

GAMES AND PLAY

Lars de Wildt

# The Pop Theology of Videogames

Producing and Playing with Religion

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## The Pop Theology of Videogames

# Games and Play

*Games and Play in Contemporary Culture and Society* is a new international and interdisciplinary book series dedicated to game and play research. Its primary focus is on the aesthetic, cultural and communicative aspects of games and play in our contemporary society. The series provides scholars with a peer-reviewed forum for their theoretical, analytical as well as historical contributions to the ongoing discussions on games and play. The series is not limited to digital games; it includes play phenomena, both digital as well as non-digital; and it covers social-scientific, humanities, as well as industry and design approaches. The proposed books should help readers understand the 'ludic' aspect of games and play—the 'gameness' of games and the 'playfulness' of play—without reducing games and play to mere applications or illustrations of other ideas or issues.

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*Producing and Playing with Religion*

*Lars de Wildt*

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# 1. Introduction

## Abstract

Religion is surprisingly common in videogames. That is odd: religion was supposed to disappear under modernity, but survives in media despite decreased church attendance. It is now far more likely for young people to encounter religion in videogames than in church. Why is that so? And how should that change our understanding of religion? In this introduction, I summarize the related literatures on secularization, religion, games and play. Particularly religion and play have been theoretically intertwined, from the works of Durkheim and Huizinga to those of contemporary experts on games and religion – some of whom have been overly enthusiastic about finding religion. I finish by outlining how this book will theorize the pervasive and persistent presence of religion in contemporary videogames, asking why game makers use religion in their games, and how players make sense of this.

**Keywords:** religion, games, play, secularization, sociology of religion, game studies, enthusiastic theologians

During fieldwork at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco, I spent most of the week explaining my research to game designers. With over 28,000 of them attending GDC that year, there was a lot of explaining to do. The most common question was not, “Why do you study what we make?” Most game developers are acutely aware that their industry is the largest and most interesting cultural industry in the world. Rather, the most common question was:

What does religion have to do with videogames anyway?

The question struck me most immediately one time, not because the developer in question was so surprised, but because that genuine shock came from a developer who had been working with Ubisoft in Montréal

for years. This is surprising only because this person had worked on *Assassin's Creed*, a game series drenched in religion. It is about a faction of historically Muslim (now secular) "Assassins" who fight the historically Catholic (now corporate) "Templars." Both are in search of the biblical "Apple of Eden" throughout history, in a Dan Brown-like litany of rituals, revelations and religious symbology. Few game series engage so centrally with the role of religion in human history – indeed, the example will run throughout this book – yet the developer I'd met just had not thought of it like that.

It suggested to me three things. First, that religion has appeared so centrally in videogames since their inception, that religion has become such an unsurprising presence, that it is barely registered by the very people who make and play those games. Second, that developers use religion in their work in ways that are so far divorced from religious practice and belief that it no longer strikes them as religious at all – but as just a convention of the genre, perhaps, or as such a minute detail (a texture, a building, a piece of music worked on for months) that it loses its religious context until an outsider like me points it out. Third, that videogames tend to depict religion in such a way that it neither offends, nor surprises, nor is necessarily even noticed by most, no matter how strong or absent their audiences' personal religious beliefs are.

Speaking of such audiences: as players ourselves, my friends and I grew up playing as Priests (Thomas), Druids (Johan), Shamans (Jan) and holy Paladins (Lars). We gained our quests from gods, to slay demons or find sacred artefacts. None of this was odd to us, despite growing up in the Netherlands, one of the most secular countries in the world (Dentsu Research Institute, 2006; WIN/GIA, 2012; Zuckerman, 2006). We were playing with religion in the same way that children might play soldier, doctor, shop, or house. In such cases, we pretend to be in imaginary situations precisely because they are so different from our daily lives. For many of the people I have studied for this book, as well as the people I have presented my findings to, playing with religion is about as far removed from our daily lives as being a medical doctor. The research for this book has been conducted and presented in Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and other countries. These are some of the most secular countries in the world, with many individuals (making up a large percentage of the population) reporting that they are "not a religious person" or even "convinced atheists" (Dentsu Research Institute, 2006; WIN/GIA, 2012; Zuckerman, 2006). Notably, the percentage among academics and other highly educated people is even higher (Johnson, 1997; Sherkat, 2008). As a

consequence, the inverse of the question above haunts me academically as well, on research visits, at conferences, and receptions – just as it haunts this text:

What do videogames have to do with religion, anyway?

Surely, not only developers, players and academics, but also the reader of this book, should be wondering the same thing. Religion is treated in many circles I frequent, both professionally and privately, as obscure, old-fashioned or even strangely taboo.

Yet, or perhaps because of those reasons, religions of all kinds are staples in videogames. They have served as an inspiration and a setting for games across decades, platforms and genres – and religion sells. One of 2022's most anticipated releases was *Elden Ring*, a game filled with various religions and mythologies. The previous year saw another release of *Halo*, in which – if the name was not enough – an alien “Covenant” faction seek religious artefacts and transcendence. The best-selling Game of the Year in 2020 was *Hades*, about the Greek god Zagreus escaping the underworld. In 2019 many Game of the Year lists were dominated by *Sekiro*, a game filled to the brim with Buddhist references and Shinto rituals. In 2018 it was *God of War*, whose ancient Greek protagonist moved to a Norse mythological setting, the sequel of which was one of 2022's biggest releases. In 2017? *The Legend of Zelda*. A game series made by Nintendo since 1986, whose churches, temples and Jesus-like hero are heavily based on its Japanese designers' fascination with the magic and symbology of an exotic and mysterious faraway religion: Catholicism.

Such examples abound. Indeed it is more likely for “young” people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – the average age of players in the United States is 34 (ESA, 2018) – to encounter religion in videogames than they would in church or anywhere else. This may sound simply provocative, but it is true that 2.2 to 2.5 billion players globally (>28.5%) and 338 out of 512 million EU citizens (66%) spend about 6 hours per week on average in-game (Limelight Networks, 2018; Newzoo, 2017; WePC, 2019); whereas weekly church attendance for adults under 40 years of age is 36% globally, 28% in the US, 16% in Canada and 10% in Europe, and declining (Pew Research Center, 2018). Put colloquially, for many adults, especially well-educated Western Europeans below 40 like me, church is a thing we see on a screen – where the magic is *real* – instead of on Sunday.

Nonetheless, this is as much a book about religion as it is about videogames. I want to stress the importance of both in modern media cultures

and I aim to contribute to fields studying either. Whether I meet scholars of religion or of media, they will inevitably ask me one of the two questions above: “What does religion have to do with videogames *anyway?*” and “What do videogames have to do with religion *anyway?*” Still, when I ask them what games they have enjoyed in the past, invariably one comes up that is deeply immersed in religious meaning or history: *Assassin’s Creed*, *Civilization*, *Halo*, *Destiny*, *Skyrim*, *Final Fantasy*, *Fallout*, and so on.

Why are videogames, the largest cultural industry on the globe (ERA, 2018; ESA, 2018), so often invested in religious heritage? More specifically, in this book I ask:

- Which choices lead game makers to use religion in their videogames?
- How do players make sense of and relate to religion in videogames?
- How does this change religion?

This introduction will start out, firstly, with an overview of what happened to religion in the supposedly secular West. I argue that while religion was supposed to disappear under modernity, it has in fact remained central to many societies across the world, and survives in Western media despite decreased church attendance. Secondly, I go over how religion and play have been theoretically intertwined throughout much of the literature on either. Thirdly, I outline how this book will theorize the persistent presence of religion in contemporary videogames over the course of its chapters.

## Religion’s Retreat from Churches to Media

In the past 150 years, few topics have been so central to the social sciences and humanities as religion and its decline under modernity. Karl Marx insisted that under modernity “all that is holy is profaned” (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 10), and Durkheim argued that the “the sphere of religion” in society “is continually diminishing” as a result of “the basic conditions for the development of societies” (Durkheim, 2014, p. 132). Max Weber, who is considered to be, along with Marx and Durkheim, a “founding father” of sociology (e.g., Baehr, 2017; Boudon et al., 1997; Connell, 1997), had a similarly teleological view of religion’s disappearance under modernity.

Weber notoriously saw his contemporary society in 1917 as “disenchanted” by scientific progress, which presents the world as technically knowable, meaning that “one need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such

mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service” (Weber, 1919, p. 139). Marx, Durkheim and Weber, each in their own way, present the coming of modernity as an irreversible loss of religion, as something that should be regarded as old or even “savage.” It is partly an idea rooted in Eurocentrist racism. Early anthropologists like Tylor (*Primitive Culture*, 1871), Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, 1890) and Lévy-Bruhl (*Primitive Mentality*, 1923) paved the way for associating religion disdainfully with what Frazer called (from his Cambridge armchair) our “rude forefathers” using religion to understand the world (1890, p. 1655).

It is in this context that this book finds itself in an awkward split: on the one hand, I explicitly denounce the Eurocentrist bias of many social scientific and humanities studies, as I (and co-authors) have done and demonstrated elsewhere (e.g., de Wildt et al., 2019; Hammar et al., 2021; López López et al., 2019). On the other hand, this book is *about* religion in the West, for several reasons that I should briefly explain here along with what I mean by “the West” in this context. Firstly, as this overview of the literature will explain, secularism is in the sense introduced above a peculiarly Western problem. Secondly, the category of “religion” as such is arguably a Western concept, too – and one that has been applied to non-Western cultural traditions in ill-fitting, retrospective and arguably colonialist ways (Fitzgerald, 2000; King & Hedges, 2014; Masuzawa, 2005; cf. Navarro-Remesal, 2017; de Wildt & Aupers, 2021). What I mean when I write about “Western,” “post-secular” societies throughout this book is what Jürgen Habermas identified as the religiously “de-institutionalized” societies of the West: Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (2008, p. 17) – in other words, (settler-)European societies. These societies, according to Habermas, are adjusting “to the continued existence of religious communities [despite] an increasingly secularized environment” (ibid., p. 19). I am aware that my choice to focus on religion and games in the “West” as such, albeit a theoretically informed one, presents a blind spot in the current project. It is important to state that this does not imply a claim to universality, as so many social scientists before me have presented studies of the West. It is instead an explicit demarcation, and I have explored this blind spot in other avenues, which I will continue to do (de Wildt et al., 2019; Hammar et al., 2021; López López et al., 2019). I am furthermore grateful for the work of all the scholars who have studied this far more extensively (e.g., Blom, 2020; Fiadotau, 2017; Hutchinson, 2019; Navarro-Remesal, 2017; Zeiler, 2014; Zeiler & Mukherjee, 2022), whose work continues to inform mine here and elsewhere.

Rather uniquely then, contemporary Western statistics do show a decrease in religious participation as Marx, Durkheim and Weber have predicted,



especially in the case of Western youngsters (Dobbelaere & Voyé, 2000; Funk & Smith, 2012; Pew, 2019). However, this is not a worldwide, but rather a demographically skewed observation (Kaufmann, 2008; Kaufmann et al., 2012; Thomas, 2007), which favours traditionally Christian conceptions of theology (Heelas, 1996; Luckmann, 1967). Secondly, and as a consequence, it denies both the resurgence of Christianity in Latin America and Africa through the unexpected popularity of Pentecostal and other forms of Evangelical Protestantism (Berger, 2005; Meyer, 2004), as well as the resurgence of Islam in global demographics and the public sphere (Berger, 2005; Habermas, 2008; Thomas, 2007), and other religions across the globe. Indeed, Europe, and more recently North America, seem to be the only “big exception” of continued religious decline (Berger, 2005; see also Berger et al., 2008; Brown & Woodhead, 2016; Davie, 2002).

Even then, that is only true when myopically looking at existing historically institutionalized forms of religiosity (Clark, 2012; Shiner, 1967): churches, rituals and what Grace Davie calls “belonging” to classical religious organizations (1990, 1994). Others have argued instead that religion has just changed in ways that secularization theorists had previously not been able to predict (e.g., Shiner, 1967). In Davie’s example, surveys suggest that Europeans and Brits *believe* in God, hell, heaven and so on, but just do not attend church or see themselves as *belonging* to an organized religion (1990, 1994). Whereas Davie looked for traditional religious concepts outside of institutional religion, Thomas Luckmann argues that there are other wholly *non-traditional* religious beliefs and practices emerging. Even if institutionalized church religion may be in decline – but again, only really in the West – Luckmann argued that it made way for a more privatized “invisible religion” (1967, p. 103). These individually customized forms of religion are typically theorized as a shift from “religion” to “spirituality,” often identifying the latter with “New Age” and conceiving it as “post-Christian,” “alternative” or “holistic” (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Partridge, 2004; Woodhead & Heelas, 2005).

Rather than in weekly Mass or daily prayer, we can find spirituality, astrology and other forms of “invisible” religion clearly visible in self-help books, podcasts and streaming platforms. This partial displacement of religion from church to media starts about as soon as churches start emptying. Christopher Partridge identifies George Harrison’s flirtation with Eastern spirituality as one such example from the 1960s; a “re-enchantment of the West” that continues until his year of writing (2004), with then-hit series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, *True Blood* and the *Vampire*

*Diaries*, each offering a “return to a form of magical culture” through popular media (p. 40).

Many of the analyses of this “re-enchantment” of the West focus rightly on media as the preferred site for religious engagement. Self-help books, magazines and podcasts aside, popular culture plays a prominent role in the persistence of religion in secular societies. Christopher Partridge observed a “re-enchantment of the West” through music, film and television, designating such pop-cultural influences as George Harrison and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as popularizing spirituality, the occult and other alternatives to institutionalized religion: a “return to a form of magical culture” through popular media (2004, p. 40). Lynn Schofield Clark (2005) documented ethnographically how teens deal with such interweaving of the supernatural and religion in fiction and found that teens’ engagement with series like *Angel*, *Buffy* or *The X-Files* led them to reconsider their religious stance against (or sometimes back in line with) organized religion, while speculating about the place of magic and the supernatural in their own belief systems (*ibid.*).

## Religious Play

Games have a specific role to play when it comes to this presence of religion in popular media. There is a long tradition in which play and religion are theoretically intertwined, and for good reason. Consider the similarities between Durkheim and Huizinga, both of whom position play as central to human experiences of religion. Durkheim’s ethnography of the indigenous Australian Warumungu describes their celebration of the snake Wollunqua by stressing two things. First, that ritual splits the world into “two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds,” namely “the profane world and the [...] world of sacred things” (Durkheim, 1995, p. 220). Taking part in the excitement of the ritual left a lasting impression that this was an experience apart from daily life, and it is from what Durkheim calls this “effervescence, that the religious idea seems to have been born” (*ibid.*). Durkheim explains such effervescence as game-like, lacking direct purpose:

[T]hey escape, partly without destination, displaying themselves merely for the sake of displaying themselves, and taking pleasure in what amount to *games*. [...] Thus, religion would not be religion if there was no place in it for free combinations of thought and action, for games, for art, for all that

refreshes a spirit worn down by all that is overburdening in day-to-day labor. (1995, p. 385)

This is not mere cherry-picking on my behalf. It is remarkable just how often the words “play” and “game” occur (154 times) as descriptors of what Durkheim observes in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, compared to how often his iconic concept of “effervescence” shows up (34 times, in both cases counted in Karen Fields’ 1995 translation of the book).

Twenty-six years after Durkheim’s work, Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga made a similar argument: that play creates a separated time and space, much like Durkheim’s ritual separation of the profane and the sacred. Huizinga imbues the “consecrated spot” of play with this same sacred potential, in perhaps the most often cited section of *Homo Ludens* on the “magic circle” (among which, notably, Consalvo, 2009; Juul, 2008; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004):

Just as there is formally no distinction between a game and a sacred act, that is to say, that the sacred act occurs in the same way as a game; so also the sacred place is formally indistinguishable from a play space. The arena, the card-table, the magical circle, the temple, the theatre, the movie screen, the court of justice: they are all, in form and function, play spaces. That is to say, they are all hallowed ground, secluded, enclosed, sanctified terrain; in which special rules are valid. They are temporary worlds within the everyday, for the completion of finite acts. (Huizinga, 1938, p. 10)

Huizinga never differentiates between the “game and a sacred act” nor between “the sacred place [and] a play space”: both have the potential to create a separate “hallowed [...] sanctified” temporary world apart from the profane (ibid.), just as they do in Durkheim’s analyses.

Many other seminal works on play and games share the discourse of Durkheim and Huizinga. Sociologist of religion (and game scholar) Roger Caillois studied Durkheim and, in his book-length response to Huizinga, argues that “all play presupposes the temporary acceptance [...] of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe” (1961, p. 19). Brian Sutton-Smith, in *The Ambiguity of Play*, calls religion and play similar, but “in effect rivals for the promotion of such altered states of consciousness” of becoming “lost in the experience and thus transcend[ing] everyday cares and concerns” (2009, p. 67), stressing later that while “religion and play are contrasted in western society as sacred versus profane; in many societies

some forms of contestive and festive play have been received as sacred and as obligatory on ceremonial occasions" (ibid., p. 85; and see empirically, e.g., Anthony, 2014). Victor Turner also compares play to entering a "liminal zone" (1982), and others alike argue that in such spaces "serious" issues of everyday life, culture and politics are transgressed, reversed and re-negotiated (e.g., Geertz, 1972; van Bohemen et al., 2014).

Modern game scholarship inherits these ideas, especially in studies of religion in games. Sociologist Stef Aupers' study of fantasy massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) argues that they offer players, on the one hand, a "secular division between fact and fiction" by reserving magic and mystery to the fictional (2007, p. 250), while, on the other hand, offering temporary "realistic online worlds" that are eagerly chosen by players who "increasingly choose [such] realities that are experienced as real, meaningful and enchanting" (ibid., p. 267). Anthropologist Ryan Hornbeck interviews players who relate to their avatar through their "soul," prompting Hornbeck to theorize their experiences as "spiritual" and akin to "collective effervescence" (2012) – i.e., the type of group excitement over shared rituals that Durkheim describes as the origin of religion (Durkheim, 1995). Theologian Rachel Wagner directly equates religious ritual with videogames, in which – away from the "vicissitudes of contemporary life" (2014, p. 193) – its "practitioners give themselves over to a predetermined set of rules that shape a worldview and offer a system of order and structure that is comforting for its very predictability" (ibid.). Better yet, theologian Robert Geraci argues that videogames "provide many of their users with the products of traditional religious institutions: communities, ethical systems, sources of meaning and purposive action, and feelings of transcendence," making them "virtually sacred" (2014, p. 75).

Academics from theologians to sociologists have picked up on this affinity between religion and games, noting it in edited volumes (Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Detweiler, 2010), methodology handbooks (Šisler et al., 2017), dissertations (Perreault, 2015; Steffen, 2017), and identifying religious practices and beliefs in games to find Judaism (Gottlieb, 2015; Masso & Abrams, 2014), Islam (Šisler, 2008), Hinduism (O'Donnell, 2015; Zeiler, 2014) or "god" (Bosman, 2019; Leibovitz, 2013).

A large part of this research on religion in videogames is occupied by the "enthusiastic scholar" of media and religion. Without wanting to trivialize their work, these are the enthusiastic theologians, religious scholars and sociologists of religion who find theoretical similarities and references to religion in the unexpected place of (secular) popular culture and automatically ascribe a supernatural substance to them as a consequence. Their project

risks being overly indexical: it points out a presence of religious signs in 21<sup>st</sup> century mainstream culture – ritual structures, narrative similarities, images of gods and so on – and too often subsequently rests on its laurels. As if to say, “Here is religion. It was lost but we have found it.” *Checkmate atheists* – to paraphrase common internet parlance.

This enthusiasm for pointing out religion is apparent, for instance, when sociologist of religion William Bainbridge plays *World of Warcraft* and, “for many hundreds of hours, frequently encountering religious symbolism,” states that this “newest secular technology returns us to the origins of religion” (2013, pp. 1–3). Liel Leibovitz calls videogames “a godly medium” which “calls on the same faculties as does shuffling into shul [...] or rising to church” (2013, pp. x–xi). Most radically, theologian Frank Bosman delivers more than one book-length catalogue of Christianity’s appearance in videogames (2018, 2019), concluding that videogames are *loci theologici*, i.e.:

[C]ultural object[s] – like for example a song, film or dance performance – in which God reveals Himself to us as Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker and in which this divine revelational act is reflected on in one way or another [...] videogames [are such] *loci theologici*, as “finding places” of faith and theology, of reflection and criticism about the hidden God of our Western world. (Bosman, 2019, p. 251–252)

## Producing and Playing with Religion

This all may well be so, and the enthusiastic theologian has a right (perhaps a duty) to find gods in games. But it is one thing to observe that religion continues to make its *appearance* in popular culture and another thing to ask what that actually means. More concretely: *Why* does an industry with a largely secular audience use religious content in its games? *Which* religions are represented and *how*? And is any of that meaningful at all to those who play those games? The attitudes and considerations of whoever produces and consumes religious content in popular culture say something about how we treat religion in our cultures and economies. And those producers and consumers are often not theologians or religious scholars, who may be too invested in their own readings to critically ask whether those signs are actually experienced religiously by players.

It is without doubt important to look at religion and videogames critically (including by theologians), in order to observe what is and what is not represented. But there are two recurring problems with the literature on

this. One is a “functionalist” bias: if play functions like ritual, or even religion, who is to say that the mere representation of religion makes it function religiously? Even then, a lot of things “function” like religion! Theories of religious functionalism focus on what religion *does*, by emphasizing the primacy of actions in addition to beliefs, in “uniting followers into a single moral community” (Hamilton, 1995, p. 17). As cited above, Geraci describes *World of Warcraft* guilds as “virtually sacred” because games like it “provid[e] many of their users with the products of traditional religious institutions: communities, ethical systems, sources of meaning and purposive action, and feelings of transcendence” (2014, pp. 13–14). Described in this way, the climate-activist group Extinction Rebellion could claim to do the same. Royale Union Saint-Gilloise, perhaps the most remarkable football club in Belgium, does the same things. Stella Artois does many of them. Are the activists of XR, football club Union and beer brand Stella Artois religions, religious, or sources of religious experience? Probably not in any theoretically meaningful way, if it is without belief in a supernatural. A second problem is a “substantialist” bias, which confuses the occurrence of religious representation in videogames with the substance of supernatural entities. By taking the gods or beliefs in videogames seriously as religious substances, enthusiastic scholars skip the question of belief, whereas believing is usually done by people – and often in different ways from each other, to say the least. Wars have been fought for less.

In the case of both problems, the solution is to do empirical, sociological research, especially since believing, belonging, making games and playing them are done by people. Do game developers make their games in order for them to function religiously and to convey beliefs? Some indeed might. Do game players experience games religiously, and do they come to believe? Some indeed might. But we barely know whether or how this happens, and how different developers and players make, play and understand all of this differently from each other. A Muslim player and a Hindu player might look, play and understand the same game differently, especially if that game is, say, *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* – whose protagonist directly depicts a Hindu god from the *Ramayana*, one of the most important epics of Hinduism. Similarly, atheist, agnostic, Amish, Azali and Armenian Apostolic game makers may make different games because of their religious position, or they may approach parts of game development differently – even when the content is not directly related to religion.

For these reasons, to research the cultural production and consumption of religion is the only way to go beyond what religious functions and meanings are represented in videogames, which have already been dutifully identified

by enthusiastic scholars of religion. That is why this book employs a two-part approach to religion in videogames: by asking:

- Which choices lead game makers to use religion in their videogames?
- How do players make sense of and relate to these representations?

Based on my answers to these questions, I will return to the question of “What does religion have to do with videogames anyway?” Or more specifically, in the conclusion I will ask

- How should we theorize the appearance of religion in the largest cultural industry of the (supposedly) secularized West, and what kind of religious change does this entail?

As a consequence, the book is divided into two parts, containing four empirical chapters which can be read in any order. After this introduction, Chapters 2 and 3 focus on videogame *production*. They will be about how games are made (so not in the industry sense of what a “producer” does, which is to oversee a game’s development and stay within a reasonable budget and timeline). Chapters 4 and 5 will be about videogame *consumption*, or how players assign meaning to the games they play.

Part I thus builds on and contributes to the field of (game) production studies. Production studies scholars study the way games are made, and why they are made that way. They do so through conducting ethnographies and interviews of game developers and their studios (e.g., O’Donnell, 2014; Kerr, 2017); carrying out political-economic analyses of game production, distribution, and corporate documentation (Kerr, 2006; Nieborg, 2011, 2021); and more broadly studying “the social and historical forces that inform the design [...] and the perceptions of those who create” them to understand the choices developers make (de Smale et al., 2019, p. 392). These choices and their context vary greatly within their global, local and/or hobbyist contexts, furthermore depending on platform, funding and business models (Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021; cf. Garda & Grabarczyk, 2016; Keogh, 2021, 2022; Švelch, 2021; Šisler, et al., 2022). Part I of this book aims to combine these approaches – ethnography, interviews, political-economy and cultural context – to, in the words of game production scholars Olli Sotamaa and Jan Švelch, “uncover the economic, cultural, and political structures that influence the final form of games, whether it is,” as Chapter 2 of this book studies in the case of Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed*, “a commercial blockbuster developed by publicly traded companies with the help of countless outsourcing partners,” or as Chapter 3

studies, “indie sensation[s] created by a small team in a co-working space,” if even at that scale (2021, p. 8). Part I of this book contributes to production studies in the form of two chapters, further outlined below.

Chapter 2 (‘Making Religion at Ubisoft’) is based on fieldwork and 22 interviews at the main office of Ubisoft in Montréal, in order to find out how religion is used in AAA (i.e., “big budget”) videogames, specifically *Assassin’s Creed*. By looking at one corporate case study, this chapter outlines the choices by which revolving teams of around a thousand employees and various globally outsourced satellite studios end up producing *Assassin’s Creed’s* specific representation of religion. *Who* decides to put religion into popular best-selling videogames? *How* does an amorphous team of creative directors, historians, writers, designers and others decide on what hundreds of programmers, narrative designers and others end up making a small part of?

Chapter 3 (‘Indie-pendent: The Arthouse Gods of Indie games’) contrasts this study of AAA development with an interview study of 35 individual independent (“indie”) game makers from different religious backgrounds. Indie games (as both a genre and a production context) are presented as original, diverse and often autobiographical. How does that translate to religious representation? Do indie developers represent their own religious positions, how, and why (not)? By looking at the popular indie phenomenon, this chapter both reduces its scope to singular game designers, while also broadening its scope outside of the hegemonic AAA videogame industry and into designers hubs throughout the Western world, including Western Europe, North America and Australia.

Part II flips the book’s focus from studying production to studying consumption. Research on consumers (or players), their receptions, understandings and interpretations of media – and especially games – has a long tradition originating in literary theory, theatre and communication studies (e.g., Jauss, 1982; Bennett, 1990; Hall, 1980). The general difference with content analysis and hermeneutics – originally a term for the scholarly understanding of divine messages – is that instead of scholars (such as theologians) interpreting a text or message, scholars study the “native” interpretations of non-scholarly readers or their “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980). The consequence of studies like this is that a text’s meaning is shown to be not just dependent on who produces (writes, makes, distributes, sells) it, but also on who consumes it and when. To name one classic example, a working-class consumer of a soap opera like *Dallas* may understand it differently than an upper-middle-class viewer: Ien Ang showed that viewers identified with different characters and judged plot progressions differently based on their class (1985, p. 105), and gender (p. 117). In addition



to this, games are not just understood: they are actively manipulated and configured by players (Aarseth, 1997; Murray, 2017; Raessens, 2005), who make choices, explore game boundaries, subvert or break the rules and so on (Apperley, 2010; de Wildt, 2014a, 2014b; Shaw, 2017) – leading to the methodical inquiry through surveys, interviews, discourse analyses and (auto-)ethnographies of how players and their surrounding communities play and understand games (e.g., Aupers, 2012; Pearce, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2014; Mäyrä, 2008, pp. 159–162). Part II enters into this tradition by studying players and the cultures surrounding them to answer how players talk about, understand and play games in relation to their own religion and games' religious contents.

Chapter 4 ('Public Religion on Videogame Forums') is an analysis of player communities at large, by looking into the discourse of five popular gaming forums. How does "gamer" subculture speak about religion, and how do they deal with both their divergent religious backgrounds as well as their different interpretations of religion's role in the games they play? These debates prove particularly interesting in the context of theories suggesting there is a retreat of religion from the public sphere, revealing a type of "public religion" prompted by the games they play.

Chapter 5 ('Single-player Religion') delves into the individual relationships of players with games and religion. Based on 20 interviews with agnostics, atheists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims and others, this chapter asks how players use games on a personal level to explore belief, identity and religious practice. By playing with other worldviews, they may gain access to other faiths and worldviews, but what does that do to their own beliefs and belongings? And how does that relate to existing conceptions of religion and absolute meaning?

Throughout these empirical chapters, a broad range of processes is laid out through which religion is produced and played with in videogames. In the conclusion ('Pop Theology'), I will consider what implications this has for religious change, in order to propose my own theory on the role of developers and consumers in playing with religion through 21<sup>st</sup> century videogames.

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# Part I

## Producing Religion

“Which Choices Lead Game Makers to  
Use Religion in their Videogames?”





## 2. Making Religion at Ubisoft

### Abstract

This chapter takes a look into the offices of Ubisoft Montréal, which is with 3500 staff members the biggest game studio currently in the world, and the main place of development for *Assassin's Creed* during most of the franchise's lifespan. This chapter draws on 22 interviews with *Assassin's Creed* developers, including its original creator (Patrice Désilets) and most of its directors to programmers, artists, writers and others who have worked on a best-selling series that thrives on the mystery of religion throughout history. Doing so, it argues that commercial interests drive a corporation to create a nostalgic "marketable religion" that commodifies belief by reducing it to an acceptable version for the largest possible audience. Five editors and a handful of decision-makers lead thousands of workers globally to make a digital religion without beliefs.

**Keywords:** production studies, cultural industries, commodification, *Assassin's Creed*, historical mystery, sci-fi perennialism

Ninety-five million players have waged fictional Holy War against the Templars, playing as Muslim Assassins or their various modern-day equivalents in the *Assassin's Creed* games. As noted in the introduction, it is increasingly likely that this relatively young audience is mostly secular. Yet Ubisoft Montréal's *Assassin's Creed* series (*AC*) is one of the best-selling games of the recent decade, even though its premise and settings are religious through and through. Ubisoft is not a religious organization: its Montréal studio is the biggest game studio in the world, and they are driven (presumably) by profit, not ideology.

So, who decides how and why to make religious content for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience? To answer these questions, this chapter is based on 22 expert interviews with a mix of famous and anonymous game developers who were involved in the start and continuation of the *AC* franchise since 2007. The analysis reveals among "whom" decision-making is distributed in the

cultural industries, how that leads to certain worldviews and aesthetics being represented and why Ubisoft's version of "marketable religion" comes to be produced for a global audience.

### Ubisoft's Religious Franchise

If modernism and technological calculation lead to a disenchantment of the world, as sociologists like Marx and Weber suggest, it is surprising to see the videogame industry rely so heavily on religion. Why, in other words, does one of the most advanced technological industries in the world sell magical worlds full of gods and religious organizations to millions of secular(izing) players? Research on videogames and religion has indeed observed that it is odd to have religious tropes appear so dominantly in games like *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy* or *Zelda* (Bainbridge, 2013; Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Perreault, 2012). However, one recurring example rises above these, both in the literature as well as for players and online communities themselves, based on previous research (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019, 2020): Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed*. Souvik Mukherjee writes that "Ubisoft's understanding of the religious differences is important in shaping the players' attitude to the game" (2016, p. 393), while theologian Frank Bosman goes so far as to claim that "in the *Assassin's Creed* game series, developer Ubisoft reinterprets traditional Christian mythology" (Bosman, 2016, p. 63). Reza Sattarzadeh Nowbari adds that "in spite of the game developers' assertion of having had a culturally divergent group for producing the game and the lack of any sort of dogmatism," a reference to the game's opening disclaimer,<sup>1</sup> "it could be argued that the game is full of messages referring to the very present day and deciphering these messages can lead to a better understanding of this game" (2012, p. 207).

What such readings have in common, firstly, is that "developer Ubisoft" is personified into a monolithic entity with underlying intentions. And secondly, that these intentions can be deciphered or understood, leading to a better understanding of the game. But who is this monolithic developer, and how – as indeed Nowbari suggests – can knowing Ubisoft and the choices and cultural backgrounds that led to the *AC* series aid in understanding

1 Since the first game in 2007, the first screen displays a disclaimer reading "Inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs." Starting with *Syndicate* in 2015, an addition reads "various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities."

how religion ends up in a 21<sup>st</sup> century industry? While previous research has looked into how religion is represented in games (Bosman, 2015; de Wildt, 2019; de Wildt et al., 2018; Wiemker & Wysocki, 2014) and what players do with religion in games (Aupers & Schaap, 2015; de Wildt & Aupers, 2019, 2020), researchers have rarely asked the question *why* game developers choose to use religion in their games, and how they come to make such decisions. In other words, while people have looked at games and their consumption by players, they have seldom looked at their production. This chapter, by contrast, asks the questions: *Who* decides to put religion into popular best-selling videogames? and *How* are these decisions made and *why*?

## Methodology

To answer these questions, I conducted fieldwork in Montréal, consisting predominantly of two types of interviews, all with workers at Ubisoft's Montréal studio, the lead studio for *AC* (with the exception of *Syndicate* and *Odyssey*). One type of interview was anonymous, with various workers from all different branches of game development (programmers, game designers, level designers etc.). These anonymous participants were sought out to compare their experiences (shared from the safety of anonymity) with named interviewees' accounts. In the same period I conducted expert interviews with a key informant in the industry and 16 named participants: various creative directors, writers, directors and lead designers. The reason they are not anonymous is twofold: first, their name attests to their central importance and authority in the process of making these games, and thus the value of their insights. Second, it is difficult to keep directors and lead designers anonymous: they are by definition famed game developers at the top of their career, directing hundreds of workers over multiple years. As such, their names are credited at the end of games, as they are in the list of participants shown in table 1.

In total, 56 developers were approached across the spectrum of producers, creative directors, writers, game designers, level and mission designers, programmers, artists, animators, audio engineers, quality assurance, marketing and so on. In the end, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted (39%), with 51% non-responders and 7% who declined. Participants are of various genders, races, beliefs and sexualities – as indeed the “disclaimer” announces – although the majority of participants was male, white and agnostic if not vocally atheist. Many of those who wanted

Table 1. List of (former) Ubisoft Informants and Participants

Name	Role(s)	Games
0	<b>Osama Dorias Informant</b>	<b>Other Ubisoft games: general Montréal industry insider; key informant.</b>
		<b>AC1 AC2 Broth. Rev. AC3 AC4 Rogue Unity Syn. Origins Odyssey</b>
1	Patrice Désilets Original Creator, Creative Director	✓ ✓ ✓
2	Jean Guesdon Head of Brand, Creative Director, Producer	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
3	Alexandre Amancio Creative Director, Writer, Artist	✓ ✓ ✓
4	Alex Hutchinson Creative Director	✓ ✓
5	Maxime Durand Brand Historian	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
6	Aymar Azaïzia Brand Content Manager, Production	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
7	Anon-brand Brand, Production, Marketing	Seven games (anonymized)
8	Russell Lees Writer	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
9	Mustapha Mahrach Writer, Level Design Director, Mission Director	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
10	Anon-writer Mission Director	Four games (anonymized)
11	David Chateau-neuf Level Design Director	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
12	Gaelec Simard Game Director, Mission Director, Lead Level design	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓

Name	Role(s)	Games													
		AC1	AC2	Broth.	Rev.	AC3	AC4	Rogue	Unity	Syn.	Origins	Odyssey			
13	Nicolas Guérin				✓				✓			✓			✓
14	Steven Masters	✓		✓		✓									
15	Anon-level1	Five games (anonymized)													
16	Gregory Belacel	✓			✓										
17	Anon-level2	Three games (anonymized)													
18	Maxime Ciccotti								✓						✓
19	Anon-mission	Mission Designer													
20	Anon-tech	One game (anonymized)													
21	Gilles Beloeil		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓		✓	✓
22	Maxime Faucher		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓		✓	✓

Note: The ordering is based on the “Game Crediting Guidelines” of the International Game Developers’ Association (IGDA, 2014).

to remain anonymous and those who declined cited job vulnerability, most of whom were either women, of religious minorities, or (junior) workers on recent games; the reasons for these, in a male-dominated and highly precarious industry (IGDA, 2018), are likely understandable but outside of the scope of this book.

Interviews were semi-structured, conducted around Ubisoft's main offices in Montréal, and conducted predominantly in English – with parts in French and Dutch, quotes translated where so. These interviews were conducted in the context of a four-month-long ethnography in Montréal's Mile End, with much (off the record) fieldwork in and around the offices of Ubisoft, and the companies of ex-workers (notably Bethesda, Electronic Arts, Panache, Red Barrels, Reflector, Thunder Lotus, Typhoon and Warner Bros. Montréal), Siboire, the Waverley, and all along the Boulevard Saint-Laurent. Second, I was given access to some internal documents, most notably various versions of what was called the “Brand Bible,” under conditions that they be quoted but not reproduced. Finally, these methods are supported by a study of the primary texts, including the main games (table 2), and their accompanying paraludic materials, including manuals, texts, player-made wikis, documentaries, making-of videos, short films, comic books and post-mortems of the development process. All data were gathered under informed consent, as well as non-disclosure agreement contracts where preferred.

**Table 2. The Settings and Periods of the Main Assassin's Creed Games**

Setting	Period	Title	Abbreviation	Release
Third Crusade	1191 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	AC1	2007
Italian Renaissance	1476–1499 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed II</i>	AC2	2009
	1499–1507 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood</i>	Broth.	2010
	1511–1512 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Revelations</i>	Rev.	2011
Colonial era	1754–1783 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed III</i>	AC3	2012
	1715–1722 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag</i>	AC4	2013
	1752–1776 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Rogue</i>	Rogue	2014
French Revolution	1776–1800 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Unity</i>	Unity	
Victorian era	1868 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Syndicate</i>	Syn.	2015
Ptolemaic Egypt	49–43 BC	<i>Assassin's Creed: Origins</i>	Origins	2017
Peloponnesian War	431–404 BC	<i>Assassin's Creed: Odyssey</i>	Odyssey	2018
Viking Expansion	872–878 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Valhalla</i>	Valhalla	2020

## Branding Religion

The *AC* series is known to 95 million players and numerous academics (e.g., Bosman, 2016; de Wildt, 2019; El Nasr et al., 2008; Mukherjee, 2016; Nowbari, 2012) as a game steeped in religion. Briefly put, its titular protagonists are the “Assassins,” a historical secret society that was introduced in the first game as an Islamic order that fights the Templar crusaders trying to take over the Holy Land. Each of the following games stages a different religious or (later, increasingly) political conflict – to the background of which the mystery of “those who came before” is revealed: a society of gods like Minerva, Jupiter and Juno to whom the Assassin–Templar conflict can be traced back to the creation of the first humans, Adam and Eve, whose powerful “Apple of Eden” is the main object over which the two factions fight throughout human history.

From the outset, it became clear that a large number of people are involved in making and continuing this trans-historical story of religious conflict. Hundreds to thousands of people work on a single game for years – over 4600 people were credited on 2018’s *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*. How does that work and who decides to put religion in a product like that? As Nicolas Guérin puts it:

It’s a big machine. For every AAA game, specifically at Ubisoft, teams are very big. We’re talking about teams of more than 600 people in one studio, and then you have many other studios amounting to around a thousand people working on a thing, which is *massive*. Plus many levels of approval and political complications around decision-making and all that stuff. It’s not you know, that the process is simple like “we think of this,” and we do it. That’s not how it works. But there was a general direction by Patrice way back when. (Guérin)

Others, too, kept referring back to one specific figure: Patrice Désilets, often along with lead writer Corey May. About the iconic “Leap of Faith,” *AC*’s original level director, David Châteauneuf, said “the Leap of Faith really carries the *signature of Patrice*.” Gregory Belacel, a junior game designer also on *AC*, specifies: “So I came up with the towers, Steven Masters did the combat, Pat Plourde led ‘presentation,’ but the Animus and things like that, *everything was Patrice’s idea*.” This includes the religious focus of the premise, described by Guérin as “very much Patrice, that concept of religion [...] and *AC* took a touchy subject! It took Muslim characters fighting Christian characters, which was *bold*. It was kind of a stance that Patrice



wanted to take on things.” Jean Guesdon emphasizes that “Patrice will tell you, he is the ‘father of Assassin’s Creed’” – making Guesdon, modestly put, its adoptive father.

When asked, Patrice Désilets confirms his role as originator: “I am the father of *Assassin’s Creed*” – albeit quickly followed by a core team of like-minded developers. “Sure, it’s eventually everybody. But the core, the flash [of the original idea]<sup>2</sup> was me. Corey was writing the two other Princes so Corey was not even on the team. Jade was still working at EA. And so I was there!” Specifically,

It was on the corner of Saint-Joseph and Chambord. In the little house there, a little apartment on the first floor where I was asked. “Okay, yeah, you have to come up with a *Prince of Persia* game.” And I’m like, “What the fuck do I do? I just finished one. What do I what do I do?” *And I came up with Assassin’s Creed!* (Désilets)

Désilets’ concept was a product of several things, including “gut feeling,” “Zeitgeist” and some direction by marketing: “in December [2003] I met with Sebastien Puel who [...] was a marketing guy for *Sands of Time* and he said, ‘Oh, fantasy doesn’t work really well these days. The next big thing is going to be historical.’” Reading up on the subject, what was supposed to be a sequel to the *Prince of Persia* franchise, became a game about the historical (and current) religious society of the Nizari Ismaili as described in “a little book from the *J’ai Lu* collection, a book about secret societies. Inside there was a bunch of them, but the first one was the myth of the Old Man of the Mountain and it was like a 10-page summary of the *hashashin*” (Désilets).

The concept was developed alongside a personal crisis of faith, fuelled by doing research for the game about the *hashashin*:

I turned thirty – this crisis of like, “What is life, what am I doing, what is the purpose of all this?” And then, it totally disappeared while making *Assassin’s Creed*, and I’m like, “No! Fundamentally I do not believe!” [...] What really pissed me off was the church! I really had a problem with church.

I always loved the supernatural story of Jesus when I was a kid, when you watched [the film] *Jésus de Nazareth*, it’s beautiful and it’s like it’s magical. There’s magic tricks which are called miracles. But then I figured out it’s

2 More common in Québécois French than in English, “j’ai eu un flash” is idiomatic for a sudden realization, a flash of genius.

also historical. And then I started to read and because I did *Assassin's Creed* and the Crusade theme... It's really about the dogma. *Assassin's Creed* is about dogma. It's against dogma. [...] When I found out about the assassins' motto, their creed, from the books I read about the *hashashin* and the Ismaili – that's what they still believe now. That “nothing is true and everything is permitted” and that's basically... how I live my life now, too!

This almost militant sentiment against institutionalized religion was broadly shared by the team. Growing up in the same culture and time period, the initial core team – Désilets, Corey May, Alex Drouin, Philippe Morin, David Châteauneuf, Claude Langlais, Nicolas Cantin etc. – “Except for Corey, roughly put we're all French Canadian with the same background, born into a Catholic family. Then suddenly that culture and faith just disappeared. [...] Of those people, nobody would say they're religious. So we were all in the same boat” (Désilets). They are all children of their parents' *révolution tranquille*, making them Québec's first generation to choose, for instance, between “religion” (formerly a mandatory course) or “morality” in school, while the province shed its Catholic identity and church influence on the state.

The goal is not to give a complete taxonomy of what cultural influences ended up in *Assassin's Creed* through Désilets (“Zeitgeist,” “the culture in Montréal around the time,” “the *Lost* TV series,” “*The Da Vinci Code*,” among other things). However, the fitting conclusion so far is that far from a monolithic corporate black box, the original vision of *Assassin's Creed* stems from a single identifiable person with very specific (even hyper-local) experiences with and ideas about religion.

However, what started as a specific idea by an identifiable individual shaped up to be a successful game, and then a franchise – and this necessitated changes to the “controversial topic” of the Crusades, especially in what was still the Bush era, “hence the disclaimer of the first game” (Guérin). The disclaimer – “that was Jade [Raymond]'s concern a lot. She was afraid of the pressure of the corporation, [because of her] being the producer. To be careful with the subject matter and make sure that nobody gets pissed off, a corporation will do that. It's normal – they're on the market!” (Désilets).

*Assassin's Creed* had to become a brand that is “fun for everybody,” because

the thing about religion is that when you're representing a character's belief, you try to do it in the correct way. But it's a videogame, so we know it's worldwide. There are a lot of people that will play it, and we don't want the game to just talk to some people and not others. We want to

get through to the majority and it's a difficult exercise, because we also want to be true to the historical era – what those people, those characters believed in at their time period. (Mahrach)

As the franchise was codified into a reproducible, continued formula – it counts 21 games, four movies, nine novels, 12 comics, and other media as of writing – Désilets parted from the project shortly after *AC2*. While the second game still involved some controversy (as Steven Masters put it, “*AC2* is in the Renaissance, so *of course we're going to end up punching the Pope*”), the franchise was later cleaned up to be “fun for everybody.”

After *AC2* in 2009, different creative directors – traditionally the lead figure responsible for what is made by hundreds of developers on a game – take on iterations of the franchise simultaneously, so that in the 10 years after, 19 more games were released. I was able to interview all the creative directors ever to work on *Assassin's Creed* in Montréal, and got a portrait of a heavily safe-guarded creative process, which participants and I came to call the “Marketing–Brand–Editorial” sandwich. Around each part of developing a yearly *AC* release (from game design and writing to all the satellite studios making assets in China etc.), there are three teams that work on all the games. Marketing provides the base of what players expect from a setting (say, “focus groups tell us that Vikings will be popular this year, and they want Nordic gods”); the Brand team protects consistency across the series (its signature “flavour,” if you will); and Editorial's approval tops each game off to appeal to the broadest possible market (figure 1).

The main architect of the *AC* brand's codification into a coherent and reproducible formula was Jean Guesdon, who started as Production Coordinator late in *AC1*'s development, and ended up building the “Brand team” that codified the *AC* formula, replacing Désilets' vision with a “Brand Bible.” As Désilets explains,

I got one last meeting with Ubi. It was at my place. Jean [Guesdon], Corey [May] and myself. And we established all the rules, all the big dadada. And then I left a month and a half after that. (Patrice)

The big “dadada,” in Guesdon's words came down to a set of tools and rules to make sure every media product, especially the games, are held together as consistently “on Brand.”

My role on the brand team was to actually explain what *AC* was about, the rules that needed to be followed by others. When we started to do novels,

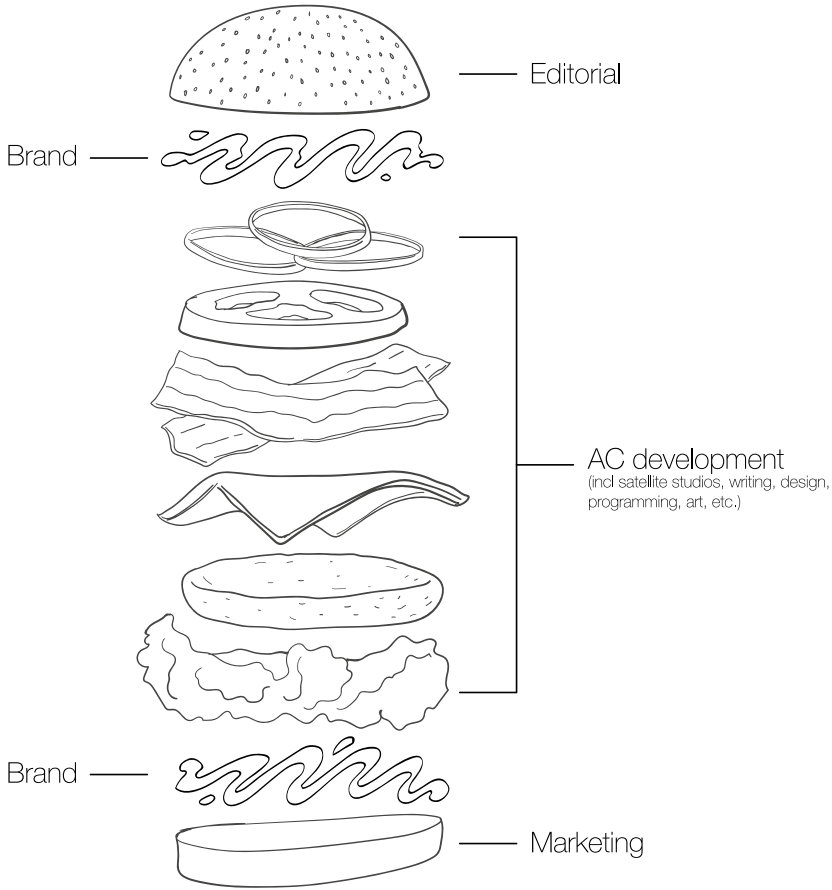


Figure 1. Around each part of developing a yearly AC release, Marketing provides the base, the Brand team guarantees a consistent, recognizable “flavour,” and Editorial’s approval tops the game off for release. (Based on illustration by Siripattana Sangduen/Shutterstock.com, edited by Wieger Jonker.)

comic books, short movies etc., I theorized and made some communication tools to explain the limitations. [...] For example, on our positioning in terms of belief and spirituality, the fact that we don’t want to take sides. Trying to portray both sides as grey. So there is theoretically no good or bad. There are two different things and they fight for what they think is good for human society. This kind of stuff. (Guesdon)

This new “positioning in terms of belief and spirituality” is a vital change from Désilets’ original anti-dogmatic view on religion, in which the original game’s Templar crusaders represent an institutionalized Christian status quo

that wants to deceive and control the population, or what an anonymous member of the Brand team (for almost 10 years) called the Templars' "opium for the masses" (Anon-Brand).

Second, Marketing provides the base of each new *Assassin's Creed* game. Based on focus groups and feedback, creative directors are given a setting, story outline and one or two new game mechanics to introduce. Alexandre Amancio reconstructs what it means to direct an *AC* game within this new structure, in which "they had already started *Unity*. [...] They knew it was the French Revolution and they knew it was in Paris. And that's about it, and that there was going to be co-op. [...] So it was like a big jigsaw puzzle. That was my job, trying to figure it out." In most cases, Marketing already had a list of themes – either from previous pitches or market research – and went on from there.

GUESDON: A setting like Egypt is very loaded with expectations, when it comes to Gods etc., in terms of pop culture and entertainment, and so we know that some players come to the game with this kind of expectations. So, how do we provide them with experiences like that?

INTERVIEWER: How do you know what players expect?

G: Well, we have a Marketing team that look at [that]. How is Egypt represented in entertainment? And so we just look at global things and you quite soon realize that it's fantasized a lot. [...] You have some focus groups and [ask] people about Egypt as a setting for an *Assassin's Creed* game.

Developers from across the franchise – from the Brand team, the core team (including directors), to junior developers – echoed that, informed by Marketing's conclusions on "what people's perception of a period is," they then knew "that's the game they have to make" [Anon-Brand]).

Finally, the process is topped off by Editorial, "a team of five people who defend the franchise atmosphere" (Ciccotti). This small group of people "at the very top has more influence over [the representation of the] worldview than anyone else" (Lees), and the way this is done defines – rather than any personal ideology or faith – how (and why) religion or anything else is represented in a certain way. Editorial was variously described as "staying away from controversy" (Anon-level2), "not stepping on toes" (Azaïzia), "and making sure it doesn't offend anyone" (Simard). In the end, "business makes the call" (Azaïzia), and they do so from Paris, where Ubisoft was started as

a family company by the Guillemot brothers in 1986. In Creative Director Alex Hutchinson's words:

If Yves [Guillemot] came down and said from France, "You're absolutely cutting the hood...." Well, he owns the company so that's [it], we're cutting the hood. [...] We do green light meetings in Paris where you have to present the characters and to present the story and the executives will weigh in. So Serge Hascoët, who is the CCO [Chief Creative Officer] of the company, has overruled settings in the past that certain people wanted and just said he doesn't find them interesting – but that's his prerogative.

Hence, "Editorial" in Paris has the final say, often erring on the side of safety. The whole process, from Marketing, to core team (led by a creative director and their producer), to the eventual product of nearly thousand employees spread across the main studio (usually Montréal) and its satellites across the world, is kept in check in its various stages by Editorial. Throughout this "stage-gate" process, Editorial are thus the final arbiter in a process that "defers to the market and the largest possible audience" (Masters), in order to check whether Marketing, Brand team, and the individual game's developers are producing something that sells.

Within the Marketing–Brand–Editorial sandwich, creative work on individual *AC* games has clear parameters. Writer Russell Lees ascribes the resulting religion-for-everyone to marketing logic, stating that "working with religion on a scale for a world audience means you can't write anybody off" (Lees). It is from this process of calculated inclusiveness that *AC*'s marketable representation of religion arises as twofold: nostalgic and perennialist.

## A. Nostalgic Mystery of History

*5. Pivotal moments in Human History are the basis of our Franchise. Assassin's Creed will always take a revisionist approach on real events. We'll use historical gaps to create our story.*

– "10 Commandments," *Assassin's Creed Brand Bible 1.0* (2010)

*AC*'s marketable religion is nostalgic: placing religion in history, and inviting 21<sup>st</sup> century (secular) players into this mystery. At its core, *AC* uses historical periods to create new games within its franchise. The idea is to "make something out of the dark corners of history, from an occultist point of view, which is linked to the whole conspiracy between the Templars and the Assassins but from a historical perspective" (Guérin). When asked why

religious conflict has mostly been central to these dark corners of history, many echoed Brand historian Maxime Durand's explanation that religion "was [not only] the thematic at the beginning of the creation of the game, but *also* it's been part of very important human history for the last thousands of years and it's been very, very important" (Durand).

Beside the sheer quantity of historical struggles and settings to work with, what is effective about religion? What "works" for game developers? Religious elements are recognizable to large amounts of people: the biblical Apple of Eden became the "story MacGuffin" because "the Apple of Eden speaks to people. People are *familiar* with it" (Belacel), and it was put in a place that Lead Level Director David Châteauneuf described enthusiastically as "a secret place, a *mystic place* that doesn't exist. [We based it on] Petra. We wanted it to be like Al Khaeznek but under Solomon's Temple. It's a known location, and most people would know about Solomon." Religious elements are furthermore "mystical," to the point that "religion gives 'oomph' to something simple. *Gravitas!*" (Guérin). It offers "mystery locations" (Simard) and "people are easily hooked by its magic. [...] Its symbolism resonates with modern societies" (Guesdon). In the more writerly words of Russell Lees, "religious settings have dramatic, inherently interesting, visually sumptuous qualities."

When describing a scene in *Unity*, in which the Assassins' initiation ritual takes place in a more secular time (the French Revolution), Creative Director Amancio explains how and why they stuck to religious aesthetics:

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)

Quintessentially, by offering religion through the "historical tourism" of *AC* (Russell), religion becomes something more recognizable to everyone – no matter where they are from – because it is ancient and mysterious for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience: "from the old world, something very cryptic – old religions like Catholicism have their own mystique" (Anon-level2). By using "history as a playground" (Masters), *AC* offers a nostalgic way for everyone to relate back to the "awe and mystery" of religion that several developers (including Désilets, Russell, and Guérin) each compared to Dan Brown's work:

*The Da Vinci Code*, It's the same thing. It's like religion has that power of being mystical at the same time as [being] a source of inspiration to many

people. It wields that occult power. Dan Brown's success is because it's so easy twisting hidden meaning into religion in history, and people love to have that feeling that, "Ooh, we're playing with something big, something important." (Guérin)

## B. Sci-Fi Perennialism

7. *Assassin's Creed is based on Technology – Nothing is Magical. Everything has a plausible technological explanation.*  
 – "10 Commandments," *Assassin's Creed Brand Bible 1.0* (2010)

*AC*'s marketable religion is furthermore perennial: it connects religion across cultures and periods to one underlying abstract struggle that continues into players' own world, now and here. While *AC*'s initial Third Crusade conflict is between the Knights Templars and the *hashashin* in the Holy Land, 1191 AD; *AC2* is about the Borgia papal authorities and the secular Assassins in Renaissance Italy; *Unity* places those factions on two sides of the French Revolution; and *Origins* takes place 2000 years before the Crusades, centring on the "Hidden Ones" versus the "Order of the Ancients," and so on. As an anonymous member of the Brand team explains:

Pivotal historical moments are often driven by religion. It's an important part of human history. But wherever the Templars are, it's just that they're located in a place of power. They're not always Christian – they just occupy the current status quo. And in other periods they will be called different things: the Order of the Ancients, Abstergo etc. (Anon-brand)

Whether religious or, in some periods, secular, *AC*'s struggle is perennial: "order" versus "freedom," "status quo" versus "resistance," and thus relevant across places and periods, and accessible to players from all cultures. The "perennial perspective," as popularized by Aldous Huxley in 1945, suggests that underneath the differences between religious beliefs, vocabularies and rituals of different cultures and periods, there is a universal underlying mystery (Huxley, 1945). In the case of *AC*, the franchise presents a pan-historical and global conflict of which "the historical context shapes which form the conflict takes" (Amancio). Central to this fascination is a universal mystery, relatable to anyone, in Anon-level2's: "Old religions like Catholicism have their own mystique: using it 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.'"



This search for the underlying mysteries of history is at the core of the franchise, and it is an approach that Guérin in his interview called “a cabbalistic approach of finding hidden meaning in religion across history, creating this sort of tertiary reading of things.” Guesdon similarly compared the brand’s strategy to “tapping into this rampant culture of religious symbolism, of esotericism,” calling it

the conspiracy theory of religions: people can dive into it, put themselves into it, can invest, can build it themselves. That’s the beauty of esotery. 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 [their] own, but every single creation is also a dot [within the whole franchise] and people, players, readers [and] 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)

*AC*’s mystery is presented by Ubisoft deliberately through the “present day,” which runs through the franchise’s different media. Because of this, fans can only put together this narrative by buying each game, film, novel and comic, to find out the truth behind a secret, divine race manipulating our historical struggles: the Isu – whose names (Jupiter, Minerva, Juno) hint at their perceived divinity by early societies.

What fans find out as the franchise goes on, and as they combine their knowledge via online forums and self-made encyclopaedias, is that these early gods are *actually* a very scientifically advanced society, passing down their technology through history. Hence, Adam and Eve were just the first version of the Isu’s creation (humanity, made to be enslaved). The Turin Shroud is a “nanotech matter regenerator” that can heal the owner, once owned by Jesus, and by Jason and the Argonauts who called it the Golden Fleece. The Apple of Eden was a neurotransmitting mind-control device which, in the words of one character in *AC*, “turned staves into snakes. Parted and closed the Red Sea. Eris used it to start the Trojan War; and with it, a poor carpenter turned water into wine.”

Thus, *AC*’s perennialist esotericism translates all the mysteries of historical religions into the 21<sup>st</sup> century vocabulary of science. In the “present day,” the players of *AC* come to find out that all religious mystery is actually technology. The Brand Bible states that “There is no magic in the *Assassin’s Creed* universe. [Arthur C.] Clarke’s third law says it best: ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,’” or as the Brand

Bible's author explains, "[W]e always made it like the First Civilization [Isu] lived for real, they left artefacts that are actual tools. [...] People are very easily hooked by these kind of features and devices" (Guesdon). According to Wouter Hanegraaff's book on "esotericism in the mirror of secular thought," such tales "of ancient civilizations which were superior to ours both in spiritual and in technological knowledge, belong to the stock-in-trade of western occultism." (1996, p. 309). The "single most influential source" for this, and a seminal figure in the development of New Age thought, was the American clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, whose stories of the past lives of his patients – much like the premise of *AC*'s Animus – enjoyed widespread popularity. Through these accounts "Cayce describes a tradition of 'perennial wisdom' that is passed on from Atlantis to Egypt, and from Egypt to the 'great initiate' Jesus" (Hanegraaff 1996, p. 309).

The *AC* franchise taps into this same desire to make sense of disparate religious mysteries. Furthermore, it does so by leveraging players' need to unravel these mysteries by unfolding the explanation over the course of 21 games, four movies, nine novels, 12 comic books, and other media. This marketable religion is, first, made nostalgic by putting it safely in historically appropriate periods; second, made perennial by tying all periods together through a universal mystical truth; and third, made present by bringing it into 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific vocabulary. As a result, the franchise itself gets an esoteric structure, that is, it depends on the disparate connection of occult or secret knowledge (historical correspondences, syncretism between traditions, symbolic images) from mystical and historical sources alike (Favre & Needleman, 1993; Hammer, 2001; Hanegraaff, 1996). Or, in Guesdon's words on *AC*:

When I was in charge of the brand, we needed to minimize the risk of inconsistencies and maximize the opportunities for connections, links, echoes from one creation to another. So that people start from something which is known, but they think they're clever, more clever than the rest of humanity and they will understand what is behind everything. This is *esotérie*. [...] It is a balance to find a sweet spot of what is known [and] what is not known. And in this gray zone people will engage. [...] I think this is why *AC* succeeded at some point.

## Conclusion: Branded Belonging

Mircea Eliade wrote about a surge in "unheard-of popularity" of the esoteric magazine *Planète* in 1960s France, leading to his explanation of what makes

esotericism attractive – if only for popular consumption (1976). Eliade argues that it was an antidote to the existentialism of the era, and he describes the magazine as a mix of popular science, occultism, astrology, science fiction, spiritual techniques and “more than that. It tacitly pretends to reveal innumerable vital secrets – of our universe, of the Second World War, of lost civilizations, of Hitler’s obsession with astrology, and so on” (p. 9). This “holistic outlook which coupled science with esotericism [...] presented a living, fascinating and mysterious cosmos in which human life again became meaningful” calling its readers to “unravel the other, enigmatic universes revealed by the occultists and gnostics” (p. 10).

Just as *Planète* succeeded by giving people disparate connections between history, mystery and religion in a time of existentialist disillusion; so *Assassin’s Creed* manages to sell a marketable form of religion that inserts meaning and mystery into history for a post-secular audience – in the tradition of *Planète* as much as *The Da Vinci Code*. What makes *AC* unique is that it involves players in doing so: not just a magazine, book or film, the structure of the transmedial franchise itself is esoteric. That is, fans need to pull together all the hints or “dots” from its many games, novels, and other media to reveal the explanations that *AC* promises. In the process, *AC* shows a blueprint of what marketable religion looks like to the broadest possible 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

*Who* puts religion in videogames? In the case of *Assassin’s Creed*, the work of one designer (and a sympathetic culture around him) evolved from a culturally and generationally specific rejection of religious dogma. With the success of games, however, the way in which religion was treated in the game became marketable.

*How?* Under corporate leadership, codified and checked by the Marketing–Brand–Editorial sandwich, the marketable religion of the franchise was made to be inclusive and “fun for everybody” – specifically, for a global audience of 95 million, good for 140 million sales between 2007 and 2019 (Ubisoft, 2019).

*Why?* It creates belonging for everyone, everywhere, without the burden of believing. By presenting religion first as belonging in history through nostalgia; second, as belonging to everyone through perennialism; and third as not needing belief through scientific vocabulary. *Assassin’s Creed’s* nostalgia, perennialism and sci-fi vocabulary together create a branded belonging for *everyone*, without belief for *anyone*. To further qualify the brand’s slogan: “Nothing is *exclusively* True. Everything is *inclusively* Permitted.”

This syncretism of historical traditions, perennial mystery and scientific vocabulary is accomplished in the same way as in esoteric (and occult)

traditions. That is, it depends on connecting not only various traditions through the promise of underlying mystery (perennialism), but it also brings magic into the realm of science and technology. This has major implications for, for instance, Weber and other modernists' dichotomy between magic and "technical means and calculations" (1919, p. 139). While it is clear that others have earlier observed and theorized the collapse of magic and science through technology in, e.g., Neopaganism (Aupers, 2010; Hanegraaff, 1996), New Age religion (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Hammer, 2001; Heelas, 1996), and virtual worlds (Aupers, 2007; Turner, 2010); this chapter adds an empirical perspective on "Why" and "How" those in charge of production come to do so. Beyond vague notions of the "atmosphere" and "oomph" of religion – although important – to draw people in, it is the structure of esotericism itself that draws consumers to connect ideas offered to them over multiple products.

Theoretically, what this means is that Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* is emblematic of two things. First, it reproduces an idea of religious decline: that religion is something of the past. This is accomplished, as argued above, by bringing religion into the present only as misconceptions of past societies – and legitimizing it in the present only through the use of pseudo-scientific discourse. This transposing of historical religions into the "rationalized" present allows Ubisoft to place the most irreligious and religiously diverse audiences alike into the same disenchanted version of history. Secondly, what marketable religion does is *commodify* a religious tradition. I am aware that commodification is a notoriously underdefined, overdetermined buzzword of Marxist cultural and political theory. At its root, however, "commodification" is a process by which something without economic value (culture, or in this case, religion), is assigned a use value and made exchangeable or interchangeable: i.e., made into a commodity (Marx, 1904, pp. 19–21). More simply, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls a commodity "anything intended for exchange" (2005, p. 35), adding that it is not necessarily (e.g., when bartering) with "reference to money [but] *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political or personal transaction costs" (ibid.). In all exchanges of commodity, from barter to capitalist exchanges, the commonality is in "the object-centred, relatively impersonal, asocial nature" of the exchange (ibid.). By reducing such "marketable religion" to an esoteric amalgamate that is supposed to include everyone, and be uncontroversial to the largest possible audience of buyers – in other words, commodifying religion – the individual religious traditions are thus reduced to commodities. And apparently: religion sells.

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### 3. Indie-pendent: The Art-house Gods of Indie Games

#### Abstract

This chapter argues on the basis of 35 interviews with independent developers (most centrally from the Melbourne indie scene) that despite the promise of their art-house independence; religious and irreligious “indies” alike cannot escape the inherited conventions of religion in game design. They make games entirely divorced from their own beliefs, reproducing Eurocentric and otherwise standardized traditions of game design for reasons of platformed standardization and economic precarity. They are gods who just need to pay the rent.

**Keywords:** production studies, indie games, commodification, cultural industries, standardization

In the previous chapter, I analyzed one big company’s leading franchise to see how and why religion is used to make commercially successful videogames aimed at global audiences. Outside of this “AAA” context, however, indie developers make games alone or in small teams, the “art-house” equivalent within a billion dollar videogame industry (Warr, 2014). The discourse surrounding indie developers stresses that what distinguishes them from the large companies in the industry is the originality, diversity and autobiographical content produced by indies. Game designer and author Anna Anthropy’s *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* first articulated this discourse:

Outside of the mainstream, [indie developers] have revealed much more [about themselves]. They have shown us a new perspective through their unconventionality, their creativity. [...] [offering] real diversity, a plethora of voices and experiences, and a new avenue for human beings to tell their stories and connect with other human beings. (Anthropy, 2012)



If indie developers “tell their stories,” this suggests that we can empirically study how they put their identities into games. In the context of this book, it is valuable to look at the role of religious identity in independent (individual) game development, in contrast to AAA development – particularly since religion and irreligion (whether Christian, Hindu, Muslim, atheist, agnostic, and so on)<sup>1</sup> are defining parts of our histories and identities (Berger, 1967; Lorenz, 2008). Do independent game developers represent their own (ir)religious backgrounds in their games, and how and why do they (not) do so? To answer this question, I interviewed 35 indies from Australia, North America and Europe.

While researchers have surveyed the religious affiliations of independent developers (Piasecki, 2016), their racial identities and attitudes (Srauy, 2019) and their gender representation in light of their economic independence (Lima, 2018), there is little insight into how religion is put into games by those who make them. More so, most studies on religion in games, as observed in the introduction (Chapter 1), are game-based interpretations. These are valuable in themselves in that they allow us to assess the prominence of religion in games and to analyze its manifestation in rich empirical detail. However, interpretations of games alone cannot draw any conclusions on the meanings of religion in cultural production, let alone any remaining cultural significance in the context of secularization in modern societies. On the one hand, we therefore need consumption-centred studies on the way players assign meaning to religion in games (de Wildt & Aupers, 2017, 2019, 2020; Geraci, 2014; Chapters 4, 5). On the other hand, we need production-centred studies on how and why (indie) developers use religion in games at all. After all, we cannot say anything about the meaning of religion in games, without studying why religion occurs in 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural industries – especially when assuming that the game industry is not just out to convert us all. From a broader theoretical perspective, to research cultural production is to research which worldviews media objects originate in, and thus shed light on how and why certain forms of (religious) representation end up in our popular culture when others do not.

## **The Rhetoric of Indie: Original, Diverse, Personal**

To find out whether, how, why and whose religion finds its way into videogames, there is a practical and a theoretical reason for looking at

1 By “irreligion,” I mean atheism, agnosticism, and other kinds of rejection of or indifference to religious traditions. Throughout this book, irreligion is considered a religious position.

independent developers. Practically speaking, since indies work alone or in small teams, researching one person's religious background in direct relation to their work potentially tells me more about how religious representation finds its way from beliefs to games. There is a pervasive rhetoric in academia that hails indie games as original, diverse and personal. Paolo Ruffino calls this the “discourse of emancipation” around indies:

In this view, [their] unique vision of game design is brought into the video game, making it a direct expression of personal, individual feelings and thoughts. [...] something strictly personal, and this therefore blurs the boundaries between the game designer's work and [their] home lives. (Ruffino, 2013, pp. 113–115)

In academic literature, being “indie” is first of all understood as producing an original counterpoint to mainstream games. Their “smaller games with smaller budgets and smaller audiences” are hence “more experimental or bizarre” (Anthropy, 2012), “establish[ing] their own cultural norms and practices” (Young, 2018, p. 6). Second, indies are presented as culturally diverse, operating outside of the dominant hegemonic culture. They “diversify the industry away from testosterone-blasted aggression” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 265), representing “a greater diversity of voices in the production of culture” (Martin & Deuze, 2009, p. 290). Existing research covers gender (Harvey & Fisher, 2015; Lima, 2018), sexuality (Shaw, 2009; Stone, 2018), race (Passmore et al., 2017), able-bodiedness (Jones, 2016; Stone, 2018) and other marginalized identities (e.g., de Smale et al., 2017; Šisler, 2008; Sterczewski, 2016). Third, indie games are hailed as personal, even autobiographical “games based on people's real-life experiences” such as *That Dragon, Cancer*, a game by a Christian family sharing their crisis of faith when their new-born son is diagnosed with terminal cancer (Parkin, 2017). Thus combined, the “lone developer myth” portrays

the auteur in full control of the creative process, a rare genius driven to realize an artistic vision, unadulterated by focus group feedback, market pressures, and other such commercial concerns shared by bean-counting AAA publishers. (Sinclair, 2019)

Indies, in short, are hailed as opening the medium of videogames to a broad and progressive intersection of ages, races, genders, sexualities and worldview – in contrast to the “impersonal creations by teams of forty-five artists and fifteen programmers” (Anthropy, 2012).

Among those intersectional identities, religion – like sex, gender, sexuality, race and so on – defines many people’s lives. Studying the way indies channel their individual worldviews into their work gives me access both to how explicit worldviews and traditions find their way into the medium, as well as what represents the AAA standard of religious representation by contrast. More broadly, it gives me insight into *how* and *why* religion finds its way into game development, before ascribing all kinds of cultural and religious significance to them as the “enthusiastic scholar” of media and religion does. For these reasons, this chapter studies the proposed originality, diversity and autobiographicality of indie games using indies’ (ir)religious identities as a clear and identifiable case of their worldview. By probing how indie developers draw on their religious and cultural backgrounds into videogames, this chapter answers the following questions: “Do independent game developers represent their own (ir)religious backgrounds in their games?” and “How and why do they (not) do so?”

## Methodology

To answer these questions, I sought out independent game developers who self-reportedly dealt with their own (ir)religious background in their videogames. Indie developers were interviewed during field research in Melbourne, Montréal, the Low Countries – three indie “hubs” – and at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco. These areas were relevant to the theoretical premise of this book: the supposed secularization of the West, in contrast to the dependence of many videogames on religious representation.

Of the 40 developers interviewed, N=35 were selected as relevant for the current study (table 3). The criteria were, firstly, to have worked as an indie game developer. Secondly, to have self-reportedly dealt with their (ir)religious background in their work, whatever that may mean to them. Interviews covered what this did indeed mean for them: whether and how their religious background was apparent in their work; why they chose to deal with this in the way they did; and for which reasons they included or excluded certain aspects of their religiosity from their work. Whenever possible, explicit design choices and projects (sometimes in the phase of early design documents) were used to talk more concretely about their choices. Importantly, most of the interviews were non-anonymous to enable us to talk about concrete choices that could be related back to the games they made. With all of them being offered the choice, four out of 35

decided to remain anonymous. The resulting semi-structured interviews were subsequently coded inductively according to a qualitative, constant comparative/grounded theory approach (Aupers et al., 2018; Flick, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Table 3. List of Indie Developer Respondents, with Their Past and Current Companies and Religious Positions**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Company/-ies (games)</b>	<b>Religious Position</b>
1.	Nicholas Lamb	Games4Diversity Religion jam	Atheist
2.	Anonymous	Civ-like focused on religious systems	Agnostic
3.	Michaël Samyn	Tale of Tales ( <i>Vanitas, The Graveyard, Cathedral in the Clouds</i> )	Catholic-raised agnostic
4.	Sabine Harrer	Copenhagen Game Collective ( <i>Pray Pray Absolution</i> )	Catholic-raised agnostic
5.	Anonymous		Pentecostal Christian
6.	Richard Bartle	<i>MUD</i>	Atheist
7.	Chris Bateman	i.a., bitComposer ( <i>Kult/Heretic Kingdoms: The Inquisition; Shadows: Heretic Kingdoms</i> ); Grindstone ( <i>Hellmut: The Badass from Hell</i> )	Christian/ Zen Buddhist/ Discordianism/ Christian
8.	Rami Ismail	Vlambeer	Muslim (Sunni)
9.	Chad Toprak	<i>Doki Doki, Salut!, The Whistler, Freeplay</i>	Muslim (Sunni)
10.	Chris Austen	<i>The Contractor</i>	Catholic-raised agnostic
11.	Damon Wade	Untitled student game (Swinburne)	Agnostic
12.	Noah Barden	Untitled student game (Swinburne)	Agnostic
13.	Jared Hahn	Stitch Up, Intra	Jehovah's Witness
14.	Ricardo Barkley	Untitled student game (Swinburne)	Christian (Catholic)
15.	Christopher Yabsley	<i>Dungeon League</i>	Atheist
16.	Rhett Loban	<i>Torres Strait Virtual Reality</i>	Torres Strait Islander tradition, [rest redacted]
17.	Jennifer Scheurle	Opaque Space ( <i>Earthlight</i> ), Flat Earth Games	Germanic Pagan
18.	Lee Shang Lun	<i>Body of Play, Midas, Sokobond, The Whistler, Impasse</i>	Christian (Presbyterian)
19.	Yosha Noesjirwan	<i>Projection: First Light</i>	Muslim (Sunni)
20.	Farah Khalaf	<i>Petra VR, Melbourne Arcade</i>	Muslim (Sunni)
21.	Matt Taylor	FreeFall Games	Christian (Baptist)
22.	Dave Lloyd	Powerhoof ( <i>Crawl</i> )	Ex-Catholic
23.	Barney Cumming	Powerhoof ( <i>Crawl</i> )	Atheist
24.	Mark Morrison	<i>Call of Cthulhu, De Blob</i>	Ex-Anglican
25.	Thomas Gordon	Unnamed game	Christian (Baptist)

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Company/-ies (games)</b>	<b>Religious Position</b>
26.	Nawaf Bahadur	<i>Riverbond, Critterbox</i>	Muslim (Sunni)
27.	Cuauhtemoc Moreno	<i>Amberial Dreams</i>	Christian (Catholic)
28.	Rasheed Abuiedeh	<i>Liyla and the Shadows of War</i>	Muslim (Sunni)
29.	Anonymous		Ex-Muslim
30.	Collette Quach	Team Nahual ( <i>Juanito el Nahualito</i> )	Irreligious
31.	Anonymous		Muslim (Sunni)
32.	Mernan Behri	Freelance game designer and concept artist, Toei Animation	Muslim (Sunni)
33.	Moustafa Chamli	<i>Al Akhira</i>	Muslim (Sunni)
34.	Denver Coulson	<i>Devil's Bluff, Our Own Storm</i>	Christian (Baptist)
35.	Osama Dorias	Magic Pants (indie), Warner Brothers Montreal (TBA)	Muslim (Sunni)

## Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Moving into indie communities, religion immediately appeared to be a sensitive subject. Developers' religious backgrounds and beliefs were often taboo, despite how central they were to religious developers' lives. More so than in a big AAA company like Ubisoft, despite their sometimes limited workers' protection, it was apparently a bigger risk to talk about one's religious conviction as an independent developer than as a contract worker at a game company. First of all, when talking about religious identity and representation in indie development, there was a clear divide between irreligious developers – who assumed most of their peers were similarly unaffiliated and uninterested – and religious developers, who were constantly aware of the controversiality of their beliefs. Asked whether religion was something openly talked about among indies, one atheist developer answered:

I don't think so. I think if someone's religious they honestly don't bring it up. It's just not the culture. I can't say it's a taboo. [...] Especially in the games development community, I couldn't imagine someone being criticized by other game developers for being religious – but it's not something that's often talked about. (Christopher)

Most irreligious developers (agnostic, atheist etc.) responded in similar ways: while asking for snowball recommendations on who to interview, those developers could rarely think of religious developers working on games. By

contrast, every religious developers – across Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and so on – knew about others in the indie community, from the smallest communities of Belgian developers to the bustling hive of over 28,000 developers at 2018's Game Developers Conference (GDC). One two-person interview with the developers from *Powerhoof* turned revelatory when, after years working together, one of them realized his co-worker was raised a Christian. They explained:

DAVID: My family is still Christian and stuff... But I generally keep it very quiet. It's just never come up or that I know others are aware.

INTERVIEWER: Is it taboo or something?

D: Yeah.

BARNEY: Yeah....

D: Yeah, it definitely is! You should in church say you're proud of things and stuff but in game design....

B: It'll be like, "Did you know David's Christian?" and it's like, "*Holy shiit!*"

D: Yeah, like, so in [a big AAA company] that was weird. But the percentage of people that are Christian – they would never say it at work. It's almost like with sexuality, like, even though people are homosexual or whatever, it would just be.... "Oh, it's just not worth [it] to talk about [it]."

I: Really?

D: Even if you feel fine being Christian and when I was, I'd be really.... It makes people in games uncomfortable. So you're coming into work at a videogames company and you decide: that's where you talk about videogames and that's how you relate to people.

I: Is this a technology industry or a [just a] game industry taboo?

B: Definitely games. *Dungeons & Dragons* and videogames have been kind of demonized by the church in various ways, so it feels a bit like, "Aaahh... The church is *against* videogames!" So they see this as an antagonistic thing.

## A. Religious Reluctance

In line with such “don’t ask, don’t tell” mores, many religious developers preferred to not be too forward about their religious identity, both within the indie community as well as in their games. Some exceptions to this pervasive social taboo were noted, however. Primarily, there were the calls for inclusivity within indie communities after 2014’s “Gamergate” phenomenon – in which a movement of online reactionaries harassed female, queer and other minority game developers. Çağdaş Toprak, who usually goes by Chad, explains about his name and faith:

CHAD: Pre-2014, my external image never really reflected my “other” cultural and religious background. My religious background was something I tried not to overly reveal. But now I find myself tweeting about holy days and all that sort of stuff more publicly.

INTERVIEWER: What changed in 2014?

C: I don’t know.... One thing that comes into mind is like... Gamergate! [...] The indie community isn’t all that big so a lot of people who kind of knew each other just got sucked in. What happened after that was a lot of effort that put into place safer space policies and inclusivity policies. [...] So I think because of that I slowly started to say, “Hey, actually this is something that also needs to be spoken about.” Letting people know that there are Muslim developers in Western game development.

While Chad felt safer, others mentioned *Twitter* as exactly the thing to fear. *Twitter* was seen as a very important extended social sphere for indie designers: a place to promote projects, to network and to engage with players – but it is also a place where indies are vulnerable to backlash. According to Farah Khalaf:

FARAH KHALAF: *Twitter* has been actually super important for me in terms of meeting different people and keeping in touch [and] also being able to express points of views and having them shared widely [...] Developers can’t really talk about religion openly, or their personal beliefs.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, why is that?

FK: I’m not sure actually. Maybe they don’t want any backlash from their social circles?

I: You mean...? Within developer circles?

FK: Yeah.

Surveys across the industry support these fears of openness about religion, even in light of the increased calls for diversity that the indie community is known for. The *Digital Australia Report 2018* measures concern over diversity in the industry as favouring gender (66%), age (65%), race (59%), national (58%) and language diversity (58%), far above religious diversity at 40% in terms of the “need for more diversity in games” (Brand et al., 2018, p. 27).

Christian developer Lee Shang Lun gave insight into why so many religious developers are reluctant to explicitly engage with their beliefs in their games, saying:

When I want to put my authentic self into a game, whether it's Christian or other, suddenly I'm grappling with the enormity, that undepictability of something that is my totality of life. How could I possibly do that? *Whereas I feel much safer making these silly experiences that pretend to be much larger than they are.*

While Christianity is a “large part of [his] life” and “whenever I get the opportunity to talk about Jesus, I talk about it,” the only part of Shang Lun's life that isn't pervaded by religion is his job in videogames. He explains:

...Maybe I'm just working up to it? I'm trying constantly to figure out what role if any explicitly Christian themes or evangelistic intent should be present in my work. In my art.... [Deep sigh] uhh.... But.... Games, it turns out, are hard to make.... [I'm] kind of circling around to find it and express it.

Others echoed this sentiment: videogame culture, industry and development circles are just not ready for diverse religious representation. Muslim developer Rami Ismail adds:

The point of cultural identity is very often that religion is seen as something else than nationality or race or gender or sexuality. But for a lot of people it is an equally huge part of what they are. [...] The exceptions in videogames are interesting because the sheer *backlash*, the anger for what is seen as forcing religious diversity on people, is seen as *imposing*. It's seen as forcing it on people because... we are just not that used to religion in



games. Religion is allowed as a background, preferably of the bad guys, but there are rarely openly religious “good guys” because it is a taboo.

## B. Standardized Signs

*Religion is just there, and it's just a palette to be used to me. [It] is a norm in the context of an RPG and it's a way to just instantly create a character that has special powers.*

– Christopher

When asked how designers did use religious representation in their games, a common reaction was that religion *is* acceptable to use in game design – just not your own. And yet, religion is omnipresent in games. So, which representations are acceptable? According to the respondents, it is acceptable to tap into already existing religious conventions and repertoires that players already know from other games. For instance, Christopher Yabsley of *Dungeon League* explains why healers in role-playing games (RPGs) are “usually” Priests, accompanied by holy Paladins, Monks and other conventional classes of the genre. Specifically, we talked about the design choices surrounding Cosmos (figure 2), a character designed “quite narrowly I guess in reference to Paladins. Because he's kind of like a cross [between a] Paladin and a Cleric.... I think [in terms of direct influences] that would be *World of Warcraft* plus *Diablo 2's* Paladin plus Paladins in *Dungeons & Dragons*.”

For indie developers, it is convenient to use a conventional repository of (religious) signs, because it communicates a lot about the game without needing to explain anything explicitly. According to Christopher and others who made similar design choices, “the supernatural is such a norm in the context of an RPG that it's a way to just instantly create a character.” Specifically, in the case of *Dungeon League's* Paladin character, conforming to these long-established conventions or “tropes” allows designers “to infer a lot of knowledge to the player at a glance”:

I use tropes such as the healing Paladin to instantly convey a lot of mechanics about my game. Now, when someone looks at Cosmos they look at him for one second and they have a good idea of what sort of role and how he's gonna play and stuff like that and that's why I play with the tropes as well and use them like that. (Christopher)

Other game designers similarly referred to such conventions as “tropes” (Sabine), “icons” (Barney), an inherited “language” of game design



Figure 2. The character Cosmos in Christopher Yabsley's *Dungeon League* is typical for a "holy Paladin," drawn from a "palette" of genre conventions.

(Cuauhtemoc) or "conventions that help with player communication," so that "if there's someone who heals you it'll get like a cross symbol because that means 'it's a healer'" (David). Why? Such conventions "have been reproduced so much it's now become a *language*," such as "having a red team versus a blue team," having a "priest be the healer" and assuming players will run "from left to right in a platformer" (Cuauhtemoc). According to Mexican Catholic designer Cuauhtemoc Moreno, this conventional "language" of game design is predominantly a practical way to communicate between developers and players.

The concept of a Priest has become such a clear representation and now everyone associates a Priest with healing, that now it's just an easy symbol of the game *vocabulary*. I don't think it even says anything particular about the creators. Just, it's a super-easy tool to represent something. There's a Priest there, it's a healer. It's like calling levels "levels" or your points a "score," and that kind of thing. It's a basic building block for the language, for better or worse. (Cuauhtemoc)

These choices are mostly practical, and neither conscious decisions nor related to developers' own religious beliefs and backgrounds. Cuauhtemoc, as a Catholic-raised Mexican, "do[es]n't think it even says anything particular about the creators," whereas for atheist Christopher, "it's just something you call on. [...] It's just a palette. I don't have any feelings about it either way – I just like it." For Chris Austen, his choice to include a Priest class, a High Priestess, a Paladin, a church and several "holy" items in his game *The Contractor* "just made sense." He stated "I just rolled with it, it just came natural. [...] I wanted a Melee class, I wanted a Mage class, so I needed a Priest class, I just built on that."

Such "naturalness" encourages developers to base their design decisions on existing conventions for pragmatic reasons. Standardized signs that have already been established make the most immediate sense to players and developers. Developers talk about these conventions as self-evident. In this example, religious contexts can simply just be "where the healing comes from":

If you get an RPG and one of the characters isn't religious, I'd be very surprised. Down to the very basic core, [the] mechanics of RPGs include a Priest as healer in a fundamental role. Every RPG game is more or less gonna have a healer, and that role and background is usually given a religious context because that's where the healing comes from. (Christopher)

Indeed, Christopher says, religious tropes "seem pretty standard [in] just everything I come across." Taking out religion may be problematic. As Cuauhtemoc states: "If you make a game where you change a convention, like run[ning] from right to left [instead of left to right], it has to be *about* that. The entire game will have to be about that [change]. It's a language of the medium now." A radical departure from convention has to be core to the game's experience to make sense lest it not confuse. Indeed, this goes as much for basic conventions such as left-to-right walking and red teams versus blue teams, as it goes for specifically religious conventions. In addition to using Priest and Paladin classes, participants named the church as a safe place, mana as a unit of magic, and so on as significant tropes.

In summary, rather than tapping into their own (religious) beliefs, independent developers reproduce religious "tropes," "icons" or "signs" that are part and parcel of the cultural repertoire of the game industry. This makes sense for pragmatic reasons of "usability" and "instant communication" to players.

### C. Western Worship

From what traditions do these standardized signs come, however? A common explanation when asked where developers got the conventions they adhere to, is their own gaming history. For David and Barney and many others, it is “hard to pinpoint the source of – it was just all the games we played when we were young.” They mention *Dungeons & Dragons*, which is “full of deities,” and all the games it inspired, as well as *Heretic*, *Quake* and *Doom*, because games like that “all just had the dark kind of creepiness of religious symbology.” It is the overall use of Christian iconography in games such as these that creates a particular “atmosphere” they consider important in games. For Christopher, too, “it’s just my background of growing up with *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Diablo* and stuff like that. I like these tropes and the worlds that they can offer.” The origins of religious representational conventions are almost uncontestedly located within Anglophone geek culture of the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Chris Bateman, looking back on decades of work stresses both “just how influential [J. R. R.] Tolkien’s novels have been in developing the narrative lineages of table-top games and videogames” and subsequently how “videogames largely descend from *Dungeons & Dragons*.” The world created in the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* resembled that of Tolkien’s Middle-earth in many ways, such as its use of races. It became a “mash-up world” (Bateman), or one in which “it’s almost just like you’ve got all the monsters ever in the world” combined together (Barney). More colloquially, David describes this repository of cultural heritage, folklore, pulp fiction and fantasy as “just massive nerds with fantasy novels, *Dungeons & Dragons* and so on.”

Game design is thus rooted in a Western tradition of looking at religion, and indie developers seem often more incentivized to stick to those traditions than AAA companies with all their up-to-date market research and advertising budgets. As Chad Toprak, Farah Khalaf, Rami Ismail, Lee Shang Lun and others specified, the conservative, market-conforming audience to stick to is one of “primarily white” and “secular” or “atheist men.” Rami points to the difference in classic representations of the Christian “Priest who is always a healer or manipulator that converts enemies” versus the exotic “wild Shaman,” as one example through which game culture’s Eurocentric perspective becomes apparent:

Shamans are much more aggressive, which says a lot about how we look at shamanism. Shamans are not healers. Shamans make volcanoes erupt and cause earthquakes, you will never see a Priest do that. So in these

cases you see a strong preference for Christian culture in game culture. A Paladin in game culture, also, is always a healer-slash-warrior. Always dressed in white, always a hero of light. *Believe me*, if games originated from the Arabic world, Paladins would be one of the most dangerous bad guys to encounter, depicted as bloody monsters – because they are *literally crusaders*. (Rami)

Similarly, Nawaf Bahadur recounted how his friends and he were confused, growing up in Saudi Arabia, about the “obviousness” of churches as a safe and sacred place in videogames:

They usually have you go to a church to revive your characters, and the person who does it is a pastor. And for a lot of people, it doesn't really make real-world sense, such as for a Muslim like me, growing up in the Middle East, it doesn't seem self-evident at all. In Saudi Arabia we don't have any churches. So for me going to a church and healing my character sounds weird. It's like, “Yeah, you're telling me to go to that building?”... We just didn't *get it* growing up – but for many people here [in Canada] it has become a symbol, the church, for healing in games. So, in level design using those symbols does help, even without the cultural background for it to really make sense.

When game developers grow up only being offered Western, Christian traditional signs, it makes sense to reproduce traditional game design as they enter the industry. Specifically, this tradition represents religion divorced from faith and church – as magical, as instrumental, and as equal to fantasy and folklore. Shang Lun stresses that, in his experience, this now-default “game culture which we celebrate all the time [...] is largely secular. It largely assumes the player is secular. It certainly does not frame religion as a ‘real’ thing.” Furthermore, it uses religion instrumentally: “You pray to gods to get health. [...] Almost always, it's transactional – which is very much not how I conceptualize my faith” (Shang Lun). Religion is elsewhere instrumentalized as “window dressing” since videogames use religious representation to “explain away” game mechanics and add atmosphere, “in the way that magic is used in a lot of fantasy stuff, a quick way to layer on to explain certain types of effects” (David). Adding to this, Barney insists that “not being very religious [myself], I find it very fascinating in terms of – like – just atmosphere! If you want to give something atmosphere, the elements of drama and magic are really strong in religion and ritual *and all that stuff*”

Just as easily as it is used as a tool to explain away things and add atmosphere, this predominantly Christian heritage is stripped of its sacrality by setting it alongside the mundane and the magical. There is a long tradition of what Richard Bartle called “making religions mundane.” Bartle created *MUD* (or *Multi-User Dungeon*), the first MMO, in 1978.

[I] put in temples and churches, chapels and crypts and such because I wanted familiar settings that I could do magic in. [...] I put them in to make them be mundane. It was just about regarding religion as another form of magic. To make religion just look like any other kind of fantasy.

This set the tone for a decades-long tradition of representing religion as instrumental and mundane. Game development started out as hobby projects in university dorm rooms and attics – much like Anthropy’s “Zinesters,” albeit decidedly white, male and North American or European. However, the culture that has resulted from this has become universal. Regardless of whether developers are atheist, Muslim or Christian, from North America, Europe or elsewhere, this tradition of representing religion is the global default. In the words of David, straying away from European/Christian traditions “just feels weird”:

We tend to shy away from Australian stuff, because it feels sort of weird? So we usually sort of default to being more American? Or English? If we’d use specific Australian or Aboriginal mythology, that would seem like we’re making a very very bold statement about *that’s* what this game is *about!* Whereas if we borrowed from English folklore, it’s like, “Oh, that’s just normal English mythology.” I can just throw those symbols around and not feel bad! (David)

#### D. Economic Expectations

In relation to such concerns of weirdness or incomprehensibility, independent developers stressed the economic risks of depicting religion differently. Illustrative is Sabine Harrer – a game scholar and game maker with the Copenhagen Game Collective, who made *Pray, Pray, Absolution*, in which players sign the cross competitively (in a mockery of what Sabine perceived as their childhood Catholicism’s holier-than-thou performativity):

It is very hard to make a game. So most developers go for a version of game development that makes them stay alive... to survive. To be able to

make games as art like *Pray, Pray, Absolution* is a luxury; to make a game that also is on the market is very risky, to get into any kind of criticism of religion. (Sabine)

Contrasting the economic independence stressed in the literature, most indies are so *dependent* on the market that their livelihoods are at stake – again, more so than contracted workers at a company like Ubisoft. This encourages them to reuse tropes as well as literal assets through the *Unreal* and *Unity* asset stores (cf. Keogh, 2018, p. 13). Sabine reasons that the economic necessity for indies to reuse assets such as churches and Priests “contributes to this constant repetition of themes and tropes and mechanics.”

Indeed, the *Unity* asset store tends to gravitate toward reproductions of the same, often European and North American, signs of all sorts – from flora, fauna, to objects. Searching *Unity*’s asset store for religion reflects this cultural-geographical bias, too: most of the assets on offer are Christian (figure 3). For instance, the “Authentic Sacred Church Music” pack comes with the following explanation: “Are you creating a game in a *religious setting* or a game where the player might enter into a *church* or *cathedral* at some point?” (emphasis in the original). A “religious setting” in *Unity*’s asset store is largely synonymous with Catholic Christianity: beside the sacred music pack, there are sculptures of angels and saints; various crucifixes; a Virgin Mary; graveyards of Christian tombstones with complimentary stone cathedral; Gothic churches; a vintage Bible; and, for those who scroll down, a few non-Christian and vaguely non-Western results, such as the “African” culture sculpture pack. Why reuse conventions at all? Minimizing risks and their financial consequences motivates designers to conform to an economy of Christian conventions.

Within this cultural tradition and economy of game design, re-framing religion otherwise becomes a risky design choice. Bartle insists that “you can’t make a game that you want everyone to play if you pitch up with a particular worldview about a particular religion.” Bateman agrees that “in a game targeting the United States, which almost all games do, [...] the betrayal of religion becomes a market concern.” Contrarily, when working on *Kult: Heretic Kingdoms* with small studio 3D People, Bateman decided on a setting that inverted many fantasy clichés of religion. The game, whose tagline reads “God is dead and religion is heresy,” involves an inquisition aiming to annihilate religion. Nonetheless,

I don’t know how successful I was at getting that across to players, to be honest. I went to a conference in Atlanta and met someone who had

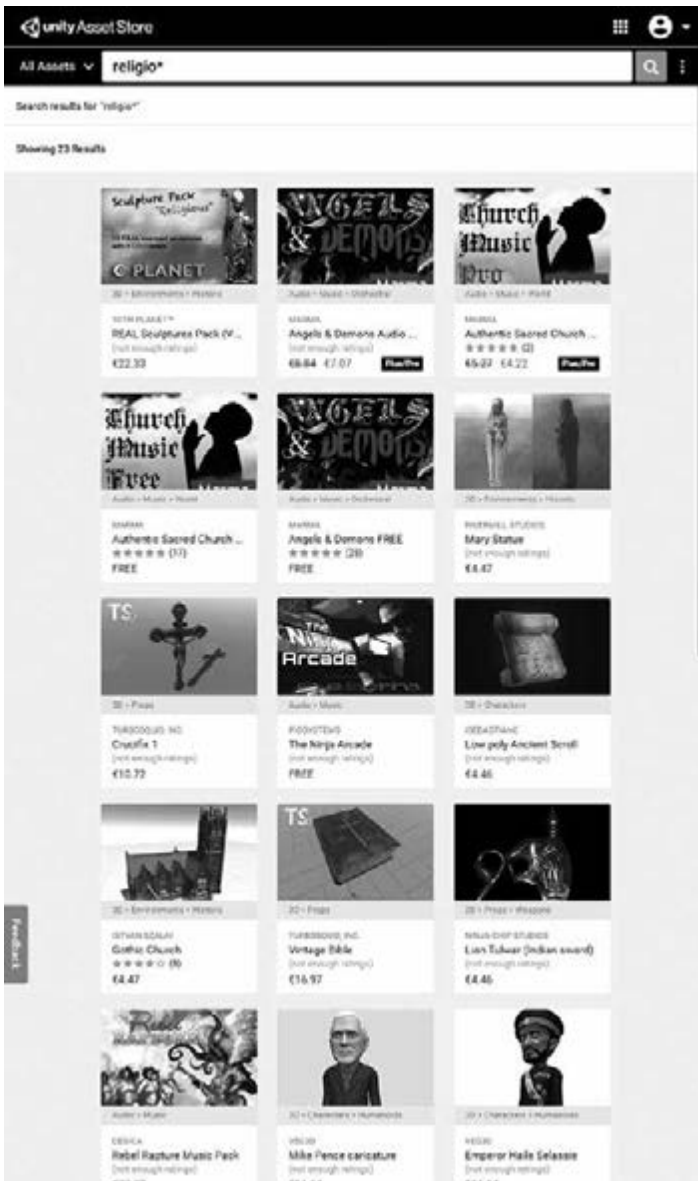


Figure 3. Results in the Unity Asset Store for “religio\*” are mostly Christian.

played the game. He was Christian and felt it'd be very off-putting to Christian players. I probably failed on that front. I'm still quite pleased to have had a go at it at all, because anywhere else in the market, on a high-end development budget, it could never have been made at all. There is just no way. (Chris)



While small profits – or even not-for-profit art practice – thus potentially allow game makers to deviate from established representations of religion, there is a pervasive consciousness of the economic risks involved. Lee Shang Lun attested that indies typically “ensure that the final product isn’t going to be too far out from what our established conception of a good game is. Because such a gamble is not feasibly taken on,” experimental game design is only possible on the basis of previous commercial success. While Shang Lun’s past successes have granted him some financial security to be able to experiment, there are still audience considerations that cause him not to make games on overtly religious topics. One such concept, *Emma*, was cancelled halfway through:

INTERVIEWER: Which of your games would you say engage more explicitly with your religious background?

LEE SHANG LUN: Um no,... none.... Uh, there’s unmade games that I’ve made where I’ve tried to represent my religious experience.... They’ve all kind of not been very interesting to most audiences.

I: Why have they not been made? I think one of them might be *Emma*. From the ABC episode that you didn’t end up making...

LSL: Well I got half-way through and then kind of just gave up. Because... [long silence] it... didn’t feel like... the kind of thing that was going to be [sighs] useful to anyone maybe?

Developers that did gain financial security often got there by not challenging convention. A successful indie developer and practicing Muslim, Rami Ismail of *Vlambeer* fame, hopes the future grants

more space for games that use religion well, that do give another perspective on the world because until now it has pretty much always been so that games with such a perspective, like *Under Ash* that Syrian game. [...] They have absolutely no chance financially, *because the market is too Western*. (Rami)

## Conclusion: Religious Values Become Commodified Signs

For now, there is little such space for deviation. I started this chapter with the questions, “Do independent game developers represent their own (ir)

religious backgrounds in their games?” and “How and why do they (not) do so?”

Do they? Those I interviewed overwhelmingly do not, due to taboos and fears. For atheists, gaming was seen as a distinctly irreligious culture; whereas religious developers expressed a deeply rooted idea that gaming is not (yet) a place for their religiosity, despite its pervasiveness in every other part of their life. How do they come to represent religion instead? They *use* religion instrumentally, through standardized signs often based on conventions typically embedded in Western Christian game-design traditions.

Theoretically, this instrumental use of religion is again, and somewhat surprisingly, best understood as a commodification of religious tradition. Just as in the previous chapter, I refer by “commodification” to a process of “maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political or personal transaction costs” to make something exchangeable (Appadurai, 2005, p. 35). In the case of my analysis, the personal and meaningful religious values of indie developers are turned into commodified signs by just such a process. Historically, religious values are communicated through ritual, collective experience and material culture, which in religious communities serve to do what sociologist of religion Peter Berger calls “constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning, binding on everybody” (1967, p. 134). However, by putting a social taboo on personal religious expression in the (indie) videogame market, and by standardizing, restricting and making exchangeable – in other words: *commodifying* – their religious values, they are thus reduced to commodified signs.

It is perhaps underwhelming to the reader (and unexpected to this researcher himself), that I must draw a similar conclusion here as in the previous chapter, but it is the appropriate conceptualization. Furthermore, it is productive for two reasons which help me flesh out the theorization of how religion is put in videogames in a way that is complementary to the analysis of Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed* series in Chapter 2. In the first place, the reason it is productive is because it is a surprising result: rather than a big, commercial, market-driven enterprise (for whom making things “marketable” and commodifying them is par for the course), the indie developer is presented in the literature as an independent figure, able to stray from conventions. This was, in fact, the very reason to ask this question: How is religion used in videogame production outside of the AAA market? Despite the literature hailing indies as exemplary for diversity, inclusivity, authenticity and originality in the game industry, the analysis shows that they, too, are in fact dependent on established convention for various reasons.

These reasons (social taboo, standardization, Eurocentrism and economic precarity) make even independent game design a difficult and unprofitable environment for expressing religious identity. Secondly, it shows that despite diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds, they all draw from the same (Western Christian) game-design traditions. Feminist philosopher bell hooks argues that this is always the case for cultural commodification, because cultural expressions (such as religious traditions and values) are sold to a dominant culture by “eating the other,” i.e., by bringing the cultural Other – the shaman, the Muslim – into the palatable world of hegemony (hooks, 2006, p. 31).

The “ultimate meaning” of religion is thus first made taboo, and then instrumentalized in its commodified form: standardized, Westernized and, finally, exchangeable as a (safe, palatable) investment. How can this be understood? On the one hand, Brendan Keogh rightfully asserts that indies’ ideal-typical “tension with Triple-A development” means indies not only oppose AAA, but are also “entangled in the narratives and values of the Triple-A industry” (Keogh, 2015, p. 156). Indeed, it appears difficult – even for indies – to escape the gravitational pull and standard of the global “culture industry” of games. Indies’ precarity seems to motivate them more so to be conservative than salaried workers in a AAA context. Given the finding that there is a tendency toward similar and standardized forms of representing religion, I propose we should recognize in this the process of what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno once called “sameness” (*Ähnlichkeit*) (1944, p. 94): a process of standardization in cultural industries, regardless of the beliefs and intentions of the workers within that industry. They describe “sameness” as a process by which cultural industries are driven to monotonously commodify ideas, driven on the one hand by taboos on non-hegemonic groups and ideas – in Horkheimer and Adorno’s time and text, “cozy liberalism and Jewish intellectualism” (p. 96), or in hooks’ work the process of “eating the other” (hooks, 2006). On the other hand, this “insatiable uniformity” is positively driven by a maximization of profit, achieved by appealing to the widest possible audience, by which “words change from substantial carriers of meaning to signs devoid of qualities” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 133).

What Horkheimer and Adorno argue to be true of signs in text, film and radio appears to be true for independent 21<sup>st</sup> century game development as well. Without wanting to support their further argument that cultural industries – through their supposed entanglement with other industries and political power – manipulate mass society into passivity, I *am* interested in the “sameness” of indies. That is, the commodification of religious values

as a reduction from “substantial carriers of meaning” (ibid.), or even “ultimate meaning” (Berger, 1967, p. 134), to exchangeable signs devoid of those qualities. Churches become places to regain health points, Clerics become merely a specific type of fighter, and so on. In this, my analysis provides cultural-sociological and empirical support for Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of sameness – across at least one AAA example (*Assassin’s Creed* in the previous chapter) and a broad selection of indies. Indeed, we can see similar observations elsewhere, namely a process of standardization under global capitalist “transnational cultural fields” (Kuipers, 2011, p. 555; Kline et al., 2003), especially with indies working under economic precarity (Lima, 2018; Srauy, 2019).

My analysis of how indies deal with religion has broader theoretical implications. First of all, the instrumental perspective that characterizes the designer choices explored in this chapter nuances the interpretations of religious scholars (e.g., Bainbridge, 2013; Bosman, 2019), who are celebrating the “spiritual significance” of religion in games and popular culture as a whole (cf. Partridge, 2004). Instead, ultimate values of religion are reduced to conventional and commodified signs. On a more general note, this chapter shows the relevance of Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of “sameness” still dominating the culture industry and, particularly, gives qualitative empirical support for how precisely such conformity emerges through different steps of commodification. It is for Chapters 4 and 5 to further analyze how players differently understand and play with that sameness. As for the production side of things: indies, regardless of their own religious positions, just need to make a living.

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# Part II

## Consuming Religion

“How do Players Make Sense of and  
Relate to Religion in Videogames?”





## 4. Public Religion on Videogame Forums

### Abstract

This chapter focuses on player communities. Based on an analysis of discussions on religion in games, among thousands of players on videogame fora, this chapter argues that players are prompted not just to play in isolation, but to collectively discuss the meanings and meaninglessness of religion in videogames. Doing so, they use videogames to learn about and, more often, fight about what games mean to them, in widely divergent ways. They thus perform a kind of “public religion”, including conversations on the meaning of gods and religions in culture. These conversations are prompted by games and loosely based on their own religious beliefs, the content of the games they play, and their conceptions of what the developers intended.

**Keywords:** player studies, post-secular society, online forums, public sphere, public religion

As the previous chapters have shown, videogame developers draw on religious traditions to present appealing worlds and rituals for players to interact with. In Chapter 2, Ubisoft’s historical action-adventure game *Assassin’s Creed* drew on Christian, Muslim and other inspirations to present a franchise in which Catholic Templars and Shi’ite *hashashins* covet the Apple of Eden. Chapter 3 showed how indies often end up safely reproducing religious conventions unrelated to their own religion. How do players then consume, play with and talk about such games? When first-person shooter *BioShock: Infinite* asked players to undergo baptism at the start of the game, one player notoriously asked for (and received) a refund. His reasoning was faith-based: it forced him “to make a choice between committing extreme blasphemy by my actions in choosing to accept this ‘choice’ or forced to quit playing the game” he had paid for (Hernandez, 2013). Plenty of other games present religion in different ways: religion is used to define factions and allegiances in strategy games such as *Civilization*; it drives fundamentalists in military games like *Call of Duty*; and it serves as a source of magic, quests and

items in fantasy games like *Skyrim* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Videogames draw on a variety of fictional and historical religious traditions, as shown by games such as *Age of Mythology*, *Ōkami*, *Prince of Persia*, *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and countless others with their roots in Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Chinese, Shinto, Zoroastrian and other theo-mythologies, including those made up for the games themselves.

So what do players do with such signs, offered up to this huge audience by a cultural industry churning out games? The omnipresence of religions in games is, to reiterate, particularly surprising from the sociological perspective of religious privatization – or the assumption that the social significance of church religion is in decline in most Western countries (Bruce, 2002). Outside of churches, millions of young players engage with religion through games instead, on a daily basis. Moreover, they gather online in large numbers to discuss what those games mean, to them personally and as a community. They do so on internet forums such as *Reddit* (243.6 million users), *IGN* (1.2 million) and more selective forums such as *NeoGAF* (151,000), which have month-long waiting lists and are visited by journalists and game developers alongside fans. In this chapter I study how gamers comes together on such forums to discuss religion in games and what it means to them, asking, in other words:

- Which videogames provoke discussions of religion in game culture’s online forums?
- How do players with various (ir)religious worldviews discuss religion in videogames?
- What implications does this have for theories of religious social significance and privatization?

### **Discussing Religious Games in the Public Sphere**

As covered more elaborately in the introduction, Thomas Luckmann argued half a century ago that religion, rather than disappearing, had become “invisible” by retreating into the “private sphere” (1967, p. 103). As Kelly Besecke convincingly argues, “Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion as privatized is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one” (2005, p. 186). However, Besecke problematizes this uncritical following of Luckmann by pointing out the publicly visible role of “privatized,” “invisible” religion in American media. Looking at media and communication as indicative

for the public sphere of a society, she observes that bookshops are full of magazines and publications offering popular Christian insights, stories about miracles and angels, spiritual self-help, enlightenment and mindfulness. Consequently, Besecke asserts that outside of the institutional–individual divide underlying secularization’s privatization theories, there is a “communicative” lens, through which it is clear that “Americans are talking with each other about religious meaning,” in books, lectures and songs (ibid., p. 181). A few years earlier, three weeks after the events of September 11, 2001, Jürgen Habermas similarly observed that Western news media and politics are once again undeniably and forcibly preoccupied with religion in “post-secular” society (Habermas, 2006; Habermas & Reemtsma, 2001). While Besecke and Habermas have very different approaches to the role of religion in society, both stress the importance of religion’s media presence as being in direct contradiction with religion’s “exit” from the public sphere.

Academically, analyses of religion in games take place mostly divorced from analyses of religion’s place in the public sphere such as Habermas’ and Besecke’s. Motivated by these vivid, yet by and large unrelated, debates in academia, I aim to study the way players reflect on and debate in-game religion. Such an explorative analysis of the social significance of in-game religion, I argue, calls for an approach studying players of games as co-constituting a game culture. Empirically, scholars have predominantly either analyzed religious representation in games (e.g., Bosman, 2015; O’Donnell, 2015), singular or non-player communities (Lindsey, 2015; Piasecki, 2016), or, less commonly, individual players dealing with such religious representations (e.g., de Wildt & Aupers, 2019; Schaap & Aupers, 2017). When cultures of players are studied, research often selectively focuses on small groups such as singular guilds (Geraci, 2014) or specific religious organizations (Luft, 2014; Zeiler, 2014).

This central focus on either games, game-specific communities or individually interviewed players conveys a blind spot for the broader communal, social and cultural context of gaming forums. Theoretically, such methodological choices blinker the implications for the social significance of religion and its role in the public sphere. In order to empirically explore religion in public debates – particularly the way people talk about, reflect on and make sense of religion in and through media – this chapter takes game culture as one such site for debates that are prompted by media use. As any culture, the subculture of gamers provides a “sociocultural context [that] shapes and influences individual activity and meaning making through socialization and enculturation” (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 98; Nasir, 2005). Game culture transcends single games, particularly through players’ collective engagement on forums. These forums, I argue, are the most “ideal-typical

habitat” of game communities where game culture is fully expressed: here players openly discuss the meanings of games and what it means specifically to be a “gamer” (Braithwaite, 2014; Shaw, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2006). In short: to know how “gamers” relate to religion in games, this chapter studies the discussions of that topic on their forums.

## Methodology

Since this chapter addresses the debates and discourses on in-game religion, and the different individual and collective meanings these may have for players, I selected and analyzed two sources in two phases of the study: firstly, I analyzed the debates on religion in games of N=100 discussion “threads” (between three and 576 posts each) on the five most popular videogame forums. The threads were collected in 2017, dating from 2007 to 2017. Secondly, a number of forum users were theoretically selected for additional semi-structured in-depth interviews (N=20).

The forum discussions were selected for topical relevance (i.e., containing discussions about religion in games, on popular gaming forums). The selection process itself, however, involved five sequential steps to keep the body of data manageable for “inductive content analysis” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, page-ranking service Alexa was consulted to rank gaming websites based on traffic data. This is explicitly a research design focusing on gaming forums: I want to know how players of videogames talk about religion, not how users on religion forums talk about videogames. Second, unarchived, inactive forums were excluded (e.g., *PC Gamer*, *GamesRadar*, *VG247*); and those focusing on single games (e.g., *Leagueoflegends.com*, *Minecraftforum.net*). This prevents self-selection of religiously-themed games – to instead find out which games afford religious discussions on open forums. Third, because Alexa’s rankings are based on web traffic for the entire website, each website was re-ranked for traffic only to their forums (e.g., *www.neogaf.com/forum/* and *forums.penny-arcade.com* instead of the full domain) using three other metrics: MozRank, MozPA and Google’s PageRank. Table 4 gives the resulting top-five forums selected for data collection, and the amount of relevant discussions found on each – to be elaborated below.

Fourth, threads were gathered on these forums through a Google search from an anonymized “research browser” to minimize the influence of previous search activity (Digital Methods Initiative, 2016). Data was collected by prefixing the Google string with the operator “site”: and using Google’s “stemming,” so that search terms include inflections and affixes

**Table 4. Final Ranking of Forums and Results of Searching for Discussions on Games and Religion**

	URL	Alexa	MozRank	MozPA	Google PageRank	Results
1	www.reddit.com	34	7.25	95.45	8	3,110,000
2	www.ign.com/boards/	325	6.52	80.83	6	5850
3	www.gamefaqs.com/boards	497	6.44	55.65	5	17,800
4	www.gamespot.com/forums/	746	4.17	55.53	6	15,400
5	www.neogaf.com/forum/	2099	6.59	61.55	5	7110

of a morphological stem (so that “religion” returns “religious,” “religion,” “religiously” etc.). The resulting search string entered for each forum was:

site:[*sitedomain*] games religion OR spiritual OR belief OR christianity  
OR islam OR muslim OR hindu

The discussions found mention religion, spirituality or belief in the context of games and/or mention one of the three major world religions (Christianity, Islam and Hinduism) or their followers. Additional religious positions (e.g., agnostic, pagan) were observed not to affect search results – despite being well-represented within discussions.

A total of 3,156,160 search results were returned (table 4), of which the first twenty threads were selected from each forum in order to keep qualitative analysis manageable. In line with the established practices of grounded theory and, particularly, inductive content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), the resulting hundred threads were analyzed and coded on commonalities and differences in the discourse, i.e. themes discussed, the position players express vis-à-vis religious in-game content and so on. This “constant comparative method” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) resulted in an empirically grounded typology. The full dataset was archived in 2315 pages (in PDF format) and is publicly available.<sup>1</sup> Informed consent was not deemed necessary up to this point: players posted anonymously on public forums, according to the terms and conditions for that forum’s publication of their posts (cf. Bourgonjon et al., 2015; de Wildt & Aupers, 2020; Mo & Coulson, 2008).

The second phase of the research and method consisted of interviewing a selection of players to further develop, complement and ground the analysis,

<sup>1</sup> The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZKDWD2>.

i.e. the typology that was inductively developed in the content analysis. Forum users were “theoretically selected” on the basis of religious diversity, their perspective on the content of games, or their role in a discussion; either of which prompted more questions and required more data, as recognized during data collection and in accordance with a constant comparative approach (Aupers et al., 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2008). Of the 38 users contacted for interviews, 20 participants responded and were interviewed (table 5). The interviews served to gather insight into the motivations, beliefs and social positions behind online posts; into how they think about and assign meaning to (religious) games in their lives; and how their religious positions are related to this. In other words: to further question the biographies, motivations and identities behind these users’ forum posts.

**Table 5. Anonymized List of Participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Religious background</b>
Bill	M	25	USA	Roman Catholic
Geoff	M	36	USA	New Age
James	M	22	USA	Atheist
Eric	M	28	USA	Southern Baptist
Grant	M	23	New Zealand	Agnostic ex-Mormon
Edward	M	23	Hong Kong	Agnostic ex-Evangelical
Günther	M	32	German	Atheist raised Lutheran
Brandon	M	25	USA	Atheist ex-Quaker
Phil	M	25	USA	Atheist ex-Evangelical
Duke	M	26	USA	Pentecostal
Joan	F	28	New Zealand	Deist
Daniel	M	29	USA	Jewish
Greg	M	24	USA	Jehovah’s Witness
Bert	M	32	USA	Presbyterian
Dan	M	34	Japan	Reformed Evangelical
Nico	M	22	Netherlands	Atheist
Ali	M	25	Netherlands	Muslim
Abhi	M	25	India	Atheist raised Hindu
Swapan	M	30	India	Atheist raised Hindu
Strahan	M	34	Ireland	Roman Catholic

## Discussing Religion in Digital Games

Due to online forums’ hierarchical, digital form, the data are already clearly organized chronologically in a thread of posts by different users, as



Figure 4. Excerpt from the GameFAQs forum.

**Table 6. Game Series by Number of Appearances in Unique Threads (2007–2017)**

	<b>Game(-series)</b>	<b>Threads</b>
1	<i>Final Fantasy</i>	27
2	<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	22
3	<i>BioShock</i>	22
4	<i>Xeno(gears/-saga/-blade)</i>	20
5	<i>(Shin) Megami Tensei</i>	17
6	<i>Dante's Inferno</i>	16
7	<i>Dark Souls</i>	15
8	<i>Dragon Age</i>	9
9	<i>The Elder Scrolls</i>	8
9	<i>The Binding of Isaac</i>	8
9	<i>Devil May Cry</i>	8

in the example of excerpts from one thread on GameFAQs in figure 4. The figure furthermore exemplifies two things. First, it presents an instance of how religious discussions were treated as recurring, conflictual and sometimes unpleasant. Its title (“Am I the only one not looking forward to the religious arguments bound to ensue?”) echoes this sentiment. As a user on *GameSpot* commented: “I think it [i]s strange that most of Offtopic is religion based,” referring to one of *GameSpot*’s largest sections called “Off-topic.”

Second, figure 4 shows two highlighted examples of users announcing their religious position (e.g., “I’m christian and [...]” “I’m devoutly religious, but seriously...,” “As an atheist”). This was commonly done to contextualize opinions (“Full disclosure, I’m not a religious person,”) and indicate authenticity (“I’d consider myself a pretty devout Muslim. My religion actually does affect the way I play”).



Which games prompt religious discussion? Based on the forum analysis, I was able to form a list of the game series which were most frequently referred to, by coding for titles as they occurred (table 6). Games are ordered by the number of discussions they appeared in. The bottom three games occupy a shared spot, with equal occurrences.

The list provides a context for how players discuss these games, since these games represent religion in different ways. Broadly categorized, series such as *Assassin's Creed*, *BioShock*, *Dante's Inferno* and *The Binding of Isaac* build on historical religions like Christianity, Islam and Ancient Greco-Roman faith. Series such as *Dark Souls*, *The Elder Scrolls* and *Dragon Age* each present their own religious system(s) – with their own original pantheons, mythologies and churches. Series such as *Final Fantasy*, *Xenogears*, *Megami Tensei*, and *Devil May Cry* eclectically juxtapose multiple fictional and religious traditions (de Wildt & Aupers, 2021). Each combines elements of biblical, Iranian, Greek, Hindu, Sumerian and numerous other mythologies alongside figures from Lovecraftian, Beowulfian, other fictional and original lore.

The list of games most mentioned in debates about religion is interesting in itself (and has informed other parts of this book), but in this analysis it primarily provides context for the debates about religious narratives, tropes and rituals. The core of the analysis focuses on the different ways gamers relate to these religious issues. Throughout the forum discussions I found four typical attitudes toward religious content in videogames, which I will set forth below: Rejecting, Debunking, Debating and Connecting.

#### A. Rejecting: “Stay Far Away from This Satanic Game”

Some users choose to reject any game that disagrees with their own worldview. Rejecters can be found across all variations of (dis)belief. Rejecting a game can be total, e.g.: “This game is worthless and is satanic. Jesus died on the cross to defeat Satan and the power of Sin,” or leading to personal calls to warn other believers:

Anyone who is a servant of Christ will stay far away from this Satanic game. Be warned this game is not of God or from God but from Satan. It's seen in the advertizing and in the actual game itself.

In Christ,

Andrew

Rejecters refuse to play a game when it endorses a worldview that disagrees with theirs. What fundamentally distinguishes “Rejecting” from “Debunking” (below), is that rejecters take the content of the game seriously, despite wishing to completely disengage from it. Indeed Andrew’s comments proved to be, as the discussion continued, out of real concern for the souls of those playing the game: a concern that gained both support (“People who call themselves Christians have no business playing this game. [Andrew and another user] are correct in what they have said”), as well as opposition (“But you’re battling Satan’s minions, not aiding them. Wouldn’t that be a good thing?”) and disbelief (“You’re joking right? I mean you don’t honestly believe *Doom 3* was made by Satan”).

Rejecting is nonetheless not an attitude solely for believers. One presumably atheist or agnostic forum user states:

All I’m saying is that I can’t relate to someone who’s religious, and if I’m supposed to bond with this character and “go on a journey” with him, I just, I can’t and I’m not interested in doing so.

In order to gain more insight into players rejecting the religious contents of games, I contacted and actively sought out some of these forum users for further interviews. Greg, for example, a Jehovah’s Witness, felt alienated by representations of atheism and (other) religions, remarking that his religious life outright “limits what I play”: he stays away from violence, demons and games like *God of War* and *Devil May Cry* that feature “un-Christian” content. Religion, he claimed, was usually revealed in games to be “window dressing”: mundane, irrelevant or it simply “turns out to be alien technology.”

Ali, a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim, felt that, although “heathen content is inescapable, you’ll have to deal with it if you want to play games,” which increasingly led him to refrain from playing games altogether. He referred to games like *Uncharted*, which use “pagan symbols,” the “satanic content” of the *Doom* series and so on. This group of players further included brothers Dan and Bert, both Christian ministers<sup>32</sup>

4.\*, who resorted to shooting and sports games that lack religious content. This is true for all the rejecters I interviewed: while gaming is a fun activity for its challenges, game-play and story, games all too often proved a distracting or even distasteful contestation of their beliefs.

## B. Debunking: “It’s Just a Game”

Debunking forum posts assert that the religious content of a game is essentially trivial, whether as a form of serious expression to begin with;

or in its relevance to “real”-world actions and morality. For religious and non-religious players alike, debunking is the fundamental assertion that one’s beliefs remain unshaken, regardless of what kind of worldview a game confronts them with.

Debunking, in its simplest form, makes clear-cut distinctions between the real world and a virtual world, by stating that “it’s just a game.” Debunking is a rhetorical strategy to denounce fiction as having any sway over religious beliefs: “If a work of fiction makes you angry because in their fictional universe God maybe did not cause historical events that is pretty sad. This is coming from a religious person as well.” By extension, another religious player noted that what religion is “about” is more important than works of fiction:

I’m Christian but nothing about this game [*BioShock Infinite*] bothered me. [...] it’s a work of fiction made for entertainment, so anyone who can have their ideals swayed by a story isn’t really getting what religion is all about.

Debunkers like the one quoted above essentially favour the truth-value of one text, such as the Bible or other religious writing, over another “text” or media artefact – e.g., *BioShock* – by debunking the latter as a fictional text and respecting the former as more true and, hence, influential to their worldview. Similarly, other (often atheist or agnostic) users are led to the same kind of reflection, with a radically different conclusion: to them, *neither* is particularly meaningful, both the Bible and *BioShock* are works of fiction.

In a thread started by a religious player asking how atheists respond to religion in games, one atheist responded, “Well, I don’t feel affected and no one should be... because you know why?... It’s just a game!... If you feel bad about a game then you have a problem...” According to another, “It’s just all fantasy to me. I don’t have a problem with it at all.” This interpretation of actions and stories in games as, in the end, irrelevant to ‘real’ life is shared by many religious Debunkers:

I am pretty sure that if you realize it[']s a game and you don’t go and commit crimes or live an awful life God will understand ;). The other day I was punching birds in *Crysis* and I would NEVER do that in real life :P.

In such cases, Debunking entails not just the assertion that videogames cannot be seen as serious expressions; but furthermore that in-game behaviour has no bearing on morality outside of the game – whether religious or related to longstanding debates on videogames and violence. In other

words, Debunking becomes the assertion that it is absurd in the first place to regard actions and stories in videogames, and all fiction by extension, as necessarily having any *real* impact on people, or gods.

What makes Debunkers especially interesting in light of religion in media, then, is that continued discussion leads to theological reflections on the truth and fiction of gods and religious texts. What differentiates the Bible from *BioShock*, for these discussants? On the one hand, for religious Debunkers their religious texts retain a special significance over videogame fictions. While, on the other hand, irreligious Debunkers see every religion as equally fictional, whether historically practiced or made up for a game. When all religious media are fictional and irrelevant like that – the Bible, *BioShock*, the Quran and *Assassin's Creed* – the only conclusion for these users was that “Fantasy fits right in with more fantasy.” As one forum user put it, “I don't really mind [religion in games], I consider Angels and Demons just the same as Trolls and pixies.” Another asserts, “I see religious elements in games as I see them in reality: it's a bunch of myths and legends that make good stories.” For some of these non-religious players, then, Debunking is not only about making distinctions between fact and fiction, or reality and fantasy: every truth claim can equally be deconstructed as a self-referential narrative.

### C. Debating: “It's Filled with Religious References”

As opposed to Rejecting and Debunking; Debating can only happen when players engage explicitly with interpretations of the game. One user replies to a Debunking post (which stated “It's just a game, don't take it too seriously”), by expressing their dislike for such trivialization: “You know, I don't like this. Just because something is a game/movie/show or w/e one shouldn't dismiss the message it tries to convey.” Another user explains their own decision to take a game seriously, when considering that even though

*Bayonetta* doesn't take itself seriously, [that] doesn't mean that it's not serious. [...] I know it's just a game, a good game, but the underlying themes of the game do give me a little bit of a chill when I play it.

What gave them “a little bit of a chill” was that “killing angels or any religious metaphor can be a[n] offensive thing to some people,” stressing that “whether it's offensive or not can be subjective.”

That interpretations of games can be “subjective” is an important way in which the attitude of Debating differs from Rejecting and Debunking.

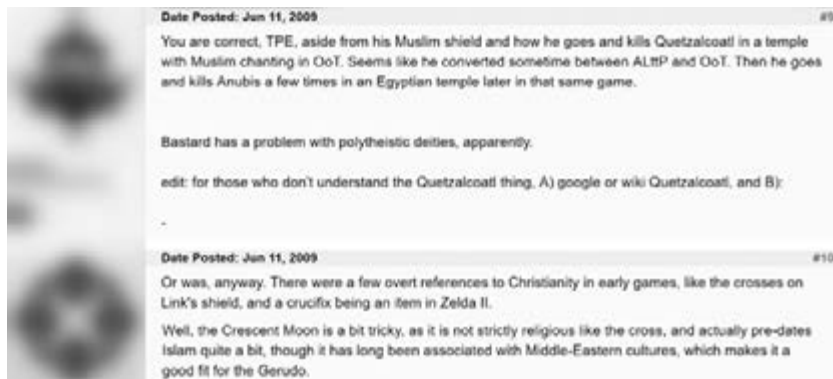


Figure 5. Excerpt from two users Debating Link's religiosity on *IGN.com*.

Games, according to these users, have negotiable meanings: they can be offensive to some and fascinating to others. Debating users engage in vigorous debates about what games really mean to them. Players freely mobilize themes and references for their arguments – e.g., “It’s filled with religious references anyway. The Ark, the Covenant, the Flood... Hell, even the game is called *Halo*” – as well as authorial arguments: “I know that *Darksiders* has no religious undertones because the developers said it doesn’t.” Indeed, many debates concern the beliefs and opinions of game “authors” such as Ken Levine, Hideo Kojima or Ubisoft’s “religious disclaimer” (for the latter of which, see Chapter 2).

An elaborate example should illustrate debates like these, by representing part of a specific discussion on whether Link – the protagonist of the *Zelda* series – is a Catholic. The participants mount various arguments which employ both a detailed knowledge of the formal properties of *Zelda* games across the series, as well as their cultural and historical contexts (figure 5).

These formal elements of the game range from visual icons to ludic elements – such as the “Book of Magic” item, mentioned by one user as being “in the first game, which had a cross on it, and is called ‘Bible’ [バイブル] in the Japanese version” (figure 6). It further includes a number of narrative, musical, authorial and even paratextual/paraludic sources: a large part of the initial debate surrounds a picture of Link praying to Jesus and Mary in a church, taken from an official Japanese guide to the game by Nintendo (figure 7).

These kinds of light-hearted, sometimes associative analyses show that players mobilize in-depth knowledge from both games and religion. Debates often point to a wide familiarity with other games for comparison (“I do find it interesting that basically every game that tackles religion seems



Figure 6. The “Book of Magic” item from *The Legend of Zelda*, called “Bible” (バイブル) in the Japanese original.



Figure 7. A depiction of Link praying before a crucifix and the Virgin Mary, from an official Japanese “Player’s Guide” (Nintendo, 1992, p. 151).

antireligion [such as] *Assassin’s Creed*, *F[inal]F[antasy]X*, *Xenogears* etc.”). Furthermore, debates point to an extensive knowledge of religions, as well: the aforementioned discussion on *Zelda* continues for 36 more posts, with additional users pointing out other religious symbols in the game, discussing Aztec, Egyptian, Mayan, Muslim and Christian elements, as well as the game’s own mythology, which was introduced in later games. All to prove – or criticize – *Zelda*’s use of religion, and not uniquely so: the same debates occur for nearly all the games I encountered.

Finally, Debating shows that no matter how formally users engage with the game, interpretations are never final. Instead, Debaters frequently argue for entirely mutually exclusive interpretations of the same game – usually following their contrasting religious beliefs. Hence, *Assassin’s Creed* is at the same time a Christian game “against the illuminaties, the knight templars and the anti-christ [sic]” while other users argue that the game definitely “did imply that religion is false,” and that

[t]he idea that laws do not come from Divinity but common sense and that the miracles in religious texts were accomplished due to mind control. [...] that’s a VERY strong anti-religious sentiment.

The protagonist of *Assassin’s Creed 2*, i.e., “the main character of *ACII* (Ezio) is a damned Catholic himself,” while another user contrarily argues that the

game is secular, in accordance with its historical period: “Renaissance Italy was the period of Humanism- secular, secular, secular. They portrayed it accurately, pack up your bible and go somewhere else.” Similarly, *BioShock: Infinite* is interpreted as both “one big ‘anti-religious’ aspect” while to others it shows that “societies without faith fail in the long run because of a lack of morality.” Despite the game’s frequent analysis by academics as a criticism of American Protestantism (e.g., Bosman, 2017; Lizardi, 2014; Wysocki, 2018), one forum user argued the opposite:

The game does a good job of emphasizing how the core values of religion are quite beautiful. [...] Love, community, redemption are all concepts the game looks at fondly. [...] By the time you reach the end of the game, it’s about people. Any vestiges of religious commentary are, by that point, positive.

Debating, while a serious engagement with the religious content of games, all too often devolves into a stalemate. In many cases, players such as those above end up entrenched within their own interpretation which accords with their own particular worldview. In doing so, they remain in debate with each other’s conflicting interpretations of the same game.

#### D. Connecting: “It Makes Me Think...”

As opposed to Debaters’ tendency for stalemates, another group of users actively seeks to reflect on and connect with religious worldviews in games. This attitude of Connecting is different from Debating in that Connecting players seek engagement with – and often get a lasting impression of – a game’s religious content, rather than arguing for its agreement with their own beliefs. Opposite from Rejecting, Connecting often entails actively seeking out such games (instead of avoiding them), for various reasons. One reason expressed is that “theistic themes often make for a fantastic work of fantasy or fiction,” suggesting that religious worlds are inherently appealing to irreligious users. This attitude toward religion in games is about more than “enjoying” fantasies, however.

Central for those Connecting is a desire to understand and experience other worldviews – narratives in which religious characters, fantasy worlds and ritualized spaces present an escape from everyday life. Another forum user, who introduced their post stating “Full disclosure, I’m not a religious person,” explains:

I enjoy the “lore” surrounding different religions. The sense of the unknown, the high strangeness, the savagery and difficulty in reconciling

the cruelty of the world with higher ideals. People using these forces to manipulate others, and those that truly seem to have good intentions.

For these players, religion is often something not found in the “normal,” an enchantment of the world that is fascinating precisely due to its absence from everyday experience. One agnostic forum user who displayed a Connecting attitude was Günther, whom I approached to ask where that desire for religious escapism came from. He explained finding solace in the certainty of games, in comparison to real life: “[T]he results of player actions in a game are far more often visible and relatable. [...] I would like for life’s choices to be seen as less differentiated and nuanced.” Indeed, as another Connecting player stated, in fantasy worlds faith in gods just makes sense “since the ones [i.e., the gods] in videogames often give good evidence that they exist, the people in those games’ universes have ample reason to be theists.”

Within the boundaries of the game world, then, this group of irreligious players can safely experiment with the certainties of religious belief without actual conversion (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019). Such desire and fascination is of course not exclusive to irreligious players; and indeed religious and irreligious players alike joined discussions by stating that they came into meaningful contact with other belief systems. One example is New Ager Geoff, who came into contact with gurus and meditation as a child through videogames, which introduced him to other belief systems “and that prompts a questioning of one’s own belief system.” By comparison, Methodist-raised-turned-atheist James was reminded of the personal side of religion by playing *That Dragon, Cancer*, which includes the player into the designers’ (autobiographical) struggle with their fatally ill child. For James, “the creators speaking about their own religious thoughts and feelings, [...] struggling with religion and questioning it,” gave him a “different sense of religion”: not as a “blindly trusting faith, more of a personal sort of thing,” stressing how it gave James a more empathetic look at the Christianity he had rejected in adolescence.

These encounters with other worldviews can be instructive and convincing, even when re-evaluating their own pre-existing beliefs. For instance, one participant explains her intriguing “meeting” with God in *Dragon’s Dogma*, which led her to think about her own religiosity (“Once you get to meet God, you learn God’s been pulling the strings all along”), making her wonder whether, outside of the game, “it’s possible that I’m only aware of the ‘appearance’ of God’s non-interaction when in reality God could be intervening in a way that’s not immediately discernible” (Joan). Such thought experiments are typical among players who actively connect to other



religious content. A convinced atheist wrote about role-playing religiously and shared his game-induced doubt in an interview:

What if I'm wrong? What is the game trying to make me think about? Just by being on the topic of religion [it] does make me question.... I constantly question my worldview and, *you know*, whether I'm right or wrong. It makes me think: is this how people in the real world use religion? (Grant)

Seeking out, trying to empathize with and understand religious worldviews can lead to players re-evaluating and even changing their convictions. I contacted one user who had written that "*Persona 4: Golden* made me a better person," explaining how it helped him realize and come to terms with the fact "that I was not religious at all. That I was the 'A' word [atheist], the one reserved for baby-eaters and neckbeards." Another user, identifying himself as a "secular humanist," shared in a thread on *Assassin's Creed* and atheism that "[t]hinking back to playing these games I can't help but realize that they probably played at least a small portion in my deconversion." One of them, when asked in an interview to elaborate, also explained that he "deconverted" from Christianity, aided by seeking out games which "showed me it was okay to be an atheist" (Phil). Throughout the interview, he stressed the role that games such as *Persona 4* played in showing him the joy of personal investment and individual choice that games can celebrate without having to rely on faith. Using the ending to *Persona 4* as an example, he explained:

The people *you* gained social links from call out to you with encouragement, the music swells in just the right way, and you toss aside your glasses to see the world how it truly is – which is what you make of it. (Phil)

In all, what makes Connecting, as an attitude toward religious representation in videogames, distinct from other attitudes found in online discussions is this willingness to seek out other worldviews and connect with them. By doing so, players in many cases not only become fascinated by them, but also gain deeper understandings of their own and others' beliefs by internalizing other ways of thinking and believing – be it temporarily or lastingly.

## Conclusion: Public Religion

While previous research has looked into either how religion appears in games (e.g., Bosman, 2015; Šisler, 2008; Zeiler, 2014), or how games and small groups

may function religiously themselves (Geraci, 2014; Wagner, 2012), there have been few attempts to articulate the discourses on religion in games within player communities widely. Namely, researchers have looked at religious beliefs in game development communities (Piasecki, 2016); at in-game guilds as “functionally” religious communities (Geraci, 2014); and at *Twitch Plays Pokémon* player communities’ symbolic and narrative mythologization of religion (Lindsey, 2015); but never at gaming communities at large, talking about religion in games in general. How do such public forums and their thousands of users operate as part of a public sphere? How do players with various (ir)religious worldviews discuss religion together? What implications does this have for theories of religious privatization?

Indeed, without wanting to minimize the value of former analyses (narrative, symbolic, game-specific and developer-focused), I argued that the methodological focus on either religious texts, production context or individual meaning-making hinders an analysis of the role of game culture and public conversation in making sense of what games mean to players. Theoretically, furthermore, such methodological choices underexplore the implications for the debate on the social significance of (mediatized) religion. Motivated by these considerations, I studied the way religion in games is actually evaluated and discussed by players in gaming communities on online forums. In this chapter I distinguished four ideal-typical approaches towards the religious worldviews presented in videogames: Rejecting, Debunking, Debating and Connecting – a continuum from a straight-forward complaint against different religious views, to a full-fledged embracing of others’ worldviews in order to understand and empathize with them. Despite being fundamentally different positions, often directly at odds with each other, all of them engage seriously with the public debate about religion.

*Rejecters* publicly contest, rather than privatize religion in games: few users give as much weight to the representation of religion in these discussions as *Rejecters* do, seeking out others to warn them, or to publicly announce and discuss why the game they reject is dangerous or harmful.

*Debunkers* publicly rationalize or disenchant, rather than privatize religion in games: debunking prompts deep theological reflection. Either (for religious debunkers), a moral hierarchy places holy religious texts above “just games,” or (for irreligious debunkers), a more relativistic perspective emerges. For them, holy books or games are not essentially different – they make for equally captivating fictional texts.

*Debaters* publicly defend, rather than privatize religion in games: they defend it as essentially meaningful. *Debaters* end up defending their elaborate interpretations based on their own background, ending in contradictory

readings of the same game. Importantly, from a social sciences perspective, these include readings by players that are often not considered nor represented in academic and theological interpretations of those games.

*Connectors* publicly sympathize with and re-evaluate, rather than privatize religion in games: religions are treated as differing but comparable worldviews to be learnt from, understood and empathized with. While religious connectors learn to empathize with other faiths than their own, non-believers paradoxically voice a desire for religious experiences in the game. From their perspective, games provide experiential meaning in an overly disenchanting world.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that religion is a vital topic of discussion amongst players in the game community. On game forums, religion is defended and attacked, found meaningful and trivialized, or sought out, understood and misunderstood. Religious traditions are compared: Christian theology is put alongside knowledge of ancient pantheons, Meso-American mythology and the gods and rituals of *Skyrim* or *Zelda*. Notwithstanding different positions, players are in dialogue about the “real” meanings of (in-game) religion and this shows that games inspire conversations on religion. It is important to note, however, that the arguments players are making in this conversation are neither non-committal nor arbitrary. Quite the contrary: what they express online about in-game content is strongly motivated by their (non-)religious identity in offline life. I therefore conceptualize this particular form of “textual poaching” (Jenkins, 2012) or “decoding” (Hall, 1980) of in-game religious texts as a form of public religion. By “public religion” I mean the discussion of the truth and meaning of religion, god(s), and belief(s) *in* public and *by* the public: that is, in groups of untrained and variously (ir)religious “amateurs” in offline or online environments.

How should we consider such vivid public discussions in the context of the academic debate on secularization or, more specifically, the proposed *privatization* of religion? Luckmann argued about half a century ago (1967) that religions do not necessarily disappear, but change: outside of established institutions and churches, individuals construct their privatized system of “ultimate significance” that are separate from the public sphere. On the one hand, my research findings align with this perspective of an “invisible” religion outside of the churches and, particularly, the more recent assumptions that popular culture is part and parcel of this trend – sometimes leading to highly individualized, consumerist forms of religiosity (Partridge, 2004; Possamai, 2005; van Otterloo et al., 2012). Indeed, for “Connectors,” in-game religion provides a clear source for reflexivity on their own religious position. God may be “dead,” but not in videogames.

And yet, on the other hand, the involvement in this “public religion” on forums also raises critical questions about the alleged non-institutional, socially insignificant and privatized nature of religion. First of all, the prominence of religion in popular media culture – film, series and games – may already be understood as another kind of institutionalization of religion: that of religion as a commodity, packaged and sold by the cultural industry of producers and publishers, to be eagerly swept up by consumers in search of meaning (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Davidsen, 2018; Hoover, 2006; Schultze, 2003; Wagner, 2012).

Second, we cannot deny the collective and essentially public nature of the discussion about religion on online forums. Informed by offline worldviews and (ir)religious identities, players fully immerse themselves in discussions and theological speculations about religion in the games they play. In her polemic with Thomas Luckmann, Kelly Besecke already noted that we can clearly see “invisible religion” by looking at the public conversation about religion in self-help books, magazines and other mass media featuring religion and spirituality. Digital media platforms facilitate such public debates even better: the non-hierarchical structure and “participatory culture” of the internet (Jenkins, 2012), invites lay-people and amateurs to voice their opinions on religion and worldviews.

In a post-secular society, religion is alive and well in media and communication. Media such as games prompt discussions on religion outside of churches: something that is particularly visible in the ongoing conversation in public places, media venues and, as demonstrated in this chapter, online forums. Indeed: this is truly a public conversation. Anyone with an internet connection can partake. People participate not primarily as members of a religion, but from divergent religious and intersectional backgrounds and on their own accord. Prompted by in-game religion, they engage in heated conversation on how meaningful a game can be, for themselves and for others, vis-à-vis sacred texts and their own convictions: all to conduct what I call public religion.

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## 5. Single-player Religion

### Abstract

This chapter builds on the previous chapter by conducting in-depth interviews with 20 players: Why do they individually play with religion? and How do they adopt worldviews (albeit temporarily) that are not usually theirs? Players, whether atheists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, self-identified Pagans or of other convictions, all have one thing in common: they are prompted by games to enter worlds with different beliefs than theirs, taking up identities of religious “Others” that do not share their own religious convictions of everyday life.

**Keywords:** player studies, post-secular society, Othering, role-play, intersectionality

*The setting is 1191 AD. The third crusade is tearing the Holy Land apart. You, Altaïr, intend to stop the hostilities by suppressing both sides of the conflict.*  
– *Assassin’s Creed* advertisement (2007), emphasis added

The advertising blurb for Ubisoft’s first *Assassin’s Creed* game does two things. Firstly, it promises to transport you to the Holy Land of 1191 AD – another place and time, infused by conflict and war between various religious identities: Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, historical (Nizari Ismailis) and fictional (secular) *hashashin*. Secondly, it constructs the player as having a double identity: while playing, “you” are also “Altaïr” – born of a Muslim father and Christian mother, fighting Templars in 12<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem. Role-playing is key to immersing “you” in imaginary game worlds like *Assassin’s Creed*. In other games, you might be a summoner of Shiva, a combatant of Ifrit (*Final Fantasy*), a follower of the Church of Atom (*Fallout*); the eponymous *God of War*, or a Shaman, Druid or Priest (e.g., *World of Warcraft*).



Departing from a critique on literature perceiving such in-game textual representations as simplistic stereotypes and discriminatory forms of Othering, this chapter studies how players individually experience the role-playing of (non-)religious identities in videogames. The main research question I pose here is “How does role-playing the (non-)religious Other in games affect the worldview of players?” To answer this question, this study gives a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews held with twenty international players from different (non-)religious backgrounds.

### Games' Fascination with the Religious

As Chapter 2 showed, the first *Assassin's Creed* was developed as a Holy War-era adaptation of *Prince of Persia* starring Islamic missionary Hassan-I Sabbah (Edge, 2012). It focused on a world of Muslim–Christian tensions and was released in a time of renewed fascination with religion. The game started development in 2003, while Western world news was dominated by the effects of religious zeal in the shape of the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror. Religious fundamentalism became a journalistic and governmental concern, leading to European and American anti-Islamic sentiments held to this day. The renewed relevance of religion prompted sociologists (Gorski, 2012), art historians (King, 2005), literary scholars (Mohamed, 2011) and political theorists (McLennan, 2010), among others, to conceptualize the current period as “post-secular” (Habermas, 2006, 2008). In critical dialogue with theories on the privatization of religion in Western countries, these academics argued in different ways that religion is once again an urgent topic in public debate, media and popular culture. The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has indeed seen films, books and games tackling this religious fascination, whether politically (e.g., *America's Army*; *Al-Quwwat al-Khasa*), historically (e.g., *Assassin's Creed*; *Europa Universalis IV*), fantastically (e.g., *Skyrim*; *Final Fantasy VII*), or domestically (e.g., *BioShock Infinite*; *The Binding of Isaac*).

Yet, videogames have always relied on religious tropes throughout platforms and genres. As Chapter 3 showed, some of games' religious roots are pre-digital, from the origins of the vampire-fighting clergyman in TSR's original *Dungeons & Dragons* of 1974, to the current demonic- and religion-themed classes of *World of Warcraft*, which count eight out of 12 classes, including Druids, Monks, Shamans, Paladins and Priests. Outside of the fantasy genre, religious organizations, rituals and pantheons occur in many contexts: religious belief survives the post-apocalyptic in *Fallout 4*; divine metaphors make sense of lost knowledge in *Horizon's* post-apocalypse; *Dead*

*Space* and *Mass Effect* show faith and worship in science-fictional space; and many more examples. Games may mirror spiritual experience (*Journey*); cast players as the Japanese sun goddess (*Ōkami*); or draw from a number of mythologies whether fictional (*Zelda*), contemporary (*Hanuman Boy Warrior*) or historical (*Smite*, *God of War*). Players, meanwhile, take up all these roles with much the same speed as they take up a controller, switch discs or download a new game.

How have players' experiences with such religious roles been studied and approached by scholars? Various academics have assessed that religious representation is omnipresent in videogames (e.g., Guyker, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006; Wiemker & Wysocki, 2014). Such studies generally draw from literary-theoretical, narratological, theological and other approaches that are firmly grounded in the method of studying text and representation. Given this focus on in-game texts and representations, the analysis usually results in a set of typologies (In what ways do religious signs occur?), genealogies (What are the origins of such signs?) and perceived gaps (Which positions, traditions and identities are excluded in the use of these signs?).

The theoretical approach underlying such empirical analyses of in-game narratives, discourses and representations is often informed by critical theoretical approaches in the social sciences. As with any media text, representations in games are neither produced in a vacuum nor neutral constructs: they allegedly reproduce dominant ideologies, institutionalized power relations and social-economic conventions that, in turn, socialize players into these hegemonic worldviews (Aupers, 2012; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline et al., 2003). From this perspective, empirical studies on representation and (religious) worldview are not merely descriptive. They typically demonstrate that minority, subaltern and marginalized worldviews are relatively under-represented in the game *or* that they are framed in a stereotypical, often negative fashion. Studies on gender and race in games demonstrate, for instance, that 52% to 80% of player-controlled characters are white and male (Everett & Watkins, 2008; Williams et al., 2009) whereas women and men are designed to follow typically traditional gender repertoires (Miller & Summers, 2007).

Although much of this research focuses on gender and race (Dill et al., 2005; Shaw, 2010; Williams et al., 2009), similar approaches can be found vis-à-vis the representation of in-game religion (de Wildt et al., 2018; de Wildt & Aupers, 2021; Krzywinska, 2006; Šisler, 2008). Religion is not only represented in a stereotypical way, but functions as a trope to make distinctions between characters who are “good” (such as Christian-like Priests, Paladins wearing crosses on their shield) and “bad” (worshipping “evil”

gods, cults, primitive Shamans and sometimes Druids; see Chapter 3). This process of Othering through tropes and genre conventions in videogames has the sociological function of drawing “symbolic boundaries” between “us” and “them” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), which confirm and reinforce hegemonic (Western/civilized/male/secular) identities by contrast to an imagined (non-Western/barbarian/female/religious) Other (Asad, 2003; Boletsi, 2013; Said, 1978). In the context of games, Kathrin Trattner pointed out that “Othering based on religious ascriptions appears in direct relation to other categories of social difference” (2016, p. 32). Constructing an Other in games is therefore never only based on religion, but always an intersectional combination of a particular religion with class, gender, able-bodiedness, race, culture and other aspects of identity (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1989). In games, examples of intersectional “others” abound – especially as defined against the overwhelming male whiteness of protagonistic avatars. Such examples include disabled people and religiously revered aliens in *Dead Space* (Carr, 2014); the African zombie in *Resident Evil 5* (Brock, 2011); and what Jessica Langer calls *World of Warcraft*’s “constant project of radically ‘othering’ the horde [...] by distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other, and center and periphery” (2008, p. 87).

Similar claims are made about first-person shooter games’ frequent representations of the enemy as Muslim, Arab and people of colour. Vít Šisler analyzes representations of the “Arab or Muslim Other” as predominantly stereotyped in mainstream European and American videogames, schematizing them as enemies, and reducing both to an anonymous horde of monolithic, ethnic-religious caricatures (2008). Even when a choice is offered, the “unmarked” default avatar is typically positioned as white, male (Fordyce et al., 2016), and might be varyingly mobilized to reproduce militaristic (Nieborg, 2006), postcolonial (Mukherjee, 2018), orientalist (de Wildt et al., 2019), or Eurocentric (Apperley, 2010) ideas and sentiments amongst players.

This supposed reproduction of ideas and sentiments is theoretically implied but seldom empirically studied in what Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and others have called an “actor-centered approach” to videogames (Heidbrink et al., 2014; Radde-Antweiler et al., 2014), that is based on the meaning-making of players (Aupers et al., 2018; Aupers & Schaap, 2015; de Wildt & Aupers, 2019, 2020; Schaap & Aupers, 2017). Given the textual approach of (religious) Othering, scholars studying games in isolation from players can make no authoritative claims about the experiences and interpretations of those players, without asking them. Such analyses, then, fall into the trap of “instrumentalizing” play: a reduction of game-play’s meaning to the game’s

formal (narrative, procedural, visual) properties, where “what players do” is merely considered to “complete the meaning suggested and guided by the rules” (Sicart, 2011). Instead, I hold that players have radically different interpretations of what games mean depending on their own intersectional identities of religion, class, race, gender and so on. This idea of an active consumer “decoding” the “encoded” texts (Hall, 1980) is already a mainstay in the study of the reception of books, film and television (Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 2012). In videogames, however, players are furthermore encouraged to “reconfigure” games, by moving, choosing and otherwise playing within their given roles (Raessens, 2005).

The problem of aforementioned readings of religious representation as “Othering” is that it is reductive to consider characters as “Other” when many games actually offer the chance to play *as* an Other. By focusing on religious representation as narratives of “Othering,” studies often dismiss the experience that is connected to role-playing the Other. By contrast to his own study on the represented Arabian-Muslim Other, Šisler suggests elsewhere that playing *as* the Arab or Muslim Other – specifically when encoded as “self-representation” by Middle Eastern developers – offers players profound insights into marginalized and contested identities, such as those of Palestinians in the case of the Syrian-made game *Under Siege* (تحت الحصار) (Šisler, 2006). Indeed, when (but only *if*) certain identities are included as roles to play – next to or in spite of white, male, hegemonic avatars – some researchers have stressed the relevant possibilities of identification with these avatars (Hammar, 2017), especially in the case of avatars that function as semi-autonomous characters with their own speech, backgrounds and actions (de Wildt, 2014b; Klevjer, 2007).

The problem with analyses of “Othering” in videogames is therefore twofold. On the one hand, players are not necessarily interpreting games in alignment with how religion and religious followers are represented in those games. They rather *understand* and *play* roles differently based on their own cultural backgrounds, convictions and identities. On the other hand, they additionally take on roles that are not necessarily their own and are thus negotiating between their own social identity and their given identity in the game world. Based on these considerations, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

- How does role-playing the (non-)religious Other in games affect the worldview of players?
- (How) does it change the way they understand other (non-)religious identities?

- (How) does it change the way they understand their own (non-)religious identity?
- What are the differences and similarities in this respect between players with religious and non-religious worldviews?

## Methodology

In order to answer this question, 20 interviews were conducted with people of various religious backgrounds, recruited as part of what later became the analysis of Chapter 4 and this current chapter. Participants were theoretically selected for maximal variation of different currently held religious positions – often viewed by them in light of changes in their convictions from childhood to now. Instrumental here was the need to systematically study the different ways in which people with different (non-)religious beliefs and traditions make sense of role-playing a religious other in videogames. Rather, say, than seek out a representative sample of players (or gamers) nor of a demographically representative cross-section of religious people, this “maximum variation sample” is intended to “disclose the range of variation and differentiation in the field” (Flick, 2006, p. 130). The method of interviewing produces inductive insights into this varied range of personal experiences with religion and games, considering them as valid and meaningful for players regardless of historical facticity (Aupers et al., 2018).

Interviewees were recruited on internet communities selected for PageRank, and regional and cultural differences, e.g., Indian or Moroccan-Dutch videogame forums. The table of respondents shows some bias: many respondents were American, male and/or white. This can possibly be explained by demographic biases amongst videogame players and videogame forum users – the latter arguably requiring a more active identification as a “gamer”: a label and culture which has been argued to be exclusionary, silencing or otherwise marginalizing women (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Golding & Van Deventer, 2016; Shaw, 2011).

With the resulting population (N=20), qualitative semi-structured interviews of one to two hours were conducted via internet video calls. Players were asked about their (non-)religious convictions, identifications and backgrounds; about the religious contents and characters of the games they played and the connections they experienced between those. When the games mentioned by the respondents were unknown to the researcher, the interview was supplemented by engagement with the game in question, in

order to provide context for the (religious) role-playing activities, experiences and meanings. In the first part of the analysis, I will discuss the medium-specific affordance of digital role-play. In the second part of the analysis, I will analyze in empirical detail how this role-playing the (non-)religious Other affects the worldviews of my respondents.

## The Affordances of Digital Role-play

Role-playing is a common and vital affordance of videogames. In the most broad sense of the word, players always perform as an Other on the screen – whether as Pac-Man, Mario or Lara Croft in arcade and console games; heroic soldiers in first-person shooters such as *Call of Duty*, or particular classes, races and characters in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) from *World of Warcraft* to *Runescape*. Such digital performances of identity cannot be dismissed as trivial acts without psychological or cultural meaning. Rather than treat the identities proposed to players as “avatars” or redundant “cursors,” “tools” or “props” standing in for the player (Aarseth, 2004; Linderoth, 2005; Newman, 2002), there is always a form of identification with the roles people play – a coalescence of identity between the player as a subject and the avatar as an in-game object (de Wildt, 2014a; Vella, 2013).

The latter becomes particularly relevant in the context of complex games like MMORPGs and virtual worlds. Sherry Turkle already argued in 1995 that “[t]he anonymity of MUDs [multi-user dungeons, a kind of text-based virtual world for multiple users] gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and try out new ones” (1995, p. 241), whereas James Paul Gee concurred that “games can show us how to get people to invest in new identities or roles” (2003). Richard Bartle referred to this as the “role-playing paradox”: by investing time, energy and emotion in the online character, the Other becomes the Self:

You are not role-playing as a being, you are that being; you're not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you're not projecting a self, you are that self. If you're killed in a fight, you don't feel that your character has died, you feel that you have died. There's no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: you are there. (Bartle, 2004, pp. 155–156)

Notwithstanding such dramatic claims of totally becoming the character, my respondents verify that their role-playing implies a form of self-chosen

identification with the character. Role-playing, one argues, is an opportunity to “spend a day in someone else’s shoes” (Grant), to act as another and to temporarily identify with their worldview, convictions and beliefs. When playing, interviewees stressed, they experience a “blurring of the avatar and my personal self” (Günther). Role-play also provides a way to take on positions that require fundamentally different worldviews and, from this perspective, one can try out deviant, (non-)religious beliefs that are opposed to one’s own. As one interviewee says: “You can role-play belief. It’s probably similar to method acting. [...] You temporarily think like someone else, but you can do it from your couch and just for a few hours at a time” (Duke). Religious belief: now available in your living room.

For “a few hours at a time” players set aside their ideas of the world, ready to act and think like someone else. This mechanism of temporarily “bracketing” their own ideas on truth and faith while playing was reported by many players:

The more I feel a blurring of the avatar and myself, the more believable the game world becomes. Because during these moments my real “self” doesn’t remind me of inaccuracies or things I wouldn’t normally accept or believe. (Günther)

Even Greg, a Jehovah’s Witness who preferred not to play games contradicting his worldview, concedes that “when immersed, I accept conditions of the game world that are directly relevant to what I believe” (Greg), even when they oppose those beliefs

I automatically suspend my disbelief. To me that means accepting the setting as it is described. In fact, I don’t see any difference between taking on the role of your character and accepting the game’s world and its conditions.

I thus will argue that the affordance of role-playing provides an opportunity, at least during play time, to play at being an Other, and identify with their (non-)religious worldview apart from one’s own. More than that: immersed in their roles, players are able to temporarily suspend their beliefs and put their ideas on truth and faith between brackets, so as to freely experiment with other ideological positions. The question is then: What, if any, implications does this role-playing of the (non-)religious Other have on the worldview of these players? In what follows, I will systematically look at irreligious people playing religious roles; and vice versa at religious believers roleplaying other-religious or atheist characters and their worldviews.

## A. “I Sort of Believed”: From Secularism to Enchantment

A number of interviewees were secular, identifying as atheists or agnostics, and were either raised without belonging to a religious tradition or had become non-religious later in life. How do they treat the religious content they encounter in games, and what is it like to play with religious characters and worlds as a religious none?

Nico, who describes himself as atheist and his parents as “militant atheists,” nonetheless felt charmed by religion in games from a young age “because I really like mythology and I really like games that are inspired by religion. *Age of Mythology* is one of my favourite games.” It is a strategy game in which ancient (Greek, Egyptian etc.) civilizations appease and are aided by their relevant gods. Although seeing it as “embarrassing to admit,” those gods made a lasting impression on him as a child because they

spurred a fascination that there must be so many gods and it was really cool to me. I sort of believed in those gods at the time. We didn’t believe in Jesus or God or whatever, but I believed in Thor and Loki and a god of darkness and a god of silence and stuff like that.

He notes that exactly because he was not brought up with religious belief and had “never been confronted with an openly Christian game,” playing *Age of Mythology* “meant that I liked those gods and how I could use them in the game.” Nico even exported such beliefs, recounting “instances when I would try and go downstairs and didn’t want to wake anyone up as a child, so I prayed to those gods to silence my footsteps.” Indeed, Nico might serve as a strong example of what has been termed digital games’ “re-enchantment,” introducing gods and magic – safely, within the boundaries of a cultural product – to atheist consumers who actually “want to believe” (Aupers, 2013).

Videogames can familiarize the religiously unaffiliated with religious environments and religious beliefs in different ways. James, for instance, described himself as a “very strongly” convinced atheist, living in “techy, atheist, [...] very rational, programmatic” California. Playing *Assassin’s Creed*, James became fascinated with Islamic paraphernalia and architecture, noting how the game’s “climate of religiousness within the world made it feel more realistic.” It even helped him to take his world history class in the “real” world. The reason, James points out, is that religion in the game is made very concrete and visceral: it did not exaggerate religion to the level of “angels and demons fighting,” but shows a humane, everyday city setting where “people just sort of stand up giving religious speeches throughout the city.”



But games have also made James more sensitive and empathetic to religious believers. The game *That Dragon, Cancer*, an autobiographical project by Ryan Green and his family, deals with their youngest son's cancer diagnosis and the family's consequent struggle with their Christian faith. The game "left a lot of marks on [him]" because of its intimate, personal setting, making the religious Other relatable to him through the game's design. Firstly, the game creates a domestic setting, including voice-over work that "just *feels* very realistic. [...] It sounds like I'm listening in their house. And that make it really personal." This domestic setting includes the player as familiar: "The characters address you sometimes. They look at you," and as an onlooker "you can empathize with them." Most importantly, it is within this personal context that James concluded that "the creators are speaking about their own religious thoughts and feelings," rather than the "surface-level religious symbology" of other games, or a reduction of religion "to a set of beliefs." Instead of a set of rules and practices, the game shows both the hopes and uncertainties of religion, through the developers' personal experiences. In particular, this emphasis on personally "struggling with religion and questioning it," and the differences between Ryan and Amy Green in doing so, had the effect of "humanizing religious people" for James. He continues: "There is a lot of objectification of religious people within tech [culture] and games," whereas "this game does a very good job of humanizing them, and then creating empathy for them" (James).

Games such as these allow secular players like James, Grant, Phil, and Günther to identify with characters with different worldviews, convictions and beliefs than their own." As Grant puts it: "Just because I don't believe in this thing 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." According to Phil, specifically "with regards to religion, the major advantage is that the experience feels more like it happened to you rather than to someone else" (Phil). This temporary identification has consequences for one's own worldview: my atheist respondents confess that role-playing encourages, reinforces or strengthens their empathy for the religious Other.

## **B. "It's Like Indian Mythology": From Religious Tradition to Perennialism**

Playing games with religious worlds and identities presented different challenges for religious players than it did for irreligious players. After all, the various fantastical, historical and global religions frequently present

different or exaggerated versions of the theologies and mythologies that fund these players' actual beliefs. Such players often found in games the ability to switch between worldviews – in the same way that secular players found a way to temporarily accommodate their worldviews to the religious worlds they inhabited. These worldviews could easily be switched between, from mono- to polytheistic, from theist to agnostic, and so on. Importantly, these worldviews are as much religious as they are cultural, geographical and temporal. Indeed, materialist approaches to religion emphasize that religion is not just determined by belief, but also, importantly, by its practices and material culture, such as architecture, media, objects (Meyer, 2006; Morgan, 2013; cf. Durkheim, 1995).

For instance, Bill has lived his whole life in Boston and identifies as a Roman Catholic. However, having spent some time as Altaïr in *Assassin's Creed's* Holy Land, Bill recounts that he has grown familiar with its surroundings: "You hear the call to prayer, you see Muslims praying, you go through mosques." An environment he has familiarized himself with to such an extent that he confidently called it a "very accurate portrayal of what 99 percent of practicing Muslims go through on a regular basis." Bill emphasized that running around *Assassin's Creed's* Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus gave a "kind of understanding [of] how in that time period religion played out and how people's everyday lives compared to today." Similar to El Nasr et al.'s comparative digital ethnography of the game (El Nasr et al., 2008), the authors' accounts – as well as Bill's – show two things. Firstly, that the game's environments are understood and experienced differently viewed from atheist, Christian and Muslim perspectives. Their meaning depends on whether players regard 12<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem as just another digital tourist cityscape, as a "holy land" or indeed as something akin to the religious "journey of a lifetime, a dream" (El Nasr et al., 2008). In Bill's case, *Assassin's Creed's* Jerusalem grants a Roman Catholic an insight into the everyday experience of Muslims. Secondly, these experiences show that the process of familiarizing with the otherness of games' environment is not just a religious one, but a cultural, geographical and temporal familiarization as well.

That the process works between cultures and worldviews is something another respondent, Swapan, attests to. He grew up in a north Indian town "where there was no internet, no library," and in a conservatively Hindu family. When arcades came to his neighbourhood, "videogames were like the medium that gave us an outlook towards the world outside." Through videogames, Swapan became familiar with the English language, with American, British and Japanese culture – and their religions. It showed him

worldviews, he explains, “that only videogames told me that exist” (Swapan). Likewise, Geoff also describes his 30-year-long gaming hobby as a string of

multiple games where it’s kind of been a theme of learning about different worldviews or different belief systems and just becoming aware of the existence of other belief systems. And that prompts a questioning of one’s own belief system.

Geoff was raised a Roman Catholic but currently describes himself as New Age, “cobbl[ing] together my own version kind of a spirituality” in a “cafeteria-style religion.” The first time he “encountered a religious-spiritual idea in a game that had an effect on [his] thinking” was in *Faxanadu* – a game that came out when Geoff first started playing games at the age of eight. Religion is intertwined with the function of the game:

In order to save in-game progress [a] Guru would give you a mantra that you had to then repeat later on. [...] And it was just like a random string of characters you had to input to return to your save. But that was something that I hadn’t encountered before. That term or idea.... What is a guru? It’s not really a priest. It’s more like a teacher.... That was a different way of thinking about religion than I had so far had up until that point of being raised Catholic and going to Sunday school.

While games started a fascination with Eastern religion for Geoff, Joan, Daniel and others, games had the opposite effect for Swapan. Instead of repeating mantras for gurus like young Geoff, Swapan instead encountered monotheism for the first time. He became “very much fascinated by the concept of pagan gods,” particularly those that had been part of his family’s everyday lives, because “according to Christians and Muslims, we Hindus have pagan gods.” By being confronted with other ways of viewing the world and acting them out as characters in videogames, Swapan started to compare different religious stories. The difference, he argues, is that “pagan gods each have their own story and can be killed. It makes them like us. Whereas in Christianity you cannot question god.”

This kind of worldview switching and comparison were shared by variously religious players. You might be able to engage in animism and “play a character that believes there is a living spirit in everything” (Eric), or if you are already familiar with that, to play games filled with Christian doctrines or Norse mythology. Swapan played consecutively through *Devil May Cry*, *God of War*, *Dante’s Inferno* and *Viking: Battle for Asgard* – mechanically

similar games that draw from widely divergent Christian, Greek and Norse theo-mythological traditions. Swapan tellingly illustrates the kind of fascination and comparison this prompts by explaining “that last game got me interested into Norse mythology because I did not know about that before. And the more I read about it, the more I learnt that it’s a lot like Indian mythology,” effectively coming full circle.

Worldview switching, then, led Swapan and others to a form of religious relativism. More than that: experimenting with other traditions through role-play, led them to the conclusion that underneath the differences in traditional religious beliefs, doctrine, vocabularies and rituals, one may find a similar or universal kernel. Worldview switching, thus, may invoke a “perennial perspective” (Huxley, 1945) on religion. Importantly, beside narrative cosmologies, mythologies and so on, games’ systems also promote this kind of worldview switching and perennialism. As various players hold, “every game in existence has a slightly different ethical system than real life” (Duke). The assertion that both games and religions propose (ethical) belief systems through rule-based presentations are both supported in academic literature (Geraci, 2014; Sicart, 2009; Zagal, 2009), as well as by other interviewees. Edward, too, compares religions in games to being “much like any system which appears to imitate another in the real world.” Eric – who has been a Catholic, then a Mormon, and currently identifies himself closest to a Southern Baptist – is adamant in comparing both religion and games to rule systems, searching “until you find a rule system that is satisfying or whatever, where you like the way it works – it is the exact same thing with these systems as with religion.” Religion in this view becomes a question of taste, comparison and optimization.

### C. “Slipping into a Secular Mindset”: Assumed Atheism

Religious players, aside from being able to compare other religious belief systems, similarly found ways of understanding and identifying with their *non*-religious other through games and their avatars. Much of the content, narratives and characters in games is secular or, at least, assumed to be informed by a secular, agnostic or atheist perspective according to various of my religious interviewees.

How do they deal with this assumed atheism of many games? In another sense of the word, how do they assume (take on) atheist identities, even if only to engage with much of the perceived “immorality,” violence, hedonism and Godless nihilism in games? Duke, to begin with, is an outspoken Pentecostal and a youth priest, yet he “play[s] the characters in games

as functional atheists for immersion purposes, and that helps [him] to understand their actions a bit better.” In *The Last of Us*, for instance, Duke can’t see himself believably playing that game and its “very nihilistic atmosphere,” in the role of

a Christian, because it’s hard to reconcile Joel’s [the protagonist’s] mindset with a Christian one. [...] His acts would be unjustifiable because his only motivation in the final area is his own desire to set the world the way he wants it.

The “final area” Duke is referring to, is a scene in which the protagonist makes a selfish moral choice on which the player has no influence. Although this kind of character-autonomy is difficult for Duke – particularly since he considers it an atheist and hedonistic scene – he tries to play *as* the character given him: “I will try to play the game consistently with that mindset, which would probably be secularly by default.” In doing so, however, he increasingly identifies with secular ways of thinking: “Even though I struggle to get invested in games with strong religious overtones, I would say it’s actually pretty easy for me to slip into a secular mindset during games. In fact, it feels necessary.” Consequently, Duke argues that playing secular characters makes him “sympathetic to the atheists out there, [...] especially the (pretty rare) atheists who live in this part of the country that is incredibly religious.”

Role-playing the secular other eventually allowed for self-reflection on the “immoral” atheist within oneself. After lying in a game, Duke found out that “it gave me a realization about myself: that I have a capacity for dishonesty.” Eric states that temporarily acting like someone else eventually teaches him something about himself, “teaching [one]self to check constantly why and how you’re doing what you’re doing.” By

role-playing [...] the game character who does things differently to achieve their goal, *you’re* being taught to self-monitor more actively, to check constantly, to compare your small decisions with your greater beliefs and your greater goal.

For some players, this type of reflection on one’s religious tradition, beliefs and behaviour, led them to completely new insights. Whereas Duke and Eric emphasize their increased empathy towards atheists, Phil and Edward argued that games helped them to realize they were not religious at all – even motivating their deconversion.

Playing *Bloodborne*, Phil “noticed some peculiar parallels” between the Healing Church in that game and the Christian liturgy. Both share a ritual of communion, “the latter imbibing the flesh and blood of Christ, literally or metaphorically, to feel closer to Yahweh” and “the former drinking the blood of the Old Ones.” To Phil, “this core idea of transcendence through blood drinking is something I was entirely accustomed to with Christianity, but repulsed by in *Bloodborne*.” Edward, too, came to reflect on his own Christian belief through *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, precisely because its main religion, the Chantry, resembles Christianity. It resembles European depictions of (medieval) Christianity in its ritual practices, symbology and iconic churches, abbeys and chapels, as well as in its reverence of “the Maker” and the Christ-like figure of Andraste.

Such comparisons between real and fictitious religions installed doubt about the validity of one’s own (Christian) tradition. Phil further worked through his doubt by playing games that feature eclectic religious iconography, such as *Xenoblade Chronicles* and *Persona 4*. Both examples are Japanese RPGs that heavily feature religious symbolism: *Persona 4*, for instance, includes figures from Christian, Hindu, Japanese and other theo-/mythologies, depicting Satan, Saint Michael and Shiva alongside Anubis, Quetzalcoatl and Amaterasu – all of whom “are shown more as myth than fact.” To Phil, for the first time, religion was presented as “rooted in people, as a manifestation of human nature.” Gods are “presented as masks one uses to face the world, manifesting as gods, angels, demons and devils,” and rituals and religious practices “are portrayed more as superstitions and tradition than committed religions.” At the end of the game, “you toss aside your glasses to see the world for how it truly is: which is what you make of it.” *Persona 4*’s mundane and eclectic religiosity, Phil argues, taught him to regard religion as “subservient to the people [its] images are rooted in.” Ultimately, he says, “this is what really helped me come to terms with my atheism. [...] In fact, games showed me it was *okay* to be an atheist.”

For Edward, the experience of playing through his religious struggles turned out to be therapeutic and transformative:

I was raised and frightened into only ever looking at religion from a single perspective: Christianity. Even considering another perspective was almost akin to sinning. [...] But what *Dragon Age: Inquisition* allowed me to do was suddenly be able to come in as an outsider – I played an elf – and be forced to view it from the outside.

After Edward viewed Christianity from the perspective of “an outsider” – through the eyes of an excluded elf – Edward investigated his religious identity. He goes as far as to refer to his life as “post-DAI” [*Dragon Age: Inquisition*] as the game “impacted how I think about religion” and “gave me the breathing room to reflect.” And yet, other games contributed to religious reflexivity as well. An important influence was *The Talos Principle*. In that game:

Your actions can be read as an adherent to a Christian-esque [...] monotheistic God [who] tells you not to go up the tower since you don't need that knowledge. But you can choose to go up the tower. [...] I decided that if I went up that tower and defied Elohim [the God-voice], it would be like defying the God of real-life Christianity.

Going up the tower terrified Edward “in a very real way” and served as a way of role-playing himself, practicing the kind of audacity it took to “defying the God of real-life Christianity.” Indeed, after Edward went up the tower: “I felt freer. Nothing bad happened. [...] I felt better and more in control of myself. I felt like I had more agency in life.” As a consequence, Edward decided to “take a break from Christianity,” eventually coming to identify himself as both transgender and atheist.

### **Conclusion: Now You're Playing with Ultimate Meaning**

Based on content analysis of religious representations (narratives, beliefs, characters) in videogames, it is often implied that these contribute to a process of Othering religiosity: a stereotypical, schematic and moral way of representing religions that draws “symbolic boundaries” between “us” and “them” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) and reinforces a hegemonic (Western/civilized/male/secular/Christian) identity by contrasting it with an imagined (non-Western/barbarian/female/religious/Muslim) Other (e.g., Asad, 2003; Boletsi, 2013; Said, 1978). Arguing that “dominant-hegemonic” representations in texts are always interpreted, negotiated and “decoded” (Hall, 1980), and, particularly, that videogames are not passively consumed but actively played, I asked: How does role-playing the (non-)religious Other in games affect the worldview of players?

Rather than seeing religion in games as representations of Othering, the analysis demonstrates that players from different (non-)religious beliefs take on different worldviews while role-playing the (non-)religious Other. In doing so, atheists relativize their own position, open up to the validity of religious claims or wilfully embrace its logic and ultimate meaning in the context

of the game world. In turn, Christians, atheists, Hindus and others switch between each other's beliefs, compare traditions and sometimes, based on this process, draw conclusions about the similarities underlying world religions. In other cases, they admit to "slip[ping] into a secular mindset," gradually turning toward the position of a secular Other.

In short, the analysis indicates that the perspective on religious representations in games as an Other is limited. When we consider games as *played* and *experienced* (rather than read or analyzed as narratives afterwards), they are multi-sided tools that afford the possibility of actually playing the Other – of temporarily "bracketing" or suspending one's own worldview and empathizing with the Other's perspective. In itself, this is not surprising: from an anthropological perspective, play has always been understood as a "temporary suspension of normal social life" (Huizinga, 1938, p. 12; cf. Caillois, 1961) – a "liminal zone" in which "serious" issues of everyday life, culture and politics are transgressed, reversed and re-negotiated (Geertz, 1972; Turner, 1982; van Bohemen et al., 2014). In recent research on play in videogames, however, this ritual function of play is often narrowed down to a psychological dimension. Game worlds are considered "laboratories" where adolescent players try out new personal identities (Turkle, 1995), safely express deviant emotions such as fear and aggression (Jansz, 2015) and "play with the controversial, the forbidden and subversive" through role-play (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015, p. 4).

Based on these findings I suggest that, instead, academics should pay more attention to the way role-playing games contribute to social-cultural dimensions of identity, or even citizenship in a multicultural Western society. "Personal identity," after all, is inherently "social" and always shaped in relation to the Other (Goffman, 1959; Jenkins, 1996; Mead, 1934). Games, from this perspective, may indeed be understood as "laboratories" for players to play the Other, but in a broader social and cultural sense beyond the individual: as a free space in which to experiment with worldviews and, in doing so, build up understanding and tolerance. By playing at being atheists, Christians, Hindus or Muslims in games, players may become aware that the absolute truths they were raised with are culturally contingent and replaceable by alternatives – both historical and fantastical. A thorough awareness of religious pluralism, sociologist of religion Peter Berger argued over 50 years ago, opens people up for relativism and tolerance:

The pluralistic situation multiplies the number of plausibility structures competing with each other. Ipso facto, it relativizes their religious contents. More specifically, the religious contents are "de-objectivated,"



that is, deprived of their status as taken-for-granted, objective reality in consciousness. They become subjectivized. [...] Their reality becomes a “private affair” of individuals. (Berger, 1967, pp. 151–152)

Two nuances remain in order not to overstate the role of games in this religious relativism. First of all, a caveat of the argument and data presented here is that “games” are not a monolithic cultural category. While it is easy to find religion in game settings from the historical to sci-fi, and from genres of fantasy to the post-apocalyptic, not all games offer religious roles and characters to identify with. There is very little religious relativism to be found in games such as *FIFA*. Secondly, despite the overwhelming number of games that *do* depend on religious conventions of representation, players’ transportation was explicitly contextualized by play, and while it has led to reflection, it is a clearly bracketed, temporary activity. Overall, it thus remains a question what the offline implications are of role-playing the religious Other in multicultural society as a whole. I have no interest in claiming games to be a magical tolerance device – they are only a way for millions of players to experience what it is like to view the world differently.

Nonetheless, I have argued in this chapter that many games offer players the chance of playing the Other. Berger claimed that the relativism of cultural pluralism, ultimately, had a secularizing effect on individual belief, since it undermined the plausibility of ultimate meaning. In contemporary “post-secular” society (Habermas, 2006, 2008), a contradictory emphasis is put on fundamentalism, religious conflict and mutual Othering: atheists, Christians and Muslims are taking sides in what can be referred to as a “clash of civilizations” (Eagleton, 2009; Huntington, 1996; cf. Mamdani, 2004). This underscores the societal relevance of further systematic and perhaps quantitative research on my theory about games, role-play and religious relativism. To paraphrase Nintendo’s famous 1980s slogan, when players are afforded the chance to see the world from new perspectives: “Now you’re playing with ultimate meaning!”

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# Part III

Conclusion



## 6. Pop Theology

### Abstract

This chapter concludes that there is a disjunction between the production and consumption of religion in videogames. On the one hand, the production of games leads to a commodification and “sameness” of religion in videogames, hollowing out the meaning of religious practice and belief. On the other hand, the consumption of games leads to meaningful public debate and individual (ir)religious experience, reasserting inter-religious conversation in the post-secular. This conclusion argues that religious signs are first turned into “simulacra” by game developers, and then played with and negotiated by players, resulting in a “pop theology.” That is, an exchange of belief for play as *the* epistemological strategy for relating to religion in post-secular, mediatized societies. Videogames thus offer a ludic epistemology of religions as worldviews to be tried on, compared and discarded, rather than as sources for belief or disbelief in ultimate truths.

**Keywords:** pop theology, ludic epistemology, simulacra of the sacred, production and consumption of religion in videogames

*What does religion have to do with videogames anyway?*  
– Anonymous *Assassin’s Creed* developer (GDC, 2018)

As the introduction claimed, and as I have argued throughout the chapters above, the presence of religion in videogames is so common that developers and players alike forget the extent to which videogames depend on religious conventions. Various religious traditions, as has been observed by other scholars and throughout this book, are used by developers to add “gravitas” to games, or to explain game mechanics, or to draw players into worlds and characters apart from the disenchantment of modern life. I set out at the start of this book to look beyond what theologians, sociologists, game



scholars and other academic writers had optimistically pointed out: that there are religious signs in videogames. “*So what?*” I have tried to ask as unceremoniously as possible, “What do videogames have to do with religion?” and “What does religion have to do with videogames anyway?” Or:

- Which choices lead game makers to use religion in their videogames?
- How do players make sense of and relate to these representations?

As a consequence of those questions, I ask in this conclusion:

- How should we theorize the appearance of religion in the largest cultural industry of the (supposedly) secularized West?
- What kind of religious change does this entail?

### **Production–Consumption–Disjunction**

The “appearance” of religion in games is not a spontaneous – and presumably not divine – process. It comes from people making games, and other people then playing those games. There is, however, a disjunction between the production and consumption of religion in videogames. On the one hand, because of the way that videogame development is organized as a cultural industry, religious beliefs and practices are hollowed out into commodified signs and, in the most precarious niches of independent development, is standardized into conventional “sameness.” On the other hand, the way that videogames are consumed by players leads to a reassertion of meaning that is experienced individually and then negotiated publicly.

To summarize the empirical chapters above, in Chapter 2 I argued that the logic of a commercial brand formed a “marketable religion” – based on fieldwork in Montréal, and 22 interviews there with developers on the AAA (“Hollywood”-style) *Assassin’s Creed* franchise, among whom were the key creators of the franchise’s decade-long history. The initial choice to use religion in *Assassin’s Creed* was, on the one hand, one of personal conviction: Patrice Désilets and his core team wanted to make a game that depicted religious institutions as dogmatic systems of powerful manipulation. Subsequent choices made in marketing, production and editorial created a brand which commodifies religion to appeal to a global audience as wide as possible, without alienating or offending anyone. Religion in *Assassin’s Creed*, as the example “par excellence” of commercially successful uses of religion in games, is thus used to create a nostalgic *belonging without*

*believing* for everyone to place themselves into an esoteric mystery “behind history,” that is brought into a “rationalized” present of secular scientific logic. Chapter 3, based on 35 interviews with independent developers outside of the AAA system, showed that religious and irreligious developers alike were reluctant to put their own convictions into their games. Instead, they too contributed to a commodification of religious signs, in this case led by practical and economic considerations: by following the standardized conventions of Eurocentric religious representation in games.

Chapter 4 studied a hundred discussions that took place on the five most popular gaming forums, providing an overview of how player communities talk about religion in games from their own perspectives. I found that players variously either (1) “rejected” religious content as not fitting their established worldviews; (2) “debunked” games as trivial in relation to their established worldviews; (3) “debated” games as interpretable only according to their established worldviews; or (4) actively sought out games in order to “connect” to worldviews not already their own. In the process, their discussions showed that player communities are prompted by the games they play to conduct a collective “pop theology” on the nature of gods, and compare the meanings of fiction such as games in relation to sacred texts – thereby muddying the distinction between fictional and sacred texts. Looking further into their life-long engagements with games and the questions prompted, both Chapters 4 and 5 drew on 20 subsequent interviews to show that irreligious and religious players alike use games to experience how (fictional) religious Others see the world – whether it is to temporarily experience enchantment; to understand other religious systems than their own; or to try on atheism, in at least two cases leading to profound reflection and even conversions as a result.

### **Production: Ontological Simulacra of the Sacred**

What commodification and sameness do, taken together, is that religious signs – their rituals, writings, aesthetics and architecture – are hollowed out as assets – into actions, scripts, lighting, level design – for the ambiance of gravitas and mystery. To put it more theoretically, the production of religion in videogame development changes religious substances ontologically. What religious substance *is* in videogames is reduced to a commodity. Again, with Arjun Appadurai: a commodity is “anything intended for exchange [...] *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political or personal transaction costs” leading to “the object-centred, relatively impersonal,

asocial” exchanges (Appadurai, 2005, p. 35). The result of this is a tendency toward similar and standardized forms of representing religion, or what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno once called “sameness” (*Ähnlichkeit*) (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 94): a process of standardization in cultural industries, regardless of the beliefs and intentions of the workers within that industry. They describe “sameness” as a process by which cultural industries are driven monotonously to commodify ideas, driven, on the one hand, by taboos on non-hegemonic groups and ideas (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 96; hooks, 2006) and, on the other hand, driven by a maximization of profit, achieved by appealing to the widest possible audience, by which “words change from substantial carriers of meaning to signs devoid of qualities” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 133). Briefly put: a reduction from (religious) substances to commodities.

Religion cannot thus be comfortably conceptualized in these empirical cases along either of the “substantialist” nor “functionalist” biases mentioned in the introduction. It is not (substantially) a connection to a supernatural substance (Marett, 1914; Spiro, 1966; Tylor, 1871) nor (functionally) a set of practices providing functions to societies and individuals (Bellah, 1964; Durkheim, 1995; Malinowski, 1925). Rather, what we see in videogames that use religion is a widespread encounter with mediatized commodifications of substances (depictions of gods, transactions with gods, metaphors of divinity), and – by extension – mediatized commodifications of rituals (initiations, meditations, summonings). What I mean by mediatized, here, as opposed to mediated, is that these signs or their games do not function as objects mediating religious substances to the profane (in the way a human-made crucifix mediates Christ to a Christian [Meyer, 2006]), but that games present religious signs that exist only within their own, mediatized context.

This changes the sacrality of religious substance into what I want to call “simulacra of the sacred.” Simulacra are a specific kind of signs that become too far divorced from their original signified to carry the same (in this case sacred) meaning. Religion is in such cases reduced to a self-contained, self-referential system of signs with no necessary connection to an original signified substance. Jean Baudrillard has already called this situation “hyperreal,” in which signs no longer need to point to their referent to make sense in their own mediatized context (1994). Simply put, whereas most modernist conceptions of language stem from the idea that a sign has a signified (a tree, a boat, Jesus Christ, Shiva) and a signifier (a word or picture of a “tree,” a “boat” or the plethora of signs and objects that signify Jesus Christ and Shiva) – we see in situations like this that the signified is

no longer necessary. Religious signs in videogames function as such: they are signifiers without needing a signified to function.

Instead, they are simulacra: copies that either have no original or have become so far divorced from an original that they become copies of copies without originals (Baudrillard, 1994). Disneyland provides an illustrative example for both Baudrillard (“a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra” [ibid., p. 12]) and Umberto Eco: “[W]e not only enjoy a perfect imitation, we also enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it” (1986, p. 46). Disneyland, in their example, no longer needs a clear connection to a reality or original signified. There *is no* original copy: all six Disneylands around the world are copies of each other, presenting copies of copies of original sources, i.e., combining copies of Viennese royal architecture, endless self-referential copies of a mouse-turned-cartoon-turned-merchandise, and a plethora of other historical and cultural “originals” from pirates to princesses, into something that presents itself as a “pure simulacrum,” without a necessary relation to an underlying reality. There is no original underlying sign of Mickey Mouse; just as there is no necessary original for the combination of rituals and inventions of *Assassin’s Creed*, nor the clichés and conventions of the healing Cleric, the safe church or the “wild” Shaman. Even if, as the enthusiastic theologian does, we attempt to retrace and collect the genealogical origins of those signs, their originals are not necessary for the signs to function.

Simulacra of the sacred function in themselves, in lieu of their religious origins, for game developers to use. In Baudrillard’s words:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of *substituting the signs of the real for the real*, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself. [...] A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary. (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 2–3; emphasis added)

In videogames, we see cultural products offering simulacra of the sacred much like Disney offers its reality: self-contained and divorced from tradition; without any vestige of the sacred, cultural or personal meanings that they carry for their believers.

## Consumption: Socially Playing with Meaning

After games are made, sold and find their ways into players' homes, the way games are consumed leads to meaningful public debate and individual (ir) religious experience. This, perhaps surprisingly, reasserts inter-religious experiences in public and private spheres, as they are played with and negotiated by players. Thus the consumption of religion in videogames changes how religions function *socially*. Considering the decline of institutionalized, practiced religious belief and belonging, on the one hand, and considering the dominance of videogames as a cultural industry, on the other, it is straightforward to say that young people in the West are more likely to see religion in games than in a place of worship (cf. Newzoo, 2017; Pew, 2018). The industry has been able to fabricate communities of religious "belonging" that share collective meaning, morality and communal functions (Chapter 2; Chapter 4; Davie, 1990; cf. Geraci, 2014), but they do not necessarily share belief.

In fact, when fans come together to discuss and bond over their shared experiences, most of them end up doing so without changing their established worldviews (Chapter 4). If anything, how players interpret religion in games is first of all different from how other players interpret religion in games (*Assassin's Creed* is a deeply religious game; but *Assassin's Creed* is also a militantly atheist game), and second of all fundamentally unrelated to how developers intended to use religion in games (*Assassin's Creed* as Désilet's militantly atheist game; *Assassin's Creed* as Guesdon's universally religious brand for everyone). They are mere signs to be debated, and compared, but always in light of the player's own pre-existing cultural worldviews, which they bring to this temporary experience (Chapter 4; Chapter 5). They are opaque: the way in which religion is communicated through games (from developers to players), and around games (between players in huge communities of shared meanings), is more like a public projection screen than a transparent mediation of privatized experience.

This is a clear contestation of theories of "invisible religion" discussed above (e.g., Luckmann, 1967), in that religion is returned from privatized systems of belief to public debate. While these games may be understood by players in widely different ways, the "post-secular" public sphere is as a consequence abuzz with talk of religion, on gaming forums where players compare, contrast and criticize their mutually exclusive understandings of the games they each played (Chapter 4). As the analysis of players' public conversation showed, religion is a vital topic of discussion amongst players in the game community. On game forums, religion is defended and

attacked, found meaningful and trivialized, sought out, understood and misunderstood. Religious traditions are compared: Christian theology is put alongside knowledge of ancient pantheons, Meso-American mythology and the gods and rituals of *Skyrim* or *Zelda*.

Notwithstanding different positions, players are in dialogue about the “real” meanings of (in-game) religion and this shows that games inspire conversations on religion. It is important to note, however, that the arguments players are making in this conversation are neither non-committal nor arbitrary. Quite the contrary: what they express online about in-game content is strongly motivated by their (non-)religious identity in offline life. I therefore conceptualized this particular form of “textual poaching” (Jenkins, 2012) or “decoding” (Hall, 1980) of religion in games as a form of “public religion.” By public religion I mean the public discussion of the truth and meaning of religion, god(s) and belief(s): i.e., *in* public and *by* the public, in groups of untrained and variously (ir)religious “amateurs” in offline or online environments.

How should we consider such vivid public discussions in the context of the academic debate on secularization or, more specifically, the proposed *privatization* of religion? Luckmann argued about half a century ago (1967) that religions do not necessarily disappear, but change: outside of established institutions and churches, individuals construct their privatized system of “ultimate significance” that are separate from the public sphere. By contrast, however, the involvement in this public “pop theology” on forums raises critical questions about the alleged non-institutional, socially insignificant and privatized nature of religion. First of all, the prominence of religion in popular media culture – film, television series and games – may already be understood as another kind of institutionalization of religion: that of religion as a commodity, packaged and sold by the cultural industry of producers and publishers, to be eagerly swept up by consumers in search of meaning (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Davidsen, 2018; Hoover, 2006; Schultze, 2003; Wagner, 2012).

Second, we cannot deny the collective and essentially public nature of the discussion about religion on online forums. Informed by offline worldviews and (ir)religious identities, I demonstrated that players fully immerse themselves in discussions and theological speculations about religion in the games they play. In her polemic with Thomas Luckmann, Kelly Besecke noted that we can visibly see religion in the public conversation about religion in self-help books, magazines and other mass media featuring religion and spirituality (2005). Digital media platforms facilitate such public debates even better: the non-hierarchical structure and “participatory

culture” of the internet (Jenkins, 2012) invites lay people and amateurs to voice their opinions on religion and worldviews.

Counter-intuitively then, videogames’ commodified, standardized “simulacra of the sacred” prompt the active making and negotiation of meaning in players. When games prompt discussions on religion outside of churches; in public places, in media venues, and in online forums, this constitutes a truly public conversation. Anyone with an internet connection can partake. People participate not primarily as members of a religion, but from divergent religious and intersectional backgrounds and on their own accord. Prompted by in-game religion, they engage in heated conversation on how meaningful a game can be, for themselves and for others, vis-à-vis sacred texts and their own convictions: not privately, but publicly.

### Pop Theology: Epistemologies of Play

This all results in a “pop theology.” That is, a change from belief to play as *the* epistemological strategy for relating to religion in post-secular, mediatised societies. If theology is traditionally the systematic development of knowledge and theory on religious beliefs, videogames present a *pop* theology: a radical emancipation of religious meaning-making outside of the church and away from professional, academic theologians into the hands of the developers and players who play with religion.

I argue that this is the biggest theoretical implication for how we should understand or indeed “know” religion through games: the epistemological change from religion as a matter of belief to *play* as a way of relating to religion. Epistemologically, how religion is known and experienced in videogames is fundamentally changed by play’s temporariness. Players may develop from their encounters with commodified religious simulacra a “kind of understanding” of being “in someone else’s shoes” (Chapter 5), but it is only understood as them occupying the temporary worldview of playing the Other, a temporary playing at religion, in the same way that children play at being soldiers, at being a doctor, running a shop (“playing shop”) or having a family (“playing house”). Hence, religions have meaning mainly within the delineated time and space of the videogame, and any knowledge presented within them is first and foremost true within their diegesis. This is why developers can take an amalgam of historically religious signs and stories and present them as a new, ahistorical religious experience. This is why, despite some players’ reflections on their own religious lives *afterwards*, what is true or not about religion in the game is contained within

the hours of media use. The consequence is that such temporary, mediatized religious experiences take place outside the cultural context in which they are made and played. While in a game, we may play at being believers: we might be in fantastical, historical, sci-fi or wholly distinct worlds, acting in absolute certainty of the existence of gods – until we are not, because we have switched off our computer, or left the game to do something else, leaving behind the game's temporary world and worldview.

What this means for religious studies, the sociology of religion and game studies is foremost epistemological, i.e., that belief in sacred substances can be made into play-time with commodified simulacra and that age-old religious traditions can be tried on and discarded by players at will. This is a medium-specific theory, intransferable to other media no matter how playful they are theorized as (e.g., Hoover, 2006). As much or as little agency as players have been theorized to have within the medium (e.g., Raessens, 2005; cf. de Wildt, 2014b), they are at least able to appropriate and reconfigure what the game means *for them* and how they choose to interpret and understand it. Moreover, they apparently do so without a necessary connection both to how developers intended it, and to how other players understood their own experience. In many ways these findings are in line with literature on (non-digital) play as a temporary, delineated experience, starting as early as Huizinga and Caillois, the latter of whom writes:

all play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a [...] imaginary universe. [...] The subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another. (Caillois, 1961, p. 19)

But can games “make” belief as Caillois states?

On the contrary, I argue that to call such a “temporary shedding of personality” a form of belief is reductive, and that in the case of religious belief it ignores the more common and theoretically productive observation that millions of gamers now *play* with what were once fundamental sources of ultimate meaning. Instead, religion finds a refuge in fiction – especially the enacted, embodied fictions of videogames – exactly because (young) people in the West do not believe anymore. So what do we make of, on the one hand, arguments by scholars like Caillois and Geraci that play is (virtually) equal to belief and, on the other hand, criticisms by scholars like Sutton-Smith and Raessens of modernist distinctions between play



and non-play as overly rigidly dichotomous? In the introduction, I briefly cited Rachel Wagner as continuing in Caillois' (and Huizinga's) footsteps by equating games to religion, and play to belief. In full:

[There is] a fundamental similarity between religion and games, generally speaking: both are, at root, order-making activities that offer a mode of escape from the vicissitudes of contemporary life, and both demand at least temporarily that practitioners give themselves over to a predetermined set of rules that shape a worldview and offer a system of order and structure that is comforting for its very predictability. [...] [G]ames offer such ordered worlds on a temporary basis [whereas] religion attempts to make universal claims. (Wagner, 2014, p. 193)<sup>1</sup>

Here, my conclusions align only with Wagner's brief caveat against the similarity of games and religion, based on the temporariness of the structures of games vis-à-vis the universal, ultimate meanings of religion (although most of her work will go on to ignore this caveat in her argument). Religions, in the words of Peter Berger, do indeed "construct a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning, binding on everybody" (1967, p. 134), whereas games, as noted above, offer worldviews that are only temporary.

That is the difference between play and belief: games delineate a separate time and place. Sutton-Smith argued similarly that "what is a potential and yet unlimited promise in religion is an actual but temporary gift in play" (2009, p. 85). However, as Sutton-Smith and others have also argued, a structural distinction between play and non-play is a dichotomy that disregards the "ambiguity of play" (*ibid.*), or in Raessens' words: "[M]odernist thought, including that of Huizinga, leaves no room for ambiguities and seeks to dispel them. As a result, however, Huizinga becomes entangled in insoluble conceptual tensions. [...] The solution is to do justice to these ambiguities, because they are so typical for play" (2010, p. 12).

Similarly, the dichotomy between belief and disbelief does not apply to the epistemological attitude of play. The temporary meaning-making of (digital) play is not a "make-belief" or a "real belief" or even a "suspension of disbelief" in the life-long sense of belief as accepting ultimate meaning. Based on the empirical studies above I argue that games demand a more ludic epistemology from players which transcends this belief/disbelief binary: a pop theology – that is, of playful and popular engagements with religion,

1 For similar arguments, see Geraci (2014), and Leibovitz (2013).

as opposed to one of doctrines of belief (where belief is an acceptance of truths, especially those without proof).

A ludic epistemology implies that play is a way of engaging in temporary systems of meaning. Specifically, playing games allows players to enter a “real enough” (Hong, 2015), or a “liminal space” (Turner, 1982), in which religion even when seen as explicitly fictional can be accepted with a measure of irony and reflexivity at a “safe distance” to be played with, which has elsewhere been called a “lusory attitude” in general (Suits, 1978; cf. de Wildt, 2014a), or “playful religion” more specifically (Droogers, 2014). The consequence of this is that players either contain their religious engagement within the context of play or, as the empirical material in this book also shows, for players to reflect on their everyday (ir)religious attitudes in life outside of play – although belief is confined outside of it.

Playing at religion in games can thus sound to the sociologically educated reader like a type of “effervescence” in the way that Durkheim explains collective effervescence:

[H]ow would experiences like these not leave [a person] with the conviction that two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds exist in fact? In one world he languidly carries on his daily life; the other is one that he cannot enter without abruptly entering into relations with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world and the second, the world of sacred things. It is in these effervescent social milieux, and indeed from that very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to have been born. (Durkheim, 1995, p. 220)

However, there are two major differences. Firstly, there are so many more of those worlds available to the 21<sup>st</sup> century player in my research, than there are to the indigenous Australian Warumungu that Durkheim studied. Rather than a collectively shared and co-constructed “world of sacred things,” there are multiple (commodified, simulated, de-privatized) worlds to return to the profane from, or switch between. Secondly, the player’s experience is digitally delineated in space and time, between them, the screen, and the computer’s on and off button. As opposed to the kind of non-digital (role-)play that Huizinga, Caillois and Sutton-Smith write about, digital videogames offer closed-off, rule-based, audiovisual worlds that are encyclopaedic, freely explorable and – more importantly – kept in check by the technological means and calculations of a computer: their boundaries are clear and unnegotiable. It is clear when and where play ends and starts. The overwhelming majority of effervescent experiences in videogames still

take place within the clearly delineated space and time of a game's screen or VR-headset, and the combination of buttons used to play with or ultimately turn games' temporary worlds on and off.

Although this book did not set out to study anything but religion in games, this of course has theoretical implications for how we should understand both religion and videogames. A pop theology – which, I suggest, is the dominant way in which young Westerners now encounter and know religion – requires a fundamental rethinking of how we have thought about religion up to now. Religion is no longer just the domain of belief in ever-lasting, ultimate meaning based on sacred substances, mediated by rich traditions of elaborate rituals and objects. Religion has become a game. There is, furthermore, a potential to better understand how other worldviews are produced and consumed in similar games: whether they are invested with religious, political, ecological or other worldviews.

To stay within the stricter scope of this book, however: What does a pop theology entail for the production and consumption of religion in videogames?

Firstly, when developers produce such worldviews, they are reproducing conventions based on enchanted worldviews long lost to many. They commodify a world wherein gods are reduced to monsters or quest-givers, wherein rituals and sacred objects are reduced to quantifiable effects and wherein religious values are reduced to commodified experiences (for 60 hours and 60 euros). Their games present perfectly true worlds that do not just play with religion as an influence here and there. Instead, they can represent all the enchantment of religious traditions, but with the certainty of gods' existence and within the technical means and calculations of a predictable machine.

Secondly, when players take on these worldviews in the ways I have theorized above, they play with religion. They do not merely play with the idea of believing this or that, but they fully take on their roles as an "Other," playing at being religious, without all that pesky belief. Just as a child would play at being a doctor or at running a business, they are dabbling in religion, trying it on, dismissing it and casting it off – all the while acting on a played truth. Religion is thus playfully produced and consumed; it is temporarily connected with, debated and compared. But unless a player was already a believer in what is depicted, I contend that there is no mediation of belief, only a ludic epistemology. Who wants to go back to the uncertainty and worldview-changing convictions of religious belief in a world like that? Instead, millions of players choose to have all the possible religions in the world available to them as an experiment, playing with religion at the push of a button.

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Young people in the West are more likely to encounter religion in videogames than in places of worship like churches, mosques, or temples. Lars de Wildt interviewed developers and players of games such as *Assassin's Creed* to find out how and why the 'Pop Theology of Videogames' is so appealing to cultural industries and their audiences. Based on extensive fieldwork, this book argues that developers of videogames and their players engage in a pop theology through which laymen reconsider traditional questions of religion, by playing with them. Games allow us to engage with religious questions and identities in the same way that children might play house or pretend to be soldiers. This requires a radical rethinking of religious questions as no longer just questions of belief or disbelief; but as truths to be tried on, compared, and discarded at will.

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