Bibles and *BioShock*: Affording Religious Discussion on Video Game Forums

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ABSTRACT

This study sets forth to analyze and categorize attitudes shown by communities of players on internet forums, debating religious worldviews in games such as *BioShock* and *Assassin's Creed*. It does so in light of the theo- and technological affordances that shape these discussions through the platforms of digital games and internet forums. Is the predominance of religion in games, as noted by other scholars, actually a topic of discussion for players themselves? And if so, which games afford discussion? What attitudes are displayed? And what are the motivations behind these attitudes? A multi-method approach is presented, analyzing 91 discussions and 20 interviews; rooted in extensive familiarization with the relevant games. Research outcomes include a typology of user attitudes, part of which actively seek out enchantment in the face of secularization. These are theorized in the context of two affordances: the theological affordances of some interactive systems to invite play with religious worldviews in a secularizing world; and the technological affordances of the internet forum as a platform that affords but shapes forum discourse.

Author Keywords

Player research; online discussion platforms; games and worldview; multi-method; online communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Every day, millions of players around the world engage in fictional worlds that appear profoundly religious, incorporating religious imagery, narratives and rituals. Despite living in an age of supposed secularization, they are playing *Assassin's Creed* [93], *Dark Souls* [36], *BioShock: Infinite* [53], or other games across genres, which draw on a variety of religious traditions. Moreover, players seldom do so in isolation: they gather online in large numbers to discuss what those games mean, within the digital affordances of an online forum: a threaded, hierarchized and pseudonymous community.

Throughout genres, games utilize religion to present worlds and rituals for players to interact with. Historical games try to quantify the political influence of church allegiances (e.g., *Civilization VI* [34]; *Europa Universalis* [73] or narrativize the power of secret religious organizations (*Assassin's Creed*). Fantasy games like *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* [70], and *The Witcher 3* [20] regularly have players deal with various gods, their shrines and those who worship them. Religion appears in the shape of oppressive theocracy in first-person shooter *BioShock: Infinite*; but as a source of hope in Fantasy RPG *Dragon Age: Inquisition* [10]. It appears in the guise of world-threatening fundamentalist terrorists in military games such as *Call of Duty 4* [52]; or as a humanizing insight into the personal background of your favourite helicopter pilot, Faridah Malik in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* [32].

While many of these games are single-player games meant to play in isolation, players can be found online, discussing these games and their meanings to them. They do so in great numbers, on internet forums such as *Reddit* (243.6 million users), *IGN* (1.2 million) down to more select forums such as *NeoGAF* (151 thousand), which have month-long waiting lists. Other than social media, forums are pseudonymous and are overall more hierarchical, both in their chronological ordering of messages and thematised subdivisions of topics; as well as their moderation by ‘mods,’ who approve posts and users, enforce etiquette and police the tone of discussions. Phenomena such as “GamerGate” have shown that forums are societally and academically relevant, if only due to the (pseudo-)anonymous, semi-organized force of online gamer communities’ policing of identity: the white, male, heterosexual “gamer” [14, 22, 61]. What place does

religiosity take in this intersection of stereotypical identity? And how do these pseudonymous communities discuss the topic of religion in games?

LITERATURE

Outside of forums, several academic communities have been dedicated to finding and analyzing the religious heritage in digital games. Several edited volumes [30, 16, 86], dissertations [88, 75], and entire journals (the *Gameenvironment* journal and Heidelberg's *Online*) carefully root out and interpret video games' reliance on religious tropes. Content analyses, especially in the context of theology or religious studies, eagerly identify religious representations in game narratives and aesthetics, finding Judaism [62], Islam [84, 85], Hinduism [72, 99] or "God" [56, 12, 96]. From a slightly different perspective, religious scholars and sociologists of religion have argued that game-design may function as religion. Design, it has been argued, may disclose what Huizinga called, a "magic circle, [a] temple," among other metaphors [50], which temporarily affords community-formation and collective effervescence [90, 37]; which may provide rule-structured ethical dilemmas for reflection [37, 82, 83, 98]; and, like religion, produce ultimate meaning through the "procedural rhetoric" of rituals [94, 11].

This is odd, because philosophers and sociologists of religion have long pointed to the perceived (and abundantly theorized) loss of religion as a source of meaning in secularized society as a whole. After all, Nietzsche's "God is dead" decries first and foremost the loss of the Christian god as a moral authority in which to ground a shared set of cultural beliefs and truths: a loss of orientation ("whither are we moving?") from which to make sense of morality, meaning and a world without transcendence [68, 43, 19, 97]. This "tremendous event" of god's death, which "ha[d] not yet reached the ears of men" when Nietzsche wrote in 1882 [68], finds resonance with Weber, who stresses that the disenchantment of the world [*die Entzauberung der Welt*]...

"...destines us to realize more clearly these struggles [of meaning] after our eyes have been blinded for a thousand years by the allegedly or presumably exclusive orientation towards the grandiose moral fervor of Christian ethics" [95]

As various authors have stated, a modern world that cannot give transcendent meaning to everyday human lives is experienced as meaningless, abstract, or "alienated" [6, 60, 100; see also 47]. As a consequence, "no longer provided with pre-given and solidly grounded meaning and subjected to rationalized modern institutions," Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers argue, "modern selves find themselves plagued by nagging questions [...] 'Do I really want this?' and 'What sort of person am I, really?'" [47].

Popular culture has been presented by many such sociologists as an enduring displacement (or even replacement) of religion as a ground for enchantment, belief and ultimate meaning [74, 23, 78, cf. 92]. Outside of

established, institutionalized religions, individuals increasingly constitute their own systems of ultimate significance [57], in what Thomas Luckmann called "bricolage," a mixing of religious elements [58], and others have called "pick-and mix religion" [42] or a "spiritual supermarket" [59, 3].

Some fictional texts, films, games and their worlds are particularly prone to be taken up for meaning-making [27, 92]. Markus Davidsen calls the properties of such fictions "religious affordances," after ecological psychologist James Gibson's concept of certain use-objects offering "action possibilities," i.e., "affordances" [38]. Consumers distil meaning from such texts and fictional worlds, with digital gaming worlds newly enabling "people[s] choos[ing] realities that are experienced as real, meaningful and enchanting" [3; see also 46]. Even when these experience appear initially in contradiction to their own (non-)religious worldviews, incorporating witches [74]; shaman and druidic worship [56]; or "Buddhist [and] Hindu stuff" into existing beliefs [45]. These experiences are not bound to pre-established or "history-based" religiosities, but can freely include "fiction-based" [27], "invented" [26], or "hyper-real" religions [77] in which individuals are inspired by fiction to construct belief systems such as 'Jediism,' 'Matrixism' (ibid.), or any number of Tolkien-inspired religions [27].

Players, meanwhile, do their own research as amateurs, in groups: as lovers of games, religion or both. More so than other media, digital games are surrounded by an enthusiastic and medium-specific "gamer culture" that relies on internet forums, community-made 'wiki'-encyclopaediae and fan cultures to discuss games and what it means (for better or worse) to be a "gamer" [89, 81, 14]. When discussing games' meanings online, communities of players discuss and negotiate games' meanings within the subcultural context of game culture.

Moreover, they do so within the technological context of online forums. As has been noted [e.g., 29, 55], online forum communities bring with them the affordance of pseudonymity, which allows both recognition (of the pseudonym) and relative anonymity outside of the forum. This recognition in turn allows forum users to accumulate social capital and prestige – being able to rise even, say, to the level of moderator or administrator. Many forums have elaborate hierarchies of users, the top ranks of which can decide on the structure of forums (divisions, subdivisions and themes) and which threads and users are allowed to participate. On the other hand, the relative anonymity of pseudonymity affords users not to be nominally responsible for the content of one's post (as with platforms such as *Facebook*, which enforces the use of real names) makes it possible for niche, controversial and illegal opinions and groups to convene, making forums for many a place where "nowhere I could talk like that" [29, 14, 55, 61].

1. Reddit.com (ranked 33)	11. Rockstargames.com (ranked 3154) *single-developer
2. Gameforge (ranked 317)	12. Eurogamer (ranked 3902)
3. IGN (ranked 325)	13. Minecraftforum.net (4073) *single-game
4. Battle.net (ranked 379)	14. Giantbomb (4304)
5. Gamefaqs (ranked 496)	15. N4G (4905)
6. Gamespot (ranked 746)	16. Planetminecraft.com (4970) *single-game
7. Leageoflegends.com (ranked 770) *single-game	17. Rockpapershotgun (5382)
8. Wowhead (ranked 1557) *single-game	18. Penny-arcade forums (5604)
9. NeoGAF (ranked 2099)	18. Game-debate.com (6036)
10. Minecraft.net (ranked 2900) *single-game	20. Destructoid.com (ranked 6,045)

Table 1. First ranking of websites for popularity based on data from Alexa.

When discussing games on forums such as *Reddit*, *NeoGAF* and other platforms, gamers such as these form “interpretive communities:” groups of consumers sharing overlapping “interpretive strategies” for texts and other cultural artefacts, based on knowledge and cultural assumptions about things such as genre conventions, authorial intention, and so on in order to establish shared interpretations [35]. Interpretive communities are a helpful concept in that it helps “explain why there are disagreements and why they can be debated in a principled way:” not because games have a stable or intended meaning, but because interpretive communities offer stabilized and opposing positions from which to interpret games’ meanings [35]. These communities and their opposing positions of interpretation, originate for Fish broadly in the set of cultural assumptions which allow communities of readers/consumers (in this case, players or even ‘gamers’) to create meanings from the game in ways that make sense to them, and on which they can agree. In some time-worn examples – such as your high school English literature class – interpretive communities can become dominant so as to render their interpretations canonical. Some examples of near-canonical interpretations include, e.g., that most of Shakespeare’s sonnets address his love for a young boy; that “rosebud” represents *Citizen Kane*’s protagonist’s childhood comfort (through the image of the sled); or that the child protagonist and his sister in the game *Limbo* are both bound to fruitlessly search the afterlife forever.

How do the online interpretive communities of players engage with religion? Instead of theologians, sociologists and religious scholars as interpretive communities, this paper looks at players and the game culture(s) that surround them: is the predominance of religion in games a topic of discussion for them? And what games do they actually discuss? Outside of academic analysis, again, the “gamer” which asserts himself in online communities in the 21st century as stereotypically white, heterosexual and male, and seems increasingly willing to police these boundaries [22,

54, 40]. What position does religiosity have, next to race, sexuality and gender, within this culturalized gamer identity? While earlier research indicates that players navigate religious identity and pluralism in response to religious content in games on an *individual* level [4, 80], there is little insight into how communities – in other words, gamer *cultures* – engage with such content. This paper looks at how players interpret and discuss religion in games, based on how they discuss it in large groups on public platforms, asking:

- Which games provoke discussions of their religious content on public forums?
- Which religious positions and perspectives are represented in these discussions?
- Which attitudes do players take toward the meaning of religious content in digital games?

This paper thus aims to provide a methodological contribution by providing ways in which to collect and organize forum data; as well as empirical insight into how and which players engage with religious themes in games, re-informing other and earlier (deductive) theoretical work.

METHOD

In order to answer these questions, three general methods were used. Primarily, we analyzed discussions on the five most popular video game forums. These amount to N = 91 discussion ‘threads’ of between 3 and 576 posts in which players from various religious and non-religious backgrounds discuss the perceived worldview of several videogames in light of their own convictions. Secondly, in order to gain further and more elaborate qualitative insight into these players, a number of forum users were approached for additional semi-structured interviews, of which N = 20 were conducted. Thirdly, the researchers became acquainted with all of the digital game titles and series mentioned throughout the research, representing an undocumented amount of hours of contact with the games’ contents. The approach should be classified as multi-method [25, 65],

where the first, second and third method followed each other sequentially. A constant comparative method was used throughout the process [5, 40, 45].

Forum discussions were collected based on a strict four-step selection of data. Firstly, page-ranking service *Alexa* was consulted to rank gaming websites based on traffic data. Second, websites were removed that no longer have active forums and have not archived them (e.g., *PC Gamer*, *Gamesradar*, *VG247*); as well as forums focusing on a single game or developer (e.g., *Leagueoflegends.com*, *Minecraftforum.net*, *Battle.net*), in order to exclude self-selection based on religiously-themed games – setting out instead to find out which games afford religious discussions on open forums. See Table 1 for the resulting ranking.

Alexa's rankings are based on web traffic for the entire website. Secondly, for that reason websites were re-ranked for traffic only to their forums (e.g., 'www.neogaf.com/forum/' and 'forums.penny-arcade.com' instead of the full domain), and cross-referenced with three other metrics: *MozRank*, *MozPA* and Google's *PageRank*, all of which focus on the use of backlinks, i.e., "other Web pages that have a hyperlink pointing to the company of interest," [21] rather than page views and unique visitors.

Thirdly, data was gathered on the selected fora through a Google search deployed from a 'research browser,' i.e., an anonymized, non-personalized browser that minimizes the customization of search results based on previous search activity, according to the practices proposed by the Digital Methods Initiative [31]. Google was used to ensure all data was gathered consistently across forums, since forums' native search functions are intransparent (it is impossible to know whether results are sorted by relevance, date, 'likes,' [trending] activity, etc.), often divided (per [sub]section), and function differently between fora. Data was collected for each forum by prefixing the google string with the operator "site:" followed by the url (e.g., "site:http://www.ign.com/boards/"). The resulting search string entered for each forum's site domain on google was:

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site:[SITEDOMAIN]+religio*+OR+spiritual*+OR+belief+OR+Christ*+OR+muslim*+OR+islam*+OR+hind*
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The reasoning behind each element is such: in order to answer how players discuss religious elements in games, threads should contain mention of either 'religion,' 'spirituality' or 'belief,' or explicitly mention one of the three major world religions (Christianity, Islam or Hinduism) or their followers. Additional religious positions (e.g., agnostic, pagan) were tried and were observed not to affect search results – despite being well-represented within discussions – and were thus deemed unnecessary for the formal search string. The wildcard '*' replaces inflections, affixes and compounds so that 'religio*' returns 'religious,' 'religion,' 'religiously,' and so on (as for 'Christ*/-ian/-ianity,' etc.).

Fourth, up to the first twenty threads were selected, ignoring those unrelated to religion (e.g., "religiously" to describe

enthusiasm or addiction) and religious groups (e.g., "Hindi" to denote language, "Hindu" as geographical-cultural identifier). These were archived as PDFs and coded through inductive content analysis [48]. Informed consent was not deemed necessary [13, 64]: players posted anonymously on public forums, according to the terms and conditions for that forum's publication of their posts.

As a second method, some groups were deemed relevant but requiring more data during collection, according to a constant comparative method [5, 40, 45]. Forum users in these groups were approached for further qualitative interviews in order to gather insight into the motivations, beliefs and social positions behind their online post. In other words: to further question the person behind the forum discussant. Of the users approached, N = 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with users from various religious backgrounds.

DISCUSSING WORLDVIEW IN VIDEO GAMES

Forum discussions are well-organized, if not always civil, conversations. As described above, when users assemble on a forum to discuss religion in games, the forum acts as a specific communicative context by both technologically mediating conversation (allowing users to register under nicknames and post in threaded conversations) as well as by enabling those users to create a culture of hierarchical, codified discussion. Long-standing forums usually have an extensive list of rules for proper etiquette, and their heterogeneous player communities put forward administrators to govern their forums.

In the context of this paper, one pertinent example of forum culture is that, on all the forums included in the data set, religious discussions were referred to as recurring, conflictual and generally unpleasant. As one user on *GameSpot* commented: "I think it [i]s strange that most of Offtopic is religion based... either we have a LOT of curious people or we have LOTS of people that like to ruffle feathers." A thread about the upcoming release of *Assassin's Creed 2* on another forum, *GameFAQs*, was outright titled "Am I the only one not looking forward to the religious arguments bound to ensue?" Of course, in this attempt to keep people from repeating the same kinds of discussions, the thread quickly turns into a religious debate. In the same thread, another user adds that

"They will always find something or someone to vent their anger towards. I can remember reading posts about *Doom 3* in '04, from Christians worried they were going to hell for playing a game with demons. The best thing to is ignore it. If the topic is hinting towards that, ignore it and find something else to read."

Signposting

Another general feature of these discussions of religion in games, which greatly helped us contextualize our analysis, is how adamant users are to indicate their own religious positions. Posts very frequently included a kind of 'signposting,' an announcement of that user's religion, e.g.:

Figure 1. Two examples of anonymized users signposting their religious positions, on the GameFAQs forums.

"I'm christian and [...]", *"I'm devoutly religious, but seriously..."*, and equally: *"As an atheist,"* *"Full disclosure, I'm not a religious person,"* or *"That plot sounds kind of badass to be honest but I'm not a religious person so what do I know"* (See Figure 1). Such pre- and affixing of posts with the religious position of the user has two consequences: firstly, it makes it easier for readers to get an idea of what perspective is behind the post – whether those readers are other forum users or academics analyzing thousands of such posts. Secondly, it may be used as a rhetorical device to indicate nuance (*"but I'm not a religious person so what do I know"*) or authenticity (*"I'd consider myself a pretty devout Muslim. My religion actually does affect the way I play"*); while keeping opinions segregated and entrenched, thereby enabling users to present their identities as relatively stable, while simultaneously allowing readers to freely agree with or ignore posts merely based on the position of who wrote it.

GAMES FOR DISCUSSION

Which games actually prompt religious debate? Based on the discussions found, 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 2). Threads are ordered by the amount of discussions (forum threads) they appeared in. The bottom three game series in the table occupied a shared spot, getting an equal amount of mentions.

This indication of games serves a few purposes. First, it informs future research: it provides a list of inductively grounded case studies, as opposed to the theoretical (and often opportunistic) sampling approach taken for case studies by theologians, sociologists and other cultural researchers up to this point [e.g., 12, 64, 71]. Second, it informed, directly, our own method in this project: these games were given precedence in following content analyses, and were prioritized in order to facilitate analysis of the forum discussions below, as well as the following interviews, all the better to understand what participants were talking about.

Thirdly, the list of games gives a first insight into which game series and genres provide the opportunities for discussions of religiosity. Several types can be distinguished: Firstly, games such as *Assassin's Creed* and *BioShock* present kinds of 'alternate histories' in which religion has not lost its central role, but is combined with modern regimes and technologies; or alternatively, is traced through the ages in a narrative of 'what if,' i.e., what if secular developments had not occurred and religious orders are (secretly) in power (e.g., *BioShock: Infinite*; or the Templars in *Assassin's*

#	Game (series)	Threads (N=91)
1	Final Fantasy (Square Enix, 1987—)	27
2	Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft, 2007—)	22
3	BioShock (Irrational, 2007—)	22
4	Xeno(gears/-saga/-blade) (Takahashi, 1998—)	20
5	(Shin) Megami Tensei [2]—)	17
6	Dante's Inferno [34]	16
7	Dark Souls (FromSoftware, 2011—)	15
8	Dragon Age (BioWare, 2009—)	9
9	The Elder Scrolls (Bethesda, 1994—)	8
9	The Binding of Isaac (Edmund [64]	8
9	Devil May Cry (Capcom, 2001—)	8

Table 2. Game series and their developers, ordered by the number of appearances in unique threads.

Creed). Secondly, game series such as *Final Fantasy*, *The Elder Scrolls* (including *Skyrim*), *Dragon Age*, *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Xenogears* present fantasy worlds in which gods are often provided as reasons for magic, incentives for quests and other variably mundane interactions. Japanese fantasy (e.g., *Final Fantasy*, *Shin Megami Tensei*, *Dark Souls*) presents an especially interesting case because of its frequent reliance on imagery from world religion, used eclectically: Lucifer, Yahweh, Quetzalcoatl, Shiva and others are freely appropriated from Judaic, Christian, Meso-American, Hindu, Shinto, Egyptian and other mytho-theological traditions. Thirdly and fourthly, *The Binding of Isaac* and *Dante's Inferno* provide two outliers. While both ground their narrative basis in Christian literary intertextuality (the Bible and Dante's *Divina Commedia*, respectively), they are mechanically different: *The Binding of Isaac* is an autobiographical roguelike based on the creator's own childhood traumas with Christian parents, *Dante's Inferno* is a third-person action-adventure which possibly deserves its own classification: within the same genre, popular alternatives *God of War*, *Devil May Cry* and lesser-known *Viking: Battle for Asgard* provide the same 'beat them all' game-play while drawing on different (Greco-Roman, Japanese demonic, Norse) pantheons [79, 17, 24]. More importantly, what did players find 'religious' about these games, and with what attitudes did they approach this religiosity?

ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGIOUS CONTENTS

Throughout discussions of these games we found four typical attitudes toward what they recognized as religious content in digital games. These ideal-typical attitudes will be set forth below: Rejecting, Debunking, Debating and Connecting. An overview of the types should show, first and foremost, an intensity of engagement with games' content on the axis from Rejecting to Connecting. Underlying these, are four attitudes along this axis of engagement which we wish to represent below. That is, of Rejecting as a type of disengagement with fictions that are perceived to challenge one's worldview. Debunking as a way of trivializing fiction to be 'actually' irrelevant to a non-fictional world. Debating as a mobilization of games' formal properties to support one's interpretation. As well as, finally, of Connecting as a willingness to seek out and engage with opposite worldviews through fascination, understanding and empathy.

1. Rejecting

Some users choose to reject any game that disagrees with their own worldview. Rejecters can be found on all sides and variations of belief. Rejecting a game can be vocal and total, stating for instance, that "[t]his game [*Doom*] 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 [*sic*] 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. In a way, what fundamentally distinguishes 'rejecting' as an attitude from the second attitude below ('debunking') is that it takes the content of the game seriously, despite wishing to completely disengage with it. Rejecting is 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."

What is difficult about rejecting as an attitude on public forums, is that because the player does not want anything to do with the game – in many cases to not even buy it based on advertising or word of mouth – they seldom speak up about it. 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 [79, 17]. 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 similarly that, although "*heathen content is inescapable, you'll have to deal with it if you want to play games*," which increasingly lead him to just not play them altogether. He referred to games like *Uncharted*, which uses "*pagan symbols*" [66], the "*satanic content*" of the *Doom* series [51], and so on (Ali). This group of players further included brothers Dan and Bert, both Christian ministers, who resorted to shooting and sports games to enjoy instead. This is true for all the 'rejecters' we interviewed: while gaming is a fun activity for its challenges, game-play and story, the latter all too often proved a distracting or even distasteful contestation of their beliefs.

2. Debunking

Debunking forum posts assert that the religious content of a game is essentially hollow or trivial. For religious and non-religious players alike, debunking is the fundamental assertion that their beliefs remain unshaken, regardless of what kind of worldview a game confronts them with.

Debunking, in its simplest form, is familiar to most people – and perhaps academics studying games in particular – as "*it's just a video game*." In many examples, debunking is a way 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

Figure 2. Excerpt from two anonymized users Debating Link's religiosity on IGN.com. Various abbreviations refer to different games in the Zelda series [70].

religion is 'about' is more important than works of fiction, such as *BioShock: Infinite*, in this case:

"I'm Christian but nothing about this game 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."

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' – e.g., *BioShock* – by debunking the latter as a fictional text and respecting the former as more influential to their worldview.

In its most extreme cases, the rhetoric of Debunking seeks to trivialize the relevance of religious content on the grounds that *any* fictional content is trivial. In a thread, started by a religious player asking how atheists respond to religion in games, one user responds "*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 Christians, as well:

"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, the rhetoric of debunking holds that it is absurd to regard actions and stories in video games, and all fiction by extension, as *really* having any impact on what people – and gods! – think or believe: fiction is irrelevant.

Flat theology

What differentiates the Bible from *BioShock*, for these discussants? Whereas for a large group of (religious) Debunkers, religious texts retained a special significance over video game fictions; debunking *all* fiction has further-reaching implications. For non-religious players specifically, this assertion may lead to the (proposed) idea that any game or story is entirely fictional and irrelevant – be it in the Bible or *BioShock*, the Quran or *Assassin's Creed*, the Dao de jing or *Dark Souls*. "*Fantasy fits right in with more fantasy.*" Many discussions involved debunkers comparing games' fictions to religious stories as equally fictional, and equally trivial. Such a position equates to what we henceforth call a 'flat theology.' As one user deftly put it, "*I don't really mind [religion in games], I consider Angels and Demons just the same as Trolls and pixies.*" Yet another one 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.*"

3. Debating

Debating, as opposed to Rejecting and Debunking, can only happen when players engage explicitly with interpretations of the game. Some of the most concise statements of the rhetoric of Debating are made in reply to Debunking. One user replies to a Debunking post (which stated that "*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 his own decision to take a game (*Bayonetta* [76]) 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’ at all is an important way in which the rhetoric of Debating differs from Rejecting and Debunking. Games, according to these users, have meaning: they can be offensive to some and fascinating to others. Debating users take games seriously by analysing them as meaningful artefacts – and engaging in vigorous debates about *what* they mean. 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*” [15] – as well as authorial arguments: “*I know that Darksiders has no religious undertones because the developers said it doesn’t.*” 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 a part of a specific discussion on whether Link – the protagonist of the *Zelda* series [69]— is 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).

The specific form of the forum is clear: messages are presented chronologically, discussants remain more or less anonymous (pseudonymous), and the discussion goes on asynchronously. The debate continues for 36 more posts, with additional users pointing out other religious symbols in the game, including discussion of Aztec, Egyptian, Mayan, Muslim, Christian elements, as well as the game’s own mythology, introduced in later games. 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 or ‘paraludic’ sources: a large part of the initial debate surrounds a picture of Link praying to Jesus and Mary in a church, which was taken from an official Japanese guide to the game by Nintendo.

This kind of ‘pop semiotics,’ in which players engage in light-hearted, sometimes associative analyses of the games they play, mobilizes knowledge from both games and religion. Debates often point to a wide familiarity with 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* touches on a range of religious topics, including the history of certain icons (the crescent moon, the cross) and the variations of feathered serpents in Mesoamerican

Figure 3. The “Book of Magic” item from *The Legend of Zelda* [69], called ‘Bible’ [バイブル] in the Japanese original.

mythologies, be they called Quetzalcoatl, Kuulkulkan or otherwise. All to either prove – or ridicule – the idea that the *Zelda* games contain religion; and the same debates occur for nearly all the games we found.

Finally, Debating shows that no matter how formally users engage with the text, interpretations are never final, but indeed ‘subjective,’ as stated by the forum user above. Debaters frequently argue for entirely mutually exclusive interpretations of the same game – usually following their contrary 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* both shows that “*societies without faith fail in the long run because of a lack of morality,*” while to other players it is “*is one big ‘anti-religious’ aspect.*” While the game is frequently analyzed by academics and critics 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 more serious engagement with games’ religious contents than Rejecting or Debunking, all too often devolves into a stalemate. In many cases, players such as those above end up entrenched within their own interpretation, appropriating the meanings of the games discussed according to their own religious position – and

fundamentally disagreeing on their mutually exclusive interpretations of the same game.

4. Connecting

Other users actively sought to connect to other worldviews than their own. 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, for various reasons. One reason is that “theistic themes often make for a fantastic work of fantasy or fiction,” suggesting that religious worlds just inherently represent quality to some users. Such users typically report that they “*even actively look for them*,” preferring to seek out game worlds that contain or thematise religion. Central among these reasons for Connecting is a fascination with other worldviews, in which religious characters, fantasy worlds and ritualized spaces present an escape from everyday life. Another forum user, who introduced his 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.”

In this sense, religion is 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 what that desire for religious escapism came from. He explained finding solace in games’ straightforward certainty: “*life isn’t handing out feedback as willingly as a game does*,” instead “*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 a lot of fantasy worlds, faith in gods just makes sense, “*since the ones [i.e., the gods] in video games often give good evidence that they exist, the people in those games’ universes have ample reason to be theists*.” As similar qualitative research has demonstrated, “*within the boundaries of the game world, self-proclaimed atheists can safely experiment with the ultimate meanings of (religious) worldviews*,” in which gods exist unambiguously [80].

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 forum user shares “*I’m a Taoist, and yet I enjoy RPG games and the like, many of which feature Christian themes. This doesn’t bother me. The bible is filled with tales that are ripe*

for gaming adaptation.” Two other examples include Geoff who came into contact with gurus and meditation as a child playing *Faxanadu* [49], which presented him with such a fascinating “*different way of thinking about religion than [he] had so far had [...] being raised catholic and going to Sunday school*” that he would later “*cobble together [his] own version kind of a spirituality*,” inspired by Eastern religions, New Age and spending much of his life playing games that allowed his “*becoming aware of the existence of other belief systems. And that prompts a questioning of one’s own belief system*” (Geoff). By comparison, Methodist-raised-turned-atheist James was reminded of the personal side of religion by playing *That Dragon, Cancer* [41], which includes the player in the designers’ struggle with their fatally ill child. For James, the game’s emphasis on “*struggling with religion and questioning it [...] humaniz[ed] religious people [...] and then creating empathy for them*,” caused him to take a more empathic look at the Christianity he had rejected in adolescence (James).

These encounters with other religious worlds and worldviews can be instructive and even convincing. Another interviewed participant explains her intriguing ‘meeting’ with God in *Dragon’s Dogma* [18], 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 positioned themselves as actively connecting to other-religious content. Another interviewed participant who, despite being a convinced atheist, wrote about playing a religious Sheppard and Altaïr,¹ shared his game-induced doubt in the interview stating:

“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?”

Seeking out, trying to empathize with and understand religious worldviews can lead to games changing their players’ 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 “*Thinking back to playing these games I can’t help but realize that they probably played at least a small portion in my deconversion. They’re some of my favorite games*.” One of them, when asked in an interview to elaborate, also

¹ In *Mass Effect* [8], and *Assassin’s Creed* [93], respectively.

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* [2], *Undertale* [91], and others played in showing him the joy of personal investment and individual choice that games can celebrate without having to rely on faith (“*religious iconography and figured are used, but they are [...] shown more as myth than fact, rooted in people [...] shown to be manifestations of human nature*” [Phil]). 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 video games, different from the other attitudes found in online discussions, is this willingness to seek out other worldviews and connect to the way they are represented in video games. By doing so, players in many cases succeed in not just finding interest in them, but at internalizing other ways of thinking and believing – be it temporarily or lastingly.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to inductively find and analyze how players engage with religion through the technological and theological affordances of digital games and online forums. Perhaps unexpectedly, they turn out to do so in various ways and for various reasons.

On the basis of a wide selection of 91 online discussions, several games present what could be called ‘theological affordances,’ that is (borrowing somewhat from Davidsen’s research into “fiction-based” Tolkien-inspired religion [28]), that these games afford groups of players to discuss the religious meanings of these games, of the religions alluded to, and of the nature of religion. In this sense, the research firstly contributes an inductive list of games that, much like Gibson’s and Norman’s affordances suggest [38, 71], are designed to afford a certain use: the reflection on religion and ultimate meaning, even among secular consumers. Such an inductive list may serve to replace, on empirical basis, the opportunistic and theoretical sampling of case studies that have been taken within the field of games and religion.

Secondly, these forums show specific technological affordances. The specific form of chronological, asynchronous, threaded conversations shapes discussion, e.g., by driving many players (specifically those taking ‘Debating’ attitudes) into entrenched positions – from which the same game can be interpreted in mutually exclusive ways: e.g., of religious and irreligious interpretive communities understanding Bibles in *Zelda* or religion in *BioShock: Infinite* as portrayed in accordance with both groups’ mutually exclusive convictions. The technological affordance of pseudonymity, while turning out less relevant

to the eventual analysis and theorization of the data, is present throughout, and undoubtedly influences the tone, extremity of positions and the length of the discussions when compared to other platforms (such as *Facebook* or other social media).

Finally, this paper’s main contribution is in providing both the empirical basis for the ascertainment *that* players actually engage in such discussions, confirming most of the content-based work on games and religion from other disciplines; as well as providing analysis of *how* players engage in these discussions. To this end, the paper proposes four ideal-types: Rejecters who refuse to confront media which (is expected to) present other worldviews. Debunkers who trivialize the meaning of fiction and interactive systems, in many cases espousing a ‘flat theology’ in which all mediatized supernatural beings – whether digital or in holy texts – are equally fictional and trivial. Debaters who engage in elaborate formal discussion on properties of games and religion, mobilizing knowledge of both under the assumption that fiction is both relevant to their convictions, and has a stable meaning in accordance therewith. Connectors were recognized as those players who engaged with games to play with worldviews, in most cases by seeking out different (world-religious or fictional) worldviews as a compelling fantasy outside of agnosticism and atheism; or as a way to engage with other-religious worldviews.

In all, the research opens up possibilities for further research: outside of forums, the question still remains how players from different religious backgrounds engage differently (or similarly) with the theological and technological affordances of games. Furthermore, insight is left to be gained into how these worldviews function. What happens when players are confronted or convinced with other ways of viewing the world? Are there qualitative differences between the provision of ‘ultimate meaning’ by digital games; and texts such as the Bible or Quran? While empirical and theoretical work is thus left to be done, this paper provides the basis for a strange possibility: that faith and ritual may be displaced – perhaps for just a few nightly hours a week – to the realm of digital play.

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