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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Rhetoric of Indie: Original, Diverse, Personal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

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

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

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

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

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

INTERVIEWER: Is it taboo or something?

D: Yeah.

BARNEY: Yeah….

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

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

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

I: Really?

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

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

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

A.   Religious Reluctance

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

> CHAD: Pre-2014, my external image never really reflected my "other" cultural and religious background. My religious background was something I tried not to overly reveal. But now I find myself tweeting about holy days and all that sort of stuff more publicly.
>
> INTERVIEWER: What changed in 2014?
>
> C: I don't know.... One thing that comes into mind is like... Gamergate! [...] The indie community isn't all that big so a lot of people who kind of knew each other just got sucked in. What happened after that was a lot of effort that put into place safer space policies and inclusivity policies. [...] So I think because of that I slowly started to say, "Hey, actually this is something that also needs to be spoken about." Letting people know that there are Muslim developers in Western game development.

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

> FARAH KHALAF: *Twitter* has been actually super important for me in terms of meeting different people and keeping in touch [and] also being able to express points of views and having them shared widely [...] Developers can't really talk about religion openly, or their personal beliefs.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Yeah, why is that?
>
> FK: I'm not sure actually. Maybe they don't want any backlash from their social circles?

I: You mean…? Within developer circles?

FK: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

B.   Standardized Signs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

C.   Western Worship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

D.   Economic Expectations

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don't know how successful I was at getting that across to players, to be honest. I went to a conference in Atlanta and met someone who had
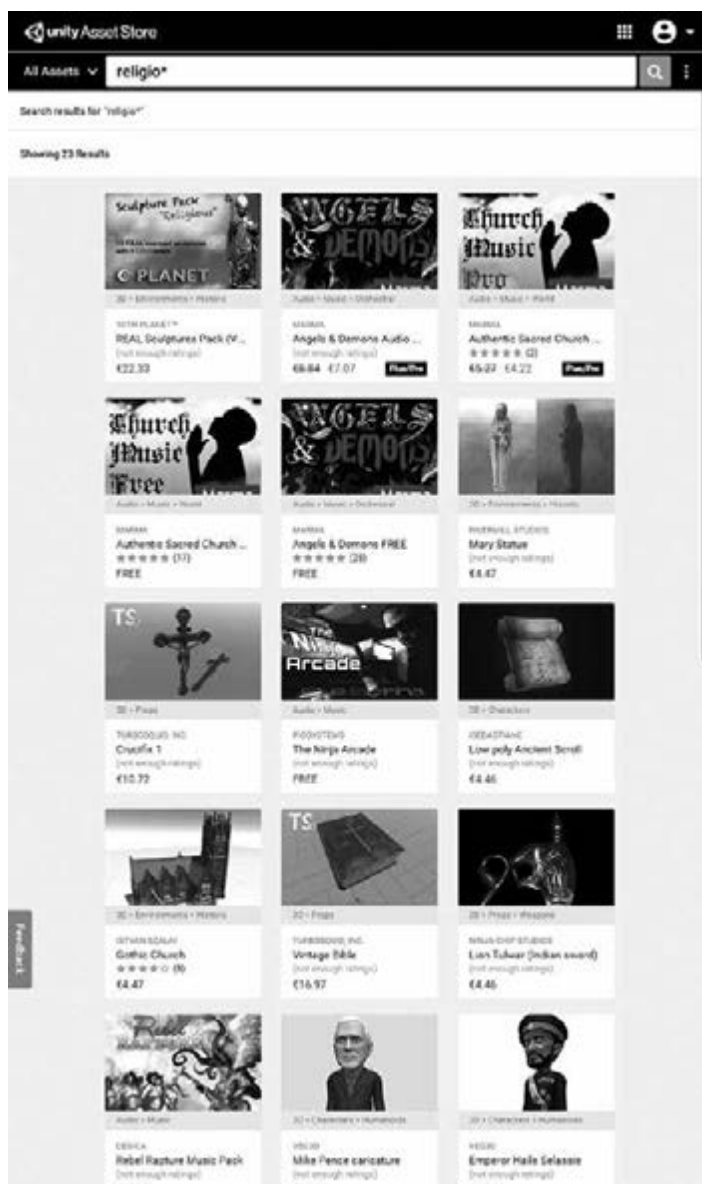
Figure 3. Results in the Unity Asset Store for "religio*" are mostly Christian.

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

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

> INTERVIEWER: Which of your games would you say engage more explicitly with your religious background?
>
> LEE SHANG LUN: Um no,... none.... Uh, there's unmade games that I've made where I've tried to represent my religious experience.... They've all kind of not been very interesting to most audiences.
>
> I: Why have they not been made? I think one of them might be *Emma*. From the ABC episode that you didn't end up making....
>
> LSL: Well I got half-way through and then kind of just gave up. Because... [long silence] it... didn't feel like... the kind of thing that was going to be [sighs] useful to anyone maybe?

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

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

Conclusion: Religious Values Become Commodified Signs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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