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Pop Theology: Forum Discussions on Religion in Videogames

Lars de Wildt^{a*} and Stef Aupers^a

^a*Institute for Media Studies, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium*

Correspondence:

Lars de Wildt, KU Leuven, Institute for Media Studies,

Parkstraat 45 - box 3603, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

lars.dewildt@kuleuven.be. Tel: +32-16-37-92-98. Fax: +32-16-32-04-97.

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-6901-6903

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LarsdeWildt>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lawjdw>

Lars de Wildt is a Ph.D.-candidate and lecturer at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. His research (inductive, multi-method) currently focuses on the ways in which videogame players and developers play with religion in a supposedly secular age. Lars has been a Visiting Scholar at Deakin University in Melbourne and Université de Montréal, is a board member for Press Start Journal and chair of DiGRA Flanders. Lars has published with *Brill*, *Routledge*, *ACM*, *the European Journal of Cultural Studies* and others.

Stef Aupers works as Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies, KU Leuven. His current work deals with different research projects on the relation between media and culture, particularly game culture. Aupers has published in journals like *New Media & Society*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Public Understanding of Science*, *Cultural Sociology*, and the *European Journal of Communication*.

Pop Theology: Forum Discussions on Religion in Videogames

Players of videogames are talking about religion. Despite longstanding theories of Western religious decline, recent scholarship has assessed that religious traditions and narratives feature prominently in videogames. In order to answer how player communities in game culture deal with religion in games, this study analyzes online discussions (N=100) and interviews with strategically selected players (N=20) to assess which games provoke discussions about religion, which religious topics are discussed about these games and what implications this has for theories of religious privatization. Based on the analysis, players are divided into four ideal-typical positions: players of all beliefs either Reject, Debunk, Debate or actively Connect with the worldviews presented in the games they play. In all, this online engagement with religion, gods and the nature of holy texts, presents a “pop theology” of amateurs showing an interest in and having a public conversation about religion in the face of a post-secular society.

Keywords: videogames, pop theology, post-secular society, online forums, public sphere, religion

Introduction and Research Problem

Throughout genres, videogames draw on a variety of religious traditions to present appealing worlds and rituals for players to interact with. The historical action-adventure game *Assassin's Creed* draws on Christian and Muslim organizations and myths to tell of Templars and Shi'ite hashashins coveting the Apple of Eden. First-person shooter *BioShock: Infinite* has players baptised to enter a hyper-Christian theocratic “city in the sky.” Religion is used 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.

The omnipresence of religions in games is particularly surprising from the sociological perspective of secularization – the assumption that the social significance of church religion is in decline in most Western countries (e.g., Bruce, 2002). Outside of the 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 thousand), which have month-long waiting lists and are visited by journalists and game developers alongside fans. In this article we therefore study how gamers discuss in-game religious content on online forums and what it means to them, in the context of a secularizing society.

Discussing Religious Games in the Public Sphere

Over the last years, the academic study of religion in digital games has developed rapidly. Edited volumes (Detweiler, 2010; Campbell & Grieve 2014), methodology handbooks (Šisler et al., 2017), dissertations (Perreault, 2015; Steffen, 2017), and entire journals (the *Gameenvironment journal* and *Heidelberg's Online*) extensively study and contextualize games' reliance on religious tropes. Sociologists, theologians and religious scholars identify religious representations in games, finding Judaism (Masso & Abrams, 2014), Islam (Šisler, 2008), Hinduism (e.g., Zeiler, 2014; O'Donnell, 2015) or “god” (e.g., Bosman 2015; de Wildt, et al., 2018). Additionally, researchers have surveyed the religious affiliations of developers (Piasecki, 2016); studied communities of *Twitch Pokémon* players' religious narratives outside of play (2015); and analyzed online gaming groups as ‘functionally’ religious communities (Geraci, 2014).

From a wider theoretical perspective, the religious elements in games and their popularity can be viewed in light of religious change. While secularization was originally hailed by social scientists as a process of religions' decline per se, rather than change (e.g., Weber, 1919; Bruce, 2002; cf. Dobbelaere, 2007), it has instead, as Karel Dobbelaere argues, become 'clear that the concept of secularization is now being used in sociology in different ways' (1981, p. 8). In fact, claims about the decline of religion have been criticized both as ignorant of global demographics outside of the West (Kaufmann, 2008; Thomas, 2007), as well as being dependent upon institutional and a-historical (Clark, 2012), or conceptually vague definitions of religion (Shiner, 1967), that have been accused of being normative (Wilson, 1985), or even 'partly for the aesthetic satisfactions [...] and partly as a psychological boost to the movements with which they are associated' (Martin, 1965, p. 176).

Rather, as Thomas Luckmann argued half a century ago (1967), even if institutionalized church religion may be in decline, particularly in the West; it is changing. It is making way for a more privatized 'invisible religion' (p. 103). Following Luckmann's influential theory, one of the dominant debates on secularization over the past half century has not been about a decline of religious authority and popularity; but instead primarily about religion's receding from the public sphere into personalized, private spaces (Shiner, 1967; Parsons, 1977; Dobbelaere 1981; Tschannen, 1991; Gorski & Altinordu, 2008). As Olivier Tschannen argues (1991), many of the most influential works on secularization have been theories of privatization, including Bellah's *Religious Evolution* (1964), and Berger's *Sacred Canopy* (1967), while Luckmann's thesis remains the most clearly defined. Consequently, Kelly Besecke argues that '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 (2005, 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 pre-occupied with religion in the ‘post-secular’ society (Habermas & Reemtsma, 2001; Habermas, 2006). 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, the analysis of mediatized religion takes place in two divorced traditions. Firstly, that of the aforementioned analyses of religiosity in and of games. Secondly, the theoretical tradition of post-secular thought, spearheaded by figures such as Besecke and Habermas, which criticizes privatization theories by pointing at the same predominance of religion in media as is apparent to scholars of religion in games. Motivated by these vivid, yet by and large unrelated debates in academia, we 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, we argue, calls for an approach

studying games' players 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, 2018). When cultures of players are studied, research often selectively focuses on small groups such as 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. If we want to empirically explore religion in the public debate – particularly the way people talk about, reflect on and make sense of religion in and through media – we need, in our case study of games, to focus on debates in game culture. 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, we argue, are the most "ideal-typical habitat" of game community where game culture is fully expressed: here players openly discuss games' meanings and what it means specifically to be a 'gamer' (Steinkuehler, 2006; Shaw, 2010; Braithwaite, 2014).

In short: if we want to know how the game community relates to religion in games, we need to study the discussions of this topic on game-related forums. In doing so, our guiding research questions are:

- Which videogames provoke discussions of religion in game culture's online forums?
- How do players with various (ir)religious¹ worldviews discuss religion in videogames?
- What implications does this have for theories of religious social significance and privatization?

Method

Since our research questions address the debates and discourses on in-game religion, and the different individual and collective meanings these may have for players, our analysis was guided by the qualitative “Grounded Theory” approach. This research strategy provides the opportunity to inductively establish patterns in (oral- or written) discourse with the explicit aim to develop typologies, concepts and theories (e.g., Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). We selected and analyzed two sources in two phases of the study: first, we analyzed the debates on religion in games of 100 discussion “threads” (between 3 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

¹ With irreligious, we mean to refer to any person who identifies as atheist, agnostic, ignostic, or otherwise rejecting or indifferent to established religious traditions.

‘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: we 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 1 gives the resulting top-five forums selected for data collection, and the amount of relevant discussions found on each – to be elaborated below.

Table 1. Final ranking of forums, and results of searching for discussions on games and religion.

	<u>URL</u>	<u>Alexa</u>	<u>MozRank</u>	<u>MozPA</u>	<u>GooglePR</u>	<u>Results</u>
1	www.reddit.com	34	7.25	95.45	8	3,110,000
2	www.ign.com/boards/	325	6.52	80.83	6	5,850
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/	2,099	6.59	61.55	5	7,110

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 (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 1), 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 (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), the resulting 100 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 and Strauss, 1967) resulted in an empirically grounded typology. The full dataset was archived in 2315 pages of PDF and is publicly available.² Informed consent was not deemed necessary up to this point:

² See Data Availability Statement below.

players posted anonymously on public forums, according to the terms and conditions for that forum's publication of their posts (cf. Mo and Coulson, 2008; Bourgonjon, et al., 2015).

The second phase of the research and method consisted of interviewing a selection of players to further develop, complement and ground the analysis, 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 games' content, 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 our constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2008; Aupers, et al., 2018). Of the 38 users contacted for interviews, 20 participants responded and were interviewed (see Table 2). 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 2. List of participants (anonymized).

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Religious background</u>
Bill	M	25	U.S.A.	Roman-Catholic
Geoff	M	36	U.S.A.	New Age
James	M	22	U.S.A.	Atheist
Eric	M	28	U.S.A.	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	U.S.A.	Atheist ex-Quaker
Phil	M	25	U.S.A.	Atheist ex-Evangelical
Duke	M	26	U.S.A.	Pentecostal
Joan	F	28	New Zealand	Deist
Daniel	M	29	U.S.A.	Jewish
Greg	M	24	U.S.A.	Jehovah's Witness
Bert	M	32	U.S.A.	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 in the example of excerpts from one thread on GameFAQs in Figure 1. 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 (“Off-topic”).

Second, Figure 1 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, we were able to form a list of the game series which were most frequently referred to, by coding for titles as they occurred (Table 3). Games are ordered by the number of discussions they appeared in. The bottom three games occupy a shared spot, with equal occurrences.

Table 3. Game series by number of appearances in unique threads (2007-2017).

	<u>Game(-series)</u>	<u>Threads</u>
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

The list provides a context for how players discuss these games, since it represents religion in distinctly different ways. Series such as *Assassin's Creed*, *BioShock*, *Xenogears*, *Dante's Inferno* and *The Binding of Isaac* build on the narrative or rituals of a single, historically practiced religion: specifically of Abrahamic heritage in all of these cases (e.g., *The Binding of Isaac's* basis in the Biblical/Qur'anic story of the same name). 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. Finally, *Final Fantasy*, *Megami Tensei*, and *Devil May Cry* freely and eclectically juxtapose multiple fictional and historical traditions. Each combines elements of Biblical, Iranian, Greek, Hindu, Sumerian and numerous other mythologies alongside figures from Lovecraftian, Beowulfian and original lore.

The list of games most mentioned in debates about religion is interesting in itself 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 we found four typical attitudes toward religious content in videogames, which we will set forth below: Rejecting, Debunking, Debating and Connecting.

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., ‘[t]his 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 games' religious contents, we 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, who resorted to shooting and sports games that lack religious content. This is true for all the rejecters we 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.

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.

What makes this group particularly theoretically interesting for studies of religion in the social sciences, is that forum users 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, by irreligious Debunkers every religion was seen 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 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.

Debating: 'It's filled with religious references'

Debating, as opposed to Rejecting and Debunking, 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. 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.”

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 2).

These formal elements of the game range from visual icons to ludic elements – such as the “*Book of Magic*” [item] in the first game, which had a cross on it, and is called “*Bible*” [バイブル] in the Japanese version’ (Figure 3). 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 4).

Figure 3. The ‘Book of Magic’ item from *The Legend of Zelda*, called “Bible” [バイブル] in the Japanese original.

Figure 4. A depiction of Link praying before a crucifix and the Virgin Mary, from an official Japanese 'Player's Guide' (Nintendo, 1992, p.151).

These kinds of light-hearted, sometimes associative analyses mobilize 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 anti-religion [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 we 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'* while other users argue that the game definitely *'did imply that religion is false,'* and that

The 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 yet another user stresses 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, one forum user argued instead that:

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 games’ religious content, 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.

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” “fantastic” fictions, 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 we approached to ask where that desire for religious escapism came from. He explained finding solace in games’ certainty in comparison to real life: ‘*the 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 (cf. de Wildt & Aupers, 2018). 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 that 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. We 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, 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 our 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: Pop Theology

The omnipresence of religion in games has become the focus of different types of academic research: several authors identify religious representations *in* game narratives and extensive references to traditions including Judaism (Masso & Abrams, 2014), Islam (Šisler, 2008), Hinduism (Zeiler, 2014; O’Donnell, 2015) or Christianity (Bosman, 2015); whereas other scholars point out that games and game communities function *as* religion (Wagner, 2012; Geraci, 2014). While previous research has looked

into the specific relevance of religion and game *communities*, there has been no attempt to articulate the discourses on religion in games within player communities themselves. 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 Pokémon* player communities’ symbolic and narrative mythologization of religion (Lindsey, 2015); but never at subcultural gamer communities at large, talking about religion in games in general.

Indeed, notwithstanding the value of all these analyses (narrative, symbolic, game-specific and developer-focused), we argued that the methodological focus on either religious texts, production context or individual meaning-making, hinders an analysis of the role of game culture. Theoretically, we added, such methodological choices blinker the implications for the debate on the social significance of (mediatized) religion.

Motivated by these considerations, we studied the way religion in games is actually evaluated and discussed by players in gaming communities on online forums. In the analysis we 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 embracement of others’ worldviews in order to understand and empathize with them. Notwithstanding different positions, 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, 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, “merely” making for 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 communication studies perspective, these include readings by players that are often not 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 disenchanted 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; 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. We therefore conceptualize this particular form of ‘textual poaching’ (Jenkins, 2012) or ‘decoding’ (Hall, 2001) of in-game religious texts as a form of “pop theology.” By pop theology we 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 transform: 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, our 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 the “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 “pop theology” 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).

Secondly, 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, we demonstrated, 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 study, 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 we call pop theology.

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