

Part II

Consuming Religion

“How do Players Make Sense of and
Relate to Religion in Videogames?”

4. Public Religion on Videogame Forums

Abstract

This chapter focuses on player communities. Based on an analysis of discussions on religion in games, among thousands of players on videogame fora, this chapter argues that players are prompted not just to play in isolation, but to collectively discuss the meanings and meaninglessness of religion in videogames. Doing so, they use videogames to learn about and, more often, fight about what games mean to them, in widely divergent ways. They thus perform a kind of “public religion”, including conversations on the meaning of gods and religions in culture. These conversations are prompted by games and loosely based on their own religious beliefs, the content of the games they play, and their conceptions of what the developers intended.

Keywords: player studies, post-secular society, online forums, public sphere, public religion

As the previous chapters have shown, videogame developers draw on religious traditions to present appealing worlds and rituals for players to interact with. In Chapter 2, Ubisoft’s historical action-adventure game *Assassin’s Creed* drew on Christian, Muslim and other inspirations to present a franchise in which Catholic Templars and Shi’ite *hashashins* covet the Apple of Eden. Chapter 3 showed how indies often end up safely reproducing religious conventions unrelated to their own religion. How do players then consume, play with and talk about such games? When first-person shooter *BioShock: Infinite* asked players to undergo baptism at the start of the game, one player notoriously asked for (and received) a refund. His reasoning was faith-based: it forced him “to make a choice between committing extreme blasphemy by my actions in choosing to accept this ‘choice’ or forced to quit playing the game” he had paid for (Hernandez, 2013). Plenty of other games present religion in different ways: religion is used to define factions and allegiances in strategy games such as *Civilization*; it drives fundamentalists in military games like *Call of Duty*; and it serves as a source of magic, quests and

items in fantasy games like *Skyrim* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Videogames draw on a variety of fictional and historical religious traditions, as shown by games such as *Age of Mythology*, *Ōkami*, *Prince of Persia*, *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and countless others with their roots in Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Chinese, Shinto, Zoroastrian and other theo-mythologies, including those made up for the games themselves.

So what do players do with such signs, offered up to this huge audience by a cultural industry churning out games? The omnipresence of religions in games is, to reiterate, particularly surprising from the sociological perspective of religious privatization – or the assumption that the social significance of church religion is in decline in most Western countries (Bruce, 2002). Outside of churches, millions of young players engage with religion through games instead, on a daily basis. Moreover, they gather online in large numbers to discuss what those games mean, to them personally and as a community. They do so on internet forums such as *Reddit* (243.6 million users), *IGN* (1.2 million) and more selective forums such as *NeoGAF* (151,000), which have month-long waiting lists and are visited by journalists and game developers alongside fans. In this chapter I study how gamers comes together on such forums to discuss religion in games and what it means to them, asking, in other words:

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

Discussing Religious Games in the Public Sphere

As covered more elaborately in the introduction, Thomas Luckmann argued half a century ago that religion, rather than disappearing, had become “invisible” by retreating into the “private sphere” (1967, p. 103). As Kelly Besecke convincingly argues, “Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion as privatized is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one” (2005, p. 186). However, Besecke problematizes this uncritical following of Luckmann by pointing out the publicly visible role of “privatized,” “invisible” religion in American media. Looking at media and communication as indicative

for the public sphere of a society, she observes that bookshops are full of magazines and publications offering popular Christian insights, stories about miracles and angels, spiritual self-help, enlightenment and mindfulness. Consequently, Besecke asserts that outside of the institutional–individual divide underlying secularization’s privatization theories, there is a “communicative” lens, through which it is clear that “Americans are talking with each other about religious meaning,” in books, lectures and songs (*ibid.*, p. 181). A few years earlier, three weeks after the events of September 11, 2001, Jürgen Habermas similarly observed that Western news media and politics are once again undeniably and forcibly preoccupied with religion in “post-secular” society (Habermas, 2006; Habermas & Reemtsma, 2001). While Besecke and Habermas have very different approaches to the role of religion in society, both stress the importance of religion’s media presence as being in direct contradiction with religion’s “exit” from the public sphere.

Academically, analyses of religion in games take place mostly divorced from analyses of religion’s place in the public sphere such as Habermas’ and Besecke’s. Motivated by these vivid, yet by and large unrelated, debates in academia, I aim to study the way players reflect on and debate in-game religion. Such an explorative analysis of the social significance of in-game religion, I argue, calls for an approach studying players of games as co-constituting a game culture. Empirically, scholars have predominantly either analyzed religious representation in games (e.g., Bosman, 2015; O’Donnell, 2015), singular or non-player communities (Lindsey, 2015; Piasecki, 2016), or, less commonly, individual players dealing with such religious representations (e.g., de Wildt & Aupers, 2019; Schaap & Aupers, 2017). When cultures of players are studied, research often selectively focuses on small groups such as singular guilds (Geraci, 2014) or specific religious organizations (Luft, 2014; Zeiler, 2014).

This central focus on either games, game-specific communities or individually interviewed players conveys a blind spot for the broader communal, social and cultural context of gaming forums. Theoretically, such methodological choices blinker the implications for the social significance of religion and its role in the public sphere. In order to empirically explore religion in public debates – particularly the way people talk about, reflect on and make sense of religion in and through media – this chapter takes game culture as one such site for debates that are prompted by media use. As any culture, the subculture of gamers provides a “sociocultural context [that] shapes and influences individual activity and meaning making through socialization and enculturation” (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 98; Nasir, 2005). Game culture transcends single games, particularly through players’ collective engagement on forums. These forums, I argue, are the most “ideal-typical

habitat” of game communities where game culture is fully expressed: here players openly discuss the meanings of games and what it means specifically to be a “gamer” (Braithwaite, 2014; Shaw, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2006). In short: to know how “gamers” relate to religion in games, this chapter studies the discussions of that topic on their forums.

Methodology

Since this chapter addresses the debates and discourses on in-game religion, and the different individual and collective meanings these may have for players, I selected and analyzed two sources in two phases of the study: firstly, I analyzed the debates on religion in games of N=100 discussion “threads” (between three and 576 posts each) on the five most popular videogame forums. The threads were collected in 2017, dating from 2007 to 2017. Secondly, a number of forum users were theoretically selected for additional semi-structured in-depth interviews (N=20).

The forum discussions were selected for topical relevance (i.e., containing discussions about religion in games, on popular gaming forums). The selection process itself, however, involved five sequential steps to keep the body of data manageable for “inductive content analysis” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, page-ranking service Alexa was consulted to rank gaming websites based on traffic data. This is explicitly a research design focusing on gaming forums: I want to know how players of videogames talk about religion, not how users on religion forums talk about videogames. Second, unarchived, inactive forums were excluded (e.g., *PC Gamer*, *GamesRadar*, *VG247*); and those focusing on single games (e.g., *Leagueoflegends.com*, *Minecraftforum.net*). This prevents self-selection of religiously-themed games – to instead find out which games afford religious discussions on open forums. Third, because Alexa’s rankings are based on web traffic for the entire website, each website was re-ranked for traffic only to their forums (e.g., *www.neogaf.com/forum/* and *forums.penny-arcade.com* instead of the full domain) using three other metrics: MozRank, MozPA and Google’s PageRank. Table 4 gives the resulting top-five forums selected for data collection, and the amount of relevant discussions found on each – to be elaborated below.

Fourth, threads were gathered on these forums through a Google search from an anonymized “research browser” to minimize the influence of previous search activity (Digital Methods Initiative, 2016). Data was collected by prefixing the Google string with the operator “site”: and using Google’s “stemming,” so that search terms include inflections and affixes

Table 4. Final Ranking of Forums and Results of Searching for Discussions on Games and Religion

	URL	Alexa	MozRank	MozPA	Google PageRank	Results
1	www.reddit.com	34	7.25	95.45	8	3,110,000
2	www.ign.com/boards/	325	6.52	80.83	6	5850
3	www.gamefaqs.com/boards	497	6.44	55.65	5	17,800
4	www.gamespot.com/forums/	746	4.17	55.53	6	15,400
5	www.neogaf.com/forum/	2099	6.59	61.55	5	7110

of a morphological stem (so that “religion” returns “religious,” “religion,” “religiously” etc.). The resulting search string entered for each forum was:

site:[sitedomain] games religion OR spiritual OR belief OR christianity
OR islam OR muslim OR hindu

The discussions found mention religion, spirituality or belief in the context of games and/or mention one of the three major world religions (Christianity, Islam and Hinduism) or their followers. Additional religious positions (e.g., agnostic, pagan) were observed not to affect search results – despite being well-represented within discussions.

A total of 3,156,160 search results were returned (table 4), of which the first twenty threads were selected from each forum in order to keep qualitative analysis manageable. In line with the established practices of grounded theory and, particularly, inductive content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), the resulting hundred threads were analyzed and coded on commonalities and differences in the discourse, i.e. themes discussed, the position players express vis-à-vis religious in-game content and so on. This “constant comparative method” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) resulted in an empirically grounded typology. The full dataset was archived in 2315 pages (in PDF format) and is publicly available.¹ Informed consent was not deemed necessary up to this point: players posted anonymously on public forums, according to the terms and conditions for that forum’s publication of their posts (cf. Bourgonjon et al., 2015; de Wildt & Aupers, 2020; Mo & Coulson, 2008).

The second phase of the research and method consisted of interviewing a selection of players to further develop, complement and ground the analysis,

1 The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZKDW2>.

i.e. the typology that was inductively developed in the content analysis. Forum users were “theoretically selected” on the basis of religious diversity, their perspective on the content of games, or their role in a discussion; either of which prompted more questions and required more data, as recognized during data collection and in accordance with a constant comparative approach (Aupers et al., 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2008). Of the 38 users contacted for interviews, 20 participants responded and were interviewed (table 5). The interviews served to gather insight into the motivations, beliefs and social positions behind online posts; into how they think about and assign meaning to (religious) games in their lives; and how their religious positions are related to this. In other words: to further question the biographies, motivations and identities behind these users’ forum posts.

Table 5. Anonymized List of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country	Religious background
Bill	M	25	USA	Roman Catholic
Geoff	M	36	USA	New Age
James	M	22	USA	Atheist
Eric	M	28	USA	Southern Baptist
Grant	M	23	New Zealand	Agnostic ex-Mormon
Edward	M	23	Hong Kong	Agnostic ex-Evangelical
Günther	M	32	German	Atheist raised Lutheran
Brandon	M	25	USA	Atheist ex-Quaker
Phil	M	25	USA	Atheist ex-Evangelical
Duke	M	26	USA	Pentecostal
Joan	F	28	New Zealand	Deist
Daniel	M	29	USA	Jewish
Greg	M	24	USA	Jehovah’s Witness
Bert	M	32	USA	Presbyterian
Dan	M	34	Japan	Reformed Evangelical
Nico	M	22	Netherlands	Atheist
Ali	M	25	Netherlands	Muslim
Abhi	M	25	India	Atheist raised Hindu
Swapan	M	30	India	Atheist raised Hindu
Strahan	M	34	Ireland	Roman Catholic

Discussing Religion in Digital Games

Due to online forums’ hierarchical, digital form, the data are already clearly organized chronologically in a thread of posts by different users, as



Figure 4. Excerpt from the GameFAQs forum.

Table 6. Game Series by Number of Appearances in Unique Threads (2007–2017)

Game(-series)		Threads
1	<i>Final Fantasy</i>	27
2	<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	22
3	<i>BioShock</i>	22
4	<i>Xeno(gears/-saga/-blade)</i>	20
5	<i>(Shin) Megami Tensei</i>	17
6	<i>Dante's Inferno</i>	16
7	<i>Dark Souls</i>	15
8	<i>Dragon Age</i>	9
9	<i>The Elder Scrolls</i>	8
9	<i>The Binding of Isaac</i>	8
9	<i>Devil May Cry</i>	8

in the example of excerpts from one thread on GameFAQs in figure 4. The figure furthermore exemplifies two things. First, it presents an instance of how religious discussions were treated as recurring, conflictual and sometimes unpleasant. Its title (“Am I the only one not looking forward to the religious arguments bound to ensue?”) echoes this sentiment. As a user on *GameSpot* commented: “I think it [i]s strange that most of Offtopic is religion based,” referring to one of *GameSpot*’s largest sections called “Off-topic.”

Second, figure 4 shows two highlighted examples of users announcing their religious position (e.g., “I’m christian and [...],” “I’m devoutly religious, but seriously...,” “As an atheist”). This was commonly done to contextualize opinions (“Full disclosure, I’m not a religious person,”) and indicate authenticity (“I’d consider myself a pretty devout Muslim. My religion actually does affect the way I play”).

Which games prompt religious discussion? Based on the forum analysis, I was able to form a list of the game series which were most frequently referred to, by coding for titles as they occurred (table 6). Games are ordered by the number of discussions they appeared in. The bottom three games occupy a shared spot, with equal occurrences.

The list provides a context for how players discuss these games, since these games represent religion in different ways. Broadly categorized, series such as *Assassin's Creed*, *BioShock*, *Dante's Inferno* and *The Binding of Isaac* build on historical religions like Christianity, Islam and Ancient Greco-Roman faith. Series such as *Dark Souls*, *The Elder Scrolls* and *Dragon Age* each present their own religious system(s) – with their own original pantheons, mythologies and churches. Series such as *Final Fantasy*, *Xenogears*, *Megami Tensei*, and *Devil May Cry* eclectically juxtapose multiple fictional and religious traditions (de Wildt & Aupers, 2021). Each combines elements of biblical, Iranian, Greek, Hindu, Sumerian and numerous other mythologies alongside figures from Lovecraftian, Beowulfian, other fictional and original lore.

The list of games most mentioned in debates about religion is interesting in itself (and has informed other parts of this book), but in this analysis it primarily provides context for the debates about religious narratives, tropes and rituals. The core of the analysis focuses on the different ways gamers relate to these religious issues. Throughout the forum discussions I found four typical attitudes toward religious content in videogames, which I will set forth below: Rejecting, Debunking, Debating and Connecting.

A. Rejecting: “Stay Far Away from This Satanic Game”

Some users choose to reject any game that disagrees with their own worldview. Rejecters can be found across all variations of (dis)belief. Rejecting a game can be total, e.g.: “This game is worthless and is satanic. Jesus died on the cross to defeat Satan and the power of Sin,” or leading to personal calls to warn other believers:

Anyone who is a servant of Christ will stay far away from this Satanic game. Be warned this game is not of God or from God but from Satan. It's seen in the advertizing and in the actual game itself.

In Christ,

Andrew

Rejecters refuse to play a game when it endorses a worldview that disagrees with theirs. What fundamentally distinguishes “Rejecting” from “Debunking” (below), is that rejecters take the content of the game seriously, despite wishing to completely disengage from it. Indeed Andrew’s comments proved to be, as the discussion continued, out of real concern for the souls of those playing the game: a concern that gained both support (“People who call themselves Christians have no business playing this game. [Andrew and another user] are correct in what they have said”), as well as opposition (“But you’re battling Satan’s minions, not aiding them. Wouldn’t that be a good thing?”) and disbelief (“You’re joking right? I mean you don’t honestly believe *Doom 3* was made by Satan”).

Rejecting is nonetheless not an attitude solely for believers. One presumably atheist or agnostic forum user states:

All I’m saying is that I can’t relate to someone who’s religious, and if I’m supposed to bond with this character and “go on a journey” with him, I just, I can’t and I’m not interested in doing so.

In order to gain more insight into players rejecting the religious contents of games, I contacted and actively sought out some of these forum users for further interviews. Greg, for example, a Jehovah’s Witness, felt alienated by representations of atheism and (other) religions, remarking that his religious life outright “limits what I play”: he stays away from violence, demons and games like *God of War* and *Devil May Cry* that feature “un-Christian” content. Religion, he claimed, was usually revealed in games to be “window dressing”: mundane, irrelevant or it simply “turns out to be alien technology.”

Ali, a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim, felt that, although “heathen content is inescapable, you’ll have to deal with it if you want to play games,” which increasingly led him to refrain from playing games altogether. He referred to games like *Uncharted*, which use “pagan symbols,” the “satanic content” of the *Doom* series and so on. This group of players further included brothers Dan and Bert, both Christian ministers³²

4.*, who resorted to shooting and sports games that lack religious content. This is true for all the rejecters I interviewed: while gaming is a fun activity for its challenges, game-play and story, games all too often proved a distracting or even distasteful contestation of their beliefs.

B. Debunking: “It’s Just a Game”

Debunking forum posts assert that the religious content of a game is essentially trivial, whether as a form of serious expression to begin with;

or in its relevance to “real”-world actions and morality. For religious and non-religious players alike, debunking is the fundamental assertion that one’s beliefs remain unshaken, regardless of what kind of worldview a game confronts them with.

Debunking, in its simplest form, makes clear-cut distinctions between the real world and a virtual world, by stating that “it’s just a game.” Debunking is a rhetorical strategy to denounce fiction as having any sway over religious beliefs: “If a work of fiction makes you angry because in their fictional universe God maybe did not cause historical events that is pretty sad. This is coming from a religious person as well.” By extension, another religious player noted that what religion is “about” is more important than works of fiction:

I’m Christian but nothing about this game [*BioShock Infinite*] bothered me. [...] it’s a work of fiction made for entertainment, so anyone who can have their ideals swayed by a story isn’t really getting what religion is all about.

Debunkers like the one quoted above essentially favour the truth-value of one text, such as the Bible or other religious writing, over another “text” or media artefact – e.g., *BioShock* – by debunking the latter as a fictional text and respecting the former as more true and, hence, influential to their worldview. Similarly, other (often atheist or agnostic) users are led to the same kind of reflection, with a radically different conclusion: to them, *neither* is particularly meaningful, both the Bible and *BioShock* are works of fiction.

In a thread started by a religious player asking how atheists respond to religion in games, one atheist responded, “Well, I don’t feel affected and no one should be... because you know why?... It’s just a game!... If you feel bad about a game then you have a problem...” According to another, “It’s just all fantasy to me. I don’t have a problem with it at all.” This interpretation of actions and stories in games as, in the end, irrelevant to ‘real’ life is shared by many religious Debunkers:

I am pretty sure that if you realize it[']s a game and you don’t go and commit crimes or live an awful life God will understand ;). The other day I was punching birds in *Crysis* and I would NEVER do that in real life :P.

In such cases, Debunking entails not just the assertion that videogames cannot be seen as serious expressions; but furthermore that in-game behaviour has no bearing on morality outside of the game – whether religious or related to longstanding debates on videogames and violence. In other

words, Debunking becomes the assertion that it is absurd in the first place to regard actions and stories in videogames, and all fiction by extension, as necessarily having any *real* impact on people, or gods.

What makes Debunkers especially interesting in light of religion in media, then, is that continued discussion leads to theological reflections on the truth and fiction of gods and religious texts. What differentiates the Bible from *BioShock*, for these discussants? On the one hand, for religious Debunkers their religious texts retain a special significance over videogame fictions. While, on the other hand, irreligious Debunkers see every religion as equally fictional, whether historically practiced or made up for a game. When all religious media are fictional and irrelevant like that – the Bible, *BioShock*, the Quran and *Assassin's Creed* – the only conclusion for these users was that “Fantasy fits right in with more fantasy.” As one forum user put it, “I don’t really mind [religion in games], I consider Angels and Demons just the same as Trolls and pixies.” Another asserts, “I see religious elements in games as I see them in reality: it’s a bunch of myths and legends that make good stories.” For some of these non-religious players, then, Debunking is not only about making distinctions between fact and fiction, or reality and fantasy: every truth claim can equally be deconstructed as a self-referential narrative.

C. Debating: “It’s Filled with Religious References”

As opposed to Rejecting and Debunking; Debating can only happen when players engage explicitly with interpretations of the game. One user replies to a Debunking post (which stated “It’s just a game, don’t take it too seriously”), by expressing their dislike for such trivialization: “You know, I don’t like this. Just because something is a game/movie/show or w/e one shouldn’t dismiss the message it tries to convey.” Another user explains their own decision to take a game seriously, when considering that even though

Bayonetta doesn’t take itself seriously, [that] doesn’t mean that it’s not serious. [...] I know it’s just a game, a good game, but the underlying themes of the game do give me a little bit of a chill when I play it.

What gave them “a little bit of a chill” was that “killing angels or any religious metaphor can be a[n] offensive thing to some people,” stressing that “whether it’s offensive or not can be subjective.”

That interpretations of games can be “subjective” is an important way in which the attitude of Debating differs from Rejecting and Debunking.

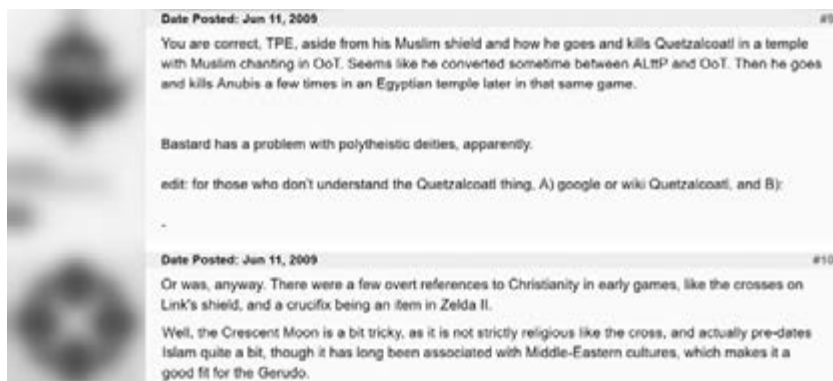


Figure 5. Excerpt from two users Debating Link's religiosity on *IGN.com*.

Games, according to these users, have negotiable meanings: they can be offensive to some and fascinating to others. Debating users engage in vigorous debates about what games really mean to them. Players freely mobilize themes and references for their arguments – e.g., “It’s filled with religious references anyway. The Ark, the Covenant, the Flood... Hell, even the game is called *Halo*” – as well as authorial arguments: “I know that *Darksiders* has no religious undertones because the developers said it doesn’t.” Indeed, many debates concern the beliefs and opinions of game “authors” such as Ken Levine, Hideo Kojima or Ubisoft’s “religious disclaimer” (for the latter of which, see Chapter 2).

An elaborate example should illustrate debates like these, by representing part of a specific discussion on whether Link – the protagonist of the *Zelda* series – is a Catholic. The participants mount various arguments which employ both a detailed knowledge of the formal properties of *Zelda* games across the series, as well as their cultural and historical contexts (figure 5).

These formal elements of the game range from visual icons to ludic elements – such as the “Book of Magic” item, mentioned by one user as being “in the first game, which had a cross on it, and is called ‘Bible’ [バイブル] in the Japanese version” (figure 6). It further includes a number of narrative, musical, authorial and even paratextual/paraludic sources: a large part of the initial debate surrounds a picture of Link praying to Jesus and Mary in a church, taken from an official Japanese guide to the game by Nintendo (figure 7).

These kinds of light-hearted, sometimes associative analyses show that players mobilize in-depth knowledge from both games and religion. Debates often point to a wide familiarity with other games for comparison (“I do find it interesting that basically every game that tackles religion seems



Figure 6. The “Book of Magic” item from *The Legend of Zelda*, called “Bible” (バイブル) in the Japanese original.



Figure 7. A depiction of Link praying before a crucifix and the Virgin Mary, from an official Japanese “Player’s Guide” (Nintendo, 1992, p. 151).

antireligion [such as] *Assassin’s Creed*, *F[inal]F[antasy]X*, *Xenogears* etc.”). Furthermore, debates point to an extensive knowledge of religions, as well: the aforementioned discussion on *Zelda* continues for 36 more posts, with additional users pointing out other religious symbols in the game, discussing Aztec, Egyptian, Mayan, Muslim and Christian elements, as well as the game’s own mythology, which was introduced in later games. All to prove – or criticize – *Zelda*’s use of religion, and not uniquely so: the same debates occur for nearly all the games I encountered.

Finally, Debating shows that no matter how formally users engage with the game, interpretations are never final. Instead, Debaters frequently argue for entirely mutually exclusive interpretations of the same game – usually following their contrasting religious beliefs. Hence, *Assassin’s Creed* is at the same time a Christian game “against the illuminaties, the knight templars and the anti-christ [sic]” while other users argue that the game definitely “did imply that religion is false,” and that

[t]he 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 another user contrarily argues that the

game is secular, in accordance with its historical period: “Renaissance Italy was the period of Humanism- secular, secular, secular. They portrayed it accurately, pack up your bible and go somewhere else.” Similarly, *BioShock: Infinite* is interpreted as both “one big ‘anti-religious’ aspect” while to others it shows that “societies without faith fail in the long run because of a lack of morality.” Despite the game’s frequent analysis by academics as a criticism of American Protestantism (e.g., Bosman, 2017; Lizardi, 2014; Wysocki, 2018), one forum user argued the opposite:

The game does a good job of emphasizing how the core values of religion are quite beautiful. [...] Love, community, redemption are all concepts the game looks at fondly. [...] By the time you reach the end of the game, it’s about people. Any vestiges of religious commentary are, by that point, positive.

Debating, while a serious engagement with the religious content of games, all too often devolves into a stalemate. In many cases, players such as those above end up entrenched within their own interpretation which accords with their own particular worldview. In doing so, they remain in debate with each other’s conflicting interpretations of the same game.

D. Connecting: “It Makes Me Think...”

As opposed to Debaters’ tendency for stalemates, another group of users actively seeks to reflect on and connect with religious worldviews in games. This attitude of Connecting is different from Debating in that Connecting players seek engagement with – and often get a lasting impression of – a game’s religious content, rather than arguing for its agreement with their own beliefs. Opposite from Rejecting, Connecting often entails actively seeking out such games (instead of avoiding them), for various reasons. One reason expressed is that “theistic themes often make for a fantastic work of fantasy or fiction,” suggesting that religious worlds are inherently appealing to irreligious users. This attitude toward religion in games is about more than “enjoying” fantasies, however.

Central for those Connecting is a desire to understand and experience other worldviews – narratives in which religious characters, fantasy worlds and ritualized spaces present an escape from everyday life. Another forum user, who introduced their post stating “Full disclosure, I’m not a religious person,” explains:

I enjoy the “lore” surrounding different religions. The sense of the unknown, the high strangeness, the savagery and difficulty in reconciling

the cruelty of the world with higher ideals. People using these forces to manipulate others, and those that truly seem to have good intentions.

For these players, religion is often something not found in the “normal,” an enchantment of the world that is fascinating precisely due to its absence from everyday experience. One agnostic forum user who displayed a Connecting attitude was Günther, whom I approached to ask where that desire for religious escapism came from. He explained finding solace in the certainty of games, in comparison to real life: “[T]he results of player actions in a game are far more often visible and relatable. [...] I would like for life’s choices to be seen as less differentiated and nuanced.” Indeed, as another Connecting player stated, in fantasy worlds faith in gods just makes sense “since the ones [i.e., the gods] in videogames often give good evidence that they exist, the people in those games’ universes have ample reason to be theists.”

Within the boundaries of the game world, then, this group of irreligious players can safely experiment with the certainties of religious belief without actual conversion (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019). Such desire and fascination is of course not exclusive to irreligious players; and indeed religious and irreligious players alike joined discussions by stating that they came into meaningful contact with other belief systems. One example is New Ager Geoff, who came into contact with gurus and meditation as a child through videogames, which introduced him to other belief systems “and that prompts a questioning of one’s own belief system.” By comparison, Methodist-raised-turned-atheist James was reminded of the personal side of religion by playing *That Dragon, Cancer*, which includes the player into the designers’ (autobiographical) struggle with their fatally ill child. For James, “the creators speaking about their own religious thoughts and feelings, [...] struggling with religion and questioning it,” gave him a “different sense of religion”: not as a “blindly trusting faith, more of a personal sort of thing,” stressing how it gave James a more empathetic look at the Christianity he had rejected in adolescence.

These encounters with other worldviews can be instructive and convincing, even when re-evaluating their own pre-existing beliefs. For instance, one participant explains her intriguing “meeting” with God in *Dragon’s Dogma*, which led her to think about her own religiosity (“Once you get to meet God, you learn God’s been pulling the strings all along”), making her wonder whether, outside of the game, “it’s possible that I’m only aware of the ‘appearance’ of God’s non-interaction when in reality God could be intervening in a way that’s not immediately discernible” (Joan). Such thought experiments are typical among players who actively connect to other

religious content. A convinced atheist wrote about role-playing religiously and shared his game-induced doubt in an interview:

What if I'm wrong? What is the game trying to make me think about? Just by being on the topic of religion [it] does make me question.... I constantly question my worldview and, *you know*, whether I'm right or wrong. It makes me think: is this how people in the real world use religion? (Grant)

Seeking out, trying to empathize with and understand religious worldviews can lead to players re-evaluating and even changing their convictions. I 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 [atheist], the one reserved for baby-eaters and neckbeards." Another user, identifying himself as a "secular humanist," shared in a thread on *Assassin's Creed* and atheism that "[t]hinking back to playing these games I can't help but realize that they probably played at least a small portion in my deconversion." One of them, when asked in an interview to elaborate, also explained that he "deconverted" from Christianity, aided by seeking out games which "showed me it was okay to be an atheist" (Phil). Throughout the interview, he stressed the role that games such as *Persona 4* played in showing him the joy of personal investment and individual choice that games can celebrate without having to rely on faith. Using the ending to *Persona 4* as an example, he explained:

The people *you* gained social links from call out to you with encouragement, the music swells in just the right way, and you toss aside your glasses to see the world how it truly is – which is what you make of it. (Phil)

In all, what makes Connecting, as an attitude toward religious representation in videogames, distinct from other attitudes found in online discussions is this willingness to seek out other worldviews and connect with them. By doing so, players in many cases not only become fascinated by them, but also gain deeper understandings of their own and others' beliefs by internalizing other ways of thinking and believing – be it temporarily or lastingly.

Conclusion: Public Religion

While previous research has looked into either how religion appears in games (e.g., Bosman, 2015; Šisler, 2008; Zeiler, 2014), or how games and small groups

may function religiously themselves (Geraci, 2014; Wagner, 2012), there have been few attempts to articulate the discourses on religion in games within player communities widely. Namely, researchers have looked at religious beliefs in game development communities (Piasecki, 2016); at in-game guilds as “functionally” religious communities (Geraci, 2014); and at *Twitch Plays Pokémon* player communities’ symbolic and narrative mythologization of religion (Lindsey, 2015); but never at gaming communities at large, talking about religion in games in general. How do such public forums and their thousands of users operate as part of a public sphere? How do players with various (ir)religious worldviews discuss religion together? What implications does this have for theories of religious privatization?

Indeed, without wanting to minimize the value of former analyses (narrative, symbolic, game-specific and developer-focused), I argued that the methodological focus on either religious texts, production context or individual meaning-making hinders an analysis of the role of game culture and public conversation in making sense of what games mean to players. Theoretically, furthermore, such methodological choices underexplore the implications for the debate on the social significance of (mediatized) religion. Motivated by these considerations, I studied the way religion in games is actually evaluated and discussed by players in gaming communities on online forums. In this chapter I distinguished four ideal-typical approaches towards the religious worldviews presented in videogames: Rejecting, Debunking, Debating and Connecting – a continuum from a straight-forward complaint against different religious views, to a full-fledged embracing of others’ worldviews in order to understand and empathize with them. Despite being fundamentally different positions, often directly at odds with each other, all of them engage seriously with the public debate about religion.

Rejecters publicly contest, rather than privatize religion in games: few users give as much weight to the representation of religion in these discussions as Rejecters do, seeking out others to warn them, or to publicly announce and discuss why the game they reject is dangerous or harmful.

Debunkers publicly rationalize or disenchant, rather than privatize religion in games: debunking prompts deep theological reflection. Either (for religious debunkers), a moral hierarchy places holy religious texts above “just games,” or (for irreligious debunkers), a more relativistic perspective emerges. For them, holy books or games are not essentially different – they make for equally captivating fictional texts.

Debaters publicly defend, rather than privatize religion in games: they defend it as essentially meaningful. Debaters end up defending their elaborate interpretations based on their own background, ending in contradictory

readings of the same game. Importantly, from a social sciences perspective, these include readings by players that are often not considered nor represented in academic and theological interpretations of those games.

Connectors publicly sympathize with and re-evaluate, rather than privatize religion in games: religions are treated as differing but comparable worldviews to be learnt from, understood and empathized with. While religious connectors learn to empathize with other faiths than their own, non-believers paradoxically voice a desire for religious experiences in the game. From their perspective, games provide experiential meaning in an overly disenchanted world.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that religion is a vital topic of discussion amongst players in the game community. On game forums, religion is defended and attacked, found meaningful and trivialized, or sought out, understood and misunderstood. Religious traditions are compared: Christian theology is put alongside knowledge of ancient pantheons, Meso-American mythology and the gods and rituals of *Skyrim* or *Zelda*. Notwithstanding different positions, players are in dialogue about the “real” meanings of (in-game) religion and this shows that games inspire conversations on religion. It is important to note, however, that the arguments players are making in this conversation are neither non-committal nor arbitrary. Quite the contrary: what they express online about in-game content is strongly motivated by their (non-)religious identity in offline life. I therefore conceptualize this particular form of “textual poaching” (Jenkins, 2012) or “decoding” (Hall, 1980) of in-game religious texts as a form of public religion. By “public religion” I mean the discussion of the truth and meaning of religion, god(s), and belief(s) *in* public and *by* the public: that is, in groups of untrained and variously (ir)religious “amateurs” in offline or online environments.

How should we consider such vivid public discussions in the context of the academic debate on secularization or, more specifically, the proposed *privatization* of religion? Luckmann argued about half a century ago (1967) that religions do not necessarily disappear, but change: outside of established institutions and churches, individuals construct their privatized system of “ultimate significance” that are separate from the public sphere. On the one hand, my research findings align with this perspective of an “invisible” religion outside of the churches and, particularly, the more recent assumptions that popular culture is part and parcel of this trend – sometimes leading to highly individualized, consumerist forms of religiosity (Partridge, 2004; Possamai, 2005; van Otterloo et al., 2012). Indeed, for “Connectors,” in-game religion provides a clear source for reflexivity on their own religious position. God may be “dead,” but not in videogames.

And yet, on the other hand, the involvement in this “public religion” on forums also raises critical questions about the alleged non-institutional, socially insignificant and privatized nature of religion. First of all, the prominence of religion in popular media culture – film, series and games – may already be understood as another kind of institutionalization of religion: that of religion as a commodity, packaged and sold by the cultural industry of producers and publishers, to be eagerly swept up by consumers in search of meaning (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Davidsen, 2018; Hoover, 2006; Schultze, 2003; Wagner, 2012).

Second, we cannot deny the collective and essentially public nature of the discussion about religion on online forums. Informed by offline worldviews and (ir)religious identities, players fully immerse themselves in discussions and theological speculations about religion in the games they play. In her polemic with Thomas Luckmann, Kelly Besecke already noted that we can clearly see “invisible religion” by looking at the public conversation about religion in self-help books, magazines and other mass media featuring religion and spirituality. Digital media platforms facilitate such public debates even better: the non-hierarchical structure and “participatory culture” of the internet (Jenkins, 2012), invites lay-people and amateurs to voice their opinions on religion and worldviews.

In a post-secular society, religion is alive and well in media and communication. Media such as games prompt discussions on religion outside of churches: something that is particularly visible in the ongoing conversation in public places, media venues and, as demonstrated in this chapter, online forums. Indeed: this is truly a public conversation. Anyone with an internet connection can partake. People participate not primarily as members of a religion, but from divergent religious and intersectional backgrounds and on their own accord. Prompted by in-game religion, they engage in heated conversation on how meaningful a game can be, for themselves and for others, vis-à-vis sacred texts and their own convictions: all to conduct what I call public religion.

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