Editorial

The Sacred and the Digital. Critical Depictions of Religions in Digital Games

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Abstract: In this editorial, guest editor Frank Bosman introduces the theme of the special issue on critical depictions of religion in video games. He does so by giving a tentative oversight of the academic field of religion and video game research up until present day, and by presenting different ways in which game developers critically approach (institutionalized, fictional and non-fictional) religions in-game, of which many are discussed by individual authors later in the special issue. In this editorial, Bosman will also introduce all articles of the special issue at hand.

1. Introduction

Video game studies are a relative young but flourishing academic discipline. But within game studies, however, the perspective of religion and spirituality is rather neglected, both by game scholars and religion scholars. Although some fine studies have appeared, like *Halos & Avatars* (Detweiler 2010), *Godwired. Religion, ritual, and virtual reality* (Wagner 2012), *eGods. Faith versus fantasy in computer gaming* (Bainbridge 2013), *Of Games and God* (Schut 2013), *Playing with Religion in digital games* (Campbell and Grieve 2014), *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (Sisler et al. 2018), and *Gaming and the Divine* (Bosman 2019), still little attention has been given to the depiction of religion, both institutionalized and privatized, both fantasy and non-fictional, deployed by game developers for their games' stories, aesthetics, and lore.

Video games have used religion as a source of inspiration since decades, while on very different levels and through different modes (Bosman 2016). Games have used religious themes, languages, images, symbolisms and the like to construct instant recognizable lores, characters and/or narratives (for example *DMC. Devil May Cry* or *Diablo III*), but also to stimulate the player to contemplate existential notions (for example *The Turing Test* or *The Talos Principle*) or invite them (sometimes even force them) to behave in a way traditionally associated with religion (for example *Bioshock Infinite*). In some instances, it has been argued that the act of gaming itself could be regarded a religious act in itself (Wagner 2012, Bosman 2019).

Two dedicated academic journals on religion and video games exist: *Gamenvironments* (since 2014), hosted by the universities of Bremen (Germany) and edited by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Bremen) and Zenia Zeiler (Helsinki); and *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (from 2004 to 2010 and 2014 to present), hosted by the University of Heidelberg (Germany) and edited by Gregor Ahn and Tobias Knoll (both from Heidelberg as well). While *Online*'s scope is broader than just video games, they have published three dedicated issues on the subject: *Religion in digital games. Multiperspective and interdisciplinary approaches* (Heidbrink and Knoll 2014), *Religion in digital games reloaded. Immersion into the field* (Heidbrink et al. 2015) and *Religion in digital games respawned* (Heidbrink and Knoll 2016).

While religion can take different shapes in digital games (Bosman 2016), ranging from material and referential to reflexive and ritual, it is not necessarily true that game developers depict their

in-game religions in a positive, confirming way, but ever so often games approach the topic critically and disavowingly, like for example *Far Cry 4* and *Bioshock Infinite*. The first depicts a clearly Christian-inspired violent doomsday sect, issuing a reign of religious terror on their environment, while the second criticizes the Christian roots of American exceptionalism (both games are discussed in this issue). The developers do not operate in a cultural void, but are tapping into a larger cultural criticism on the religion phenomenon in general. Richard Dawkins, the godfather of battle-ready New Atheism, for example, ends the preface of his famous *The God delusion* (Dawkins 2006, p. 5) as follows:

> If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. What presumptuous optimism! Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination using methods that took centuries to mature (whether by evolution or design).

And Dawkins isn't the only prominent thinker to link religion with violence. Atheist authors like Hitchens (2007), Harris (2004), and Stenger (2008) have suggested the same. They echo the chorus, made famous by John Lennon's song *Imagine*, that the world would definitely be a better place if there was "no religion too". And some developers seem to echo the same idea in their digital games.

The religion criticisms found in video games can be categorized as follows (Bosman 2019): religion as (1) fraud, aimed to manipulate the uneducated masses (for example *The Rise of the Tomb Raider*); as (2) blind obedience towards an invisible but ultimately non-existing deity/ies (for example *The Binding of Isaac*); as (3) violence against those who do not share the same set of religious rules (for example *Far Cry 5*); as (4) madness, a deranged alternative for logical reasoning (for example *Nier: Automata*); and as (5) suppression in the hands of the powerful elite to dominate and subdue the masses into submission and obedience (for example *Dishonored* and *Dishonored 2*).

The critical depictions of religion in video games by their developers is the focus of this special issue.

2. Contributions

The articles in this special edition of *Religions* are dedicated to the analysis of video games and religion, most of them concerning the critical use of (institutionalized) religion in video games. Many contributors opted to discuss individual games and game series, that feature religion critical content.

Jarell Paulissen focusses in his article 'The Dark Covenant' on *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Halo 2*, and *Halo: Reach*, arguing that "the apparent dichotomy between humans portrayed as rational thinkers and the aliens presented as religious fanatics is too simplistic". Using Barbour (1989) idea of 'non-overlapping magisteria', he opts for the 'dialogue' model of interaction between religion and science as being present in the *Halo* series.

Heidi Rautalahti concentrated, in her article 'Disenchanting faith', on the three *Dishonored* installments (1, 2, and *The Death of Outsider*), and especially on the religious fractions featuring in the games: the Outsider, the order of The Abbey of the Everyman, and witch Delilah Copperspoon with her witch coven. Using Weber's (Weber [1922] 1978) three ideals of authority—charismatic, traditional, and legal—she demonstrates that all religious authorities in the game series are contested ones.

Jan Wysocki, in his 'Critique with limits', makes a stock-taking of all religious motives and themes in the game *Bioshock Infinite*, especially concerning the 'Church of Comstock'. *Infinite*, as the author judges, is "strangely vacillating between a biting liberal caricature of religiously fueled nationalism and a nod to widespread moderate mainstream values in which unusual religious movements are negatively portrayed".

Archibald van Wieringen and Frank Bosman analyse the intertextual relationship (Kristeva 1980) between the game *The Binding of Isaac* and the Biblical story by the same name. In their article 'I have faith in Thee, Lord', the demonstrate that McMillen's game starts as a rathe dull and obvious criticism on religion and/as child abuse, but is gradually developed into a rather neutral depiction of religion

as a copying mechanism, cumulating in a surprising critique on the effects on children of their parents' (violent) divorce.

Other authors chose a more broader approach to the over-arching theme of games and religion criticism. Tobias Knoll, in his article 'Instant Karma', discusses the use of the original religious notion of 'karma' in modern video games, especially with regard to so-called 'morality systems' in digital games: systems that—implicitly or explicitly—judge the moral actions of the gamer, influencing the outcome of certain quests (missions) and/or the game's ending(s). Knoll used the game *Mass Effect 2* to show that such systems usually feature "strong elements of moral duality", as well as a "a strong notion of cause and effect".

Pavel Nosachev concentrates on the different ways "occult bricolage", a "play with themes and images from the sphere of Western esotericism", is conceived in the game *Gray Matter*. He differentiates between the three in-game answers, all incarnated in an in-game character. And Javier Gil-Gimeno, Celso Sánchez-Capdequí, and Josetxo Beriain argue that digital football games, like *FIFA 17* and *FIFA 18*, "creates meaning, and succeeded throughout two main processes such as the sportification and progressive rationalization of violence". In their article 'Play, game, and videogame', the authors compare two ideal types, the Dionysian-Messi versus the Apollonian-Ronaldo.

In 'Thing greater than thou' argue Lars De Wildt, Stef Aupers, Cindy Krassen, and Iulia Coanda that "modern technology (computers, AI, VR, androids) itself is becoming a sacred object of veneration in fiction, specifically in post-apocalyptic games that imagine man-made annihilation," and showcase such with the help of the game *Fallout 3* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. Such game stories, as the authors suggest, "reflect developments in real life, in which technology such as artificial intelligence is feared as an increasingly powerful, opaque force."

A last category of authors concentrated on the idea of religion and world-building. Mark Wolf argues in his 'Contemplation, subcreation, and video games' that "religious and theological ideas can be made manifest in video games, including the appearance of religion and religious iconography within video games and through the playing of video games as a potentially religious activity, especially contemplative ones that vicariously place the player in a different environment". As examples he uses games like *Cyan's Myst, Riven*, *Journey*, and *Everything*.

And Connie Veugen, in her article 'Stay your blade' introduces Klastrup and Tosca's elements of transmedial worlds (Klastrup and Tosca 2004): "Mythos, the lore of the world, the central knowledge necessary to interpret and successfully interact with events in the world; Topos, the setting and detailed geography of the world; and Ethos, the explicit and implicit ethics and (moral) codex of behaviour." With the help of the *Assassin's Creed* series, it becomes clear that "the transmedial world uses different media to expand the Mythos of the series, while, on the other hand, the Ethos of the storyworld influences player decisions in the game world."

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