violence through moralization and problematization. *Spec Ops: The Line*, taken as an example, challenges the military shooter genre's criticism as a propagator of violence by providing a narrative that directly transfers the moral responsibility for the player's actions to the player and addresses the player directly through loading screens and in-game dialogue. Players' fascination with in-game violence is shown in the properties of trivialization and dehumanization, while moralization reflects an ambiguous attitude towards in-game violence. Lastly, problematization signals to players how immoral their actions in the game actually are, and this game's communication of moral ambiguity towards in-game violence is somewhere between fascination and terror.

Leonardo Marcato uses a spiritual approach of conscious gaming to explore the connection between digital games and spirituality by examining games such as *Planescape Torment*, *Bioshock Infinite*, *Life is Strange*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *and Sid'Meier's Beyond Earth*. One can critically analyze these videogames as cultural products that convey messages about potential pasts, present situations, and future scenarios in a language that resonates with players. Digital games, both indie and high-budget productions, have the power to impact players' worldviews by offering an immersive experience that can push the boundaries of game involvement. Unlike movies, digital games allow for existential involvement in the game, which can extend to all aspects of a player's life. The author argues that from a philosophical perspective, the relationship between playing modern digital games and spirituality is a compelling subject. It can help in understanding what the advancement of technology means for the fundamental element of Human nature and how it evolves in the contemporary world. The article also examines the concept of trans-humanism, which is historically and culturally tied with spirituality. The idea of digital agency, avatar, and immersion can open the ground for discussions on trans-humanism, post-humanism, and how to define Human nature and evolution. Marcato concludes that digital games can have a spiritual dimension that needs to be explored further. The immersive nature of digital games and the existential involvement of

players in them make them an important medium to understand the relation between Humans and technology and how they connect to spirituality.

There is a specific structural and functional cohesion to the design of sacred spaces in isometric top-down computer Role Playing Games, with a teleological rationale behind spirituality and religion. Mateusz Felczak examines the spatial narrative created by sacred architecture in the genre mentioned above, focusing on space, verticality, map layout, and how game mechanics connect with interactive and non-interactive elements of those architectures. The object of this analysis can be found in fantasy-themed or post-apocalyptic titles, whose meaning and function of religion and spirituality must be understood through the spaces' spatial design. One interpretation is modularity and inter-activity, for example, temples, chapels, and natural areas, built from the integral building blocks of gameplay, prioritizing assessable explorability and interactivity. In these games, the neomedieval architecture of sacred objects is formulaic and asset-driven, with negotiable power relations and modifiability through player action. The portrayal of religion in video games is influenced by the mythic-like structures of mythology scholars, and how sacred spaces are used to amplify the divine presence and create an 'unmediated' experience of religion. In cRPGs sacred spaces tend to connectconnect with the natural environment, for instance, being associated with ruined temples and abandoned religious buildings, usually located distant from cities, whose paths are obstructed by natural habitats. The design of these architectures is often teleological, where the hero's progression through the game reflects the advancement toward godhood. The absence of gods in cRPGs can strike a post-secular note, and exploring sacred spaces often affords players more agency. To conclude, the evolving influence of *Dungeons&Dragons* on religion and play may impact future assessments of sacred digital spatiality in upcoming fantasy-themed cRPGs.

Lars de Wildt argues that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise includes religion in a perennial and esoteric manner, which leads consumers to construct meaning through bricolage. He approaches his research by doing a content analysis and including player and developer interviews. The franchise employs mysteries linked to the Catholic church to uncover the plot and conspiracies of different societies. The games also suggest that there is more underneath the surface of societies' history. De Wildt also notes that an increasing number of people turn to the secularisation of religion, that religion changes into privatized bricolage, and the ongoing inclusion of religion in media in the form of the esoteric, the mysterious, or the occult. The author continues that the *Assassin's Creed* displays religion as perennial, which means that throughout history, rituals and beliefs persist but slightly change. Additionally, this idea encompasses the belief that all religions stem from the same mysterious source. Next, de Wildt also argues for the esoteric nature of *Assassin's'Creed*'s inclusion of religion. He describes it as creating meaning through non-institutionalized practices. This includes eclectic traditions such as science, traditional religion, and historical secrets. In the videogame series, it represents as the knowledge transmitted and connects religions, mythologies, science, and other mysteries of history. Important to note here is that only a few have access to this insight. This exclusivity is because all media of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise needs to be consumed to derive the meaning of the presented religion. However, instead of an individual bricolage, the franchise provides a commodified puzzle to be solved. To conclude, this franchise uses the com-

mon truth of religious traditions and the combination of knowledge to create meaning and an understanding of the 'real' truth that only consumers of all media can access.

Graziana Ciola and Francesca Samà examine the representation and function of divine characters in the *Saint Seiya* manga, anime, and video game series. Through an analysis of various *Saint Seiya* video games released since the late 1980s, the article explores how the gods are portrayed, their role within the gameplay, and the distinction between the heroes in the games versus their manga and anime counterparts. The authors also examine how Masami Kurumada's interpretation of traditional epic narrative patterns is influenced by interactive storytelling and how cultural and religious syncretism play a role in the in-game experience. Of particular interest is the game *Saint Seiya: The Hades*, which is argued to offer a religious gaming experience deeply rooted in the game's narrative content. Its gameplay provides a tangible representation and opportunity for players to directly engage with the fundamental concept of *Ananke* or Necessity, which was a prominent aspect of Ancient Greek spirituality and worldview. This study highlights the importance of video game adaptations as building blocks of modern-day classical mythology and as an integral part of *Saint Seiya*'s continuing pop-cultural relevance. Furthermore, this work asserts the significance of the interactive format implemented by hybrid RPG fighting games in exploring different declensions of a traditional narrative structure across several new media. In summary, Ciola and Samà provide a compelling analysis of the representation and function of divine characters in *Saint Seiya* and highlights the unique and immersive gaming experience offered by *Saint Seiya: The Hades*.

David Stevenson investigates how Esotericism is increasingly embedded within Japanese role-playing game narratives and explores how these videogames reflect the occult complexity of non-canonical religious texts in a way that is repurposed as a form of religious experience. For those reasons, he examines four different JRPGs. Both *Final Fantasy VII* and *Xenogears* exhibit a constant miniaturization of humanity, with Humanity lingering at the bottom of a totalizing mythic order in this structural shift from the horizontal conflict of hero and villain to a vertical one. *Xenogears* specifically focuses on a religious myth that directly incorporates Judeo-Christian motifs and situates the player within the mythos while including a Jungian philosophy. The *Shin Megami Tensei* series then includes religious figures, demons, and deities and involves Gnostic eschatology represented in several figures. Next, references to many academics and its inclusion of Adam and Eves as antagonists, presenting as a 'Genesis' for machines, addresses *NieR: 'Automata*'s issue of gnosis. Through allusions to modern philosophy and religious characters, this game creates a modern myth in which the religious awakening occurs in the context of a world beyond enlightenment and history. All these JRPGs feature a retelling of creation myths and explore the theme of heroes fighting destiny. Additionally, these games intend to address the intricate spiritual dynamics of human life recurring in all these games. Stevenson's analysis shows that JRPGs serve as a unique modern conduit of religious expression which might be seen as an attempt toward the output of spiritual thought. He also highlights that these games rework old myths told from the dawn of time with the intricacies of modernity.

Marco Seregni and Francesco Toniolo provide an in-depth analysis of *NieR: Automata* and its rejection of several spiritual issues through a game studies and philosophical approach. The authors examine how the Council of Humanity and its location on the moon

creates a sense of superiority and distance to the player, and how humans attempt to reach this divinity through the shooting of missiles. The lack of communication also reinforces the distance between the creator and the creature. This shows, according to the authors, the sense of the precariousness of the creatures and their life. Next, the authors focused on the concept of faith and trust in divinity, and how *NieR: Automata* employs the religious phenomenon of betrayal in various ways including the rebellion by the Android A2, 'Pascal's ecumenicity, and the imitation of the religious systems by the Machines. 'Adam's rejection of his purpose and accepting the God of the opposite faction contributes to this theme. Another important aspect is the concept of sacrifice and hope. This is represented through the sacrifice of an 'individual's body, and with the loss of backup data that assures the replicability of the Androids. Additionally, the players themselves are asked to delete the game data permanently to help others. The endings further develop this idea. They display a picture between nihilism and hope in their vision of the world. The persuasion of a certain goal and the ending of the purpose of life after achieving it highlights this idea. Overall, the game promotes a secular spirituality that rejects following a God. In the end, Seregni and Toniolo highlighted how a world of war between Humans and Androids rejects spiritual ideas.

The *Dragon Age* series and *Hate* games illustrate that videogames can engage players with meaningful questions concerning spiritual doubt in two different ways. Sarah Faber explores spiritual uncertainty in these games and how they include postmodern fears, doubts, and alternative ways to determine the best religious practices. These videogames also display the practical difficulties of using religion as a moral compass. This research leads to the conclusion that the relation of the individual towards the existence and nature of higher powers and the questioning of such is one method employed by the *Dragon Age* series. In these games, divine magic and the existence of a God are constantly rejected and questioned. According to Faber, this leads to a complex relationship between the protagonist, the spiritual leader, and the NPCs. It raises the question of the difference between gods and influential people. The open-ended nature of these questions allows players to explore and come to their own conclusions. In contrast, the *Hate* games reflect on belief systems in terms of their impact on ethics and politics, demonstrating spiritual doubt on a societal level. In these games, the ancestors' approval complicates leading a good life, which serves as a deity-like figure due to its correlation with moral correctness. In the end, Faber demonstrates that these games offer unique perspectives on spiritual doubt both on an individual and societal level.

Leonid Moyzhes examines *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and how this game constructs a main religion, the Chantry, in its fictional world by relying on external views of religion. In the aforementioned game, the player can create their own story of the Inquisitor through dialogue systems and the decision system, influencing both the stance of your character and the Inquisition as an organization. The game portrays several dimensions of religion, such as social, mythological, as well as doctrinal and ethical. The Chantry itself is also tightly connected to political issues driven by text interpretations, which promote the use of religion to push specific political agendas. This portrayal also de-emphasizes the day-to-day religious life while creating a similarity of secular discourse. Moyzhes also argues that the American Protestant tradition has influenced the Chantry, which is encoded similarly to Medieval Christianity. The Chantry demands that

society is restructured according to their ideals, focusing on interpretations of sacred texts that lead to doctrine and ethics. Religious affiliation and heroic deeds are used to demonstrate adherence to these ideals, while emotion, ritual, and material dimensions are primarily ignored as having no inherent value. Moreover, the game includes the affordance of creating the Chantry as a positive organization to address problems on a societal and humanitarian level. Leonid Moyzhes demonstrates how the American-centric Protestant view and secularism influenced the Chantry through the idea of affordance, allowing players to exercise agency and interpret the game's ideological attitudes.

Christine Tomlinson takes a qualitative approach to explore religion in the *Dragon Age* series, analyzing its position in the game world and narrative and how players engage with it through online fora data. Multiple playthroughs – playing as different genders and with different backgrounds – and analyzing choices, experiences, and assessments of players' public posts in fora led to the results of this study. The author argues that, albeit the game incorporates religious elements of the physical world, the primary purpose is to convey its dynamics and social structures. The *Dragon Age* series also presents various belief systems that vary in emphasis across the games, creating both opportunities and tension. One central question that emerges in such a dynamic is the relationship between individuals and their interpretation and institutions. Character dialogues often represent such conflicts. Moreover, religion serves as a tool for the player to influence the narrative and the game's outcome. Tomlinson also argues that the players include their knowledge, beliefs, and morals, employing them to further develop and explore the game. Online discussions facilitate this process by drawing attention to different interpretations of in-game elements and providing solutions to appropriate choices that lead to the most positive and desirable outcomes. The fora also reveal that players often use religion for prosocial in-game behaviour. Overall, the *Dragon Age* series employs real-world knowledge to provide familiar religious aspects, such as dynamics, institutions, and beliefs highly discussed in online fora.

The relationship between spirituality and games is complex and multifaceted, of which the exploration has just begun. Live Action Role Playing games and Role-Playing Games have been found to offer opportunities for personal transformation, exploration of spirituality, and philosophical questioning, and can be used for therapy, spiritual direction, personal growth, and emotional preparation for life-threatening scenarios. Making-believe spirituality in LARP games can allow players to experience proxy for spiritual experiences while offering a basis for interpreting lived experiences. Games have been created to explore themes of identity, meaning, purpose, and connection, while fan communities use preexisting games to nourish new wave spiritual practices such as pop culture witchcraft. Spiritual practices and rituals, such as occultist ones, are reinterpreted and applied to new technologies, while different methodologies and frameworks are taken from other disciplines and repurposed to better understand and analyze the spiritual experiences that games can offer to players, including the examination of the spatial narrative created by sacred architecture in cRPGs, the portrayal of religion in historical games, and the themes and concepts of video games from a philosophical perspective. It is an object of inquiry also in which ways spirituality and religions are represented in videogames, as the scholars look at several game franchises and analyze how these use religion to create meaning and understanding for their

consumers. Videogames can engage players with meaningful questions concerning spiritual doubt in different ways, and they include postmodern fears, doubts, and alternative ways to determine the best religious practices, as well as the practical difficulties of using religion as a moral compass. Given the richness and complexity of the study of the fruitful relationship between spirituality and games, it is imperative to delve deeper into this field to gain a comprehensive understanding of its underlying concepts, as such an understanding can provide game developers and players with the necessary tools to fully appreciate and harness the value of spiritual experiences in gaming. Hence, this anthology emphasizes the need for continued research and dialogue to advance our comprehension of spirituality in games and unlock its potential for enriching both the gaming experience and the spiritual dimension of our lives.

[transcript]

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