Faculty of Theology
University of Helsinki

"I WOULD RATHER CONTEMPLATE BIG QUESTIONS"

IMAGINING CONTEMPORARY RELIGION IN DIGITAL GAMES AND AMONG GAMERS FROM ACTOR-CENTRED AND GAME-IMMANENT PERSPECTIVES

Heidi Rautalahti

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I investigate the representations and encounters of religion, or the religion-like aspects that digital games and culture afford today. The thesis asks how contemporary intersections with video games and gamer narratives enter into a confluence with religion and non-religion, using two distinct approaches. The key research questions studied in the framework of digital game studies, popular culture studies, and the study of religion are: How is religion constructed and represented in recent mainstream digital games from a game-immanent frame, and how do players encounter religion or religion-like aspects in recent mainstream digital games from an actor-centred frame? The research questions are applied through mapping new cultural occurrences and employing a theoretical sociological approach towards contemporary popular culture and religion. What notions do these approaches bring forth when discussing how meaningfulness or meaning-making occurs in popular culture today?

The empirical part of the thesis consists of four sub-studies published in separate articles.

1 Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion

2 Disenchanting Faith—Religion and Authority in the Dishonored Universe

3 “How video games changed my life”: Life-Changing Testimonies and The Last of Us

4 Non-religious Players Asking Big Questions: Video game worlds affording affinities of meaningful encounters

Each sub-study utilizes different datasets and methodology. However, they adhere to a shared epistemology and twofold approach of enquiry, focusing on content and reception. A game-immanent and actor-centred approach divides the two distinct viewpoints of focusing on study data, which consists of video games and player narratives.

Based on these approaches, it is found that religion and religion-like aspects are encountered in digital games as conversational cues for potential religion criticism, however games that are considered meaningful by players provide an immense amount of support in difficult life events, bring together emerging communities, and aid in contemplations on life’s big questions. The thesis presents novel findings in reading and examining video games, critically commenting on a Western scheme of representations of imagined organized

religions. I interpret the observed critical views that digital games represent as contemporary cultural discussions and re-negotiations of the societal place of religion. The data brings forth discourses on categorical discussions on research on religion, and non-religion in contemporary meaningful communities. In addition, the thesis reveals new observations on contemporary religious landscapes that speak of a post-religious environment relating to research on non-religion, existential cultures, and meaning-making, which has also been supported by previous research on meaningful video game player encounters.

Games challenge institutional religion, but simultaneously do not shy away using and imagining religion as one way to contemplate life's deep and big questions. Games themselves, whether their stories have religion representations or not, afford reflective thought in players on big questions.

In addition, the aim of the thesis is to increase awareness of experienced meaningful encounters with popular culture as an important and paramount part of constructing life worlds and post-secular thought. One result of contemporary meaning-making is what the thesis headline suggests: "I would rather contemplate big questions", than religions.

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Finally, I thank my family and friends for seeing me through this journey. Thanks to my parents, Outi and Pekka, for your patience and support, and my brother Jörre for the dear memories in front of the family Super Nintendo. And thank you to my tabletop role-playing game friends, many of whom I am proud to call colleagues.

Finally, I dedicate this to Roope, my greatest support, fan, and friend.

Koivumäellä 23.9.2022

CONTENTS

LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following publications:

I Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion

Rautalahti, Heidi (2018a). Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion. *Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*. 13. 56–78. doi.org/10.17885/heiup.rel.2018.0.23844

II Disenchanting Faith—Religion and Authority in the Dishonored Universe

Rautalahti, Heidi (2018b). Disenchanting Faith: Religion and Authority in the Dishonored Universe. *Religions*. 9(5). 1–12. doi.org/10.3390/rel9050146

III "How video games changed my life": Life-Changing Testimonies and The Last of Us

Rautalahti, Heidi (2019). 'How Video Games Changed My Life': Life-changing Testimonies and the Last of Us. *Gamevironments*. 10. 1–38. nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-00107540-18

IV Non-religious Players Asking Big Questions: Video game worlds affording affinities of meaningful encounters

Rautalahti, Heidi (2021). Non-religious Players Asking Big Questions: Video Game Worlds Affording Affinities of Meaningful Encounters. *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 33:2. 69–88. doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.2020-0012

The publications are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

ABBREVIATIONS

etc.	et cetera
i.e.	id est
e.g.	exempli gratia

FOREWORD

26 January 2022.

Remembering the early spring of 2020, the COVID-19 virus spreads across Europe. People are staying home. Remote work and remote socializing, social distancing, and other means of communication are vigilantly implemented. Convenience stores are running out of canned foods and toilet paper. “Social closeness, though physical distance” becomes the mantra (Sauli Niinistö, *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* 12.3.2020). Digitally mediated environments and stories become more relevant, not by choice but out of necessity.

Looking at video games as important reflection points and profound connections in life seems obsolete. It is out of necessity that digital content is important now. It carries and facilitates connections, social relationships, and our drive to stay connected to the outer world – when it is physically closed away from us. Digital games become something more than artwork or entertainment. They become representations of relationships – social reflections, messages, providing food for thought when it could not be gotten elsewhere. Is digital content the only thing emerging victorious from these times?

During the first lockdown day in Helsinki on the 16th of March 2020, I played a game called *Everyone’s gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room SCE Santa Monica Studio 2015). The narrative-driven walking simulator tells the story of the town of Yaughton, where all the people have suddenly vanished. The player steps into an eerie town with empty houses, investigating traces of previous events. Clues linger in radio messages and phone calls. Posters pinned on house doors and shops state that all is closed because of the flu. The town is in lockdown and worry and distress are visible in the messages left behind. People wonder if “the vanishing” is due to an epidemic or something else. The player traces the narrative back to the last minutes before everyone vanished and learns how people’s lives and relations had been tangled together. The game tells the story of entwined relationships, and how maintaining these ties is more vital than waiting for everything to someday disappear. Despite the game introducing the idea of predestination, or a preplanned life path for all, the game discusses how relationships in times of distress are the most important connections in life.

Not knowing that the game would tell the story of a flu-quarantined town in lockdown, I could not have played the game at a graver time. The place at first made me anxious and worried, but by playing the game I could manage the feelings and thoughts I had about the real pandemic.

1 INTRODUCTION

> To clarify: there are so many things I want to do, but my chains always pull me back. Luckily, I have found my escape, and it's not too uncommon today. My great escape is gaming. I boot up the computer, get into position and then I leave this world. It's not a screen, it's a gateway to wherever your heart desires. I spend most of my time in a little place called Azeroth, a familiar name to some, I'm sure. In there my handicap doesn't matter, my chains are broken, and I can be whoever I want to be. In there I feel normal.
>
> Musings of Life: "My Escape". Blog post 19. July 2013.

Mats Steen, the 25-year-old writer of the blog Musings of life, died in 2014 from muscular dystrophy. He wrote a blog about his life being handicapped; however, he lived life to its fullest potential as Ibelin in *World of Warcraft*, an extremely successful and popular online multiplayer roleplaying game (Blizzard 2004). In Azeroth, Ibelin had a rich social life, close friends and great respect from his peers. Mats' parents came forward in 2019, telling their side, and the story spread in news media (Schaubert 2019).

The story of Mats, or Ibelin, crucially represents what digital games or media mean today. Such media can be for deep reflections, critical contemplations, fluently mixing and rearranging conceptions of art and entertainment – and especially representations of religion. Games have the potential to connect with users in ways other media cannot. They interact, bring close, elicit big questions, and challenge individuals by means of emerging new aspects of thought. They create connections and relations, tying players closely to an investigative mindset; to wonder admits new mysteries, and new worlds.

"In retrospect, I think we should have been more interested in the game world, where he spent so much time", said Mat's father. Game worlds and popular culture do matter, which this thesis concurs with in every sense, discussing it in the context of religion and video games.

"I would rather contemplate big questions": Imagining contemporary religion in digital games and among gamers from actor-centred and game-immanent perspectives" compiles four sub-studies that seek to answer the question of how contemporary intersections of video games, communication and gamer narratives lead to a confluence with religion and non-religion. This is formulated into a research question: "How is religion constructed and represented in recent mainstream digital games from a game-immanent frame, and how do players encounter religion or religion-like aspects in recent mainstream digital games from an actor-centred frame?" The question is iterated as twofold: 1) how religion criticism in video games represents changes in contemporary religious landscapes, and 2) how meaningful connections emerge in today's digital lives.

The two-sided approach (game-immanent and actor-centred) is chosen to view the overlapping representations of religion and religion-like aspects in games and in player experiences. The distinctions are carried alongside each other in their sub-studies to highlight a flexible understanding how religion and religion-like issues can be studied in game culture; to consider receptive aspects as well as content immanent aspects. Each enquiry diversly describes the overarching study questions affording understanding of religion and non-religion as versatile elements in games and gamer discussions.

The idea behind the combination of the two enquiries contributes to how art in games (or games as art) can be perceived and discussed: in the eye of the beholder and in understanding the art object itself (e.g. Bopp and colleagues 2021; Craveirinha and Roque 2019). I find the two-sided approach comprehensive in understanding a diverse cultural phenomenon such as religion and video games.

By focusing on the area of popular culture and digital games, the study also asks how games afford meaningful encounters, and critically discusses religion(-like) contemporary issues reflected and imagined in video games and by players. In addition, this thesis discusses the sub-study results in greater detail, drawing discursive companions from media, other game examples, and contemporary discussions on religion and video games. Chosen examples are selected to further discuss the cultural, communicative, and positioning of topical digital game cultures and changing religious landscapes.

The title of the thesis, "big questions", underlines the practical dilemma of researching emerging peripheries imagining and discussing religion and non-religion. These emerging peripheries are argued here as practical and communicated crossings and dwellings, or confluences, of sociocultural flows (Tweed 2006; Ammerman 2020; Arens 2011; Pace 2011). The dictionary explanation for a confluence would be a coming or flowing together, meeting, or gathering at one point. This is operationalized here in the frame of encompassing popular culture as an arena for meaning-making and meaningful encounters. Finally, the discussion of "big questions" as a viable category bridging the study of religion, non-religion, and contemporary meaning-making is found in this thesis (Taves 2018).

1.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The thesis uses a flexible understanding of religion in its sub-studies. Discussing what religion is resides at the very heart of academic research of religion. In this sense, "religion" may be seen as a category and concept, which asks to be defined to proceed with research. As said, the talk and act of imagining what religion is fluctuates case by case, and it does not necessarily reside as an academically described category outside of scholarly language games (Smith 1982, xi; Taira 2020, 303). In similar terms, the later discussion on non-religion in this thesis also hangs on imagined categorical assumptions and research of what is non-religion. This does not mean, however, that religion (or non-religion) is not talked about, explained, or experienced outside university walls. In fact, regarding the discursive study of religion, the observed and interpreted language and meanings of religion (informed by study subjects) result as sufficient explanations depending on the study task (Hjelm 2021; Taira 2021). Scholarly imagining and study subjects imagining religion are different things but, overlapping, both contribute to a greater understanding of religion. Contextual communication constructs (views on) religion, making it a "contested category" (Beyer 2006, 6–7).

In this thesis, imagining religion means an encountering of "crossings and dwellings" (Tweed 2006) of the pursuit to understand (non-)religion concepts and discourse in contemporary settings – such as in video game culture by games and players. Thomas A. Tweed's idea of describing religion research in different and interconnected locations as wandering offers the fast paced, non-tangible and changeable virtual places of video game culture agility in approach and comprehension (Tweed 2006). While contemporary (non-)religion manifests itself in light of this thesis as flexible, in motion and viewed in many locations, the concept itself can be viewed as wandering, crossing and dwelling, as Tweed also theorizes (2006).

Here, "imagining contemporary religion" means to operate and discuss with a temporal and negotiated concept of religion that does not possess a clear-cut description. Nor does the concept of imagining. In different centuries and communities, imagining can be described as tapping into all the knowledge and imagination contextually available when thinking and creating, still leaving the process of imagining ambivalent and slippery (Viholainen 2021, 9–19). As it is used in the headline, imagining presents itself as a tool for discussions of theory and research, as well as the way how the studied games and players imagine ideas and thought. Imagining also means the act of combining case studies that aim to understand ambiguous representations of religion in video game culture. Therefore, this thesis advances the scholarly discussion imagining the discursive meanings of contemporary religion and emerging non-religion in popular culture.

The concept of popular culture and religion research is understood in a flexible manner as well. Popular culture is approached as an "everyday practice, environment and resource for individuals and communities encountering religious content and discourse" (Moberg and Sjö 2018, 292; Lynch 2005, 14). In addition, while oral religions and traditions turn into written text, the current change entails religions turning into (new) digital forms (Ong 1967, 11; Grieve 2015, 60). Video games as a negotiated space for cultural representations afford a chain of memory for traditions and meanings to be documented via game form (see, e.g., Hervieu-Lèger 2000, 123, on religion as a chain of memory).

The thesis views video game culture in terms the postmodernist spatial theory of "thirdspace". This is applied to aspects of games as impactful artefacts, places for identity formation in virtual affective spaces, "real and imagined worlds". Above all, this thesis theorizes "the location" of these aforementioned processes (Soja 1996; Knott 2018). The location of religion discourse in this research takes place in digital spaces of embodied impact, albeit with non-tangible and non-traditional modes of affect in video games and gamer experiences. The tactile experience of playing digital games on a control console, PC or mobile device plays a part in constructing the embodied play experience; however, in line with the "thirdspace" theory, the thesis focuses on imagined encounters of meaningful impact: content representations of games and reception discourse of gamers.

Experiences in virtual realities exist in imagined spaces and locations, which can be theorized by using the idea of thirdspaces: imagined places actualized as ideas and memories experienced "somewhere" (i.e. "thirdplace"). The thirdspace theory (also formulated by Bhabha 1995), which I interpret here in a similar way as Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echaibi (2014), problematizes the non-tangible location of digital culture. They describe it as imagined, distanced, and power-related, being "in-between" (Hoover and Echaibi 2014) speculative digital spaces. This is descriptive of the thesis' video game analysis, observed online social communities, and documented player recollections with video games. The encounters happened "somewhere", but are memorable.

Lastly, this thesis draws on the theoretical framework that social reality is constructed by narratives the self builds of sensed environments and spaces, that is, narrative identities of "being heroes of our own stories" (Ricœur 1992, 32–33). The thirdspace theory positions this narrative self, into actual spaces that are imagined, looked back at, remembered, and afforded by narrated memories and recollections of places, times, and encounters (see, e.g., Anable 2018 on remembering game events). The "narrative reality" (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, 2) of imagined video game worlds is actualized in players' recollections and stories of meaningful encounters with video games.

The thesis is organized by first introducing the research of popular culture, video game culture, and religion, grounding the research in these respective studies and research discussions. Here, I also explicate the methodological framework which forms a background for each sub-study. Secondly, previous research amplifying the multi- and cross-disciplinary approach is presented. I also discuss the culturally negotiated aspects and categorical conversations points of video games as impactful media. The concept of satire is also discussed in order to understand and explain critical notions in video game representations. Thirdly, the thesis adds aspects to the sub-study results. This is done by bringing in for consideration themes on game analysis principles and stance-taking, religious monstrosities and criticism, fan studies and religious communication, and finally the aspects of non-religion research. Fourthly, the research contribution is followed by a discussion summarizing the study results and contemplating practical implications as well as directions for future research.

1.1.1 RESEARCH ARTICLES I–IV

The articles of the thesis consist of four different studies,[1] done in order and thematically divided into two approaches. The game-immanent approach is highlighted in the two first studies (I–II), and the actor-centred approach in the latter studies (III–IV).

The first article, "Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion" (peer-reviewed article published in *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* in 2018), focused on the game-immanent approach and game analysis, player interactions, the religion imaginary, and moral aspects concerning religion representations in a game context. The data consisted of games selected on the basis of their known religion discussions in story, gameplay, and milieu (*BioShock 2007*; *BioShock 2 2010*; *Dishonored 2012*). I found that religion criticism centred on religious authority images, and individual player reception affected play experience outcomes. The subjective side of a play experience therefore influences methodologically conducting video game analysis; this aspect of doing game-immanent research is also discussed in the article.

The second article, "Disenchanting Faith—Religion and Authority in the Dishonored Universe" (peer-reviewed article published in *Religions* in 2018), continued and further tested the game-immanent approach by deepening the previously found criticism of authoritative representations of organized religions. Here, the theoretical focus utilized Max Weber's religion authority distinctions (1978 [1922]) in analysing game data based on the whole

[1] The studies are referred throughout the text interchangeably as articles and sub-studies.

Dishonored game (2012–2017) series. The analysed games were seen to discard man-made religious authority distinctions, however, leaving the possibility of a supernatural existence unanswered. The game stories speak of a triumph for the individual while authorities are dismissible, echoing a larger tone towards religions present in popular culture.

The third article, "How video games changed my life": Life-Changing Testimonies and *The Last of Us*" (peer-reviewed article published in *Gamevironments* in 2019), used the actor-centred approach when focusing on users and players of games, rather than the game data itself. Here, the study looked at online discussion boards and videos on "life-change" and meaningful play where the game *The Last of Us* (2013) came up multitude of times. The online data consisted of shared player narratives in reference to the game, and shared speech in relation to emerging community building. By utilizing theory-driven content analysis, I found that the testimonial tone of the narratives resembled religious speech in testimonials. The remarks were made in light of Tuija Hovi's research on charismatic Christian speech communities (2006; 2007; 2016). The game and emerging online community provided a rewarding and important space to share meaningful play experiences.

The fourth and last article, "Non-religious Players Asking Big Questions: Video game worlds affording affinities of meaningful encounters" (peer-reviewed article published in *The Journal of Popular Culture and Religion* in 2021) continued to examine the actor-centred approach and used the third study's findings in formulating and creating an argumentative qualitative interview method to test the reception of arguments on meaningful play. Through content analysis, I formulated three narrative models of meaningful play experiences from interview data. The study interviewed Finnish adults on encountering meaningful video game experiences. I found that the main recurring narratives involved life's big questions, sensitive life events, and enchanting sensations with video games. The three narrative encounters describe how meaning is made with video game worlds, and which themes become important for players when video games act as a basis for self-reflection.

1.2 RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

Returning to the beginning and the example of Mats, it is easy to remark that digital worlds saturate our lives in inseparable ways. For some, they become a lifeline. Simultaneously, digital mediums afford new ways of being and new pervasive ways of talking about profound questions of life, including issues related to religion. Video games are not a direct part of the tangible world, but inhabit a (third)space through which we can experience, remember, and reflect on embodied and tangible issues. Questions of contemporary religiosity and religion have a similar basis as the big questions contemplated in Mats' example. Popular culture and religion research offers serious grounds for ideas to be discussed concerning culturally changing contemporary beliefs and non-religion.

This thesis advances the discussion of contemporary religion, lived religion (McGuire 2008, 4–5), or "big questions", viewed through video game cultures. The aim is to examine the negotiations and "peripheries of religion" (Love 2010, 193) in video games rather than understanding religions from a world religions paradigm. The study views digital games as being present in the everyday sphere as a mundane and ordinary element (Pargman and Jakobsson 2008), although sometime surfacing in societal and public discussions, especially concerning religion representations.

The title part "contemporary religion" points to the sub-study findings of religion criticism. In the sub-studies that used game analysis as a method, I found that authoritative religion is framed in a critical manner in mainstream video games. The examined games facilitate narratives and ideas representing and challenging religious authorities or concepts. In addition, in the latter sub-studies on player online discussions, and especially among the player interviews, I found that the interviewed gamers were keener to discuss nuances of meaningfulness in games than connecting them with concepts deriving from religious speech or narrative. I interpret this as one example of how religious landscapes and meaningful encounters are expressed, changing, and overlapping in today's contemporary environments.

Ultimately, the thesis observes the use of religion as discussed and imagined in selected video games, and among the players of video games, as accounts and cases in game culture and popular culture. Rather than focusing only on substance representations of "religion in video games", the thesis expands on "religion in video game cultures", finally arriving at "non-religion's" discursive territory and "existential cultures" (Lee 2015; 2018). This thesis' arrival at existential cultures from religion representations is also comparable, reflecting Tweed's depiction of research being a journey and state of wandering, per his theory on religions as contextual cultural flows (Tweed 2006).

This flexible angle has been chosen to represent the study scope of how religion and meaning-making are surfacing and flowing through today's varying communities in (popular) culture. Notably, the deliberate focus of the thesis on meaningful experiences with video games centres the study interest on a seemingly emotionally positive vibe. That is to say, digital games, culture and play reportedly also deal with gambling, addiction and discrimination (e.g. Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018; Wardle and Zendle 2021). Noteworthy also is the fact that not all games have to elicit and motivate meaning-making or meaningful experiences. However, the study interest especially in these aspects and player-narrated experiences accentuate positive experiences with single-player games.

The viability and importance of the sub-studies and thesis aims are explained considering popularity, societal impact, and changing living spaces. The recently published Finnish Player Barometer of 2020 found that daily and weekly playing of digital entertainment games is increasing among the Finnish population (Kinnunen, Taskinen and Mäyrä 2020). People have been spending more time indoors with games. In addition, as I have noted elsewhere, "The study of cultural values in popular culture as represented by video games is relevant now and, in the future, not only due to representations of sociocultural reflections in games, but given the major impact of game consumerism today, which is steered both by designers and audiences" (cited in sub-study I of Rautalahti 2018; Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014). Additionally, the discussed contemporary discussions of religion connect to the ongoing scholarly conversations of the placement and stance of religions in contemporary societies and life worlds, where meaning-making is taking place outside of traditional sites.

As one direction of the thesis, the last sub-study engages a non-religion scope throughout the text, playing into future implications and directions for research of the thesis themes, changing religious landscapes, and reflected societal atmosphere of (Western) popular culture. In general, in the recent past and beginning of the twenty-first century, a large number of people in the Western world have claimed to not be religious (Cotter 2020, 7). Indeed, early definitions of "non-religion studies" understood non-religion as something other than religion, or as formulated by Lois Lee, "Non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion" (Lee 2012, 131). For clarification, the "secular" is treated in this thesis as residing under the umbrella of non-religion, simultaneously recognizing that the secular itself ascribes differentiating positions depending on location and context (Cotter 2020, 17). In this work, I will follow Lee's more recent thoughts on viewing contemporary meaning-making and non-religion, even though still ambiguous, with a social emphasis defined as "existential cultures" (Lee 2015; 2018), discussed later. Non-religion serves here as an equally general and broad concept as religion, leaving room for exploration of something other than religion or religion-like.

A major objective of the study was to connect with scholarly discourse on contemporary theories and discussions of religion negotiations in current popular culture, using the examples and data gathered from video game culture as a counterpart. The thesis brings applications of a religion framework to the study of games (i.e. player experiences and meaning-making with games). However, the research contribution, even while balancing disciplinary intersections mainly focuses on a study of religion framework as a fundamental toolbox. The conversations and dialogue between video games and video gamers are compiled in the study results.

Therefore, the primary question for the thesis is:

How is contemporary religion imagined in digital games and among gamers from actor-centred and game-immanent perspectives?

The main question is divided into three sub-questions:

1. How is religion constructed and represented in recent mainstream digital games from a game-immanent frame?
2. How do players encounter religion or religion-like contemporary aspects in recent mainstream digital games from an actor-centred frame?
3. What contemporary views on religion in digital games and among gamers come forth in the sub-study data?

2 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

> You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play.
>
> Huizinga 2014 [1950], 3.

Everyday culture is negotiated through online digital outlets. Our lives, and selves, are saturated in digital ways (Couldry 2017, 147). Ideas of religion and big questions circulate in social and virtual spheres, where locality is understood in alternative ways. Time, place, and shared space – a thirdspace, where memories serve as timestamps and recollections of agency and visitations – reside in immaterial planes.

This chapter continues the discussion of the foundational outlining remarks of the thesis background, disciplinary dispositions, and research field of games, gamers, and religion. The chapter also explicates the premises for the methodology and approaches used in the thesis, as well as aspects concerning research language, subjectivity, and ethics.

The part of the thesis title "contemporary views on religion in games and among gamers" reflects the ways that religion is being talked about, communicated, and represented in recent mainstream digital games and cultures. I frame the environment and scholarly context of this study in popular culture and video game cultures, as well as contemporary views and discussions of religion. Additionally, this "interstitial" research environment, as well as scholarly position, situates itself in current religion and media research discussions (Peterson 2020, 6).

"Contemporary" in this thesis means that the sub-study results correlate to current discussions theorizing religion in today's Western societies. However, A strict distinction between classical and contemporary theories of religion (Stausberg 2010, 8–9) is by no means the aim of this thesis. Especially, as explicated earlier, I lean on Tweed's formulations of "crossing" and "dwelling", which offer a dynamic, procedural, and contemporary approach towards understanding religion and cultural ways of meaning-making, or "confluences", as Tweed would describe them (2008, 167). Tweed's idea is also visible in the ways video game worlds allow a state of "wandering", the state of being or "movement and relation" in a time and place (Tweed's formulation, cited by Hughes 2010, 212).

Nancy Ammerman describes the focus on the "everyday" as examining the unofficial and "non-specialists" life of religious people (Ammerman 2007, 5).

For this thesis, the scope of "religious people" is far too narrow; the study material and data point to culturally critical and fluid ideologies of beliefs, faith, and (non)-religion in games and among gamers. Along the same lines as Ammerman's aim, the current study is interested in how "nonexperts experience religion" and the social world "in which religious ideas, practices, groups, and experiences make an appearance" (Ammerman 2007, 5–6). Similarly, the secular to religious scale is seen as restrictive, and is thus allowed to be permeable (Ammerman 2007, 9), which is why the concepts of religion and non-religion are treated flexibly.

Accordingly, the discussion of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) on the intersection of subjectivity, religion and spirituality, societal change (Rautalahti 2018a), and the themes of secularity and worldviews influence the interpretative lineage and background of this thesis. The discussion of popular culture as a meaningful contextual arena where myths, values, and religious ideas are discussed and understood (Ostwalt 2003) is at the core of this study.

The interest of this research and approach to popular culture is therefore framed from a sociological perspective. Following Laura Grindstaff's formulation on sociology and popular culture, "popular culture is viewed as a commercial institution that, in producing objects and practices, also produces (and proscribes) social representations and ideas about the world, particularly as they relate to identity formation (race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth)" (2008, 210). The game-immanent approach is related to the task of analysing the social representations of religion or religion-like elements in video games, while the actor-centred approach is related to social action or the reception of groups or individuals converging in fan worlds (Grindstaff 2008; 2010).

In general, (popular) culture is an arena for "continual struggles" of various meanings of power relations (Storey 2009, xvi–xvii; Marcuse 1977, 9), which are present in video game representations. These discourses become evident in the study data and present underlying problematizations: what are these struggles, meanings, and discussions in video games concerning contemporary discussions of religion?

Reading (video game) culture is a central aim of the method in this study. "Reading culture" in this sense is connected to viewing culture as a pool of social constructions. According to Raymond Williams, culture, as a theoretical frame, may be understood in three general ways that steer possible study approaches, analysis, and objectives. Culture may be an "ideal", where human actions and values are perceived as pure and absolute. Secondly, culture is "documentary", entitling the documentation of imaginative and intellectual human properties. Lastly, culture is "social", representing and expressing behaviour, meanings, and values of specific cultures in ordinary life, art, institutions, and learning. (Williams 2009, 4.)

The obviously overlapping spheres of culture highlight the dynamics and possible cross-disciplinary aims of the chosen research area of this thesis. For the purposes of this thesis, popular culture research is understood to be focused on a layer of culture in constant negotiations of popularity or trends driven by commercial, artistic, audience interaction, and receptive aims. Popular culture is understood here as a theoretical construction to comprehend certain negotiated and temporal cultural expressions tied to geographical, cultural, societal, and capitalist elements, which it is plausible to reach through research.

The grounds of concentrating on mainstream (video game) culture stem from the idea that mainstream culture has accessibility and visibility to many consumers, yet it is also recognized that mainstream culture is driven by commercial ambitions. Frank Maet appropriately argues on behalf of commercial contemporary popular culture that even as "all works of art have become partly commercial whether they are made to be commercial or not, they function in a technological system that corresponds with a capitalistic system" (2013, 7).

Distinct to the role of video games and commercial interest, since the global pandemic began in 2020, game companies were quick to introduce the hashtag #PlayApartTogether (Snider 2020). Not to dispute the integrity of this gesture, it is worth noting the capitalist interest of the campaign. This hashtag again underlines the intersection, context, in which digital game cultures – the field of this thesis – operates, a place in today's popular culture.

2.1 BETWEEN GAMES AND RELIGION – RESEARCH SCOPE

The research field of video games and cultures only emerged along with the home consumer game market approximately from the 1970s–1980s, occupied previously by the arcade game scene (Mäyrä 2008, 42, 60–61). Even further back in the prehistory of digital games, coined by Frans Mäyrä, the 1940s–1950s marked experimentations of artificial intelligence and computer development in university laboratories (Mäyrä 2008, 39–41; game history is also discussed by Donovan 2010). The first graphical computer game *Tic-Tac-Toe* was programmed at the University of Cambridge, England in 1952 (Mäyrä 2008, 40). Back then, the familiar pen and paper game served as a demonstrational tool (Mäyrä 2008, 41) rather than a meaningful aesthetic cultural representation of how digital games can be seen today. Game studies can even be seen as having origins among early anthropologists interested in play and culture (Mäyrä 2008, 7, 38).

When describing game studies, Frans Mäyrä formulates, “The focus of game studies is the interaction between the game and the player, informed by various contextual frames” (2008, 2), which here reside in discussions about the study of religion. Whether the origin histories of games are located in economics, art, or technical or cultural threads, it is similarly defined what meanings digital games have and how they could be viewed (Mäyrä 2008, 50; Kultima and Peltokangas 2017). Simply defined by Espen Aarseth, games can then be seen as “ludo-narratological constructs”,[2] describing the distinctive nature of how story is woven with gameplay (Aarseth 2012, 130). Combining religion studies with game studies eventually brings out the playful aspects of religions or the serious side of games.

Games can be also understood through their cultural impact and their self-positioning as a popular medium. Jeroen Bourgonjon and colleagues argue for three functional motives of art and games: first, video games may traditionally mimic expression of life; secondly, games may in a traditional sense have the aim to evoke “emotions and beliefs”; and third, games continue to self-challenge and decompose their own evolution, meaning that video games are aware of the legacy of past works (Bourgonjon and colleagues 2017, 5–8).

By now, generations of audiences and players have memories of encounters and life events associated with games (Anable 2018). Players accustomed to digital play have accumulated gaming literacy, an inherent knowledge of reading, managing, and experiencing game content, actions, and expectancies (Zimmerman 2008). Gaming literacy could be even described as one mode of today’s cultural capital.

Game environments have become more than spaces where play happens. Their positions as meeting places increase when social distancing has become the new normal. According to the previously mentioned 2020 survey of play and games in Finland, (*Pelaajabarometri 2020: Pelaamista koronan aikaan*), to be more specific, the number of people reporting playing digital games (at least sometimes) was 78.8 %, an increase from 76.2% in the previous survey in 2018. People who answered that they were active in playing digital games rose to 63.6% from 60.5 %. The 2020 survey acknowledges the impact of the COVID situation on the results, which offers an interesting insight into

[2] Aarseth explains the combination of narratives and games as ludo-narratological constructs. Gameplay and stories have common ground and are built into digital games in varied assemblages. For example, the level of narrative usage is different in strategy-paced *Tetris* compared to story-driven *Dishonored* games. Both are considered digital games, but the latter (*Dishonored*) uses levels of storytelling to accompany the gameplay actions.

how play habits may have increased during social distancing and lockdowns (Kinnunen, Taskinen and Mäyrä 2020; also noted by Barr and Copeland-Stewart 2021).

2.1.1 POSITIONING, LANGUAGE, AND SUBJECTIVITY

Research language and dialogue place the researcher in a specific field or disposition (Lankoski and Björk 2015). Specific word use may confine fields; however, a multi-disciplinary research question demands mixed concept use. In game studies, Lankoski and Björk (2015) prefer the use of the concept "component" (elements constituting a game), which originates from Järvinen (2008), for game analysis as an explanatory tool. Järvinen continues the definition of game elements as three major groups that can be used for describing, identifying, and analysing games, gamers, and gameplay; he identifies these as "systemic", "behavioural", and "compound" elements (Järvinen 2008, 31). According to Järvinen (2008), the systemic category includes formal elements, such as game components. The behavioural category includes elements that combine games into a sociocultural structure, while compound elements describe the platform and mechanics where the game world takes place (Järvinen 2008).

In this thesis, the language and terminology are based on research efforts made in an emerging niche field combining popular culture, religion, and game studies. According to Järvinen' s clearly overlapping distinctions, this thesis' data is compiled from behavioural and compound elements, but paved and expanded into sociocultural scholarly foundations. Even though current game research scholarship can without hesitation be called a variation of approaches, the cross-disciplinary approach in this thesis and the central study of religion focus contribute to an emerging field and language within humanistic game studies.

Digital gameplay is an active and expressional participatory act designed for entertainment. Gameplay, even done with research aims, can hardly be described as unpleasant. Considering contemplations on subjectivity and research, I can honestly say that my time and analytical play spent examining games has been most enjoyable, at least, offering a "benefit of professional stimulation" (Horsfield 2018, 53–54). However, this brings up the notable aspect of research subjectivity, positioning, and dilemma of being a fan-scholar noted by, among others, Matt Hills (2002).

Hills and Irma Hirsjärvi criticize that the fan-scholar axis is problematic in cases where the scholar might romanticize a great affect a fan might experience (Hills 2002; Hirsjärvi 2009) towards their object of fandom. In these circumstances, when a scholar could be a fan, the scholarly interest and the affection of a fan might overlap.

My position towards the thesis is first and foremost scholarly. What I have learned throughout the years working on the thesis sub-studies is the variety, depth, and great appreciation of games, their makers, and respect for players' unique experiences. I have learned to enjoy digital games in nuanced ways, keeping one eye always on a "deeper meaning" that could be read through academic lenses even when playing games for leisure. The research aim itself has increased my attitude of becoming a fan of games, which here means the deep appreciation or affection towards a (game) "text" (Lamerichs 2008).

The by-product of an academic game analysis and act of play may be actual fun. For researching in-game content, game analysis begins with the researcher, followed by continual self-reflection of one's position (Heidbrink, Knoll, and Wysocki 2016, 170). The "reading" of a game, however, comprising a qualitative interpretation, theoretical discussion, and observation, involves research ethics and great visibility as uncompromised academic objectives. Nevertheless, popular culture research temporally situated in "today's" environment means tackling perspectives close to the researcher's own living context, and therefore it can pose challenges of objectivity.

The research positioning present in sub-studies I–II is very much placed in the vicinity and the subjectivity of the researcher performing the game analysis, reading, and continuing qualitative interpretations with theoretical discussions. The positioning in the latter sub-studies of III–IV is that of an observer, data gatherer, interviewer, data controller, and qualitative analyst during data interpretation.

2.1.2 RESEARCH ETHICS

Social media often makes public discussions that were previously and traditionally private. This research has taken into consideration the ethical situations of doing online forum research, where public discussions are selected for research purposes. In this situation, the selected discussions (sub-study III) displaying narratives of sensitive life events were posted on a public and openly visible discussion board on *Reddit* using either forum-generated pseudonyms or chosen ones. I recognize that the researcher has a position of power, bringing forth and framing discussion content for research purposes. The forum discussion does not reveal any recognizable content regarding player identities. The aspects of anonymity and open forum discussions were discussed with the journal *Online Journal Gamevironments*, which published the third research article (III).

In the case of the interview data in the fourth sub-study (IV), measures were taken to ensure the highest anonymity. According to the General Data Protection Regulation (EU 2016/679), the identity of a natural person is to be protected and concealed in cases of revealing information on religion or philosophical or political views. In my interviews, these topics did come up in the observed player narratives. In this case, age, gender, or other specific information is to be absolutely concealed. I do not describe in detail any information of the interviewees and only give information of "age groups" or other unrecognizable descriptions, such as quotes from the data; for example, "playing games is a preferred pastime" refers only to "player", "gamer", or "interviewee". Even though the resulting research article gives only "need-to-know" descriptions of the interviewees, the research aims of observing and analysing player narratives of meaningful encounters with video games is sufficiently delivered and described. The University of Helsinki ethics committee was notified of the interview data compilation (sub-study IV) and provided with a statement of the measures taken to secure anonymity.

2.2 APPROACHES AND METHODS – GAME-IMMANENT AND ACTOR-CENTRED

At the University of Tampere, Finland, the globally unique Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies defines game cultures in four overlapping areas of research: meaning and form of games, creation of games, players of games, and the societal frames of games articulated by Mäyrä (2020, 27). According to this four-partite distinction, the thesis situates itself in the two latter focal points: players of games, and the cultural and societal frame of games, additionally approached by questions of religion. Regarding Järvinen's earlier notions regarding game research distinctions ("behavioural", "compound", 2008), the Centre of Excellence distinctions offer a more nuanced and socioculturally emphasized manner of understanding the phenomenon of games in culture, as well as game culture. The more recent formulations also highlight the changing public discourse and atmosphere of understanding how game cultures are a part of societal constructions.

Reading games as cultural artefacts here means following and examining a game experience and gameplay (being the player), and the cultural representations it might bring up. The cultural meaning in games has been a research area often understood in terms of content analysis or qualitative analysis focusing on a specific game's gameplay, the possibilities of interactions, and all given information aligned with the focus of the research question (Consalvo 2012). Mia Consalvo additionally argued a decade ago that a more nuanced qualitative approach to how meaning is found in videogames and by gamers is a plausible future research area (Consalvo 2012).

Regarding "reading a game", Marie-Laurie Ryan proposes a four-sided frame in which to situate the narrative aspects regarding computer "texts", in order to understand the components of a digital game. First, the reciprocal nature of games creates an interactive relationship with the player (reader). Secondly, games consist of unique “volatile signs and variables” with “multiple sensory and semiotic channels”. Lastly, the game’s “networking capabilities” underline the environments shared with other players. (Ryan 2006, 98.) These formulations of computer texts as narratively distinct platforms pave way to understand what later innovative video games and narrative world mainstream games could foster.

The thesis interest therefore lies in what the representations of religion in digital games do, and how religion-related issues, or related sociocultural conversations, are discussed by players. The two distinctions of approaching the study question reflect especially “game-immanent” and “actor-centred” research approaches, established especially within the research of religion in video games by Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, and Jan Wysocki (2014; 2016). An object-immanent approach, compared to an actor-centred approach, frames and constructs the thesis questions forming the understanding of epistemological possibilities of relational culture and artefact research. The artefact informs of the culture, and vice versa. The approaches especially add to the theoretical frame how the study questions and research tasks are applied to understanding popular culture as a relational area for research in each sub-study.

This thesis in its early stages was oriented to find and analyse “religion representations” in video games. However, the twofold study approach cumulatively later provided a dynamic frame and context to discuss with and bring forth the varying relations and contemporary existential landscapes that are present in the process of playing video games. In addition, it underlines the frame of popular culture and video games as arenas for versatile meaning-making.[3] The cultural product and its user reside in a conversational relationship (Forbes 2005, 26–27). In addition, the two-sided (methodological) approach in this study is argued to be considered vis-à-vis a larger scope, considering cultural studies, not only issues or representations concerning religion in video games, as Heidbrink and colleagues had originally outlined (2014; 2016). The two-sided approach model can be seen as connected to and formed from a larger body of cultural study aims of viewing cultural products in communication with surrounding societal relations and restraints.

All in all, the cross-disciplinary efforts within game studies tend to reformulate concepts and contribute to new research language and approaches. The religion and digital games field has especially contributed to reformulating the main qualitative frameworks used in this study, namely, the game-immanent

[3] On games and meaning-making, see, e.g., Arjoranta 2015; Fiadotau 2015; Adams 2009.

and actor-centred perspectives (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014; 2016) explained in depth below.

2.2.1 GAME-IMMANENT – READING GAMES

The game-immanent study approach is understood as focusing on any content within a game (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014; 2016, 159–160) also conceptualized as a game analysis. Immanent here means something existing, or operating within, inherent in a game. Games are multi-modal mediums consisting of visual and audio experiences, offering stimuli sensed in varying ways (Carillo Masso 2016). The game's milieu, or "game space", is constructed with story (narratives and plots) and aesthetic environments of landscapes and soundscapes (Heidbrink and colleagues 2014; 2016, 159–160).

Game analysis, or reading a game, is a method of play with intention. The intention with religion is often to look at the manner in which religion is being constructed, placed, or represented and negotiated in the game (Heidbrink and colleagues 2016, 162). In other words, play with intention can be understood as play with a theoretical or analytical concept in mind. It can also be comprehended as making observations and remarks through an intentional lens. The concepts of game analysis, reading, and play with intention are overlapping denominators that bring forth the epistemologies of play as method.

Frank Bosman (2016) proposes a four-step methodology of reading or qualitatively analysing a game, which includes insights from both game-immanent and actor-centred approaches: internal reading (playing the game), internal research (collection of in-game information), external reading (mapping intermedial relationships), and external research (gathering out-game information). Bosman's formulations have served as background architecture when designing the current thesis studies.

I have demonstrated in sub-studies I–II how game-immanent approaches extend to game analysis and ways of reading games. My research intention has been to focus on and view games expressing reciprocal narratives and stories, especially keeping the focus on the player's optional ways of gameplay – choices within games and how these choices affect the game's outcome and the reading itself. In this sense, I agree with Hanna-Riikka Roine's argument on the nature of reading reciprocal "texts": "How You Emerge from This Game Is up to You" (2015; 2016).

Jeremiah McCall has approached history in video games as "problem spaces" to evaluate and recognize a dilemma which is represented and delivered through gameplay (McCall 2011, 94; 2021). Extending this approach to religion in video games, a similar notion was used in sub-studies I–II, which thematically recognize the possibilities of the individual (player), the power-relation (antagonist characters), and religion (the attributes of antagonist characters), composing a triangular problem space in which to evaluate religion representations.

The game-immanent approach is also a viable frame when play as a method is regarded as (auto-)ethnography, though this conceptualization has not been the aim of this thesis. Understanding the relationship of scholarly play, or research-driven play as a method for extracting data (the read game material), implies the subjective, situational and relational nature of self-produced play connected to a time, place, and context. Simply put, wandering among fictional communities inside game worlds entitles aspects of data-gathering through self-experiencing, which has similarities to an ethnographic approach (e.g. Brown 2015). The auto-ethnographic take on play, for that matter, could be described as creation-based knowledge-making (e.g. Harrer 2018; on ethnography as a game research method, see Sundén 2012).

Concepts of game analysis, reading, or play with intention as data-gathering methods all call for increased visibility on the research documentation of the (ambiguous) play act itself.

2.2.2 ACTOR-CENTRED – READING CONTEXT OF GAMES

The latter part of the main research question of the study – how players encounter religion or religion-like aspects in recent mainstream digital games – underlines the event horizon of games as cultural products demanding interaction in order to be accessed, experienced, and interpreted. This principle sets the baseline for also examining the actors and agents interacting, making and communicating with games.

The actor-centred approach – or player-centred approach, as Heidbrink and colleagues put it (2014; 2016, 162) – focuses on the ones reading, playing, and making the games, as well as on public reception. The actor-centred approach reminds of "the sociocultural practice of 'gaming'" (Heidbrink and colleagues 2014, 1). Interactivity, creativity, and player agency make up the other half of play. A game is unravelled by players, who then emerge with their own ideas, relations, thoughts, and skills. The cultural reception may be represented in public discussions and disputes on game content and aspects of appropriateness (e.g. Zeiler 2014).

The actor-centred approach (as well as game-immanent approach) has similarities to what cultural and literary studies have generally called the reader-response theory (Clark 2007). The viewpoint from text (game) to the player (reader) is understood in terms of gameplay (reading). Games contain fiction and can be read as such; this is a shared notion with literary theory

(Kücklich 2006). Games as "text" is understood here in the broadest sense (Heidbrink and colleagues 2014, 5).

The actor-centred viewpoint is used in sub-studies III–IV. First, the approach (sub-study III) centred on players talking online about games assesses the case by comparing observed speech acts to religious talk on important life changes and models of testimonials. The latter sub-study focuses on player interviews on meaningful encounters with games, formulating three narrative themes of these experiences.

3 CENTRAL CONCEPTS AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The purpose of this chapter is to bring forth and combine previous research regarding the study questions and deepen the understanding of the concepts used in this thesis. I further build on the beginning remarks and outlines made in the previous chapter (2) and discuss the research disposition among game culture, popular culture, and religion in a societal and topical context. First, the discussion concerning a flexible understanding of religion and non-religion, as well as cultural change, is enriched by popular culture and game research. Secondly, relations, changes, and positions of popular culture and religion are further discussed concerning the relations between religion and popular culture in society. The chapter also positions the thesis's stance on game dispositions in culture, approaching aspects how video games negotiate satire as one way of understanding critical religion representations and discussions in popular culture. The theme of religion criticism is one evident question throughout the thesis's sub-studies I–IV.

The discussion of the aforementioned enquiries of religion-like cultural phenomena, and change, has occupied scholars for decades. The imagining of religion and its origins (e.g. Smith 1982, xi; Taira 2020, 303) can be seen as a staple in the history of the field, formulated by Taira into six distinctions: 1) faith, textual and dogma-centred viewpoints, and 2) experience-centred, 3) participation-oriented, 4) shared universal ground, 5) culture-centred, and 6) human-centred emphases. These overlapping distinctions shed light on the canon of scholarly interest and formulation of religion to this day. However, as Taira points out, academics themselves are influenced by sociocultural changes and relations, which affect their work and understanding of concepts. Over time, a flexible understanding of religion is to be expected (Taira 2020, 306, 323–324).

This thesis connects to discussions of flexible religion-like peripheries and theorizations when discussing ambiguous and contemporary (non-)religion in popular culture today. Contemplated already by the early sociologist (of religion) Émile Durkheim, the origin of religion has societal representations, purposes, and practical functions that may change into something else when practices change over time. For religion to change, there has to be a change in the nature of societal order. (Durkheim and Giddens 1972 [1887], 219–222.) This change Durkheim formulates has continued in later discussions, contributing to understanding the secularization of society and conversations focusing on the aftermath of the change – or, in other words, cultural shift. The aftermath of this ongoing shift is approached and discussed with varying aspects and conceptualizations related to religion. For example, the understanding of ritual, which is not only to be seen as a traditionally religious concept in society, was formulated by Catherine Bell in the 1990s as a "differentiated strategy of social action" and power (1991, 223). By this, the concept of ritual opened to explain wider interpretations of societal practices, including popular culture conventions such as fan-culture practices (e.g. costume play as fan rituals; see John W. Morehead 2019, 192). On the side-lines, concepts explaining and comparing new religious and ideological movements as quasi-religion – with unintended genuine similarities to religions, as contemplated by Paul Tillich (1963, 293), for example – explained religious changes and movements in society. Implicit religion, emerging in the 1960s, described or reduced religion as a concept explaining commitment to, for, and affected by something on a personal or communal level, but it was debated for its generalization (Bailey 1990; 2009, 802–803, 805). Adam Possamai presented the definition of hyper-real religion to describe fiction or popular culture derived from religious movements or phenomena emphasizing the confluence of "real" and "fiction" (Possamai 2012, 1–2). These conceptualizations can be seen as having a comparative attitude, from a traditional and world religion paradigm recognizing dynamics and actions as something like religion but not quite – a discourse many times seen in the "popular culture as religion" discussion (e.g. Forbes and Mahan 2005). Efforts formulating the present religion-like scope should tread lightly by not searching and comparing straightforwardly from a traditional religious system paradigm (criticized also by Cotter 2020, 129, 202).

In Thomas Luckman's thought, religion does not diminish over time but changes forms in a changing society. He sees the creation of alternative, subjective, or new communal religious movements stemming from overarching societal changes of institutions. The "modern sacred cosmos" is reached in a private and subjective sphere because of societal subjectivization, summarized in the idea of invisible religion (1967, 116–117).

However, what if that sacred cosmos also changes and shifts? The conceptual non-religion discussion (e.g. Cotter 2020; Lee 2015; 2018) brings forth aspects regarding the aftermath of religion and cultural shifts from another perspective, asking and imagining what non-religion is. While the non-religion scope centres on non-religious subjects, irreligious individuals and phenomena, it negotiates a similar conceptual space as religion. This thesis operates in between religious and non-religious conceptualizations influenced by Lee's notion of "existential cultures" (Lee 2015; 2018, 63). The agnostic bent and religion criticism in the thesis' game-immanent studies to the actor-centred studies viewing meaning-making through contemporary religion builds a case contributing to the aftermath discussion of emerging existential cultures.

While religion can be theorized and conceptually used in many ways, it places challenges for research in video game culture, which is filled with an abundance of rich graphical, narrative, and multimodal signals related to a broad scope of religion. Indeed, where to start?

The scope of religion and video games research has seen efforts to formulate methods and approaches to examine religion and video games. Bosman outlined five ways for viewing religion in and emerging from video games (2016, 33–36), which are similar to other theorizations in understanding the relations of religion and popular culture (e.g. Mahan and Forbes 2005). The material, referential, reflexive, ritual, and meta-level categories compile lineages to observe religion within the games as well as the actors playing games and making games. Bosman's material level refers to representations and what he calls the "explicit occurrence of religion in games" (2016, 35). The referential level points to the "implicit or explicit reference in the game to an existing religious tradition outside the game" (2016, 35). The reflexive view adheres to "reflection on existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion within the game itself" (2016, 35). The ritual level is understood as "players who are involved in in-game behaviour that is traditionally associated with religion" (2016, 36). Finally, according to Bosman, the meta-level explains how "the experience of gaming itself is identified as religious (by scholars and/or the gamers themselves)" (2016, 36).

These remarks frame the ideas, concepts, and language available or used to describe "religion" in games or game cultures. As this thesis points out, the peripheries and views of contemporary religion may afford and provide legroom for research that focuses on meaning-making, religion, and games, where religious "side-lines" are of interest. Accordingly, Bosman also contemplates the issue of researching strictly something as "religion" in games, while there is a bigger picture to be explored (Bosman 2016, 39). It is safe to say that the study of religion and popular culture research by default face debates on where to aim research interests: on the aspect of what religion "does" (functional assumptions), or what religion "is" (substantial assumptions) (Beyer 2006, 4–5), whether focusing on game-immanent or actor-centred approaches in game cultures.

In this chapter, I further describe previous research and current dispositions, aspects of doing popular culture, and game culture research, as well as discussions on categorical assumptions and discipline negotiations driving research.

3.1 RELATIONS AND POSITIONS OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGION AND VIDEO GAMES

The term “contemporary religion” in this study is implemented to highlight how the research environment and scope are targeted at looking at a certain layer of contemporary culture, which is here called popular culture, as previously explained. Popular culture itself can be described simply as something “many people like”, or as quantified mass production, and then again alternatively as “complex social positions within the production and consumption of culture”, as David Chidester has formulated (2005, 19–20). Furthermore, “contemporary” is also perceived as a temporal concept as well as a word meaning “alternatives”.

Popular culture is thus perceived in this thesis as a framework underlining a layer of cultural activities, communities, and conventions of social relations. Especially these relations reveal the fluid element of how (popular) culture can be understood. The aforementioned research approaches, game-immanent and actor-centred, can be seen as similar attempts to what Bruce D. Forbes and Jeffery H. Mahan (2005) outlined as displaying the relationships that take place in popular culture and the religion domain. The four relationships between religion and popular culture outline the connections or discourses that reside with the actors of popular culture and religion. Here below, I present and interpret these four relations through the example of video games to show how video game culture can be seen to encompass society.

First, the societal relation is represented in terms of the question of what religion in video games is. An example of this are the I–II sub-studies, which mainly examine these levels of relations. In these first studies, I looked at the roles the player and antagonist characters take in terms of power, authority, and religion in the games.

Secondly, the relationship can be viewed in terms of how video games reside within religions. This could mean to view how religious communities use the medium of video games to further their agendas. One research example of this is Tim Hutchings’ take on the children’s game *Guardians of Ancora* and its negotiations in gamifying the Bible (2019).

Thirdly, the relationship can be viewed from the aspect of how video games or popular culture become a religion itself. Here the main question is how beliefs or communities emerge and are inspired by themes present in video games. As there are many examples from popular culture fueling different beliefs, such as Jediism from the *Star Wars* film saga (Davidsen 2011), video games as source material still lack in volumes on these types of emerging communities. However, there is evidence of *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks 1994–)

games inspiring belief actions. A now-cancelled Weebly-blog page[4] that was dedicated to honour the Daedra deities from the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) and *The Elder Scrolls* game world was entitled prayer instructions and a compendium of prayers. The blog was presumably published in 2013 and gathered information on the Daedra. As a side note, the page also featured an "Add Your Prayer" comment thread. Under the "Daedra Worship: A Shrine for the Princes" main header, there were 78 comments or prayers composed by contributors to the page.

Fourthly, the relation of religion and video games in society can be examined by viewing video games and religion in discourse. Here, additionally, sub-studies I–II act as an example of this relation, as they focused interpreting critical messages, discussions and stance-taking on issues concerning religion and power in society. Here the relation represents an interactive and dynamic dialogue, coming back to what Storey meant as culture being an interpretation and representation of "continual struggles" in society (2009, xvi–xvii).

Specific events of social discussions can also shed light on religion and popular culture research, and bring forth the delicate nuances of different interest groups. As an example of emic versus etic debates, John Laycock (2015) described incidents of moral panic over role-playing games in North America, where a heated societal discussion itself lifted role-playing games into a religious (Christian) discourse. Whether or not the role-players themselves identified their play as religious or spiritual, their accusers explicit and even furious campaigns of dangerous role-playing being of occult origins were narrated in religious terms and threats (Laycock, 2015). The opponent's arguments raised the role-playing games into the societal sphere of religious discussion. These processes are analogous to what research of religion (in games) can do to frame popular cultural phenomena as religious phenomena, by no means undermining one another. The challenge of research is to see *when* a "rock song is just a rock song" as Kate McCharty has said (The Religious Studies Project podcast 2016), regarding reflections on cultural impacts and affects: when not to assert something being about religion when it is not.

3.1.1 HISTORIES AND RELEVANCE OF POPULAR CULTURE AND RELIGION RESEARCH

The congruence of popular culture and religion as a forming discipline, has dealt with self-reflective dialogues on how to imagine or assume religion in culture and society. This cross-disciplinary research be seen to date back to a Western cultural change in the mid-decades of the last century. At that time, many new technologies and television, radio, and other mediated

[4] daedraworship.weebly.com

entertainment reached a new type of audience, namely, mainstream consumers. The demographic of Western popular culture rapidly claiming space and the "mass arts" entering the stage had an impact on how culture was understood (Carroll 2013, 2). The rise of youth culture, rapid changes in world history, and ideas of a coming new age coloured the upcoming popular culture researchers' life worlds. Popular culture was not dismissed, as it had powerful materialistic and tangible impacts, societally and economically.

As cinema was slowly growing as an affective place mediating a culture tradition distributed for home audiences, the research of mass arts or entertainment gained credibility (Carroll 2013, 2–3). At the same time, the study of religion field discussed what can be researched, where the discipline would proceed, and what is plausible for research. First, research focused on everyday life, examining case examples and the "ordinarity" of religion and popular culture (Beavis, Dunbar and Klassen 2013; Pesonen and Rautalahti 2020). Early paradigms of research fluctuated from popular culture "effects" among marginalized groups, such as youth and immigrants (in the U.S.) to "gratifications and usages" of "consuming" popular culture, formulated by Lynn Schofield Clark (2007, 7–8). The 1960s also marked the rise of cultural studies, with British critical research emphasizing power relations among marginalized populations.

Popular culture research was born within cultural change. Schofield Clark summarizes the discursive nature of popular culture research as inherently and historically cross-disciplinary, centring on "culture, the popular, and mass culture" in a given time and space, Zeitgeist, and history (2007, 7–9). Clark also gives credit to reader-response theories[5] among the societal and industrial changes, and historical events of feared "culture industries" governing people (World War II Germany), contributing to the origins and relevance of critical cultural studies stretching to this day's popular cultural studies (2007, 13–14).

Popular culture illuminates societal discussions while balancing as entertainment. Lynch formulated the "otherness" of popular culture compared to "high culture", with popular culture being something other than folk culture, and often representing commentaries or opposing stances towards the dominant culture; also similarly coined elsewhere (i.e. Caughie 1986, 159; Lynch 2005). Often distinctions of cultural material belonging to either high culture, low culture, or everyday life have been questioned in cultural studies, given the rise of early reader-response approaches (Clarke 2007, 13–14). Different audiences have different types of power. As seen in sub-studies I–II,

[5] Reader-response theory or criticism originating from literary scholarship acknowledges the reader as a significant actor and agent constructing textual meaning formed in the process of the reader's response to read text, a conceptualization arising in the 1960s. (Clarke 2007, 7; Browne, Chen, Baroudi and Sevinc 2021).

the critical tones against religion and societal power relations in researched video games fall into a canon of popular culture challenging dominant (religious) governance, which afford political undertones on the negotiations of “consent and resistance” (Caughie 1986, 160) in society.

Research on popular culture and religion traditionally focuses on film, music, and literature. For this thesis, the developing technical innovations or constant negotiations of “what is considered as popular culture” steer the research objects. Video games could be seen stemming from this material-oriented research aim as “the next plausible thing”, or as an arena and phenomenon creating new ways of being, connecting, and reacting with meaningful experiences related to discussions of religion. In this sense, a general gratification and effects paradigm can be seen as steering the study interest.

It is noteworthy to state that games by no means are to be placed on a pedestal in comparison to other impactful cultural products on a larger scale. Digital games enjoy a market leader position, which is one way of arguing for the importance of research and their impact. Fortunately, the discourse of popular culture research being unimportant or subsidiary to more “serious” cultural studies has been decreasing steadily in academia (Schudson 2009, 556).

Popular culture research, however, might sometimes be reminded of the old stigma of (academic) discourse related to consuming of popular culture, and fandoms seeing them as “less”, trivial, and more unclear than other research (Hirsjärvi 2009; Clark 2007, 7–8, 19).[6]

It is important to be reminded that popular culture presents a valid arena for research and especially provide new information on contemporary beliefs and emerging non-religion discussions. Current and future research efforts and motivations can easily leave behind popular culture and religion research notions only originating from “private enthusiasms” (Forbes, 2005, 26–27).

Religion – or issues concerning religion and fans – and popular culture are a viable and crucial part of contemporary living and meaning-making in society, as this thesis strongly shows. Agreeing with Clark, the relevance of studying popular culture in the study of religion (and theology) analogically ties to understanding how “faith communities and alternative communities are formed and maintained through connections to material goods” and how this is reflected in society (2007, 10–11) and, importantly, everyday life (Clark

[6] Regarding the challenges of doing religion and popular culture research, I have witnessed conference presentations on the topic of popular culture and religion where the presenter has begun with apologetic words of how this is not what they “really” focus on in their work. Then again, game studies seminars or conference presentations, in my experience, rarely begin in this way. The challenges of pairing popular culture and the study of religion need clarification.

2007, 15). Popular culture research from the "bottom-up" perspectives offer insight into "meaning-making of everyday lives" (Lynch 2007, 125; Clark 2007, 15). Games (culture) form their own "canopy" (Berger 1967), which in relation to ordinary and everyday life can be reflected upon.

Thematically, religion and popular culture research has been divided into theological, societal, and mythological frameworks of examination (Martin and Ostwalt 1995; Ostwalt 2003; Pesonen, Lehtinen and Myllärniemi 2011, 31–35). The theological view often takes into consideration the dogmatic aspects of different religions within popular culture, the balance of good and evil, deities, and belief systems. For example, the video game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games 2017) invites the player to watch a naming ritual that displays a credible yet fictional theological and cultural convention of a rite of passage created in the game world. The societal aspects centre on criticism of ideologies, critical issues of religions, authorities, and power relations, a constructive area that this thesis mainly contributes to. Lastly, the mythological aspect considers mythic tales and narrative-making in popular culture. Here, for example, mythical hero roles and gender assignment in film representations have been examined (Sjö 2007).

Theories of popular culture and religion research often claim different stances on how to do research versus what is being researched within religion and popular culture. Christopher Partridge presented the generalizing theory of "re-enchantment of the West" (2004), arguing that ideologies of the occult reside firmly in popular culture as people yearn to be enchanted, or "return" to enchantment. Conrad Ostwalt predicted that popular culture will increasingly display religion-related issues due to institutional secularization (2003). Gordon Lynch argued that religion and popular culture research should not only focus on the world religions paradigm and instead should view religion in a diverse manner (2007, 125–126). He additionally mapped the common approaches or assumption of studying religion (in popular culture) in regard to the category of religion. The phenomenological assumption focused on universal qualities and shared lived aspects of religion; the substance assumption viewed structures, symbols, and traditions; and the functional assumption focused on aims, motivations, and shared outcomes similar to sociological approaches (Lynch 2007, 127–129). These assumptions relate to the twofold approach of the thesis, which aims to understand the lived aspects of (non-)religion yet remains entangled with cultural representations of traditional religion in games.

What could be added to Lynch's distinctions is the framework of Sean McCloud's notion that today's popular culture is underlined by consumer orientations of the "project of the self" (2003). Consumer interest in varying ideologies, religious or not, could be argued, not by straightforward attraction to these ideologies but by attraction to the self-experiencing of these ideologies. On a side note, it should not be forgotten that the popular culture industry plays a part in creating these needs for consumers.

While the study of video games and religion offers contextual insight into how religion is negotiated in game representations today, the approach simultaneously offers viewpoints to study of religion methodologies and theoretical discussions (Clarke 2007, 16) in light of changing digital cultures and the debatable concept of “digital religion”. While the ongoing discussion of the current digital religion is diverse in the sense that it is often pinpointed in case-specific examples, it does not possess a clear definition. Sometimes it seems to even be described as any religious or spiritual activity taking place online (e.g. in the work of Wilkins-Laflamme, digital religion is considered as viewing or posting religious or spiritual content online; Wilkins-Laflamme 2021). Ideally, I argue, the vague conceptualization of digital religion would dissolve, and the case examples would act to define literal agents, such as in the case of religion and digital games. Despite these challenges, the religion and video games field remind digital religion scholarship of an intersection with relevant popular culture studies, underlining its significance as an impactful societal factor, as previously discussed.

Popular culture (and religion) research as a unified field can be fairly debated. The various research aims gather studies interested in the shared phenomenon of popular culture (Clark 2007, 16). While the research developments and focus on popular culture as a phenomenon take place in a Western paradigm, especially centring on the United States, a minor but viable thread of Finnish popular culture and religion research has taken place from the 1970s and film studies (e.g. Matti Paloheimo’s *Uskonto Elokuvassa*, 1979).

This thesis represents a continuation of global game studies and religion research; however, in its own right it is related to local emerging and pioneering work on religion and video games in Finland. In a Finnish context, popular culture and religion research has focused on critical perspectives by individual scholars on representations, including gender images, religious agents, and Christian music (i.e. Sjö 2007; Moberg 2009; Pesonen 2016). In this scope, the popular culture and religion frame in a Finnish context has participated in particularly sociological conversations in understanding and explaining religion, post-religion, and changing religious landscapes (i.e. Sjö and Häger 2015; Moberg and Sjö 2018). In the Finnish context, this thesis follows the continuation of studies on representations, critical discussions, and debates concerning and imagining a change in societal religious atmospheres (i.e. Nynäs, Illman and Martikainen 2015), viewed here from the frame of popular culture. More specifically, societal (religious) change is viewed from video game cultures and the narratives they represent, including the contemplations that players elicit. While the critical cultural studies frame researching popular culture in the study of religion has been common in a

Finnish context, the current thesis focus on video game cultures and religion in study of religion discussions is unpresented.

In general, this thesis positions its relation to popular culture research as viewing the ideological work that popular culture does today relating to contemporary discourse on religion. How the popular culture and religion framework is used in this thesis follows to a large degree the pioneering scholarly discussions of lived and mundane life as a platform where popular culture and discussions of religions, religion-like issues, or meaningful encounters and worldviews collide.

3.1.2 GAME STUDIES RESEARCH – FROM MAGIC CIRCLES TO A MULTIDISCIPLINARY AFFECTIVE TURN

Game studies have varying histories depending on disciplinary environments, shared discourses, and aims. The histories of game studies are relevant to this thesis' positioning and foundational background, and they highlight the nuances of religion and videogames discourses derived from larger humanities and game studies intersections. While the field of game studies could be positioned as a curiosity topic under traditional cultural studies, efforts have been made to situate game studies as its own typology (Nieborg and Hermes 2008, 135).

The fluctuation of game study histories has often been drawn in terms of "gameplay", "narrative", and "representation", shifting the aims, debates, and even culture wars within schools of research or administrative focal points (Mäyrä 2020, 12). The history of "invented" game study is often dated back to Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (2014 [1950]) on the nature of play in human societies and culture, Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*, which views the social functions of play as contemplating the challenging semantics of conceptualizing play (2001 [1961]), and Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play*, which problematizes play as an adaptive variability and concept (2001 [1997], 221, 229–231). Often this framing firmly attaches the discipline or field to problematizing questions of what a game is, what play is, or if games are something played through machines. The societal and cultural changes brought by electronic, digital, or (mass) production of games have additionally steered research of game studies (Nieborg and Hermes 2008, 135).

At the same time as the game industry began to establish itself, the field research aims, whether commercial or academic, overlapped (e.g. *Rules of Play* by Zimmerman and Salen 2004). For example, design studies or user or player experience studies are all discussed in topical scholarly discussions on platforms shared with the industry today.

Especially influential to forming and joining a game study discipline was the shared discourse of the “magic-circle”, repurposed for digital games by Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen (2003), also implementing the idea of a “lusory attitude” of play.[7] The emerging digital game scene started renegotiating with Huizinga’s concept of the “magic-circle”, which originally described how one loses themselves in play, and that play is always something “magical” and special beyond everyday life (Huizinga 2014 [1950]). While the issue occupied the self-reflective disciplinary conversations of game studies for a lengthy period, many debated the straightforward use of the concept (e.g. Pargman and Jakobsson 2008).

The narrative of a more contemporary history of game studies could be dated to the first issues of *Game Studies* in 2001 or *Games and Culture* in 2006. The field or new discipline came at an apologetic time, with debates whether “games” in their varying forms were an area to be seriously researched. The economic impact was often used as a justification. (Mäyrä 2020, 17). Parallels can easily be drawn to the birth of popular culture studies and its research field, as discussed before.

While other disciplines, such as literary studies, took an interest in researching games, the field entered new debates. Especially notable was the discourse of whether games should be understood from a ludological (gameplay, act of play) or narratological (narrative, narrative representation) framework, affecting how the field was labelled. (Mäyrä 2020, 17). Additionally, the approach to game research crossed between “the study of games and games in cultures” and methodology concerning “aesthetic forms and meaning production processes” (Mäyrä 2020, 23). In the case of religion and games, the cultural approach is evident, although in relation to the game-immanent or actor-centred approaches the intersection between the study of games and games in culture is where they clearly overlap. Accordingly, today Mäyrä speaks of viewing “games as culture” (2020, 23), opening possible dialogue and scholarly efforts in a wide and inviting manner. The discussion within game studies that connects with the current thesis aims are part of novel scholarly discussions on affect and games as an emerging research lineage involving a humanities approach to game research.

The “affect theory”, or framework of affect, has been understood differently according to different disciplines. One of the more recent discussions is the topic of affect or, in other words, “the affective turn” (Patricia Clough 2008) in game studies, noted also by Frans Mäyrä (2020, 12) or in the media and affect sphere by Bern Bösel (2020, 7–8). The “turn” can be seen as a change in

[7] The lusory attitude was originally coined by Bernard Suits in *The Grasshopper* (1978). He proposed that to construct any game, a goal, the means to achieve the goal, rules, and, finally and most importantly, the lusory attitude were needed (1978, 35–36.)

theoretical approaches or as a change in the nature of cultural phenomena (Kontturi and Taira 2007). The affect discussion has many multidisciplinary threads and usages; however, in general it is interpreted in this thesis as subjective "discursive and non-discursive" sensations and emotions which are affected by culture and social circumstances alike (Rantasila 2020, 50; Kontturi and Taira 2007). Affect can be seen as a nomadic concept given its versatile and mobile cross-disciplinary use, discipline-bridging properties, and ability to highlight the different research cultures of its usages (Rantasila 2020, 50; Surman, Stráner and Haslinger 2014, 16–17). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary explains the noun "affect" "as a set of observable manifestations of an experienced emotion" (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary s.a.).

Although affect theory discussion is not central to this thesis or discussed in depth in the sub-studies, it tangentially relates to this text in terms of future implications and a wider understanding of the ways in which meaning-making can be seen as occurring and manifesting in popular culture and digital religion research (e.g. Peterson 2020). In this thesis, affect is understood as the approach to games from an actor-centred viewpoint and audience reception, described in the aim of research focused on the player and their experiences, organizing or categorizing affects – emotions, feelings, or other chosen interpretations. These efforts overlapping with audience reception (and affect theory) have previously been topical (e.g. Pargman and Jakobsson 2008) and in the games and psychology research thread; human and computer interactions (e.g. Mekler, Iacovides and Bopp 2018) have a firm position operating from an "affect" focal point. Previously, Petri Lankoski (2012) pointed out that there are many questions to be asked about play experiences and emotions, and about the aesthetic experiences that games induce.

The "affect and humanities" discussion with games is increasingly taking part in game studies. Highly notable here has been Audrey Anable's (2018) work on games, cultures, and affect.[8] The thesis framework on religion discussions in games as well as how players discuss their impressions of religion with games positions itself near the affect and game studies discussion, while the sub-studies centre on aspects of player experience.

The framing or situating of religion and popular culture research with game studies can be discussed through the shared ground concerning affect and games. It is fair to point out, though, that while this fabricated congruence may serve as leverage to voice humanistic research within game studies, it also brings forth traditional research aims of focusing on humans, cultures, and interpretations of game studies. Affect studies and cultural studies find communality. As James Paul Gee has famously stated, "video games will

[8] Additionally in game studies, the affect question has been noted, for example, by Arjoranta 2015.

challenge us to develop new analytical tools and will become a new type of 'equipment for living'" (2006, 58).

Research in game studies is multidisciplinary by default, varying from focal points shared with popular culture studies and, as this thesis shows, the study of religion as a viable partner in crime. The locations and "homes of game studies" are many, and the field continues to attract attention (Grufstedt, Rautalahti and Lasausse 2020).

3.1.1 THE RELIGION AND VIDEO GAMES RESEARCH SCENE – JOINING FORCES

The relatively young scene of researching video games and religion jointly has emerged from scholarly observations of religion in video games or game culture and public discourse. The interest has been at first to understand the possible interactions with religion in digital games and to formulate methods in researching religion among games. In one of the first books published in the topic of religion and virtual reality, *Godwired* (2012), Rachel Wagner focuses on how people are engaged and drawn towards virtual spaces of existence. The curiosity, identity reflections, and explorative possibilities in game worlds connect to a similar curiosity present in religions (Wagner 2012, 234–235).

In addition, religion is studied as an elemental resource of storytelling and world-building in video games. William Sims Bainbridge discusses a collection of religion-derived concepts encompassing video game spaces such as deities, souls, priests or shrines, and their stories (2013). Similarly, Bainbridge contemplates the future of religion and secularization and, in the process, the possible role of playing video games (Bainbridge 2013, 24; Wagner 2012, 234–235). Both works discuss how these cultural aesthetic messages and codes become increasingly important – a companion – for contemporary life.

Questions about the role of religion, or how it may be encountered in games, has been the focus of the research scene as well. Enquiries concerning religious games, religion in mainstream games, and gaming as implicit religion were listed as central themes in "Playing with religion in digital games" (Campbell and Grieve 2014, 3). Campbell and Grieve also discuss the digital ways religion or religious behaviour becomes mediated through varying platforms and newly emerging ways, thus "shaping faith practices" (Campbell and Grieve 2014, 17). Indeed, digital spaces provide changing outlets for religious activity and agency, as well as cultural meaning-making.

Conversations about appropriation in video games, a lack of cultural sensitivity, or even religious conflict – seen at its most extreme as blasphemy – have additionally been of interest. Blasphemy and sacrilege, concepts of religious conflict, are equally tools as ways for drawing boundaries within increasingly diverse cultures (Coleman and White 2006, 1–2). The “lines in the sand” present negotiations of freedom of expression, where especially the arts, and in this case video game culture, test boundaries (Coleman and Fernandes-Dias 2008, 1–8).

A famous case of a boundary-crossing incident in games dating from 2013 involves the video game *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, 23, 35; Hernandez 2013). To begin the game, the player must accept to be baptized, followed by a cut-scene of a forced water baptism, to enter the cloud city of Columbia. One player contacted the game publisher for a refund because the representation of the baptism was against their beliefs, and the player was reimbursed (Kotaku 2013). Another noted incident involved the Church of England and the representation of Manchester Cathedral in the video game *Resistance: Fall of Man* (Insomniac Games 2006). In the game, the church is destroyed. The Church of England claimed that copyright violation and desecration took place in the game (Campbell and Grieve 2014, 1–2).

3.2 GAMES NEGOTIATING RESOURCES AND BOUNDARIES AMONG RELIGION, PLAY, AND SATIRE

If religion is viewed as being a natural construct mediating human activity, a way of doing, being, and managing different beliefs, there is a tremendous amount of activity in game narratives that could be identified as belonging to religion. David Chidester (2005, 30) states whether religion is understood as based on social institutional organizations, the supernatural, or symbols concerning the sacred, “religion presents resources and strategies for being human.”

Games often portray layers of cultural discussions, signals, markers, or images where occasionally questions of appropriateness or good taste are publicly raised, as discussed previously. The aspect of religion as a resource for games is negotiated through categorical understandings of what religion is and does, not only by games but by gamers. Often, religion is a conceptual and ideological vessel for cultural criticism, sometimes receiving satirical expressions. However, there are other lines of interpretation. For example, a functional depiction of religion (activity) offers game designers useful material, resources, inspiration, and practices for narrative and gameplay construction.

In the example of the game *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions 2020), the concept of ritual as an activity is played out as functional gameplay steps and actions when the main player character visits shrines. The first-person, action-driven video game enables the protagonist to visit Shinto shrines and honor altars, with a cut-scene animation displaying the action of the appropriate bow and clapping of hands. Many of the shrines in the game are especially built for the Shinto deity Inari, the god of abundance, resources, and good luck (Okuyama 2015, 180–182). Even a fox, the “kitsune” who is the gatekeeper or guide to the Inari deity, is placed as a signal and hint for the player to find the shrines’ locations. If the player finds a fox, the good omen, it will lead to an altar or shrine, just as Shinto belief describes (Okuyama 2015, 180–182). The scene describes the factual event and ritual of honouring shrines as well as the intent of giving thanks or wishing for good luck. Gameplay-wise, the action of honoring shrines grants the player beneficial amulets for varying purposes. One enhances weapons and another offers luck in certain fight actions. The idea of the Shinto faith or way of life is shown to penetrate everyday life and the gameplay actions support that message or interpretation. Religion is woven as a seamless part of the Tsushima islanders’ lives in the game world.

Another digital game using religious concepts in game story is the game called *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012). This short, minimalistic, and peaceful game describes a path of a pilgrimage, which takes influences from East Asian beliefs and Buddhism in its visuals and philosophy. The journey the player begins not only describes a passage of challenges but ends when they reach a mountaintop of light, only to return to the beginning and start again. The idea of reincarnation and life as a literal functional journey is underlined as an ideology afforded by the game.

However, not all examples or representations of religion in video games receive subtle or even discrete and kind approaches. As I have found in my sub-studies addressing game analysis and religion, representations of antagonist characters, and power arrangements in video games, the scenes and authority of religion in these games are, to say the least, debated. Religion, as a religious authority or religious organization, is depicted as an opponent for the player, and the player’s task is to rid the world of the evil. Games that portray religious actors or organizations rather than ideologies or contemplation, like *Journey*, many times have a critical societal tone in their narratives.

Audiences, or players, do not always take these implications – or the critical undertones games are making – for granted. As in the previously mentioned case of *BioShock Infinite* (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, 23, 35), or in the instance of *Hanuman: The Boy Warrior* (Zeiler 2014), the use of religious aspects received varying responses. In the case of *Hanuman: The Boy Warrior*, a Hindu advocate criticized the use and appropriateness of a deity in a game (Zeiler 2014). In general, games raise questions and conversations about other societal dilemmas, such as sexism, how women are portrayed, or how violence is depicted – not to mention the debate whether games themselves are acceptable entertainment (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, 14). Religion is a theme among many other cultural discussions, being conversational "hot potatoes".

Despite games stirring public opinion, games access a style and manner of representing challenging societal themes. This, I argue, could often be interpreted as satire. At its best, satire can open cultural and political debates, with polemic relations acting as a mode or procedure rather than a specific genre; this is "transgressive satyr" (Griffin 1994, 4–6). However, satire can be said to walk a fine line between comedy and parody. For example, the first-person shooter video game *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft 2018) presents a violent story of an imagined United States cult, whose history is told in today's environment but adding a threat of a Third World War. *Far Cry 5* draws attention in a satirist manner to the cult history of the United States.

Despite the explicit historical connections, the game paints a background with the comical stories of secondary characters, rednecks, and barbeque-loving town dwellers, all placed into a fast-paced environment. *Far Cry 5* can thus be seen as reimagining events and incidents from cult history by means of satire (Rautalahti 2018c). In the game, the player steps into the role of a stranded police officer in rural America trying to survive in an environment dominated by a hostile cult and members of The Project Eden's Gate. The group is governed by a fanatic leader, John Seed, who preaches of a "great collapse". He has an unmistakably close resemblance to the historical cult leader David Koresh of the religious group Branch Davidians, known for the so-called "Waco siege" in 1993, where many FBI agents and cult members were killed (Newport 2006, 1–2). The actual and sensationalized (media) event itself, which has been later criticized as a disaster, stood as proof of the public opinion how religious cults were in fact "dangerous" (Newport 2006, 1–2). *Far Cry 5* does not try to change this discourse but offers the opportunity to contemplate and play with differentiating positions, approaches, or stances that could be seen at work in such an event.

Satirical expressions use aspects of play or playfulness in managing sensitive and debated themes, whether satire is understood as something playful (Griffin 1994, 71, 83–87) or even acts of "carnival" (Bakhtin 1984, 107, 123). The element of playfulness and (carnivalesque) humor in satire bridges aspects of how it works in games both as an active gameplay action and a literary or narrative mode, as noted also by Thomasz Majkowski (2014). Video games could be seen as a "carnival of violence", Majkowski says (2014), like in the case of *Far Cry 5*. The satirical imagining of a debated past may juxtapose differentiating positions and the stance-taking of events, providing reflection through the act of play. The game story of a horrific sect leader and his senseless followers, situated in acts of playfulness, parody, and ridicule, disarms the monsters and antagonists, making them targets of laughter (Mittman and Hensel 2018, xi). This is not to say that "games are only games", or should not be taken as serious cultural artefacts. In addition, this leveling of satire and play is not to claim that all games are satire. It could be argued that video games are plausible tools for satirical expressions when entailing commentaries of cultural debates. Furthermore, games create multiple positions and intersections of interactions, all at the same time, through the act of play and playfulness, as Ian Bogost formulates through the term "procedural rhetoric" (2007, ix). Procedural rhetoric describes players' experiences of authorship of gameplay through the rules and processes of a game.

Contrary to the popular notion that games and play are fun, this is not always the case, which highlights the scope of researching meaningful encounters with video game culture. Games and their stories move players in similar ways as other popular culture products in the domain of entertainment. Sad films and literature make us cry, and so do video games. For example, the emotionally driven video game *The Last Guardian* (SIE Japan Studio, GenDesign 2016) has a famous ending, which has led to video compilations of players reacting to the dramatic and emotional ending scenes ("Gamers Reactions To Sending Trico Away | The Last Guardian", Mixed Reactions 2019). Video games can move players deeply, as in the case of *The Last Guardian;* the many-faceted emotional relationship of an animal and human is treated in an exemplary manner.

Digital games not only provoke individual emotions, but games are also used as tools for driving societal change. In 2016, the location-based mobile game *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016) became a world-wide phenomenon engaging large masses of players. *Pokémon Go* included specific locations as "gyms" (GPS points) for players to meet and play in actual places in different environments. One of these gyms was placed in the United States on the lawn of the famously conservative Westboro Baptist Church, which has attracted many headlines in its past of homophobic campaigns. One player defeated the gym and placed their *Pokémon* character, a Clefairy named "Loveislove", to rule the gym, making a specific action in regard to the location of the gym and the visible landmark. The church noticed the incident and responded on social media, claiming that playing *Pokémon Go* was sinful. (Hernandez 2016.) This one interaction, among many, shows how games are viable tools for stance-taking and voicing dispositions. On a side note, it is not exceptional, for many churches globally have been appointed as game locations. Interpretations for why this is suggests that churches are visible in urban environments and pose a relatively safe location to randomly visit (Hernandez 2016).

Games are profoundly affective (Anable 2018), but do they cross or renegotiate boundaries of cultural appropriateness and appropriation. Satire, or carnival, often inherently tests cultural attitudes of seriousness. As discussed previously, games and their implications of religious issues may in some cases become offensive or transgressive. Jan Wysocki discusses his game reading of religious motifs in *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), stating how there are limits to (religion) criticism by asking and pointing out the economical “risk”: do multimillion game corporations have the leverage to critique major religious movements, such as, in this case, Evangelical Christianity, in their games (2018)? Wysocki argues that mainstream and mass-market games, given their commercial stance, may only employ a superficial and safe discourse in their societal critique. His contemplations underline the elemental aspects of popular culture, namely, the fine line between making art, taking a stance, and selling consumer products.

Mainstream game makers and developers are becoming increasingly attentive to cultural appropriation and sensitivity, or at least it is a topic “worth” being associated with. Cultural representations especially associated with humor, or (game) play for that matter, have their fine lines, particularly in a religious context, raising the question when something is entertaining and in good or poor taste (McIntyre 2018, 1–11). In the age and trend of explicit cultural discussions of appropriation and representations, developers and studios are increasingly targeted for any misconduct. For example, the Polish studio behind the video game *Cyperpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) was called out for how they addressed issues concerning religion in their game. The studio stated that to portray a believable yet futuristic city scene, religion is a part of ordinary life and a representation of “authenticity” (Kim 2019). This statement and gesture suggest the reservation about engaging in certain cultural debates, representations, and expressions. Interesting in this incidence, however, is the use of the concept of authenticity.

Verisimilitude is a negotiated stance that calls for the audience’s capacity to navigate the nuances of (game) representation (Grufstedt 2020). Game developers similarly make decisions of probability, according to their aims of portraying, for example, historical facts and fiction (Grufstedt 2020, 245–251). The concept of realism is especially present in games that aim to portray a plausible ordinary life; therefore, religion or churches in plain Western picturesque town milieus are an expected imagery. One of the games discussed in sub-study II, *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), does not explicitly contemplate religion; however, it has a church placed in an ordinary American town environment (depicting the year 2013), as one would assume of such a representation.

The appearance of cultural signals, markers, or images associated with religion in video games does not in every case hint at a satirical expression, or a reading asking for stance-taking. That being said, it is simultaneously necessary to point out the literary notion of the so-called Chekhov’s gun, that nothing is placed in a story or narrative without later purpose (Rayfield 1998, 203). The same, I argue, applies to cultural representations in games. They are negotiated and purposefully placed in the game (by game makers) due to speculative reasons that may be deliberate, cultural, representational, or an echo of the contemporary times, values, and morals. Religion discussions placed in games are not formed in a vacuum but echo "crossings and dwellings" (Tweed 2006) under a larger societal and cultural canopy. Peter Berger's formulation (1967) of religion being or providing a "sacred canopy" reveals how it can afford tools for communication, reflection, and social construction among other cultural platforms (also noted by Lee 2015). This viewpoint would also provide some explanation for why religion(-like) discussions are found in popular culture and, accordingly, video games. They are a part of present contemporary life worlds in one way or another.

Without doubt, the vast pool of popular culture affords an arena of multiple inquisitive reflections (Ostwalt 2003, 154), and therefore it can be seen as endorsing a bricoleur attitude (Lévi-Strauss 1989) to be explored through varying sources, including video games.

Video games participate in cultural debates through representational nuances that are deliberately similar to playful and satiric expressions mirroring a relational cultural ambience. It is thus possible to summarize that video games take part in negotiating the limits of cultural expressions, religion, and satire.

4 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

The thesis is compiled of four published research articles (sub-studies I–IV). The studies focus on video game material from varying angles to discuss changing contemporary religious views and understanding on non-religion from a popular culture research stance. The thesis brings added value to an important societal element of popular culture and video games, which allocate an increasingly exceptional amount of space in people's lives. Changing religiosity or meaningfulness is created and contemplated in fictional and digital intersections that deserve attention; this thesis attends to this through the following study examples. Additionally, the thesis adds to understandings of methods by implementing and testing game-immanent and actor-centred approaches for each example. Lastly, the thesis adds to the religion and video game research fields' plausibility as entry points to a growing game studies sphere where player experiences and meaning-making are topical issues.

The first sub-study (I) contemplates game analysis practices and reading, leading to observing stance-taking and games as sociocultural commentaries on religions. The preliminary game-immanent approach opens future questions of player responses on the affect and impact of games; these are complemented by the later sub-studies. The first sub-study is discussed considering methodological distinctions of reading video games, and it further outlines the video game principles of conducting game analysis and a cultural reading of religion representations.

The second sub-study (II) continues by taking the results and discussion of the first study and further problematizing in a game-immanent frame the constructions of religion authorities. The study considers authority constructions and problems in relation to Max Weber's tripartite theory of religious authority. Here, the observed religion criticism, embedded in religious authority constructions, is further discussed with literary tropes of monstrosities and monsters. The ultimate religious antagonist reveals something of shared societal fears of losing individuality and autonomy.

The third sub-study (III) begins the actor-centred approaches of the thesis compilation, complementing the game-immanent observations made earlier. The study examines public online discussions by players on the theme of life-change and video games. The third study goes further into detail from a communal player stance, revealing implications of observing contemporary online communities sharing devotional practices.

The fourth and final study (IV) gathers the previous observations of religion sociocultural criticism, remarks on online player stories about impactful memories and communities, and concludes with player interviews examined in terms of contemporary religion discussions. The study question concerning narratives of meaningful encounters among players concludes the thesis enquiry of how religion criticism in video games represents changes in contemporary religious landscapes.

The themes and results presented in the following individual research contribution paragraphs (4.1–4.4) describe the according study aims and processes in comparison to one another. The study results are further examined and contemplated in the discussion chapter.

4.1 ARTICLE I RESULTS – ANALYSING AND READING ALTRUISTIC STANCE-TAKING ON RELIGION WITH VIDEO GAMES

The first sub-study (I) article titled "Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion" (2018) examines religion representations from a game-immanent approach. The results reveal common sociocultural critiques towards organized religions or faiths seen in current popular culture products. The examined games *BioShock* (2K Boston, 2K Australia 2007), *BioShock 2* (2K Marin 2010), and *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012), now dating back over a decade ago, still engage in topical societal discourse contemplating societal inequality and religious freedom. These games were chosen for analysis while, especially at the time of study, they were topical and known for their moral decision-enabling branching narratives, religious characters, and mainstream popularity.

The observations of emerging cultural discussions, or discourses, connect to the limits of satiric expression, as presented before. In addition, cultural expressions are seen as representations of "continual struggles", as Storey has stated (2009, xvi–xvii). These understandings give a background to the examination of religion and stance-taking seen in fictional video games and popular culture examined in the first sub-study.

The article contemplates reading the video game "text" of religion representations and analysing reciprocal content, that is, the player versus game relationship. The data was gathered from the mentioned video games via screen capture video and notes documenting relevant gameplay acts and scenes regarding the study questions on religion representations.

The article also serves as a commentary on method for analysing video games in a qualitative manner, namely, taking the individual player and their possible experiences into account, drawing on contemporary religion discussions for comparison.

Considering the game environment and acquired tools for examination, the article discusses the challenges of cultural readings of games that rely on subjective decisions in gameplay. The story and gameplay only unfold as the individual player proceeds with the game, a process described in general as player-response, originating from a reader-response understanding of reading and agency (i.e. Mortensen 2002; Iser 1978, 9, 49). The challenge of "reading" games is famously explained by Espen Aarseth in that games are ergodic texts, meaning that they consist of building events (gameplay and system) but also non-narrative actions (Aarseth 1997, 1–2, 93–95). As Aarseth himself observes, the reader has a vital position in making sense of the text (1997, 2). The reader-response debate has roots in literature and culture studies, as noted by Clarke (2007), for example, though in the context of games the debate has extended into a discussion of the player-game relationship.

As seen in the background premise of this thesis, narrative reality is constructed by the narrative self (Ricœur 1992); therefore, the player has a sense of autonomy in understanding and unravelling the play experience – telling the game story to themselves.

Ian Bogost, however, argues that games can be studied through what he calls procedural rhetoric, a way to set the focus of game analysis on rules, mechanics that forward certain ideologies, and discourses or themes in games (Bogost 2007, ix). This argument was primarily debated for its focus on the game system and its developers rather than the player's response or reception (Sicart 2011). These competing views can be seen in the present discussion of the game-immanent and actor-centred approaches towards game research. Both the player and the game form the unit of interpreting games.

Taking into consideration these principles of the player and game relation sets a methodological precondition or requirement for conducting game analysis, which is ultimately done through subjective play. As Roine notes, it is up to the player how they emerge from experiencing, reading, or playing games, or texts (2015; 2016). Therefore, sub-study I can be seen as describing the ambiguity of play experiences, reading, and the result of being on the fence of good and bad religion – so it is up to the player to make final interpretations.

Accordingly, sub-study I takes a diplomatic stance and sees the actor-centred approach overlapping with the game-immanent viewpoint. The selected games for research are additionally seen as "choice-matters" games, as they rely on narrative and gameplay devices of advancing certain scenes and actions through the choice the player makes, thus leaving some narrative paths untold. In many mainstream games, the player may often take a stance and "play your way", which seems to be a sought-out quality for game consumers (and game makers). Therefore, choosing a strategy for gameplay relates directly to the reading of the game becoming a part of the premise of analysis. Primarily for this reason, the chosen style of gameplay, that of altruistic aims, is explicated in detail in the article.

The chosen predisposition of altruistic gameplay strategy for game analysis was selected to reflect how games promote supposedly morally good choices in their progress. The ending scenes are taken into closer consideration in *BioShock, BioShock 2, and Dishonored*, with all of them teaching the lessons of forgiveness, atonement, and the benefit of merciful actions. The shared theme of allowed atonement towards enemies and wrongdoers comes across in the strategy of altruistic play.

The study contemplates and brings forth questions of how to interpret religion representations in video games. The methodological contribution of sub-study I relates to nuances of reading video game text and how a qualitative cultural reading, here regarding religion representations, is possible when taking game systems principles into account. The player's position is an ongoing negotiation with their surroundings in a game world. The procedural nature (Bogost 2007) of playing video games positions the method of reading in an interactive frame.

To sum up, sub-study I first raises the issue of methodological distinctions in conducting game analysis for cultural reading purposes, and practices of reading and playing with religion representations. Games, and especially the selected ones dealing with choice-systems or narrative variations, challenge aims of empirical data-gathering, even as play experiences are tightly tied to the player subject. Still, accepting these elements, argumentation and interpretations in congruence with theory discussions can be made, as the article shows.

Secondly, sub-study I contemplates the player's position of stance-taking. The player protagonist becomes the conversational counterpart in the critical religion narratives and commences in a cultural dialogue with the game. Counter-intuitively, when the game story aim is societal harmony, the player actions and gameplay consist of killing antagonist characters. This is also the case with the games in sub-study II. The first-person-shooter style of gameplay, where the act of killing is central to gameplay, has a long tradition in gamemaking despite good deeds being implemented in the overall game story (PBS Game/Show 2015).

As the study shows, organized, institutionalized religions or leadership become powerful and frightening opponents in dystopian worlds, where the player's actions are rooted in promoting societal peace and equality. Bosman notes that religions are well suited for societal criticism in dystopic narratives

(2014, 179), which this article agrees with. An end-of-the-world narrative is a crisis for worldviews as well.

Finally, religion is treated in the observed games as a societally constructive element, which is debated due to the politicization of religion in the game universes. The games can be seen as contemplating “the range of religious power, the question of what one can claim in the name of religion” (Beyer 2006, 6, contemplating scholarly debates of what is religion). Titus Hjelm calls for more work considering discursive religion “negotiations and struggles”, “good and bad religion”, and its variations in media (2019, 233). Popular culture and video games provide acute examples and possibilities for future research as contemporary lives divide into digital and transforming intersections. The aim or task of cultural research, including its critical aims and overarching concept, is often understood as having emancipatory aims, revealing or pointing out power relations (Clark 2007, 7–9).

The article also contemplates the possibility of games influencing the player’s ideologies and views on the themes at hand. With its game-immanent approach, the first sub-study reveals only the interpretative reading of the games done by the scholar, whereas the actor-centred approach taken in the later sub-studies underlines the player aspects of affect. These later observations, involving players’ stories of meaningful game encounters, confirm the plausibility of players being affected and impacted by games and their socio-critical commentaries, and game encounters formulating individual narratives of meaningfulness, tying the loop of the thesis sub-studies together.

The findings from the first sub-study led me to extend the game-immanent approach and the focus on examining critical cultural discussions concerning religion to further consider the whole corpus of the *Dishonored* games. The increasing tension of religions framed as misusing societal power presented in this game universe offered an excellent opportunity to deepen the theoretical discussions and negotiations of representations of authority.

4.2 ARTICLE II RESULTS – THE MONSTROUS RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

> Monsters do perform important work for us as individuals and communities, policing our boundaries, defining our norms and morals through their inversions and transgressions. Through their bodies, words, and deeds, monsters show us ourselves.
>
> Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel 2018, x.

The second sub-study (II) and article extend the game-immanent examination of religion discourses in video games by focusing on criticism in mainstream digital games, especially on the previously found religious authority constructions. The article re-examines some of the methodological choices and practices of conducting game analysis that were initiated in the first sub-study. In addition here, I briefly examine the second article and sub-study notions, the religious dominators as monstrosities (of religion), extending the notion of religions and fearful representations.

The aim in the sub-study to examine the authority relationships was to deepen the socio-critical remarks of religious authorities made in the first sub-study in relation to how religious authorities are constructed. In other words, the aim of the second sub-study was to consider the sociological and religious relations in the selected game universe in light of the player, the game world society, and how religions are organized, considering authorizing power relations. In addition, I see that the results of the sub-study connect to temporal cultural discussions of authority, dismantling attitudes towards organized and hierarchy-driven religion constructions represented in popular culture.

Monstrous religious authorities are a continuing theme or trope in popular culture or video game storytelling, as discussed previously. The power relations between organized religions and societies have numerous examples of encounters in known world history. The *Dishonored* games dwell in these narratives and create their interpretation, adding horrific elements; therefore, the aesthetics of monstrosities are chosen for comparison, extending the contemplation of the article on authority stories and religion in video games.

The preliminary remarks made in the first sub-study steered the second study's focus to revisit the *Dishonored* games by broadening the reading and analysis to the whole game universe: all the current published games, including *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012), the second game *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios 2016), and the third game *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* (Arkane Studios 2017). The shorter (in terms of length of gameplay) games with dlc (downloadable content), *Dishonored: The Knife of Dunwall* (Arkane Studios 2013a), and *Dishonored: The Brigmore Witches* (Arkane Studios 2013b), were also taken into focus.

The method and analysis of reading a reciprocal game and narrative material was returned to and refined. Differing from the first sub-study, the method of recording gameplay (video) was replaced by screen shots and handwritten notes serving as data, returning to a viable method also noted by Heidbrink, Knoll, and Wysocki (2016, 168). The recording method was changed due to the practical observation of time- and data-management, as well as increased familiarity with the games at hand. Less time was consumed taking notes, and screen shots of chosen significant play events include found game lore texts or other significant dialogue regarding the research questions. The data was then evaluated and analysed. The objective for gameplay was now to examine the relationship of the religious authorities and their followers, as constructed in the games. This was achieved by examining the other non-playable characters' relationship to the presented authority, the story antagonists, and the player protagonist's connection to these relations.

The religion authorities or specialists in the *Dishonored* universe are the antagonist characters. This means that the roles or attributes given to these figures were aimed to act against the objectives of the protagonist player character. The antagonist characters – or, in other words, the monsters of the game – are a part of the hostile world which the player character needs to overthrow or bring a resolution to.

In the second sub-study, I examine the qualities of the antagonist characters in comparison with Max Weber's tripartite distinction of religious authority. Especially the decision to further analyse the game universe through the game-immanent approach and analysis was due to Weber's own thought behind the construction of authority distinctions. The use of power in society (religion as a part of it) and in the game universe became visible in the dynamics of the one in command and the one being ruled, where a contract of obedience would naturally form (Allen 2004, 97–116). In order to theoretically discuss the authority constructions, Weber's tripartite distinctions of power and authority were used as a companion for discourse in the sub-study.

The ideal types of authority or domination, according to Weber are traditional, charismatic, and legal; these reflect historical depictions of authority and societal structures of authority divisions, which Weber famously formulated in *Economy and Society* (Weber [1922] 1978, 241–44). Traditional authority relates to conventions and customs of belief in inherited authority, such as a feudal leader. The charismatic authority is explained as an appealing or "charismatic" person or heroic figure, also as a religious leader – or, in modern language, a superhero. Weber himself described charismatic authority as having "superhuman" attributes. The legal authority ideal describes how domination is achieved through trust in official rules, such as trust in bureaucrats or public officers (Allen 2004, 97–116; Weber [1922] 1978, 241–44).

The tripartite authority ideals are expressed in the games through antagonist characters and their followers, as explicated earlier. The agents of authoritative positions linked to religion in the game world are identified in terms of the traditional and legal constructions of authority, primarily as the fictional organized religion of The Abbey of the Everyman, a religious and authoritative legal actor in the game universe's city scenes, present throughout the whole game series. The religion of The Abbey of the Everyman is constructed in the game world in a hierarchical and patriarchal manner. The fictional organization also has designated "Overseers" to police the streets and capture unwanted heretics, underlining the forceful, restrictive, and discriminative attributes linked to the "the Abbey". By defeating the Abbey, the player takes power away from the represented authority model.

The charismatic authority is identified as an antagonist character of a witch named Delilah Copperspoon. The character steps in as the main antagonist as the game series progresses. The charismatic domination of Delilah centres on her devoted followers, whom she ruthlessly uses for her own gain, that being eternal domination. When the player protagonist defeats Delilah and restores peace yet again to the *Dishonored* universe, the player simultaneously discards the concept of charismatic authoritative power.

The Outsider is a mythical deity character present in all the *Dishonored* games, representing the cosmological milieu of the game universe. The Outsider deity is hunted by The Abbey of the Everyman, for he represents beliefs and traditions that could threaten the power of the organization. In the latest game additions, however, the Outsider is represented as an ambiguous authority to be defeated or exposed. The Outsider falls into the charismatic authority category; however, he is not to be defeated in a similar sense as the previous antagonists. The defeat of the Outsider involves finding out his origins and secret. The Outsider deity is revealed to have originally been a man trapped by magic and forced into his role. The nihilistic frame encompassing the Outsider storyline dismisses the charismatic authority's mythical position and disentangles the construction of their power.

As part of the protagonist's task and journey, the opposing forces – that is, monsters – are faced and conquered. A conclusion and result of the sub-study is that the gameplay and storytelling act of defeating the authorities also underline the game universe's own examination of how these authority constructions would prevent or sustain the continuation of a society in the hands of such leadership; the answer is, poorly. In the end, all the authority models are discarded, raising the individual protagonist (the player) as the liberator from societal injustice and for individual freedom. The player protagonist can discover first-hand the faulty religious authority models and, in a sense, take part in cultural discussions of authority constructions and religious domination in society.

The monsters of the *Dishonored* universe – all of the antagonist characters, or the religious authorities – raise feelings of fear, moral discomfort, or horror. Here, however, a mythical horror or "sublime" of unknown horrific representations (Švelch 2018) does not straightforwardly apply. The horror in *Dishonored*, I claim, is created in the unjust milieu established by the monstrous leaders. The Abbey or Delilah Copperspoon, or even the ambiguous deity known as the Outsider, are plain to see for the player, but their existence threatens the core values of post-modern Western individual lifestyles, namely, control over one's beliefs and individual aspirations in life and society. In a way, the monstrous of the religious authority representations play and challenge the idea of the culturally contextual "assumed or expected moral purity" of religious leaders (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, 34). However, as discussed before, game makers have at their disposal a variety of factual and historical material of cases of religious leaders misusing their position; they source these for design processes, not to mention literacy examples (see, e.g., George Orwell's *1984* (1949) of a world of strict societal domination and surveillance similar to the universe of the *Dishonored* series).

One aspect related to religious authorities that is left out of the religion criticism in the Dishonored series is the existential nature of life itself. Cosmological or essential concepts are not discarded in the games, despite The Outsider being deduced has having mortal origins, while magic or the existence of an otherworldly planes is not debated. This notion is tied to the monstrous rationales of domination and fear of losing individual control to something other than oneself. The unknown qualities of life and its existence, according to the game universe, seem not to be framed as inspiring fear.

However, the shared elemental fear and danger present in the *BioShock* games, *Far Cry 5*, and the *Dishonored* series is the idea of control, power, and domination falling into wrong hands. The monstrous quality of religious authorities is created between the relation of leaders and their followers. The followers need only place their blind faith in their leaders, a warning that the games all communicate.

4.3 ARTICLE III RESULTS – FAITH EXPRESSIONS AND COMMUNALITY

The Last of Us (fan) game community saw a change in their rituals – or, in other words, fan performances – during 2020. The fans of the game and the game studio had over the years created a custom to celebrate the story universe date of a global pandemic emergence, "Outbreak Day", on the 26th of September. In 2020, the story event seemed problematic, as an actual global pandemic derailed the appropriateness of the celebrations. The change or rebranding of festivities, initiated by the game studio Naughty Dog, was named *The Last of Us Day* (Ruppert 2020; Last of Us wiki).

Arguably, the performances of devoted communities, such as found in sub-study III and presented in the according article, change or transform due to topical, societal, or authoritative actions and events. The year 2020 saw many changes in the day-to-day practices of religious communities, when distancing became an obligatory objective. The fan community rituals – or, as articulated in the sub-study's language, the observed shared testimonials and narrative performances – underline the contemporary nature and fluidity of digital communities. Despite their "un-tangibility", they also face changes in communal practices.

The third study underlines the "religion-like" aspects awash in popular culture, examining how emerging communities form inner connections, support systems, and narrated expressions, as well as performances and communicative mannerisms perhaps more commonly associated with religious communication. These confluences with religious expressions can be said to depict contemporary landscapes of today's myriads of worldviews. Consequently, the study addresses especially the actor-centred approach according to the thesis enquiry: how is religion constructed and represented in recent mainstream digital games, and how do players encounter religion or religion-like aspects in recent mainstream digital games?

The third sub-study focuses on active meaning-making in popular culture and video games framed by the actor-centred study approach. The premise was to look at life-change narratives, which were especially prominent in online discussions. At the time of data-gathering, the video game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) came up repeatedly in online searches regarding forum discussions and videos on the topic of "life-change". Therefore, the game became a central focus of the study enquiry.

In the data, understood here as literary life-stories, players tell and preform concepts and content from the game to express how much the game and the gameplay experience had meant to them.

The data was selected from appropriate public and freely visible *YouTube* videos and online *Reddit* discussions concerning the theme or narrative "how video games changed my life" where *The Last of Us* game was mentioned. The connection between *Reddit* and *YouTube* platforms was found due to their internal cross referencing of the narrative; some discussions would point to video links describing similar topics. For research purposes, the videos and discussion threads were recorded or downloaded as PDF files, and thus extracted and separated as data for a qualitative reading of text and narrative. The extraction of data could also be defined as implementing means of "online ethnography" when the observed narratives are connected to the community they originate from (Lamrichs 2018, 54–58). The narratives were compared to the social context (text thread) they were posted in.

Specifically, the study looked at 5 videos and 27 online discussion threads discussing the notion of games having changed players' lives. The number of discussions meant how many were found overall during the time period of data-gathering with the life-change search words. Most times, the "change" was positively described. The mode of narrated speech or utterance was analysed using Tuija Hovi's notions of religious speech as community building and self-transformative performances, or faith expressions (Hovi 2006; 2007; 2016). This resulted in a comparative approach towards the communal practices of emerging fan collectives, and their profound testimonials of self-transformative narratives. The process of coming together also highlighted the discussion participants' individual and emancipatory revelations of their life-change narratives. The act of sharing a sensitive life event, through which the game story, characters, or themes were contemplated, sometimes included difficult or painful memories and live events.

The third sub-study found that social and narrative motivations steering the sharing of the life-change narrative in this case expressed belonging, a reformulation of the self, and transformation. The shared narrative gave access to community (belonging), the narratives were tools for reformulating oneself (reformulation), and the life-change narrative had a transformative quality in its expressive performance in the online discussions (transformation).

The communal yet individual sharing of life-change narratives was always derived from the source of inspiration, *The Last of Us* game. The game and its recent sequel *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020) arguably represent innovative and lauded landmarks on how video games can use storytelling, interact with players, and engage them in intricate ways (e.g. *The Last of Us Part II*: Bafta Awards 2021, Game of the Year). The games both heavily use cut-scene video animations to advance the story, and player autonomy is occasionally restricted in gameplay. Due to these deliberate restrictions used in forwarding gameplay, undeniable frustrated emotions or transgressions nevertheless affect in engaging ways when delivering an imagined reality of the individual's limited mode of living in a post-apocalyptic environment.

The game stories and gameplay scenes situated in survival, flight, or fight situations frame the social emotions of personal survival and the moral thought entwined with it. Both games contemplate aspects of survival ethics and emotional challenges of revenge and peace.

When the story of everyday life in the game universe is represented as direct survival, the problems in the comfort of the players' home may begin to present themselves in a different light. This is seen in the observed shared online narratives. One player expressed that the "endure and survive" theme of the game underlines the aspect of one's own survival; if they, the characters, can make it in the game world, so can the player make it here. As Nicolle Lamerichs writes, "alignment with the media text is a purposeful and reflexive activity because fans consciously reiterate their feelings toward the source text" (2018, 19). This also describes a process that is fairly visible in the observed *The Last of Us* emerging fan community.

The sub-study did not take into larger discussion aspects of fandom or a fan study, despite those being given subsidiary recognition in the article. The choice was made in light of the study aim to focus on the functionality and constructions on speech community formations and comparisons. However, the topic is briefly revisited here. Hirsjärvi notes that the treatment and understanding of fans have changed in half a century, from disoriented societal and psychological profiles to a nuanced way of meaning-making and identity work (2009, 16). The conceptions of audience, reception, and receiver have changed in fan studies into a more problematized one as time has passed (Hirsjärvi 2009, 16). Fans and other communities of devotion have similarities in their expressive and collective ways of being together, as the third sub-study shows.

Fan studies, one aspect of qualitative studies of (media) audiences, since the 1980s have been based on the foundational ideas of active reception and participatory cultures (Lamerichs 2018, 15; Jenkins 2009, 5–6). Fans or fandom, with the latter underlining the participatory aspect of fans re-producing new texts and expressions, holds a firm place in culture, being even more accessible now through online platforms (Lamerichs 2018, 15–17). The "intense socialising", as Lamerichs calls it (2018, 17), is evident in the data observed in the third sub-study.

The sharing of the life-change narratives arguably reflected an emerging community around the game – and around the opportunity to share, welcoming the narrative-sharer into a group – to receive gratification. According to Lamerichs, fans are individuals driven and connected by the love for a (media) text (2018, 14). She writes about fans:

> Ultimately, affect helps construct the identity of the fan, which is grounded in an emotional ownership of media content. This emotional ownership is achieved through creative practices, the purchase of objects or memorabilia, and the establishment of social bounds with like-minded individuals. (Lamerichs 2018, 19)

Specifically, the "ownership" and effect of *The Last of Us* fans steered the socialization of the group. Lamerichs also notes that affect, or fandoms, is not only derived from aesthetical appeal or social conventions but as entitling ways of "making sense of the world" (2018, 19), a fundamental aspect with which I strongly agree in light of this thesis' results and analysis. Drawing on Hovi's study among religious communities and their language as community-building and self-transformative, the parallel or analogy with fan-based communities is evident. The narratives of any devoted community follow converging paths and, on the other hand, show the possibility of such communities emerging.

The shared communication drew fans together and afforded a space to testify about one's story. The aspects of community and shared communication become prevalent around a joint aim, even devotion, and content, in a similar way as religious communities. Woodhead argues that in today's Western atmosphere regarding "non-religion", the sociology of religion research needs to observe the larger outlook of culture and values renegotiating the aim of research (2017, 261–262). Regarding secularization as larger changes in temporal societal-historical constructions, formal belonging to religious institutions or organizations becomes unnecessary (Woodhead 2017). In the institutionally post-religious landscape, meaning is made and formed in alternative informal communities, as the third sub-study observes. The emerging fan community acts arguably as an example of how the aspiration to be heard and met exists, at least alongside formal communities.

The observed *The Last of Us* fans show the coming together of a community of shared narratives and shared culture contexts expressing deep affections and devotion highlighting the needs and wants to express narratives of life-change. Fluid online intersections and communities provide accessible opportunities and reception for such contemporary demands, to express one's meaningful encounters.

4.4 ARTICLE IV RESULTS – COMMUNICATION, THE SELF, AND SUDDEN AFFINITIES

The fourth and final sub-study further addresses the actor-centred approach by focusing on player experiences, the actors, and users of games. Differing from the third sub-study, the fourth study focuses directly on asking the players' experience, their narratives, rather than observing source material on social and communal expressions on meaningful play. While the third study discussed the manners and ways in which fan-based communities converge with religious communities' speech performances, the fourth study centres on the individual narratives of described experiences and possible confluences surrounding commonly understood religious expressions, only to arrive at the centre of non-religion discussions.

The study's main question is how video game players self-narrate meaningful connections with video games. The study focused especially on how narrative themes were composed by players on meaningful experiences with video games. A meaningful encounter was understood as close to an "affinity", but demanding substantive attributes which the study sought to find (Mason 2018).

The decision to name the player-game event as a meaningful encounter rather than "player engagement" (Lankoski 2012) in general arose from the aim to underline a category of affinity and highlight the larger scope of popular culture or fiction consumption behind games. The meaningful encounters which were brought up in the study were said to happen in a reflective relationship with the game, not necessarily representing engagement with the game per se. As Lankoski pointed out, there are questions to be asked about play and emotions, and of the aesthetic experiences that games induce (2012). The religion and game interaction research frame therefore also offers another entry point for discussions on experiences and emotions with games.

Data was gathered from a sample of 14 accounts and interviews, treated as narratives, among Finnish adult video game players in 2019. It was found that meaningful encounters with video games were narrated in terms of three distinct themes. Interviews were chosen as a study method to stress the actor-centred approach in finding how players themselves would express issues related to or found in previous game-immanent sub-studies.

For data gathering, a semi-structured interview method was chosen and modified from an argumentative qualitative interview (developed, for example, by Vesala and Rantanen 2007). Originally the method was developed for examining attitudes as discursive concepts (Pesonen and Vesala 2007, 29–32; Pesonen, Niska and Vesala 2013); however, in this study the method acted as a tool for eliciting interviewee narratives. The interview was constructed in statements or arguments that were revealed to the interviewee one by one. In this case, the statements acted as gateways for additional questions that would bring forth narratives of meaningful encounters with video games. The pre-formulated statements also presented commonly known language and concepts related to religious speech or expressions. Religious speech was selected for its plausibility regarding previous research done among religion and video games.

The hypothesis behind the study enquiry related to what Ostwalt has argued about the cultural sphere of popular culture, namely, that it is an arena through which beliefs and values are understood (2003, 154). The sub-study in its early stages sought to see how players would talk about beliefs, meaningful encounters, and video games. It quickly became evident, though, that players would discard religion-related language, primarily because a majority of the interviewees themselves did not identify as religious, as told during the interviews. In addition, all of the interviewees self-described themselves as generally non-religious, reflecting a common and current Finnish cultural-historical context. The religious landscape in Finland today reflects changes taking place at large in Europe and the Nordic countries, where formal participation in traditional religious institutions is becoming less; however, the public visibility of religions is greater (Furseth 2017, 1, 305). It is to be noted, however, that the diminishing participation of traditional faith communities can be a result of a larger cultural and societal "subjective turn" where the sense of individual authorship of faith management prevails, and general attachment to traditional self-positions, duties, and roles are changing, giving way to a "culture of choice and subjectivity" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 2–3; Furseth 2017, 1, 305), including new language and concepts describing contemporary faith.

The language and narratives in which players described their encounters with meaningful game memories were something else than the language or concepts related to commonly known or used words for traditionally religious experiences. It is worth self-criticizing, in hindsight, that preferred language, whether understood as religious or not, and the sense of belonging to a religion can be separate things. Participation, belonging, and religiosity mirror a larger heterogeneous (Finnish) landscape, which varies but is not limited to aspects of gender, generation, and social status. The interviewees came from varied backgrounds not representing any specific trait other than mostly belonging to an age bracket of twenty to thirty years old, placing them loosely in the generation of "Millennials" or Generation Y category. This generation is known for its church-leaving propensity, "no longer believing in belonging", placing high value on one's own beliefs and life-views, and discarding tradition as an authority (Niemelä 2015). In this light, the non-religious flair of the interviewees and their preferred language mirror shared generational habits and aspirations. Although the non-religious and generational tendency was consequently apparent in the interview narratives, the narratives themselves serve as data on Millennial talk about meaningful experiences. The fourth sub-study can be seen as producing case material on an otherwise religiously ambiguous generation and its accounts of life-views and meaning-making.

In focusing on the everyday expressions of religion, or religion-like speech, narratives as research material have the potential to speak to larger cultural tensions and schemes (Ammerman 2013, 8). As Ammerman introduces, "Stories are important, in part, because they are not merely personal. They exist at the intersection of personal and public" (2013, 8).

During the interviews and later thematic data analysis, the narrative themes of "Big questions", "Life events", and "Enchantment" became common denominators when describing a meaningful encounter with video games. These themes would come up in player stories about what they looked for and wanted in video games, reflecting an explorative attitude. In all the narrative themes, the reflective focus for the player was on negotiation and discovery of the self.

Big questions related to existential contemplations with games and their multimodal stories. Sometimes the moral dilemmas presented by games or morally uncomfortable characters would make players reconsider their attitudes toward real-life encounters by presenting challenging and morally discomforting situations. In these cases, players would tell that they had tried to learn tolerance and resilience from these situations. At other times, falling under this theme, players would recall game situations connected to historical events of unjust treatment of marginalized people. Players would contemplate their increasing understanding or empathy towards such remarks and recollections.

Encounters with life events would awaken the player to reflect on an event in their own life through a matching or similar game event, or the act of play. In otherwise stressful or challenging times in life, games would provide a break or safe space to spend time. At other times, the interviewed players described a revelation, harking back to a memory in their life of a particularly sensitive or stressful moment. This revelation worked to the player's benefit and was considered a positive event. The game event gave deeper understanding, knowledge, and tools for self-reflection (also noted by, e.g., Mekler, Iacovides, and Bopp 2018).

The Finnish Player Barometer found that young respondents in particular singled out digital play as creating a place to ease bad feelings. Overall, it showed that Finns saw gaming in a positive light (51.4% of respondents) (Kinnunen, Taskinen and Mäyrä 2020). Similar notions were recognized in the fourth sub-study interviews as well.

The theme of enchantment described the immersive and aesthetic explorative mind-set when dwelling in game worlds. Daniel Vella (2015) calls this the "sublime" in ludic worlds: "At its core, the sublime has continued to refer to the same aesthetic feeling attendant upon the contemplation of an object that exceeds both the field of perception and the grasp of the mind's faculties, and that opens up, in its various developments, to feelings of awe or terror." This comes close, or even analogical, to what players described as enchantment in game worlds. Enchantment at first sight as a feeling or sensation was described as a surprising event encountered in game worlds. The experience of enchantment would have been hard or even impossible to duplicate with the same games, the interviewed players shared.

In the third sub-study, I observed the emerging online community and its narratives related to religious communities' expressions or performatives. Here the examination focused on the group's social construction of certain communal performatives and narratives. Sean McCloud and Matt Hills argued how spoken common similarities to religious expressions are used to express very important and valued cultural meanings in society and in secular (fan) contexts (2002; 2003). This applies also to the individual player narratives observed in the fourth sub-study. Opposed to the third sub-study, however, it would seem that in an in-person interview setting, when the affirming (online) community is lacking a social setting, individual player narratives prefer utterances specifically outside of shared “religious expressions”. The in-person interview narratives did not display the testimonial tone observed in the third sub-study.

One major reason for this is that the third study used data reflecting an emerging community, a variable directing communication, whereas the interviews were especially targeted towards the individual player’s narratives. The social setting where the communication, or narrative, was forwarded changed from communal to the individual. The social elements of belonging and sharing meaningful encounters in a public online group chat were not present.

The identity negotiation reflected chosen language and meanings. The interviewed players chose, as was brought up during interviews, expressions and narration in accordance with their inner conviction or preference. Some players stated, for example, that if an interview statement or concept was not appealing to them, they would use other expressions affording meaningful descriptions, such as “big questions”. Therefore, inner convictions or preferences can be seen as narrated in terms of identity negotiation (Ricœur 1992).

In line with post-religious discussions concerning contemporary societal religious landscapes, the fourth sub-study revealed that the interviewed players would rather talk about “big questions” than religion. The meaningful encounters or affinities frame sudden remarkable events with video games reflecting the player’s self. The study on non-religious players additionally highlights how (secular) adult video game players choose to narrate, in general, important life events in relation to popular culture. The study interviews showcase narratives and accounts of how adult life worlds are enriched and constructed with (popular) culture.

The chosen expressions, narrative themes, relate in this line of thought to theorizations of how religion is a matter of communication (i.e. Pace 2011; Arens 2011). Even though the player interviews speak of a need to explore and express meaningful encounters with video games, they share a similar plane with religious performances. The players choose to express themselves individually, contextually negotiating non-religious expressions or extending away from recognized “religion-related discourse” (Cotter 2020, 129). Culturally visible non-religious communities and religious communities both provide tools (e.g. words, speech) affecting each other, providing “canopies” to tap into for existential thought and expressions (Lee 2015, 191; Berger 1967).

Contemporary lives are entangled with “projects of the self”, as McCloud argues (2003), similarly describing qualities of discourse, or narrative, in the identification of self-reflections with video games. The “persuasion” that Bogost claims as affording the interactive interface of video games systems (2007, ix) could also be argued to invoke the drive to explore an unknown space, the game, and interactive possibilities for existential self-reflection. The game resides in between the aim for self-knowledge, but also as a vehicle inspiring the self-explorative journey. Lastly, if compared to the generational tendencies of Millennials, it seems even logical that self-projects and inspirations to encounter meaningfulness in game worlds would be prominently present today, and growing (Niemelä 2015; Puffer 2018).

5 DISCUSSION – CONFLUENCES OF MEANINGFULNESS

In this thesis, I have observed and examined diverse circumstances where implications of religion and non-religion converge in the example of topical video game culture. This has been done by using and stressing both a platform-centred approach, which is (game) medium-immanent, and an agency, actor-centred approach. These studied circumstances and confluences speak volumes of current motions in religious and worldview discussions. I define them further as relating to characters and dynamics on qualities of affect, communication, and community in popular culture and religion, as seen in the thesis' sub-studies. As Sofia Sjö and Marcus Moberg argue, among others, popular culture research provides serious prominence and relevance to the fields of sociology and the study of religion (2018, 300).

Kate McCarthy comments on the "affect realm" of religion in the US that it mostly "happens" within popular culture (The Religious Studies Project podcast 2016). If popular culture is the main domain driving and negotiating concepts and issues relating to religions (in a Western scene) for a wide audience, then modes of confluences – affect, communication and community – afford one way in which religion or religion-like content and affect can be observed in regard to this study's results. Similarly, regarding popular culture, Ammerman (2007, 5) previously asked, "How does religion operate in the modern world?" Answering to these continuing enquiries, this thesis has observed the resulting confluences of meaningfulness between the peripheries of contemporary religion in video game culture.

In the discussion part of the thesis, I contemplate further the sub-study results and implications concerning these central remarks, discussing a framework of observations constituting affect, communication, and community: modes which relate to the thesis' research question of examining digital game culture, religion, meaning-making, and meaningfulness in today's life worlds. This approach can be viewed in relation to what Lynch discussed as a functional approach to popular culture and religion (2007), vis-à-vis what has later been discussed as "affects".

First, I discuss here the affects that players and games seem to express and communicate, and, on the other hand, the theoretical tendencies of game studies and the study of religion to observe expressions of affect in (gamer or player) experiences. I begin this chapter by discussing the concept of "big questions", as well as the argument I make in the fourth sub-study (IV). I continue the discussion with discursive dilemmas concerning concept-making within research lingering on the non-religion sphere, popular culture communities and their broken heterogeneity, and practical implications regarding humanistic game studies and player experiences for aspirations of the industry.

In the "Further Directions" section, I discuss the theoretical and practical aspects of researching, examining contemporary religion and popular culture.

5.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS – CONCEPTS, READING, AND AFFECT

The theoretical dimensions of the study address and shed light on conceptual conventions and definitions by suggesting and extending the idea of "big questions" (Taves 2018), regarding the generally expressed "religion-like" or "grey areas" of religion (Love 2010, 193).

Often the mediated "trope" of religious institutions and technology poses that they are by default counterparts opposed to one another (Campbell 2010, 4). Heidi A. Campbell states that "official" religious communities negotiate their relation or engagement with society by developing new media or technology in complex stages in regard to "social shaping" (Campbell 2010, 42). Drawing from the social shaping of technology (STT), Campbell proposes that technology similarly not only determines conventions of usage, but religions negotiate and assimilate the relation on a social scale, resulting, as Campbell proposes, in a "religious-social shaping of technology approach" (Campbell 2010, 42–58). However, when in today's digitally saturated lives the same relation is examined between players and videogames, the trope becomes unclear. It is not about whether technology is against religions – by far this thesis has numerous examples of video games discussed eagerly in terms of issues concerning religions and beliefs – but it is about blurring the lines of technological and religious spaces.

5.1.1 SCHOLARLY CONCEPTS, PLAYER COMMUNICATION, AND COMMITMENT

The observed players (in sub-study IV) were not inclined to express their meaningful encounters with words used commonly in relation to religion. However, the players still ended up talking about big questions, existential examinations, and self-reflections on enchanting experiences. Such choice of words mirrors preferred communication, identification, and commitment and engagement, if it is accepted that the words we use have this manner of power of self-identification (on words as transformation, see Latour 2013, 70–74).

While my research on the everyday and mundane among nonexperts focused especially on a lived and common scope of people today, the "religious" is not present in a traditional sense. The research of the "everyday" therefore asks for extended concepts, such as "big questions". Ann Taves suggests that especially "big questions" as a research approach, hypernym, and concept has the leverage to be permeable and still touch on shared meanings with religions (Taves 2018).

Considering discourse on the concept of "religiosities", as Ammerman suggests naming the varieties of religious implication in popular culture, offers another plausible concept worth bringing forth in the study of the everyday (Ammerman 2007, 9). Religion is hardly ever only "one thing", and it does not necessarily mean following institutional religious authorities, as Ammerman explains. The "bricolage and hybridity" of the spiritual (Ammerman 2007, 8), religious, or non-religious thought comes through especially in the player interviews of this thesis (sub-study IV). Concerning theory and method, Ammerman also asks how and what research should be exactly looking for when religion has not disappeared from societal spheres (Ammerman 2007, 14) or popular culture. Now over a decade has passed, a more relevant question to be asked could be how the visibility of religion has changed in popular culture. Additionally, what emerging or subsiding conceptual issues could be topical in understanding current religiosity or non-religiosity, such as "existential cultures"?

In light of this thesis' research contribution, material, data, and results, the everyday lived experiences of religion and cultural expressions in popular culture reflect big questions of meaning-making. The frameworks of big questions and existential cultures offer fruitful ground increasingly related to the expanding "non-religious" research scene (Lee 2015, 2018), including in popular culture and video games.

5.1.2 VIDEO GAMES COMMUNICATE SUBTLE, CONTEMPORARY, AND CRITICAL VIEWS OF RELIGION

From the game-immanent approach, when attributes connected with religions are implemented into game worlds, it often seems that they are present to set the tone for the moral dilemma at hand, the power-hungry leader, the oppression of people, and the rule of the dominating antagonist. While this is not the case in all game examples presented in this text, the main analysed games narratives work in favour of this plot line. Religion understood as relating to the debated and traditional world religion paradigm appears in video games as a spice and flavour for moral dilemmas. Regarding a public discussion of religion in popular culture, as discussed earlier in the text, attributes connected to religions or faith often receive an untouchable status due to fear of public blasphemy or disrespect.

Recent video games still discuss religion and societal issues, although the strictly critical tone is saturated into a more fluid scale, as discussed earlier. An interesting example of absent religion is from the indie game *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), which is aesthetically a pixel-art representation of a farming simulation that tells the story of a North American small town. The highly popular PC-game (for example, it holds a firm top place on *Steam's* game shop's download list) is said to hold appeal for its nostalgic artistic choices and calm idleness of gameplay. *Stardew Valley* is about moving to a small town, building a farm, making it flourish, and helping other townspeople live their lives. There is no straightforward antagonist or threat that is present. What might be odd about the game's town, though, is the lack of a church (Rautalahti and Saukko 2020).

Stardew Valley's religion criticism is not embedded in displaying forceful authorities, but in the lack of such representations. The assumption that an average small town would host a chapel of sorts, or a comedy-relief wicker for that matter, is a literary trope itself. In *Stardew Valley*, the central role and function of upholding yearly rotations and seasonal festivities, which could be seen as belonging to a priest character, is held by the town mayor and city hall. In this new paradigm, the mayor takes up the traditional role of the priest and runs the town's life. Religion in *Stardew Valley* is present as a fictional denomination called Yoba, which some folks subscribe to and others shy away from, as evidenced in character speech and narratives. Yoba is not a central theme in the game, and it merely comes up in remote character stories that are not necessarily visible to a casual player. While the inspiration for Yoba can be debated, the religion representations in *Stardew Valley speak* through their absence, and through the awkwardness with which some characters treat Yoba followers (Rautalahti and Saukko 2020).

Compared to the observed games in sub-studies I–II, the morally uncomfortable societal atmosphere in the *Dishonored* series supports contemplation on categorical transgressions vis-à-vis the idea of religious authorities. Noël Carroll defines horror as something impure and dangerous, directly related to what Mary Douglas formulated in *Purity and Danger* (1966) of categories and schemes directing our actions around culturally negotiated elements (Carroll 2013, 302–314). The horrific representation of religions in the *Dishonored* series threatens something perhaps familiar, safe, and traditional. Similarly, Elvira Torill Mortensen and Kristen Jørgensen ask what the "sense of transgressions" in games is, as gameplay often includes exposure to disturbing, stereotypical, and violent content (2020, 1–2). While Carroll debated similar aspects in his idea of "the paradox of horror" in horror films or aesthetics (1990), Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020, 3) argue that the playful attitude, or play, mitigates the transgressiveness of games. Arguably, "playful provocations" mediate negotiations of norms, social rules, and the limits of cultural expressions in time and space (Mortensen and Jørgensen

2020, 34). Provocations understood as relating to religions in games might be explained by aesthetic or political decisions, namely, the artistic expressions of game makers. However, the reception is culturally, contextually, and societally received and debated.

Rather than describing monstrous religious authorities and misuse of power, as is evident in sub-studies I–II, the religion criticism in recent games follow subtle interpretations of a nonappearance of religions. As discussed earlier in the case of *Ghost of Tsushima*, or *Journey*, religion is an extremely fruitful resource for story and gameplay, not to mention the enticing dramatic reactions or emotions it may invoke in players and public discussions. Religion offers collective stories, memories, and emotions to tap into, affording an imaginative framework for design and play.

5.1.3 AFFECTIVE TURN(S) IN GAME CULTURE AND RELIGON IN POPULAR CULTURE

While players in the later sub-studies (III–IV) express narratives of profound self-reflection, what they are also expressing are representations of affect (with video games). This section discusses the possibilities of approaching (non-)religion representations in game culture, as observed in this thesis, and the continuance of reflective “crossings and dwellings” in popular culture through the affect discussion concerning the study of religion and game studies.

Affect describes the process leading to effect, a route or path to an outcome. Often it is understood as a subjective and non-subjective manifestation of culturally and socially circulated “discursive and non-discursive” sensations and emotions (Rantasila 2020, 50). The conceptual “affective turn” (Patricia Clough 2008) described across a multitude of fields, simply described, centres on the core of viewing and researching causality. As Michael Hardt additionally explains, affect is “both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it” (2008, ix), as well as the process in between, fluctuating within respective fields. The thesis’ manner of operationalizing affect is additionally discussed in Chapter 3.

Affects are socially and otherwise transmissible and susceptible to environmental changes (Greenwald Smith 2011, 243). Affect here is understood as something corporeal, embodied, or bodily, including felt, expressed, and communicated emotions, narratives, and recollections, considering player experiences (Hardt 2008, ix–xii). Rachel Greenwald Smith reflects on affect theory, stemming from social sciences and media studies, as preconscious reactions where changes in social relations alter effects, as highlighted in sub-study III. The communal social circulation of shared narratives also invites engaging with and sharing additional stories.

The shared effects of video games, player communities, and individuals, especially observed in sub-studies III–IV, transform video games into vessels of affects. The affect discussion connects to contemplations in the study of religion, especially on the “subjective turn” or “subjective thesis” of modern-day living (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 2–3, 9–10). People imagine themselves to be individual and unique in their experiences and reactions, though in tandem they reflect historical and social “shared dimensions” (Greenwald Smith 2011, 243). Greenwald Smith additionally argues that affects therefore present relevance to the study of cultural productions (2011), similarly debated by Clarke in popular culture studies and research of the “everyday” (2007).

The meaningful affects of games are shared and passed on. First, the idea of transmissible cultural affects resembles what Danièle Hervieu-Léger formulated as viewing religion as a chain of memory: when knowledge, tradition, memories, and interpretations are passed on (2000, 123), the affects arguably pass on as well. Kirstin Peterson acknowledges “the significance of affect in facilitating religious connection” in recent religion and media scholarship relating to emotions and experiences (2020, 5). Experiences and devotions are similarly found in fan communities and video game cultures. Even an early formulation of digital games describes video games as cultural and cognitive artefacts representing socialized external memory compartments (Greenfield 1994, 5). Additionally, Audrey Anable (2018) wrote later on the connections between digital games and affect, arguing how today’s adults have memories and accounts of how games shaped their lives and past experiences. Secondly, the reflection on the affective turn in cultural studies seems close to what Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead formulated as the subjective turn and thesis, mentioned above, that the current Western trend of societal and cultural living is “subjective life”-oriented rather than “life-as”, where an authoritative (religious) element would manage the individual’s faith and worldview cognition (2005, 6–7). The subjective turn of religiousness and spirituality is rendered from larger societal and historical changes (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 2–3), which arguably resonates in cultural studies and research placing importance on the individual and their affects.

Regarding affect, impact, and player response management, the negative reactions – namely, transgressions – have received attention in game scholarship. Mortensen and Jørgensen studied gameplay experiences (using a control group of players) with transgressive encounters (2020). Mortensen and Jørgensen describe their results of transgressive encounters on three different levels. The player is the target of the transgressive encounter in games, while games are experienced procedurally; secondly, the player reacts and manages the encounter through emotions; and thirdly, the player enters what Mortensen and Jørgensen describe as the ludic sublime (2020, 195–197;

Vella 2015). The "ludic sublime" (Vella 2015), according to Mortensen and Jørgensen, is an overwhelming sensation of momentary awe and wonder, which may as a transgression be defined as either the complexity of the game, not seeing the end of the game, emotional management, or active mitigation of the complexity (2020, 197–198). As discussed previously, the fourth sub-study (IV) regards the "ludic sublime" as a concept that is close to enchantment, which additionally furthers the scholarly discussion on the varied descriptions of an affective encounter "between immersion and aesthetics" (Rautalahti 2020).

Regarding affect, player response, and gameplay management, the fourth sub-study on meaningful encounters does not take a preliminary stance on whether an encounter would be transgressive, or "good or bad", but observes though similar player experience management as described by Mortensen and Jørgensen. Found also in sub-studies I–II, the level of player autonomy and subjective play in a game can affect the reception of a represented concept, especially the take on religion being good or bad.

5.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS – COMMUNITIES OF GAME CULTURE

The aim of this chapter is to voice selected positions within game culture and game communities. First, I discuss the player's self-negotiated positions and the positive implications of fiction consumerism. The second aim here is to discuss the practical implications of cultural research and its application for industry-motivated aims.

The communities of game culture defined here are understood as the groups using games and groups making games. The thesis caters to both parties in the game-immanent and actor-centred viewpoints in their respective sub-studies. These communities are discussed further in light of some practical remarks made during the research of the sub-studies.

The "making games" group is discussed here through methodological possibilities and future applications of the method used in the fourth sub-study (IV). The community of the "game player" is discussed further due to interview remarks also gathered in the fourth sub-study (IV). Sub-studies I–III inform of concepts and contexts that may give rise to societal discussion, a consideration for game production communities.

5.2.1 VIDEO GAME CULTURES MATTER – PLAYER COMMUNITIES RECOGNIZING POSITIONS AND DISCOURSE

During the interviews of the fourth sub-study, players would occasionally recall or introduce a common "trope" associated with popular culture consumerism. Players, especially women, would recognize and bring up memories of the criticized position they had as "girl gamers" or as individuals who played video games. The aspects associated with this position would be of others questioning their sexuality, gendered appropriateness of play, or time consumed with games. Additionally, the interview setting of describing meaningful encounters was an important event for some interviewees, as I describe in the study research article (IV). To some, the interview setting felt like a moment to share their appreciation for video games and being accepted as themselves for their interest in and passion for gaming.

The discourses the interviewees recognized are connected to larger unfortunate positions that alternative fandom communities face. As fandoms and popular culture become mainstream, (masculine) "nerd cultures" face challenges by the hegemony. At the same time, the stigmatizing discourse of games and play being proper only for adolescent players is also diminishing. The pluralization of popular culture has shown the varying communities inside a traditionally and allegedly unified nerd culture to face controversies and ultimately spring up with an identity crisis of its own. The excluding and including practices of nerd or fan cultures have created disputes such as the "Gamergate" controversy or harassment campaign, which, described in brief, relates to gender equality in gaming communities and identities. The "illusion" of a singular community of popular culture consumers, or "nerd/fan culture", is thus broken (Arjoranta, Kontturi, Varis and Välisalo 2020). Arguably, similar hindering tendencies have travelled to academic game studies, where the debate of "who is a game scholar" and "who has the right cultural capital to participate in game studies" has sometimes surfaced (Gekker 2021).

Fans and fandoms have since the 21st century become an increasingly influential cultural factor, not to mention an arena providing tools to create meaning and understand the world and oneself, as found in the third and fourth sub-studies (see also, e.g., Blom 2021, 9, 188). Not all video game players are fans, but video games relate to fandom cultures, meaning that players contribute to an extremely influential economical and societal demography that should not be taken for granted.

Stories, game spaces, and playful encounters can make all the difference in practising strategies of meaning-making, self-reflection, or understanding the surrounding world. During the global pandemic of 2020 came research describing how popular culture consumers who had consumed many horror, speculative, and fantastic fictions, including having a "morbid curiosity", and possibilities of apocalyptic scenarios and thought, would have higher salience, preparedness, and tolerance for the probability of actual disruptive societal occurrences (Scrivner, Johnson, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Clasen 2020). The study argues that "exposure to frightening fictions allows audiences to practice effective coping strategies that can be beneficial in real-world situations" (Scrivner, Johnson, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Clasen 2020, 2).

Matthew Barr found that digital game playing increases self-reported graduate skills in higher education (2017). Skills understood as "graduate attributes" are described as problem-solving, communication, resourcefulness, and adaptability (2017). Barr's study suggests that game-based learning interventions would have plausible possibilities for pedagogical use in higher education (with adult learners). Additionally, Barr argues that the "alleged ill-effects" associated with the negative tropes of playing video games should be considered with thought, given their positive outcomes (2017).

Tuulia Nevala found that playing games has the tendency to become more meaningful for adult players, gradually affording an important role in managing well-being (2017). Additionally, collective recollections of gaming memories, due to the effects of encounters, have cultural and societal significance. This is arguably even more so when framed as meaningful encounters with games, as I have observed in the third and fourth sub-studies. What remains to be seen in the future is what big questions and experiences are carried or passed on through shared and impactful video game memories.

5.2.2 ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND INDUSTRY AIMS – APPLICATIONS FOR RICH USER-EXPERIENCE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Other practical implications from applying the thesis' study methods provided an interesting application for industry-oriented research aims. Industry motivations differ from academic aims on game research; however, certain fruitful convergences and crossroads present themselves occasionally, not to mention the shared aim to understand player experiences. Therefore, the methods or theories behind the research might be similar.

Researching player or user experiences (PX/UX) can mean focusing on testing or examining how the user interacts with the designed product, and what emotions or behaviour it might elicit (Hodent 2018, 98). Users are often examined during the development process to make sure that the product would deliver a satisfying experience or other appointed aims. User experience research in general can mean a user-oriented attitude towards game design processes or advocating the users' compatibility with the product.

Often today, topical cultural subjects and convergences with religions might surface, while the discourse of appropriation and cultural sensitivity are held to be important, stirring public debates, as I have discussed in earlier chapters.

Religion is substantially presented as a sensitive topic in the public sphere and in popular culture. Sub-studies I–II especially inform of possible stance-taking and disruptive discourses that may arise from games' use of religion as a resource. Industry aims can gain a greater understanding of players and their experiences from approaches and research combining game studies and cultural studies.

Regarding methodology, the interview method used in sub-study IV presented a plausible chance to showcase to an industry audience at the Game Research and User Experience Conference in 2020 (14.12.2020, GRUX 2020) a shared aim. My conference presentation on "Players Diving Deep: Eliciting play experiences with an argumentative qualitative interview method" was accepted through a review process to enter the conference (Rautalahti 2020).

In this presentation, I reflected on the fourth sub-study's methods and results and presented hands-on pointers to the audience, which consisted of game or user experience professionals mainly working in game development organizations. I presented tools to execute an argumentative qualitative interview for UX-research and a case example of sub-study IV, where the method was used. The presentation and method were well received. I talked about how socially "deep themes" during in-person interviews can become manageable not only to the interviewee but to the researcher as well. The use of the modified argumentative interview method seemed to bypass supposed interview hierarchy roles in ways such that the interviewee was answering to the arguments, not to the researcher. This again eased the sensitive interview situation. The conversation began to circulate on the arguments, downplaying the power relations. Qualitative interviews for industry efforts might even serve as tools for user community building and as ways to engage hardcore fans.

A successful in-person interview has the possibility to provide a secure place for the interviewee – which should, of course, be the starting point of any interview conducted with responsible conduct of research. As my interviewees told me, they wanted to participate and tell their important personal stories. Many felt passionate about this aim and expressed their concern of how popular culture fandoms were sometimes referred to negatively as mundane or irrelevant in public discussions.

Practical implications of this thesis intersect academic as well as industrial aims in utilizing plausible methods bringing forth usages of religion representations and highlighting equality for player identities.

Further directions concern theoretical discussions on player identities and researching changing landscapes of religion in (popular) culture.

5.3 FURTHER DIRECTIONS – EXISTENTIAL POPULAR CULTURES

Popular culture and video games enable possibilities to explore, express, and reflect different worldviews, ideas, and concepts without belonging or stance-taking. Video game stories represent discussions that are both critical and understanding of religiosity, historical religions, invented faiths, and ritualistic expressions. The cultural reproduction and reformulations of these elements or narratives through play and games afford reflections on these interactions. This final discussion chapter contemplates the extended directions where the thesis results could be taken following conceptual debates. As noted throughout the text, the final arrival at a non-religion discourse has been the result of acquired knowledge and a cumulative attitude approaching study of religion research on topical popular culture.

In the games observed in this thesis, the tones of the game-immanent reflections have been critical and challenging of the imagined element of religion in a societal, authoritative and functional manner. In a similar sense, the actor-centred viewpoints have challenged an understanding of religion understood from an expressive and communicative viewpoint. The challenges of conceptualization are not new. The etymology or category of religion (in religion studies and theology) has been discussed for at least more than a hundred years (Hoyt 1912). As Peter Beyer wrote in 2006 (2):

> The heterogeneity of religion, the contested nature of the category as to what it means, what it includes and what it implies in the contemporary context, calls for ways of observing religion that focus explicitly and precisely on the peculiarity of the notion in that setting. (Beyer 2006, 2)

Beyer calls for contextual approaches and the temporal nature of theorizations. He focuses on religion as a social reality, construction, and "function system", which only by circumstance is called "religion", from a sociological approach (Beyer 2006, 2–3). On the other hand, if research is focused on something other than traditional religion, and aimed at constructed meaning-making systems, what is to then be called secular or religion when positioning research? Louis Lee acknowledges the "vague notion of secularity" as equally ambiguous or a flexible category describing something as non-religion, however, not as an opposite to the term religion but "as a way of highlighting that religion is not an exclusive term" (2012; 2015, 4), describing, for example, meaningful encounters relating to this thesis' discussion on contemporary life and space.

The "conditioning social context" that Beyer calls out as a defining feature for religion research (Beyer 2006, 5) is evident in this thesis' actor-centred research. The findings of a community expressing and sharing their life-change narrative (III) steered the study question of a contextual approach and functional understanding of the category of religion or religion-like peripheries. The sub-study on an individual player's expressing of meaningful encounters (IV) similarly taps into communicated constructions, not by expressing meanings commonly related to religions but deliberately by other narrated selections, tying these findings to the negotiations and relations with religion, non-religion, and "reimagining the secular" (Lee 2015, 185). The narratives that players told of meaningful encounters (IV) translate as empirical accounts of speech on existential and epistemological contemplations of contemporary media culture discussed by "non-religious adults". Carrying on with Lee's existential culture conceptualization of today's non-religious cultures (2015), games – or other popular culture products in comparison – foster and produce existential meaning-making, which arguably affords existential cultures, and motivations to ask life's big questions. The research on topical "non-religion" or the variety of existential cultures can be approached from the aspect of religion and popular culture, adding new discussion points to how big questions are used, understood, and defined in contemporary communities and popular culture content.

The observations using the game-immanent approach of the antagonist "roles of religion" in video games in sub-studies I–II led to examining religion as a societal and sociological category, defined by the "conditioning context" of religion in the game worlds (Beyer 2006, 5). In the studied games, religion was constructed within authorities, hierarchy, and societal order.

When the observed video games and players narratives are imagining – or, in other words, communicating – traditional religion away, what is to be said about future directions for religion and popular culture research? As Kirstin Peterson remarks, current research is expanding boundaries on definitions of only seemingly stagnant concepts or categories where the "transcendent and intangible aspects of life" are to be found (2020, 6). The epistemologies of researching peripheries of religion might arrive at contesting conceptual boundaries, giving way to new ones.

5.3.1 CONTESTED RELIGION, BIG QUESTIONS, AND MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTERS

To examine contemporary religion and popular culture today is to linger on the outskirts and peripheries of traditional religion, viewing the debated aftermath of cultural shifts of religion in society. As John Luckmann already formulated, "One must not avoid seeing it (cultural shifts in societal order and religion) because one clings to traditionalist religious illusions. Nor must one ignore its implications because one may be inspired by secularist optimism" (1967, 117).

This thesis has examined contemporary religion, namely, how religion is represented and discussed in games, and how non-religious players talk about meaningfulness with games. Religion and study of religion frameworks have provided theorization and concepts, "points of reference", to arrive at the resulting non-religious meaning-making in today's culture (Lee 2012). The concepts of non-religion may serve as "placeholders" for future research (Lee 2015, 194).

The flexible view on "religion" in this thesis has been tied to each sub-study's material, from a constructive and substantive view to a functional approach examining how player communities act, or how player narratives express speech and narratives on meaningful encounters with games.

The video games examined in this thesis present religion as a societal and authoritative agent, presented to be criticized. The idea of religion as a "function-system" (Beyer 2006, 2–3) turning against people's well-being is an evident story representation in the studied games. Only the player protagonist survives, delivering solidarity and justice to the game world. The player triumphs as the victor, being the individual with the right knowledge and experience – also on matters of faith and beliefs. While societally constructed aspects of organized religions might be dismissed in the studied games, the existential origins of worlds and life itself are rarely missing. As in sub-study II, the authoritative religious rulers and gods have subsided, but the (magical) mystery of the world itself still exists. The games contest religion as a societally constructed element but leave the aspects concerning life's big questions opening further contemplations.

Religion as a concept similar to other socially communal functions is presented in the third sub-study (III) through social processes bringing like-minded individuals together and underlining a shared important topic. In sub-study III, *The Last of Us* game presented the focal point of communal devotion, a social support system, and an object of passion. Here the category of religion can be seen as contested by scholarly remarks, while religion becomes deluded when its conceptual boarders are extended: the old dilemma of functional frames "passing anything" as religion. However, what is to be taken from this is that, using a theoretical comparative point from the study of religion, as in the case of sub-study III, the processes of emerging communities can be observed, understood, and discussed in new and informative ways.

While the whole thesis' aim was to examine contemporary views on religion (in popular and video game culture), one of its results is that, even though the views describe games and gamer conversations by stepping outside a traditional religion scope, they analogically describe topical and current sceneries of (Western) beliefs and worldviews, a point also found by Chris

Cotter (2020, 16). Cotter describes that researching non-religion allows one to "test the universalities of religion" (2020, 16). Teemu Taira speaks of the benefit of researching fan cultures or popular culture, using study of religion frameworks as providing topical interest and entry points, conceptualization, and theory for research on contemporary religiosity and discourse (2019 [2006]), 44, 213–214). As Beyer states, religion is an ambiguous category (2006, 254), and it should be treated as such, especially when researching current dynamic cultural and societal "crossings and dwellings" (Tweed 2006).

Cotter critiques the intent of researching "big questions" as inevitably producing discourses on "life and the universe" heading towards existential cultures and models derived from religion, and argues for research to take into account the "mundane and unremarkable" contemplations of the religion-related discourse on study aims (Cotter 2020, 129, 202). However, in order to position research in a study of (non)-religion scope, some shared conceptualizations already take place deriving from a study of religion frame, albeit recognizing that these conceptualizations differ from everyday language. Nevertheless, like Hoover said, within religion and media studies to ask people about spirituality or values, one must ask about spirituality and values (Hoover 2006, 86).

At the same time, the socio-economic and cultural representations of the "non-religious" popular culture consumer should be expanded from the Western and socio-economical homogenous participant (of digital game cultures) to question how economically unable consumers use popular culture as a resource for existential self-reflections (the "ordinary" people consuming popular culture is also problematized; see, e.g., Lynch 2005, 14). In light of digital technology, some belief systems or meaning-making possibilities are then behind privileges. In addition, questions on who has the possibility of making games could be extended to in fact reach questions on whose popular culture, whose religion, or whose non-religion is it anyway? The same enquiry suggests extensions for scholarly discourse on how access to religion and existential cultures are increasingly granted through economical parameters, which may dictate religion-consumers' motivations, that is, implicating the differences of existential cultures within different socio-economical groups. To be a part of only video game cultures is seldom cost-effective.

However, I propose that as working concepts, big questions and meaningful encounters could underline expressions and discourse described as "mundane devotion" as well: the acts, expressions, and encounters with the observed (popular) culture that converge with qualities of devotion. As the word itself "devotion" describes both religious dedication and dedication to other causes, it could support compiling and furthering the aspects I have defined in explicating the circumstances considering the sub-study results. Especially in the fourth sub-study, the players did to some extent deliberately seek out games for deeper reflections, but many times the surprise and revelations of a meaningful encounter is unplanned and delivered in a mundane everyday setting – while having fun, relaxing, and playing video games.

I additionally argue that communication, use and choice of meanings, and words concerning worldviews (referenced with popular culture) are paramount indicators of present-day religious landscapes (Clark 2007, 11). As one interviewee in sub-study IV claimed, "I would rather contemplate big questions", indicating that they would prefer to think about life's important questions without words or concepts derived from religions. Although this stated preference reflects a common discourse present in studies done on people's views about new spirituality or worldviews (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, 25), a similar tendency seems to arise in this thesis when video game experiences are at hand. This discourse could indicate that certain open world atmospheres in games, contemplated in detail in the fourth sub-study (IV), have the potential to wake and elicit reflection concerning worldviews and contemporary faith concepts. Additionally, video games as a source for meaningful encounters also teach of an explorative mind-set and curiosity towards surroundings and the self, which speak of the beneficial qualities that playing video games could foster, observed in sub-study IV.

As clear-cut categories become challenging when looking at contemporary landscapes of religion, non-religion, and something in between, it also contests the continuance of using these clear-cut categories when further examining current and topical scenes. Therefore, religion conceptualizations should be used with some consideration. Agreeing with Mitsutoshi Horii, religion classifications and categorizations are to be treated with criticism, demanding further focus on the fabrication of the "religious-secular dichotomy" itself and being attentive to the varying meanings that people ascribe to "religion" (2015, 21, 33). Similarly, Peter Horsfield speaks of researching beyond the "secular sacred dialectic" and contemplates the expansion of religion as a singular category describing existential cultural expressions. He cites Louis Lee's discussion on "existential cultures" as a concept worth advancing (2018, 63; Lee 2015), which I agree with.

Others have suggested researching contemporary religion and especially the video games field using "value formations" as an analytical comprehensive tool going beyond the category of religion dilemma (Grieve and colleagues 2020, 77). Grieve and colleagues suggest that while the category of religion can be rigid in game-immanent research, value formations take into account the "entangled values" of "production, product, and reproduction of values" and actor-centred remarks (2020, 77). I agree that using a flexible understanding of religion in a contemporary setting of video game culture calls for an agile approach towards method and material. This also supports my use of the two-sided research approach for this thesis to reach a flexible understanding of how the study of religion can approach video game culture in research, leading to how a flexible understanding of religion and non-religion can be viewed in video game culture. While value formations have not been conceptually the focus in this thesis, I agree that the concept and its discussion add to a more fruitful and many-faceted understanding of religion and religion-like issues in video game cultures. I propose, however, that the use of existential cultures includes the aspect of actors imagining big questions, which Grieve and colleagues (2020) do not take into account.

In light of this thesis and research, considering popular culture as an arena where myths, beliefs, and values are discussed and understood (Ostwalt 2003), with emerging communities and individuals expressing, "crossing and dwelling" with meaningful encounters needs understanding and conceptualization. Existential cultures as a working concept describing contemporary meaning-making seems more than adequate – for now. Aligning with Lee, the use of transitional or entangled concepts like "not religious", "non-religion", or "secular" change as scholarly discourse furthers research on "the secular bodies" and continues the discussion on untangling the conceptual binaries of religion and the secular (Lee 2019, 7–8, 25). Nevertheless, defining concepts here is ultimately a "creation of scholarly study", such as the concept of religion (Cotter 2020, 197–198).

As Hervieu-Léger notes, "Fluidity and mobility are keywords in modern religion, which finds itself in a world that is pluralistic through and through" (2000, 163). Peterson also writes, "Scholars should continue to move beyond the bounded categories of religion and media" (2020, 8), and continues in setting the aim for current scholarly directions of religion and media research to seek out lifeworlds and "assemblages" (Hess 2015, 1630), constitutions, and "constellations" of "contemporary technological culture" (Hess 2015, 1631; Peterson 2020, 8). Peterson calls for looking "at religious identity and practices as one aspect of a larger assemblage of elements, such as media technologies, sensations, spaces, emotions and identity", providing in-depth contemplations on the temporally challenging cultural currents of religion and media research (2020, 8). Digital games and culture afford questions and assemblages of existential cultures to take root and grow, depending on the framework and viewpoint of the constellation at hand. Additionally, specifically recognizing "modes" of non-religious experiences that are analogous to religions and spirituality in popular culture in tandem says something about the experiences themselves (Lee 2015, 189).

The imagined ripples of traditional religions in emerging communality and interaction, as well as video games' criticisms of traditional religions, highlight new ways of imagining religion in academia as well as society. The concept of religion becomes the working framework to cautiously understand other cultural phenomena, in this case emerging meaningful encounters and existential cultures in popular culture. Future work is to be done where existential cultures serve as a primary framework to peer back at cultural phenomena.

6 CONCLUSIONS – IMAGINING CONTEMPORARY RELIGION

On the 4th of May 2020, Daniel Ahmad posted publicly on *Twitter*: "Power of video games: A *Final Fantasy XIV* player recently passed away due to COVID-19. Friend organized a funeral and memorial march in the game, which was attended by hundreds of players, to honour the memory of their friend" (Ahmad 2020). A video link to the gathering[9] was included. Although this type of online commemorative practice is not unprecedented in multiplayer online digital games (Haverinen 2014), it emerged as an existential communality in unprecedented times. Throughout this thesis, I have intentionally touched on topical events and news relating to the present, including the global pandemic affecting (digital game) cultures, in the aim of grounding the thesis work firmly in contemporary contexts.

Whether they come in digital form or not, stories manage our ways of being. As Doris C. Rusch said, "We long for media that helps us make sense of that funny, old thing called life, our role within it, and what it all means" (2016; similarly formulated also by Clark 2007, 11). Stories provide reflection, a counter partner; they facilitate relationships resembling social connections and existential thought. They make us ask important and profound questions about the nature of life and make us feel enchanted – even for a while, despite what is happening outside. Games and stories become even more interactive, responsive, surprising, and accidentally meaningful to the self.

The motivations of usage of digital games is expanding. Ubiquitous video games themselves have different aims, game making motivations, or purposes of use. The play event itself might entitle meaningful encounters, aspects of self-discovery, and reflection, not to mention asking "big questions" in memorable affect spaces. The culturally imagined identity of a person playing video games in their free time only for leisure needs a careful re-consideration. However, this is not to undermine the individuals self-identifying as playing games just for fun.

By operationalizing and examining the use of game-immanent and actor-centred approaches, and the sub-studies' respective results, I have combined and observed the intricate qualities of video game culture and contemporary religion discussions of today, which open future questions to understand ways of existential cultures emerging in popular culture and in digital game communities. The balancing of the two study approaches additionally

[9] Kealmir: Ferne Le'roy (Zalera); Guardian Tree Funeral March. youtube.com/watch?v=19g85-kSONM. 12.4.2020 *YouTube*.

highlights how versatile cultural objects and phenomenon can be treated as research subjects.

The thesis headline quote “I would rather contemplate big questions” expresses as a summary the religion criticism afforded by the examined games as well as elicited by the gamers. Games challenge institutional religion, but simultaneously do not shy away using and imagining religion as one way to contemplate life’s deep and big questions. Games themselves, whether their stories have religion representations or not, afford reflective thought in players on big questions.

Religion is imagined in the examined video games with connotations of hierarchy, authority, and power, receiving critical attributes and highlighting individual and subjective aspirations. Religion, traditionally understood, is also absent when players describe meaningful encounters with video games.

Considering the games I have analysed and observed, including the actors using games (namely, the players), religion representations play a minor role or they are the focus of criticism. There is much more to be understood, from only substantive examinations of how religion is represented in games being extended to how and what religion representations say and do in games mirroring larger cultural negotiations. I see that the examined games appropriate cultural discussions echoing secularization, change, and values of individualism. Contemporary landscapes, such as popular culture and video games, can be said to have a critical tone towards organized religions, they communicate these tones and affects in stories and gameplay. Additionally, players choose to express, or communicate, their meaningful encounters, affects, with digital games through expressions self-proclaimed to be unrelated to religious expressions. However, the communal social aspiration to share, be recognized, and noticed brings people together as communities in ways that converge with religious performances.

Games provoke memories and experiences. Popular cultural products have roles to play in shaping events in current life worlds. Ultimately, the thesis has observed the use of religion as a discursive element in the selected video games and among the players of video games, providing accounts and cases in game culture and popular culture. If importance, decisions, and meaning-making are societally configured through popular culture, there is probably a major demographic overlooked within popular culture research of religion and non-religion.

As observed, the substantive religio-critical views in Western popular culture are especially imagined and negotiated in terms of power relations and authorities, though fictive, by organized Western religious institutions in video game worlds. This criticism, which can be seen as foreshadowing or reflecting societal changes among imagined historical religious institutions, is actualized in contesting and contemporary concepts of religion in research and among players. The content analysis of video games has shown that religion and religion-like aspects are encountered in digital games as conversational cues for potential religion criticism. The theme of big questions is not only echoed in the actor-centred sub-studies, but it also encompasses the game-immanent work where religion institutions are criticised. Here the players' focus is redirected on oneself and contemplations on good and bad religion.

I have also shown that players use popular culture platforms in many ways to reflect important personal and existential contemplations. While these encounters may reflect generational attitudes, they tell us more about how Millennials use meaning-making tools today. Meaningful encounters are intentionally sought after, and for these digital games currently seem to be a vital and accessible medium.

The lived religion framework interpreted by the study results presents itself as examining accounts on lived non-religion. Imagined as a framework, lived non-religion presents further directions for research in understanding contemporary life worlds of present-day living, and a window on upcoming generations (within emerging existential cultures).

Research in contemporary popular culture, entertainment, and the arts is vitally prominent when studies aim to examine the spaces where discussions of societal stance-taking are held. These discourses are ongoing not only in places where societal governing is executed, but where culture is made and consumed. The video games examined in this thesis show the dynamic imagined relationship of the ones governing and the ones being governed, and how religion is substantially challenged – leaving the door open for phenomenological and existential contemplations.

The game-immanent and actor-centred approaches applied here to video game cultures have given greater insight into the assemblage of an examination of contemporary views on religion discussed through the examples and study results of video games and gamers. The twofold approach has substantially and functionally provided a way to discuss games as they should be discussed, given their nature: a game comes to life through the player, and is never a game without play. The player gives the interpretation, reading, and experience which provides information on play and the game.

Ultimately, the two-sided approach defines in which ways a flexible understanding of religion can be discussed and researched within video game culture: as artifact (game) immanent and (player) actor-centred. The multifaceted nature of the question how religion can be understood in video game culture is evident in the ways religion is found to be represented in games and how representations in games can prompt gamer contemplations.

By operationalizing both approaches, the primary research question was:

How is contemporary religion imagined in digital games and among gamers from actor-centred and game-immanent perspectives?

The three sub-questions were:

1. How is religion constructed and represented in recent mainstream digital games from a game-immanent frame?
2. How do players encounter religion or religion-like contemporary aspects in recent mainstream digital games from an actor-centred frame?
3. What contemporary views on religion in digital games and among gamers come forth in the sub-study data?

The research questions are answered in this thesis by examining the player actors and games, and how they consider contemporary views on religion. Sub-studies I–II answered them through game-immanent approaches revealing representational criticism of religion and societal religion discussions. Sub-studies III–IV explained through an actor-centred frame the impact of meaningful video game experiences from communal and subjective reflections regarding contemporary religion discussions. Both study pairs contributed to the multifaceted discussion on societal secularity and existential popular culture.

New or emerging communality, or existential cultures, and constructions of religion-like social vehicles challenge classification. By researching popular culture communities, there is much to say on the construction of groups coming together in general, to gain understanding of how like-minded people are immersed in the same important subject or object, even affording existential contemplations; this can also be applied to other cases where the emerging communality is tied to aims disrupting social balance. The emerging existential popular cultures and communities raise new and important questions.

Building a case researching today's popular culture and contemporary views on religion, as this thesis has shown, especially in video game culture, provides a topical window onto the growing existential cultures and communities of today. The effects of shared and individual existential video game memories and experiences pose interesting contemplations for the future: what ideas (of religion representations) will be carried on, what will be left behind, and why? Popular culture and video game cultures are rich arenas for research on contemporary religious communities and existential cultures, platforms for religion discourse, existential (self-) exploration, and spaces to marvel at life's big questions.

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