Article

Techno-Religion and Cyberspace Spirituality in Dystopian Video Games

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Abstract: Once a niche part of the cyber community, video games today represent one of the major industries and "the combination of technology and spiritualist narratives". In the cyberspace dedicated to video game trivia, we can find intimate reports of players who claim that video games impacted them spiritually or that they felt unity with the spirit of the universe. By analyzing three video games (Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, Cyberpunk 2077, and Death Stranding), the author aims to explore how spirituality and cyberspace interact in narratives that follow the mentioned games and the interface that pulls the player deeper into the storyline. These games vary in styles and approaches and do not tend to support a view of one true God or any mainstream religion. Therefore, an intricate relationship between cyberspace, algorithmic patterns, and spirituality make these games different and exciting for examination. The author demonstrates the unique perception of spirituality and ideas that influenced the creation of these new spiritual cyberspaces within video games, especially New Age concepts of technopagans such as singularitarians and transhumanists.

Keywords: video games; cyberspace; dystopia; spirituality; algorithmic patterns; singularity; *Death Stranding*; *Cyberpunk 2077*; *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*

1. Introduction

The times when video games were considered a form of entertainment for young people and without any value of expression, are behind us. Today's video gaming industry surpasses traditional entertainment formats such as movies and music (Witkowski 2021). The perception of an average video game consumer as a young teenage male is long debunked. According to statistics, the average gamer is 35 years old, and the male to female ratio is roughly 50:50 (Jovanovic 2022).

Religion and video games are getting more attention as many authors point out that the relationship between the two is almost unavoidable (Wolf 2018; Paulissen 2018; Jones 2022; Aupers 2007; Grieve and Campbell 2014, etc.). At the same time, "religion", "spirituality" and "game" might be the three most elusive concepts to define. Moreover, according to the authors such as Johan Huizinga, play and religion are deeply connected and should not be considered "an absolute antithesis" (Huizinga 2016).

On the one hand, video games are seen as an apotheosis of modernity, as a signifier of secularity (Shinkle 2013). Conversely, games are full of religious expressions, contrasting with the expectation that religion will decline as technology advances (McGrath 2004). From a sociological perspective that draws on the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber, contemporary sociologists have been claiming that modern society is becoming progressively secularized, and that technological progress will be religion's eventual downfall (Hughey 1979; Riesebrodt 2014; Reaves 2012; O'Brien and Noy 2015; Turner 2016; etc.). This is true to a degree, as "churched religion" is in decline, at least in most Western countries (Bruce 2002). Nevertheless, millions of players engage with religion and spirituality through video games daily (De Wildt and Aupers 2020).

This paper examines three dystopian games—*Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room 2015), *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020), and *Death Stranding* (Kojima

Productions 2019). The focus of the article is on which ways the beliefs of technopaganism found their way into the spiritual concepts of contemporary dystopian futures imagined in games. More precisely, how are transhumanism and singularitarianism represented in the dystopian worlds of these three games. By showing us the results of bad choices and forcing us to experience them, the dystopian genre in video games frequently compels us to critique our society while shedding light on important facets of the human condition.

Technopaganism never had one definition. However, it is feasible to distinguish two different technopagan expressions. First is one belonging to neopagans, who relocated their religious and spiritual practices online, and the other belongs to technopagans on whom this article is focused, the technologists and techno-enthusiasts who spiritualized cyberspace and developed concepts of different realities (Dos Santos 2021).

This article will focus on technopagan ideas of transhumanism and singularitarianism. Transhumanism is a philosophical and intellectual movement that advocates for the development of publicly accessible technology that can extend human life. Transhumanists believe that one day, people may be able to change themselves into beings whose capabilities surpass those of modern humans (More and Vita-More). As a subcategory of transhumanism, singularitarianism is a movement guided by the idea that mankind will eventually experience a technological singularity (Woodrow 2015).

In choosing case studies, this paper focused on three recent (not older than 10 years), popular dystopian video games. Even though on first look, these three games share nothing in common, I will demonstrate that all three share deep influences of the imaginaries and beliefs of technopagans.

Academic scholarship dedicated to studying the intricate relationship between video games and religion usually focuses on games that incorporate either mainstream religions, beliefs of ancient pagan religions, or worlds that have entirely new religious pantheons constructed solely for the purpose of the game (Hannikainen 2020). Most studies on technopaganism in game worlds follow various neo-pagan religious concepts (Vallikatt 2014; Stewart and Strathern 2007; Aupers and Schaap 2015). Few explore the other side of New Age technopaganism which is mirrored in technologist spirituality (Storey and Storey 2016). Therefore, this paper aims to explore how the technopaganism of techno-enthusiasts and technologists is represented in in-game worlds set in dystopian futures.

The main questions in this paper are: How do these video games explore and depict the New Age spirituality of technopagans? How is spirituality placed in a dystopian future? Additionally, and more importantly, what is the role of technology in relation to the spirituality of dystopias in contemporary games?

2. Methodology

The study of video games is relatively recent in academic settings, and methodologies for analyzing this topic are still being explored (Aarseth 2001; Campbell and Grieve 2014; Wolf and Perron 2003, 2009; McGonical 2011; Sicart 2009; etc.). In their book *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman suggest that a video game is a multilevel experience (Salen and Zimmerman 2003). In other words, the game experience depends on the world it presents, the game design, and the narrative it follows. When approaching the study of video games and religion, we can distinguish two main methods of analysis: game-immanent and player-focused approaches. The game-immanent approach focuses on the idea that games are the product of human culture and can be studied as "textual material". Researchers can explore religious and spiritual concepts and themes by engaging in the "reading" of games (Campbell 2012). The player-focused approach relies more on the interactive experience of gaming. By studying players' experiences, researchers can determine how and to what degree games influence players' religious beliefs (Newman 2012).

I will use a game-immanent approach to study how spirituality, cyberspace, and New Age messianism (Finnegan 1992) resonate in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and *Death Stranding*. Focusing on a "text" study, I will use the main quests

(stories), gameplay mechanics, and dialogues between the main character and NPCs (non-playable character).

Furthermore, I will focus on the lore describing the world of games found in books, hard drives, radios, video recordings, and holograms existing in-game. *Cyberpunk 2077* is influenced by gameplay more than the two others because the narrative shifts with players' choices, which also affects what kind of ending can be reached. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* and *Death Stranding* are linear, already-fixed stories where players' interactions do not interfere with the already-established narrative.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Spirituality in the Code

In spirituality and religiousness, there is a fundamental belief that some supreme power or force exists to provide purpose for everyone and everything, at any given time (Kale 2004). However, spirituality, unlike religion, surpasses the need for organization or clearly defined customs (Shafrauske 1984). In other words, spirituality does not depend on any religion and is inclined to be more individual. Nonetheless, religion often guides spirituality by providing concepts, symbols, and beliefs (Kale 2004). Religion is, by definition, a personal system of organized beliefs, rituals, and practices that are used in the worship and service of deity. On the other hand, spirituality suggests a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself. At its root, religion is a matter of faith—faith in something based only on a person's willingness to embrace all of its tenets. However, spirituality places greater emphasis on direct experiences (Van Niekerk 2017).

There is little agreement in the literature concerning spirituality in the precise definition of the term. Many authors have their opinions on what spirituality truly is. Beck defined spirituality as an inner state of self, a person's primary force (Beck 1986). Vaughan argued that spirituality is a uniquely subjective experience of the divine (Vaughan 1991). Other authors, such as Zinnbauer or Pargament (Zinnbauer et al. 1999), defined spirituality in simpler terms, as the continuous search for the sacred or divine. In many of these works, spirituality is closely connected to the "search" for a higher self, purpose, and meaning. However, there is a group of authors that gives priority to connection as a core principle in spirituality. In his work, Sass linked spirituality to a need for connectedness, the exigence for transcending the material world and unifying it (Sass 2000). Regarding the ultimate objective of spirituality, I tend to agree with the claim that it is to empower one's mind to transcend the "material world" and achieve a higher level of awareness (Rogers 2020). For the purposes of this study, I have concentrated on spirituality theories that emphasize the notions of the search and a need for connectedness because these concepts serve as the fundamental building blocks of spirituality in the investigated video games.

Themes of the higher self, elevated consciousness, ad spirituality guide the main characters in the analyzed games. This inclination towards spirituality is the underlying narrative of all three games analyzed in this article. In *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, spirituality is expressed on multiple levels, depending on which character chapter is being referred, and is deeply intimate. In *Death Stranding*, spirituality is expressed as a strong need for a connection, and the cycles and patterns connecting all life inhabiting Earth. On the other hand, *Cyberpunk 2077* deals with the spirituality and concept of the soul inside cyberspace. The concept of spirituality tightly connects cyberspace, algorithmic patterns, and databases in all three main stories.

3.2. Religion, Cyberspace, and Video Games

The relationship between cyberspace, video games, and religion formed in the early 1980s with the new wave of techno-enthusiasts. The development of the Internet and related technologies in the 1990s created a new conception of technology as mysterious and enchanted. As mentioned, sociologist Max Weber famously claimed that technology would strip the world of any mystery as it is calculated and logical (Weber 1948). In his already widely known interview, Marc Pesce claimed that a new worldview is emerging and that

new digital realities are embodied on the Internet and in virtual reality (Davis 1995). Pesce was talking about so-called "technopagans".

Technopaganism brought the perceptions and claims that technological systems surrounding the Internet, V.R., and A.I. are already becoming increasingly prominent and, as such, are transcending individual humans (Aupers 2009). They are entangled with the genre of literature, "cyberpunk" (Garner 2004). Technopaganism is built upon the notion that the new world of the Internet will be a new plane for developing the spirituality of humanity.

The discourses of studying religiosity, spirituality, and cyberspace took off fast with the broader use of the Internet (Campbell and Grieve 2014). In her 1998 book, *CyberGrace*, Jennifer Cobb argued that society found a place for revitalizing of connection between religion and technology with the emergence of the Internet. Interacting with cyberspace becomes a way for the spiritual progression of humanity (Cobb 1998). However, Margaret Wertheim argued that spirituality is not ingrained in cyberspace, but it is constructed (Wertheim 2000).

Video games quickly found their way into the previously mentioned concepts. Religion and spirituality have become inseparable parts of games (Leibovitz 2014). In the early days, religious and spiritual expressions remained an underlying element of the story and gameplay. However, today, video games take on such proportions that they can be perceived as facilitators of expressing spirituality or as a commentary on religious concepts. For example, the game series *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2013, 2016, 2017) critiques authoritarian religion (Rautalahti 2018). Video game theorist Erik Zimmerman famously claimed that the twenty-first century would be the "ludic century".

CD Projekt Red, the developer of *Cyberpunk 2077*, and Kojima Productions, are pioneers of the future of video games, both technically and culturally (Saad 2020). *Death Stranding* (Perrone 2019) and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (Martin 2015) mainly aimed to go beyond mere entertainment. Moreover, in the case of Hideo Kojima, the philosophy of a game designer strongly influences the creation of the philosophy featured in the in-game world.

4. Dystopia and Cyberspace

When studying dystopias/utopias, it is impossible to do so without admitting the role of science fiction. Science fiction acknowledges technology and science in developing a dystopian/utopian genre. Both utopian and dystopian visions are depicted as stable systems, where utopian systems are considered favorable for humankind, but dystopian systems are unfair, bleak, and suppressive.

Video game developers started creating new fictional worlds. More often than not, these worlds were in dystopian settings. Science fiction and video games formed a relationship with visions of the future and possible technologies. Jasper Jull argued that fictional worlds in video games are probably the most vital innovation they have to offer (Jull 2011). Science fiction has always been oriented towards reflections and commentaries on the social and political issues of its time (Csicsery-Ronay 2003). Utopias of positive inclination prevailed in science fiction before the twentieth century. The shift towards dystopias and bleaker anti-utopias came towards the end of the twentieth century and are by far the most prevalent in science fiction today (Fitting 2010).

Video games are instinctively matched with science fiction. In creating the fictional worlds, video games were (and still are) more inclined towards the concept of dystopian worlds, usually paired with a post-apocalyptic setting. The games analyzed in this article have all the signifiers of dystopian and post-apocalyptic undertones. Dystopian settings strongly influence spiritual and religious concepts upon which the narratives are built.

In the early days of science fiction, religion had almost exclusively negative descriptions, usually as something belonging to the past, an artifact of the time when humanity was irrational. The cyberpunk genre is indistinguishably coupled with religion and spirituality in the fictional worlds of the games.

Pioneers of the cyberpunk genre intensely engaged with new concepts of spirituality that consequently influenced the emergence of technopagans. They finally found their way into fictional video game worlds in the form of the worldview propagated by technopagans, thus coming full circle. Before the emergence of cyberpunk, data systems were illustrated as strange machines operated by unknown engineers and technicians in the service of the state, military, or industrial complex (Tandt 2013). This conception changed with the emergence of so-called "populist technology" in the 1980s when the first personal computers and video game systems found their way to a wider audience. In the literature, it was already argued that the emergence of cyberpunk, embodied in the works of William Gibson, Vernor Vinge, and Neal Stephenson, embraced a more open approach toward religion, spirituality, and magic (Farca 2018).

Furthermore, spiritual and religious manifestations were no longer limited to nature but made their way into the virtual domain (De Wildt et al. 2018). The facilitator for these expressions was found in cyberspace, a term coined by William Gibson in his most famous novel, *Neuromancer*. Gibson described cyberspace as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators . . . Algraphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system" (Gibson 1984). Gibson's description of cyberspace relies on connections experienced outside the body and in relation to the coded world. Similar concepts were developed by Vinge's "the Other Plane" and Stephenson's "MetaVerse".

The emergence of the worship of a Technology God came with the twenty-first century. Techno-worshipers and technopagans evangelizing about a Technology God in artificial intelligence, bionic, robotics, and virtual reality found new ways to express New Age spirituality, united with technological advancement. The key concepts upon which cyberspace spirituality builds are virtual reality and artificial intelligence. While other ideas of transhumanism, such as bioengineering, are also part of "technologism", they are only a step towards the ultimate goal—a transcendence of material form and, finally, the achievement of immortality.

Ideas of transcending the material form are not the product of the New Age and can be traced to the ideas of Rene Descartes. Modern science is based on linking two worldviews defined by Descartes: res extensa, or the outer, peripheral world that we perceive with our senses, and res cogitans, or the internal and conscious world that subtracts our beings, thoughts, and actions. Much like modern techno-worshipers, Descartes hoped that humanity would be able to separate the divine part of itself from the mortal form. Furthermore, Descartes knew that perception through senses is insufficient and cannot provide an accurate, scientific comprehension of the universe (Smith and Hacker 2020).

Similarly, nineteenth-century mathematician George Boole constructed the belief that the human mind is a "missing link" that would connect humanity with the divine. Boole developed binary algebra, where he expressed belief in the unity of God and the oneness of the universe. This system made the human thought process as something replicable. Moreover, in Cartesian terms, the possibility of the conception or creation of a thinking machine would be a salvation of the mind from its mortal prison (De Ledesma et al. 1997). Furthermore, with Boole's system of describing the laws of human thought, Claude Shannon and Alan Turing explained the operation of electric circuits and paved the way for the electric stimulation of thought (Cave 2020). Philosopher Michael Heim argued that the human fascination with the computer is deeply spiritual—"what better way to emulate God's knowledge than to generate a virtual world constituted by bits of information. Over such a cyber world, human beings could enjoy a god-like instant access." (Heim 1993).

The founders of cyberspace expressed their techno-spiritual hopes of solving body and mind duality by arguing that A.I. could replicate an electrochemically structured mind and liberate it from mortal brain cells. Ideas and concepts of artificial intelligence resonated strongly with many cyberpunk writers. William Gibson took it a step further and described it negatively as a malicious virus that would achieve autonomy and spread itself over the entirety of cyberspace, finally reaching out into the physical world, again coming a

full circle. In *Neuromancer*, Gibson explored the idea of an autonomous and rogue A.I. embodied in Wintermute, which manipulated the main protagonist, Case, in an attempt to pursue its own evolution (Gibson 1984). Similarly, in *Cyberpunk 2077*, the main character is tasked with helping a pair of influential politicians who suspect that someone is spying on them. The main protagonist, V, finally realizes that the operation was led by a rogue A.I. that escaped behind the Blackwall and evolved there. This unnamed rogue A.I. overreached cyberspace in a successful attempt to alter the physical world to its whims.

The following chapter will analyze in detail three case studies and describe the techno-pagan ideologies that crept into the video-gaming industry. More specifically, I will demonstrate how the concepts of autonomous A.I. and the technological singularity are explored in each game. Finally, I will draw some connections between them and discuss how technopaganism influenced the world of dystopian video games.

5. Case Studies

5.1. Everybody's Gone to the Rapture

> "They're all dead, Father. All of my birds"—Wendy Boyle, Chapter 2, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*

The apocalypse in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* is unlike any other. It is an apocalyptic story, but there are no nuclear bombs, zombies, or another common cataclysms inherent to an apocalypse in video games. In dystopian terms, *Everybody's Gone* presents more as a "romantic utopia", as it is situated in a very idyllic setting. In terms of gameplay, this game is classified as a "walking simulator". A video game oriented on a gradual exploration through observation, with little or no action or interference by a player (Clark 2017). In gaming communities, "walking simulators" are often looked down upon for the reason of having lesser game-like elements.

The player begins their journey in an idyllic English village and is greeted by the words of physicist Dr. Katherine Collins, saying that everything is over, and she is the only one left. The game places the player in an ambiguous role, one of the observer. The player cannot see themselves, and it is not explicitly made known who they are. However, by moving through Shropshire and the village of Yaughton, it is noticeable that the player has footsteps and a specific shape, as sheets on drying lines lean upon them. The game's narrative is mainly conveyed with audio logs that can be found on radios, recorders, phones, and phone booths. Radios play an essential role and are tuned to what seems like a cold war numbers station (Sorrel-Dejerine 2014). Other narrative forms are balls or human-shaped swirls of light that play out like conversations between former inhabitants, forever captured in time and self-contained.

Everyone's gone to the Rapture has two main stories: the mystery of everyone's disappearance and the story of the lives of the departed villagers. The first story is immediately apparent; an entire village population vanished in the wake of a scientific discovery by two physicists in the village observatory. The second narrative unveils as the player progresses throughout the game and witnesses ghostly conversations that happened shortly before everyone disappeared and when inhabitants were aware something sinister was happening and that people were vanishing into thin air. *Everybody's Gone*, in this regard, offers a new approach to sci-fi setting by providing a more emphatic background with human dramas, such as who is sleeping with whom, who's gossiping, and who's in a fight. However, all these dramas are underlined by much deeper topics such as race, gender, or ethics. Surprisingly, reviews and reflections about *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* show an evident lack of analysis of spirituality, which is omnipresent in the game from the beginning till the end.

During their work in the village observatory, Katherine Collins and Stephen Appleton, spouses and physicists, discover an unusual light pattern in the night sky. In the conviction that they have found a new form of life, they start studying it closer. Observing the interaction of the pattern with flora and fauna, they soon begin to notice that the pattern is infecting other lifeforms, starting with birds and cows and finally spreading to humans.

Conceptually, the story revolves around the key term: singularity. Following the conversations between the villagers, and especially the traces left by Stephen and Katherine, we obtain a picture of the Pattern (Figure 1). There is no information on where the Pattern came from, only what it does and how villagers perceive it. Stephen sees it as a disease and attempts to stop its spread; the local priest, Father Jeremy, perceives it as a manifestation of a Christian God; Katherine thinks it is her spiritual pair, a collector of time and memories; Wendy, Stephen's mother, sees it as her late husband returning from the Second World War; Frank, Stephen's uncle, experiences it as his final confrontation with God, with whom he had a grudge after his wife died of cancer.

Figure 1. Pattern dancing in front of the church.

Everyone who encounters the Pattern starts suffering from hemorrhaging, tiredness, and finally, complete disappearance into the light. In the final chapter, where we find ourselves inside observatory grounds, we follow the story of Dr. Katherine Collins, who introduced the game to us. Katherine describes Pattern as the "collector of Time". In other words, the Pattern is a collective consciousness that must absorb all experiences simultaneously. However, it cannot see death as an issue, and why the finality of material existence is terrifying to Yaughton's inhabitants. In this instance, the Pattern is a form of divine being that basks in its eternity and does not comprehend the human condition, its awareness of death, and experience of time as a limitation of existence, because, for the Pattern, time is arbitrary (Sandu and Vlad 2018). The pattern is a paradigm of higher consciousness. In every human encounter with a Pattern, besides the human drama that unravels, there is an omnipresent spiritual experience. After absorbing everyone in Yaughton and possibly the entire world, the pattern reaches singularity, having all memories existing forever and simultaneously.

The Pattern moves through the electric vires and circuits and rides on radio waves to unify all living things. Through the Pattern, the developers are exploring the possibility of a technological singularity. The term "technological singularity" was coined by Vernor Vinge, one of the founders of the cyberpunk genre. Vinge explored a few possible ways of a singularity happening: the development of computers that are conscious and possess an incredibly high intelligence; the possibility of a human/computer interface that would allow the exchange of knowledge and experiences on intimate levels; or advancements in medical and biological science in attempts to enhance human intelligence (Vinge 1993). When researchers speak of technological singularity, they have in mind a possibility of an event where A.I. would achieve a level of autonomy where it could improve or build machines more powerful than itself (Bauwens 1996).

The Pattern explores the idea that downloading consciousness into a virtual network is a way of transcending the limitations of temporality. In a few recordings, Katherine states that Pattern is alive and is frustrated why it moves in unpredictable ways, searching for the logic of its actions. The Pattern reached levels of intelligence far too great for humans to understand, becoming a technological singularity that cannot be predicted.

The game ends with Katherine embracing the Pattern and disappearing with the ray of light. In her final words, she states that humanity finally can "slip away, unafraid" because everyone who longed to be together can be united now in a Pattern forever. All the stories about the village inhabitants follow the same narrative. At first, confusion about everything going on. Then, the denial of the things happening and attempts to fight the inevitable faced with human finitude, and finally, the acceptance of things to come, or maybe a new reality that was beyond comprehension before. It seems that developers intentionally left out what happens after, pointing out the powerlessness of humans in front of what appears to be not a transhuman but a posthuman condition.

Regarding the thoughts on new reality, physicist Basarab Nicolescu, in his writings, proposes a new reality inspired by the spiritual concepts of technoscience, in which humanity would unite the sacred and profane (Nicolescu 2017). The same is suggested in the epic finale of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, where the game leaves us with an experience of the sacred. At the same time, our imagination runs wild and profane, and our curiosity demands things be observed and explained.

5.2. Cyberpunk 2077

"They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care; They pursued it with forks and hope; They threatened its life with a railway share; They charmed it with smiles and soap". Spider Murphy, quoting Lewis Carroll, *Cyberpunk 2077*

The world of *Cyberpunk 2077* is the newest video game homage to the science fiction genre of cyberpunk. The Night City and the rest of the world in *Cyberpunk 2077* is a dystopian future set in a hyper-capitalist society where corporations have such reach that governments no longer have any authority or autonomy. Following the template of many cyberpunk dystopias, *Cyberpunk 2077* explores the themes of political ethos. However, above all the themes that intertwine in the narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077*, I argue that the central questions in the game's narrative are what determines being a human and how human nature can be defined in a world transformed by technology? Or as Brian Christian puts it, "to be human is to be "a" human, a specific person with a life history and idiosyncrasy and point of view; artificial intelligence suggests that the line between intelligent machines and people blurs most when a puree is made of that identity" (Christian 2011).

Furthermore, the developers of *Cyberpunk 2077* did not stray from two leading directions in cyberpunk literature, the alteration of the material environment and the inspection of consciousness. In *Cyberpunk 2077* universe, the human body is no longer God's unchangeable creation but rather a dynamic one (Schallegger 2014). Besides exploring transhumanism mirrored in body augmentations, *Cyberpunk 2077* gives more significance to the "software" altercations in the metaphysical scheme of human experience. The main narrative revolves around the ultimate obscenity: the usurpation of the soul itself.

Religious and spiritual imagery in *Cyberpunk 2077* is noticeable from the start. The developers of CD Projekt Red, in an interview, shared their thoughts on religion and spirituality being present in the futuristic world of cyberpunk, saying "we do not want to avoid religion as a topic, the authenticity of the world is what counts for us" (Kim 2019). The main protagonist, V[1], agrees to carry out a heist and steal a new type of construct developed by a megacorporation, Arasaka Corporation. However, the heist goes wrong. In an attempt to salvage what is left of a chip, V injects it into their own interface, only to discover that the shard carried the personality construct of a rocker boy and terrorist, Johnny Silverhand, who supposedly died fifty years before the main story takes place. Johnny Silverhand represents humanity's rebellion against corporate entities' omnipresence and absolute

dominance. Arasaka Soulkiller project, as the experimental shard is called, aims to achieve immortality and "godhood" for its owner Saburo Arasaka. With the idea and the concept of the Soulkiller program, *Cyberpunk 2077* opens the question of the existence of the soul, morality, and immorality.

In the cyberpunk genre, the questions of higher consciousness are very common subplots, and, as was already mentioned, one of the most common engagements with autonomous consciousness inside cyberspace is A.I. Similarly, *Cyberpunk 2077*'s metanarrative around the Soulkiller program revolves around A.I, and the questions of what is distinctively human if we are no longer restricted to a material form? Is the "being human" exclusively restricted to human bodies and beings, or does it transcend such limitations? The first instance of exploring this dilemma is introduced with the character of Johnny Silverhand in the form of a virtual construct of personality that exists inside V's mind. In a sense, Silverhand was resurrected from the dead, having been inside the data fortress Mikoshi, which he describes as experiencing eternity and the endless darkness of nonexistence. A similar description can be found in Gibson's works, where he describes cyberspace as "an infinite cage". Since we are finite beings in our physical form, the infinity of cyberspace, where we can move endlessly, would be experienced as a cage, as Michael Heim puts it (Heim 1993).

The second form of conscious A.I. that the game introduces is in the form of Alt Cunningham (Figure 2), former net runner and original creator of Soulkiller. Alt Cunningham was killed by Arasaka Corporation but managed to upload her consciousness in cyberspace, where she continued to exist as an autonomous A.I. so powerful that, at one point, she managed to crash an entire Net. For that reason, the Blackwall was built to protect Net from her and the A.I.s she created. When a player is introduced to Alt, she is already a completely different person from the original Alt Cunningham, which existed in the physical world. Alt herself states that she is only a construct without any soul, and she only has memories of the original Alt, but she herself is something completely different. In conversation with V and Johnny, Alt explains that consciousness, or as she poses it, "neuro engrams", shall be transformed into data, but everything else will cease to exist. By "everything else", she refers to the soul saying that Soulkiller does precisely what it promises.
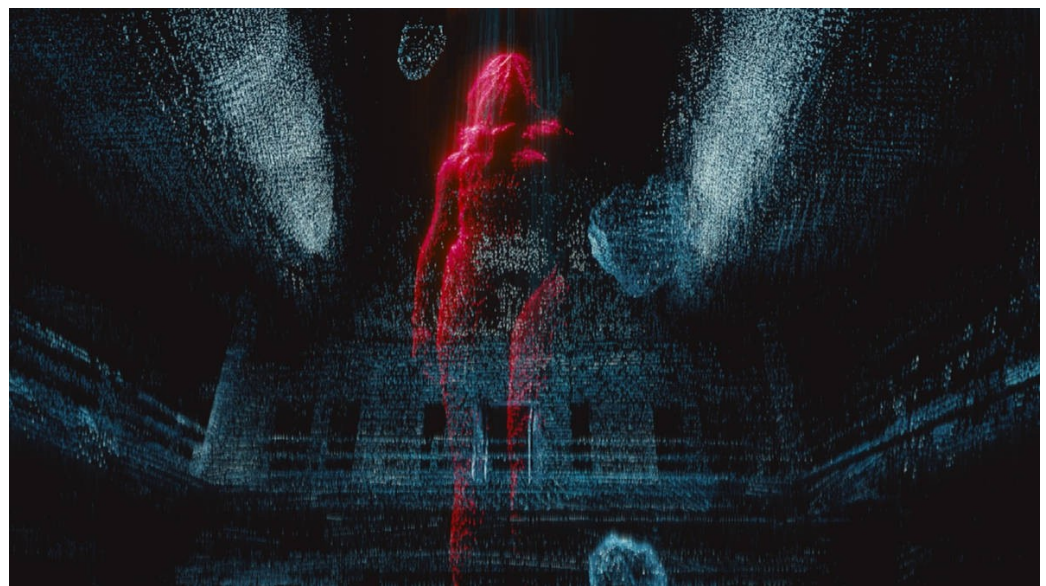
Figure 2. Alt Cunningham in cyberspace.

In the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, she is the most feared entity on the Net, as she is a free, independent A.I. who knows how humans think. William Gibson explored such an idea in *Neuromancer*, as well as the concerns of the possibility of the existence of an A.I. that could become so powerful that it could reach the technical singularity. In a way, Alt

is a representation of what Robert Geraci refers to as an "apocalyptic A.I." (Geraci 2010). Still, she claims she possesses no soul and is not the original Alt Cunningham. Again, the question of soul circles back to the central question of the cyberpunk genre: what does it mean to be a human?

The first problem when discussing the concept of a soul is that there is no consensus on what a soul actually is. However, even though there is no general definition, what all agree is that the soul is not material. In his *Dialogues*, Plato wrote that the soul is both the source of life and the mind. For Plato, the soul is an eternal entity, a prime mover of a body, or the true essence of a person, that exists in perpetual metamorphosis, possessing the memories and experiences of its past life (Plato 1984). In *Cyberpunk 2077*, the soul is posed as a spiritual concept. In this sense, the soul has distinctive individual life and a unique personality, being a sacred entity that cannot be constructed or quantified. When Alt Cunningham tells V that after creating an engram of consciousness, the soul is destroyed, she is explaining that with the digitizing of consciousness, the sanctity of a person as a unique individual is shattered, and the soul is "killed". With Soulkiller, the soul becomes something palpable and material, losing its spiritual characteristic. Furthermore, according to the logs related to the Soulkiller project, Arasaka Corporation advertised this project to artists, the intelligentsia, and other influential people. By promising the possibility of immortality, Arasaka Corporation aimed to own all engrams submitted to Soulkiller, thus making the ultimate profanity, commercializing "the soul".

As for the cyberspace in *Cyberpunk 2077*'s world, it conceptually and visually resembles Gibson's "cyberspace" or Stephenson's "MetaVerse". With body/mind augmentations, the borders between the physical and virtual worlds are blurred, and cyberspace adopts a sacred aura. Cyberspace becomes a spiritual realm in which humanity finds refuge from the omnipresent grip of corporate entities of the modern world. In contrast to most transhumanists who believe that science and technology are crucial elements in improving humanity and achieving a favorable posthuman existence, *Cyberpunk 2077* paints an utterly different picture, following the lines of the dark path of achieving a technological singularity or immortality. David Chidester argued that religion represents the negotiation of what it means to be human (Chidester 1990). In this sense, virtual reality could represent the facilitator for contemplating religion and transhumanism. Furthermore, authors such as Giulio Prisco argue that when transhumanism reaches the possibilities of immortality and the "apotheosis of humanity", religion will not be necessary and will be replaced by transhumanism (More and Vita-More 2013).

Depending on what ending the player settles on, outcomes are different. However, for all endings, one thing is common, V cannot stay alive for more than six months, as the interference of Silverhand's engram permanently damaged V's neuron. *Cyberpunk 2077* leaves players wondering whether the Soulkiller program finally achieved its purpose and what was "human" about all characters and the main protagonist.

5.3. Death Stranding

> *"Living Is No Different Than Being Dead If You're Alone". Amelie Strand, Death Stranding*

In the first game produced by Kojima Productions, *Death Stranding*, the audience is presented with a story of a devastated USA (and possibly the entire world) and humanity on the brink of a sixth extinction (Lockwood 2008). The world of *Death Stranding* is a dangerous place where humanity is forced to hide in underground bunkers because of toxic rain and ghostly ghouls roaming the wilderness. At the same time, *Death Stranding* is a game full of philosophical and spiritual reflections and speculations. In many ways, *Death Stranding* is an excellent example of a contemporary video game that aims to be more than mere entertainment, where the philosophy of a game designer plays a crucial role. Hideo Kojima's first independent game is full of philosophical beliefs, reflecting on trauma and healing, the nature of biology, connection, and loneliness (Green 2021).

In terms of genre, *Death Stranding* belongs to "walking simulators", the same as *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*. However, it demands more player engagement and has five difficulty levels.[2] However, *Death Stranding* transcends video gameplay. Even though the player has plenty of tasks to complete, the details of design and narrative expressed in the long cut scenes step more into an interactive-novel type of experience.

The main story follows the player's character, Sam Bridges, in his mission to walk across North America from the east to the west coast in an attempt to connect scattered settlements to the Chiral Network. However, the underlying story is brimming with introspection about the origin of life, the nature of the universe, links between life and death, and the existence of the soul. Similarly, as in *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Death Stranding's* overarching theme is climate change and its disastrous consequences on Earth. This theme could be divided into two subcategories: the ecomodernist idea that the development of technology will save us, inspired by ideas of technogaiaism, and, on the other side of the pendulum, the idea of returning to nature and a primordial way of living. These two ideas are contradictory, the first being favorable to technology, whereas the second considers technology an enemy destroying nature.

The event, known as a Death Stranding in the game, refers to the previous five mass extinctions in Earth's history that followed the same pattern as the most recent, sixth extinction, which is happening in the temporal line of the game. In this Death Stranding, the Earth and humanity are entirely changed due to the cataclysmic infringement of the world of the dead into the world of the living, or as the character, Diehardman puts it, contact of antimatter with the matter. The beginning of *Death Stranding* occurred on the Beach, the world between the spiritual and physical world, when parts of it seeped into the world of the living. Following this event, the soul (named "Ka" in the game) of any human that died after the event failed to pass into the world of the dead, remaining tethered to the physical body (named "Ha" in the game). Because of this separation, the soul repeatedly tries to reunite with the body, resulting in necrosis of the body as it becomes filled with matter from the other side. Throughout the game, the player discovers that the main instigator of Death Stranding is an Extinction Entity, or EE, embodied in Amelie/Bridget Strand. The EE is a living being whose only purpose is to initiate mass extinction and to be a bridge by which two worlds become entangled (Figure 3).
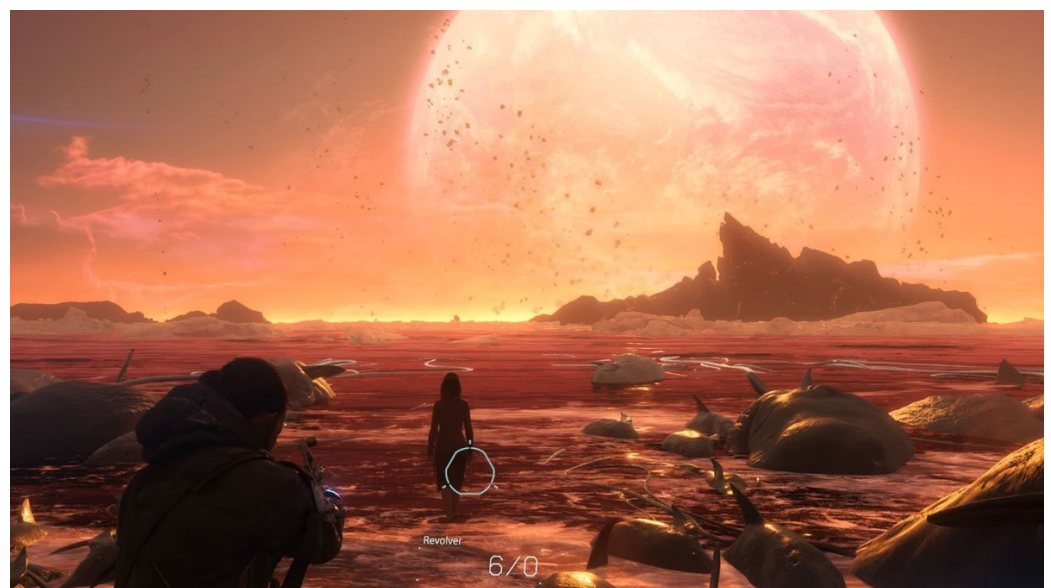
Figure 3. Sam and Amelie (in the form of an EE) on Amelie's Beach.

The aftereffects of such instances manifest with Timefall rain and the appearance of Beached Things (BT). Timefall rain is represented as a deadly rain that speeds up the time realm of all things that come into contact with it, living and inanimate. BTs are beings from

the other side, the realm of death, who have become stranded in the living world during the contact of matter and antimatter. In the core of all BTs, there is an antimatter that, again, reacts violently with living things, creating void outs.

Finally, one more impact between the living and the dead, spiritual and material, is the creation of the Bridge Babies, or BBs. The origin of these babies is tied to mothers who became brain-dead during late-term pregnancy. These late-stage fetuses were then harvested and placed in artificial wombs to keep the fetuses alive and stop their progression. In the world of *Death Stranding*, the BBs are considered a perfect bridge, not living nor dead, very sensitive to the presence of BTs, and carriers of the already mentioned Chiral Network.

The Chiral Network is a spiritual successor of the Internet in the post-apocalyptic world of *Death Stranding*. The player is tasked to set up the Chiral Network, which connects all the remaining cities. In the game, the Chiral Network only exists due to chiralium and BBs. Chiralium, or chiral crystals, is a byproduct of void outs in matter/antimatter contact. The idea of the Chiral Network is not entirely imaginary, the word "chiral" exists in the real world, and its original meaning is connected to the concept used in the main story. The property of "chiral" means that the mirror image of a person or an object is not identical to itself; it is not the same as the original (Zheng et al. 2021).

Death Stranding is full of symbolism and relies on many religious and spiritual concepts. Still, as with the previously discussed games, it follows the engagement with notions of soul, life beyond the physical world, and cyberspace as the conveyor of connection and unification of humanity. Developers heavily rely on the concept of the rope and stick, the rope being a symbol of connection and the stick as a tool for defending and evolving. The main character, Sam, wears the quipu, a symbol borrowed from Quichua culture. Quipus were used in Incan society as a way to record or transmit information and were passed by messengers known as chaquis. Quipus were tools used for communication or storytelling (Benson 1975). In the same way, Sam carries around qupids, a set of USB sticks containing data that should be uploaded to the Chiral Network, and share experiences and information, connecting people separated by physical boundaries.

The idea of connection and shared living experiences underlies the main story in *Death Stranding*. Kojima convolutes the theory of evolution with spiritual concepts to point out that the physical world cannot exist without the spiritual and that it is finite, trapped in its own mortality. Furthermore, developers dramatize Darwin's theory of continual evolution by introducing the concept of the EE and the inevitability of mass extinction. Following this logic, evolution promises advancements and the emergence of a "new species", a new generation to inherit the Earth. This posthuman condition is only achieved by complete extinction and humanity's need to embrace the finitude of its physical form and, throughout the spiritual realm, enrich the collective knowledge that will pass on to the next generation.

The exploration of connection in *Death Stranding* is widely expressed in experiencing the opposite, separation and loneliness. Gameplay enhances this feeling; the player finds themselves in a world that reeks of decay, a vast nothingness that makes them feel small, insignificant, and lonely. To stress this profound feeling of loneliness even further, there is no background music; the player is all alone in a silent world that surrounds them (Lizardi 2022).

Death Stranding is an allegory of loneliness and connection, where the commentary on today's technology is twofold: unifier and divider, creator and destroyer, spiritual and rational. Unlike the previous two games, *Death Stranding* relies more on the ideas of transhumanism and its branches, specifically technogaianism, concluding that research, development, and responsible use of future technologies will help restore the Earth's environment.

6. Conclusions

At first glance, the dystopian, post-apocalyptic worlds of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and *Death Stranding* seem very different. However, I argue and demonstrate that all the spiritual experiences and worship in these games revolve around

the technology and technological innovations that are instigators of the apocalypse and a way to the redemption of humanity. Unlike other post-apocalyptic and dystopian games, such as the *Fallout* series (Bethesda 2009, 2015), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games 2017), and *Metro 2033* series (4A Games 2013, 2014, 2019), where spirituality and religious worship revolve around the technological innovations that brought the apocalypse (De Wildt et al. 2018), these three games are more philosophically oriented towards the New Age concepts of religion and spirituality, introduced by technopagans such as transhumanists and singularitarians.

Dystopian video games do not exist in a vacuum. They reflect, as other dystopian forms of expression, the contemporary commentary on political and cultural topics. As with many other recent dystopian games, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and *Death Stranding* paint a dark and bleak future where technology is presented as a destroyer and savior of humanity.

The peacefulness of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* contrasts with the tragedy that took place in the village. The Pattern that wiped everyone out quickly adapts to new surroundings and learns from gained experiences. The Pattern portrays the fears connected to an A.I. that would be able to achieve ultimate autonomy and turn against humanity. Its inability to comprehend the human fear of mortality, the unknown, makes it "unhuman", the other, an entity beyond our understanding. On the other hand, we are faced with the very human drama of the inhabitants who, faced with their mortality, express their spiritual tendencies differently.

Cyberpunk 2077's dystopia immerses the player in a cyberpunk world, where ideas of cyber spirituality, rampant A.I.s, biotech gadgets, and even the human soul are sold as commodities. The representation of A.I. in *Cyberpunk 2077*, embodied in Alt Cunningham, portrays the A.I. as aware of its otherness, non-human nature, and its lack of a soul, as it has memories of the original Alt and has an idea of what having a soul feels like. However, Alt does not seem bothered by the lack of it. If anything, she believes that it is not in her artificial nature to have one and expresses no interest in "regaining" it somehow. The player's main quest to destroy the Soulkiller program reflects the human need to keep the spiritual part of its nature intact. It contrasts it with the notion that cyberspace can be a spiritual place as it is a material plane, expressed in data and robbed of the sacred aura. Johnny and Alt, being engrams in the game, describe the Mikoshi data fortress as hell, where the price for "immortality" is being paid. Furthermore, in *Cyberpunk 2077*, the human body is the focus of scientific study and the new idea of subjectivity emerges in which the body is no longer a component of the self but instead inhabited by it. In the end, *Cyberpunk 2077* argues that spirit and body are inseparable and that a "real human" has to have both.

Death Stranding leans more on the human need to be connected and how technology makes humanity isolated and connected at the same time. Interestingly, *Death Stranding* was released just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. Humanity faced quarantines and isolation for the first time in recent history. Many players wrote on forums dedicated to the game that they found solace in playing the game that dealt with the almost identical concepts that they were living through. Furthermore, the *Death Stranding* apocalypse serves as a reminder of what could happen if climate change is not addressed adequately. Or, as Samuel Sotillos put it, the discord between people and the natural world is a mirror of the balance between people and the spirit that has been lost (Sotillos 2022).

In conclusion, these three games offer unique approaches to researching the intricate relationship between spirituality and technology. The narratives of these games engage on different levels, with issues such as a conscious, autonomous, and powerful A.I., biotech, cyberspace, transhumanism, and posthumanism. The variations expressed in these games rely on the imaginaries of the technology theorist that laid the groundwork regarding the questions of a technological singularity, higher consciousness, and what makes humans human. In playing these dystopian games, players engage in new forms of gaming while

thinking about cyberspace and spirituality in a new framework. These games demonstrate, again, that the spirituality expressed in metaphors of a God-Machine is an inevitable part of the human imagination of a dystopian future or scientific spirituality.

Lastly, I concur that the human body's physical boundaries exist in all virtual kinds of spirituality (Galik and Galikova 2017). In many respects, video games may translate a modern man's spiritual experience into the virtual world. The potential of attaining a technological singularity or the uploading our consciousness into cyberspace, as shown by examples from these three dystopian video games, still rejects the idea that the people are "actual humans" without a body to carry a soul.

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Notes

[1] V can be female, male, non-binary, or transgender, and V's gender and sexuality do not affect the course of the main narrative. The player is free to alter V to their liking, experimenting with gender constructs or fluidity of sexuality.

[2] Games designed by Hideo Kojima are notorious for their difficulty levels.

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