# Single-player Religion

de Wildt, Lars

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# 5.    Single-player Religion

**Abstract**

This chapter builds on the previous chapter by conducting in-depth interviews with 20 players: Why do they individually play with religion? and How do they adopt worldviews (albeit temporarily) that are not usually theirs? Players, whether atheists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, self-identified Pagans or of other convictions, all have one thing in common: they are prompted by games to enter worlds with different beliefs than theirs, taking up identities of religious "Others" that do not share their own religious convictions of everyday life.

**Keywords:** player studies, post-secular society, Othering, role-play, intersectionality

> *The setting is 1191 AD. The third crusade is tearing the Holy Land apart.* You, Altaïr, *intend to stop the hostilities by suppressing both sides of the conflict.*
> – *Assassin's Creed* advertisement (2007), emphasis added

The advertising blurb for Ubisoft's first *Assassin's Creed* game does two things. Firstly, it promises to transport you to the Holy Land of 1191 AD – another place and time, infused by conflict and war between various religious identities: Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, historical (Nizari Ismailis) and fictional (secular) *hashashin*. Secondly, it constructs the player as having a double identity: while playing, "you" are also "Altaïr" – born of a Muslim father and Christian mother, fighting Templars in 12th century Jerusalem. Role-playing is key to immersing "you" in imaginary game worlds like *Assassin's Creed*. In other games, you might be a summoner of Shiva, a combatant of Ifrit (*Final Fantasy*), a follower of the Church of Atom (*Fallout*); the eponymous *God of War*, or a Shaman, Druid or Priest (e.g., *World of Warcraft*).

Departing from a critique on literature perceiving such in-game textual representations as simplistic stereotypes and discriminatory forms of Othering, this chapter studies how players individually experience the role-playing of (non-)religious identities in videogames. The main research question I pose here is "How does role-playing the (non-)religious Other in games affect the worldview of players?" To answer this question, this study gives a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews held with twenty international players from different (non-)religious backgrounds.

## Games' Fascination with the Religious

As Chapter 2 showed, the first *Assassin's Creed* was developed as a Holy War-era adaptation of *Prince of Persia* starring Islamic missionary Hassan-I Sabbah (Edge, 2012). It focused on a world of Muslim–Christian tensions and was released in a time of renewed fascination with religion. The game started development in 2003, while Western world news was dominated by the effects of religious zeal in the shape of the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror. Religious fundamentalism became a journalistic and governmental concern, leading to European and American anti-Islamic sentiments held to this day. The renewed relevance of religion prompted sociologists (Gorski, 2012), art historians (King, 2005), literary scholars (Mohamed, 2011) and political theorists (McLennan, 2010), among others, to conceptualize the current period as "post-secular" (Habermas, 2006, 2008). In critical dialogue with theories on the privatization of religion in Western countries, these academics argued in different ways that religion is once again an urgent topic in public debate, media and popular culture. The early 21$^{st}$ century has indeed seen films, books and games tackling this religious fascination, whether politically (e.g., *America's Army*; *Al-Quwwat al-Khasa*), historically (e.g., *Assassin's Creed*; *Europa Universalis IV*), fantastically (e.g., *Skyrim*; *Final Fantasy VII*), or domestically (e.g., *BioShock Infinite*; *The Binding of Isaac*).

Yet, videogames have always relied on religious tropes throughout platforms and genres. As Chapter 3 showed, some of games' religious roots are pre-digital, from the origins of the vampire-fighting clergyman in TSR's original *Dungeons & Dragons* of 1974, to the current demonic- and religion-themed classes of *World of Warcraft*, which count eight out of 12 classes, including Druids, Monks, Shamans, Paladins and Priests. Outside of the fantasy genre, religious organizations, rituals and pantheons occur in many contexts: religious belief survives the post-apocalyptic in *Fallout 4*; divine metaphors make sense of lost knowledge in *Horizon*'s post-apocalypse; *Dead*

*Space* and *Mass Effect* show faith and worship in science-fictional space; and many more examples. Games may mirror spiritual experience (*Journey*); cast players as the Japanese sun goddess (*Ōkami*); or draw from a number of mythologies whether fictional (*Zelda*), contemporary (*Hanuman Boy Warrior*) or historical (*Smite, God of War*). Players, meanwhile, take up all these roles with much the same speed as they take up a controller, switch discs or download a new game.

How have players' experiences with such religious roles been studied and approached by scholars? Various academics have assessed that religious representation is omnipresent in videogames (e.g., Guyker, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006; Wiemker & Wysocki, 2014). Such studies generally draw from literary-theoretical, narratological, theological and other approaches that are firmly grounded in the method of studying text and representation. Given this focus on in-game texts and representations, the analysis usually results in a set of typologies (In what ways do religious signs occur?), genealogies (What are the origins of such signs?) and perceived gaps (Which positions, traditions and identities are excluded in the use of these signs?).

The theoretical approach underlying such empirical analyses of in-game narratives, discourses and representations is often informed by critical theoretical approaches in the social sciences. As with any media text, representations in games are neither produced in a vacuum nor neutral constructs: they allegedly reproduce dominant ideologies, institutionalized power relations and social-economic conventions that, in turn, socialize players into these hegemonic worldviews (Aupers, 2012; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline et al., 2003). From this perspective, empirical studies on representation and (religious) worldview are not merely descriptive. They typically demonstrate that minority, subaltern and marginalized worldviews are relatively under-represented in the game *or* that they are framed in a stereotypical, often negative fashion. Studies on gender and race in games demonstrate, for instance, that 52% to 80% of player-controlled characters are white and male (Everett & Watkins, 2008; Williams et al., 2009) whereas women and men are designed to follow typically traditional gender repertoires (Miller & Summers, 2007).

Although much of this research focuses on gender and race (Dill et al., 2005; Shaw, 2010; Williams et al., 2009), similar approaches can be found vis-à-vis the representation of in-game religion (de Wildt et al., 2018; de Wildt & Aupers, 2021; Krzywinska, 2006; Šisler, 2008). Religion is not only represented in a stereotypical way, but functions as a trope to make distinctions between characters who are "good" (such as Christian-like Priests, Paladins wearing crosses on their shield) and "bad" (worshipping "evil"

gods, cults, primitive Shamans and sometimes Druids; see Chapter 3). This process of Othering through tropes and genre conventions in videogames has the sociological function of drawing "symbolic boundaries" between "us" and "them" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), which confirm and reinforce hegemonic (Western/civilized/male/secular) identities by contrast to an imagined (non-Western/barbarian/female/religious) Other (Asad, 2003; Boletsi, 2013; Said, 1978). In the context of games, Kathrin Trattner pointed out that "Othering based on religious ascriptions appears in direct relation to other categories of social difference" (2016, p. 32). Constructing an Other in games is therefore never only based on religion, but always an intersectional combination of a particular religion with class, gender, able-bodiedness, race, culture and other aspects of identity (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1989). In games, examples of intersectional "others" abound – especially as defined against the overwhelming male whiteness of protagonistic avatars. Such examples include disabled people and religiously revered aliens in *Dead Space* (Carr, 2014); the African zombie in *Resident Evil 5* (Brock, 2011); and what Jessica Langer calls *World of Warcraft*'s "constant project of radically 'othering' the horde [...] by distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other, and center and periphery" (2008, p. 87).

Similar claims are made about first-person shooter games' frequent representations of the enemy as Muslim, Arab and people of colour. Vít Šisler analyzes representations of the "Arab or Muslim Other" as predominantly stereotyped in mainstream European and American videogames, schematizing them as enemies, and reducing both to an anonymous horde of monolithic, ethnic-religious caricatures (2008). Even when a choice is offered, the "unmarked" default avatar is typically positioned as white, male (Fordyce et al., 2016), and might be varyingly mobilized to reproduce militaristic (Nieborg, 2006), postcolonial (Mukherjee, 2018), orientalist (de Wildt et al., 2019), or Eurocentric (Apperley, 2010) ideas and sentiments amongst players.

This supposed reproduction of ideas and sentiments is theoretically implied but seldom empirically studied in what Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and others have called an "actor-centered approach" to videogames (Heidbrink et al., 2014; Radde-Antweiler et al., 2014), that is based on the meaning-making of players (Aupers et al., 2018; Aupers & Schaap, 2015; de Wildt & Aupers, 2019, 2020; Schaap & Aupers, 2017). Given the textual approach of (religious) Othering, scholars studying games in isolation from players can make no authoritative claims about the experiences and interpretations of those players, without asking them. Such analyses, then, fall into the trap of "instrumentalizing" play: a reduction of game-play's meaning to the game's

formal (narrative, procedural, visual) properties, where "what players do" is merely considered to "complete the meaning suggested and guided by the rules" (Sicart, 2011). Instead, I hold that players have radically different interpretations of what games mean depending on their own intersectional identities of religion, class, race, gender and so on. This idea of an active consumer "decoding" the "encoded" texts (Hall, 1980) is already a mainstay in the study of the reception of books, film and television (Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 2012). In videogames, however, players are furthermore encouraged to "reconfigure" games, by moving, choosing and otherwise playing within their given roles (Raessens, 2005).

The problem of aforementioned readings of religious representation as "Othering" is that it is reductive to consider characters as "Other" when many games actually offer the chance to play *as* an Other. By focusing on religious representation as narratives of "Othering," studies often dismiss the experience that is connected to role-playing the Other. By contrast to his own study on the represented Arabian-Muslim Other, Šisler suggests elsewhere that playing *as* the Arab or Muslim Other – specifically when encoded as "self-representation" by Middle Eastern developers – offers players profound insights into marginalized and contested identities, such as those of Palestinians in the case of the Syrian-made game *Under Siege* (تحت الحصار) (Šisler, 2006). Indeed, when (but only *if*) certain identities are included as roles to play – next to or in spite of white, male, hegemonic avatars – some researchers have stressed the relevant possibilities of identification with these avatars (Hammar, 2017), especially in the case of avatars that function as semi-autonomous characters with their own speech, backgrounds and actions (de Wildt, 2014b; Klevjer, 2007).

The problem with analyses of "Othering" in videogames is therefore twofold. On the one hand, players are not necessarily interpreting games in alignment with how religion and religious followers are represented in those games. They rather *understand* and *play* roles differently based on their own cultural backgrounds, convictions and identities. On the other hand, they additionally take on roles that are not necessarily their own and are thus negotiating between their own social identity and their given identity in the game world. Based on these considerations, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

– How does role-playing the (non-)religious Other in games affect the worldview of players?
– (How) does it change the way they understand other (non-)religious identities?

–    (How) does it change the way they understand their own (non-)religious
     identity?
–    What are the differences and similarities in this respect between players
     with religious and non-religious worldviews?


## Methodology

In order to answer this question, 20 interviews were conducted with
people of various religious backgrounds, recruited as part of what later
became the analysis of Chapter 4 and this current chapter. Participants
were theoretically selected for maximal variation of different currently
held religious positions – often viewed by them in light of changes in their
convictions from childhood to now. Instrumental here was the need to
systematically study the different ways in which people with different
(non-)religious beliefs and traditions make sense of role-playing a religious
other in videogames. Rather, say, than seek out a representative sample of
players (or gamers) nor of a demographically representative cross-section of
religious people, this "maximum variation sample" is intended to "disclose
the range of variation and differentiation in the field" (Flick, 2006, p. 130).
The method of interviewing produces inductive insights into this varied
range of personal experiences with religion and games, considering them
as valid and meaningful for players regardless of historical facticity (Aupers
et al., 2018).

   Interviewees were recruited on internet communities selected for PageR-
ank, and regional and cultural differences, e.g., Indian or Moroccan-Dutch
videogame forums. The table of respondents shows some bias: many respond-
ents were American, male and/or white. This can possibly be explained
by demographic biases amongst videogame players and videogame forum
users – the latter arguably requiring a more active identification as a "gamer":
a label and culture which has been argued to be exclusionary, silencing or
otherwise marginalizing women (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Golding & Van
Deventer, 2016; Shaw, 2011).

   With the resulting population (N=20), qualitative semi-structured
interviews of one to two hours were conducted via internet video calls.
Players were asked about their (non-)religious convictions, identifications
and backgrounds; about the religious contents and characters of the games
they played and the connections they experienced between those. When the
games mentioned by the respondents were unknown to the researcher, the
interview was supplemented by engagement with the game in question, in

order to provide context for the (religious) role-playing activities, experiences and meanings. In the first part of the analysis, I will discuss the medium-specific affordance of digital role-play. In the second part of the analysis, I will analyze in empirical detail how this role-playing the (non-)religious Other affects the worldviews of my respondents.

## The Affordances of Digital Role-play

Role-playing is a common and vital affordance of videogames. In the most broad sense of the word, players always perform as an Other on the screen – whether as Pac-Man, Mario or Lara Croft in arcade and console games; heroic soldiers in first-person shooters such as *Call of Duty*, or particular classes, races and characters in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) from *World of Warcraft* to *Runescape*. Such digital performances of identity cannot be dismissed as trivial acts without psychological or cultural meaning. Rather than treat the identities proposed to players as "avatars" or redundant "cursors," "tools" or "props" standing in for the player (Aarseth, 2004; Linderoth, 2005; Newman, 2002), there is always a form of identification with the roles people play – a coalescence of identity between the player as a subject and the avatar as an in-game object (de Wildt, 2014a; Vella, 2013).

The latter becomes particularly relevant in the context of complex games like MMORPGs and virtual worlds. Sherry Turkle already argued in 1995 that "[t]he anonymity of MUDs [multi-user dungeons, a kind of text-based virtual world for multiple users] gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and try out new ones" (1995, p. 241), whereas James Paul Gee concurred that "games can show us how to get people to invest in new identities or roles" (2003). Richard Bartle referred to this as the "role-playing paradox": by investing time, energy and emotion in the online character, the Other becomes the Self:

> You are not role-playing as a being, you are that being; you're not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you're not projecting a self, you are that self. If you're killed in a fight, you don't feel that your character has died, you feel that you have died. There's no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: you are there. (Bartle, 2004, pp. 155–156)

Notwithstanding such dramatic claims of totally becoming the character, my respondents verify that their role-playing implies a form of self-chosen

identification with the character. Role-playing, one argues, is an opportunity to "spend a day in someone else's shoes" (Grant), to act as another and to temporarily identify with their worldview, convictions and beliefs. When playing, interviewees stressed, they experience a "blurring of the avatar and my personal self" (Günther). Role-play also provides a way to take on positions that require fundamentally different worldviews and, from this perspective, one can try out deviant, (non-)religious beliefs that are opposed to one's own. As one interviewee says: "You can role-play belief. It's probably similar to method acting. [...] You temporarily think like someone else, but you can do it from your couch and just for a few hours at a time" (Duke). Religious belief: now available in your living room.

For "a few hours at a time" players set aside their ideas of the world, ready to act and think like someone else. This mechanism of temporarily "bracketing" their own ideas on truth and faith while playing was reported by many players:

> The more I feel a blurring of the avatar and myself, the more believable the game world becomes. Because during these moments my real "self" doesn't remind me of inaccuracies or things I wouldn't normally accept or believe. (Günther)

Even Greg, a Jehovah's Witness who preferred not to play games contradicting his worldview, concedes that "when immersed, I accept conditions of the game world that are directly relevant to what I believe" (Greg), even when they oppose those beliefs

> I automatically suspend my disbelief. To me that means accepting the setting as it is described. In fact, I don't see any difference between taking on the role of your character and accepting the game's world and its conditions.

I thus will argue that the affordance of role-playing provides an opportunity, at least during play time, to play at being an Other, and identify with their (non-)religious worldview apart from one's own. More than that: immersed in their roles, players are able to temporarily suspend their beliefs and put their ideas on truth and faith between brackets, so as to freely experiment with other ideological positions. The question is then: What, if any, implications does this role-playing of the (non-)religious Other have on the worldview of these players? In what follows, I will systematically look at irreligious people playing religious roles; and vice versa at religious believers roleplaying other-religious or atheist characters and their worldviews.

## A.    "I Sort of Believed": From Secularism to Enchantment

A number of interviewees were secular, identifying as atheists or agnostics, and were either raised without belonging to a religious tradition or had become non-religious later in life. How do they treat the religious content they encounter in games, and what is it like to play with religious characters and worlds as a religious none?

Nico, who describes himself as atheist and his parents as "militant atheists," nonetheless felt charmed by religion in games from a young age "because I really like mythology and I really like games that are inspired by religion. *Age of Mythology* is one of my favourite games." It is a strategy game in which ancient (Greek, Egyptian etc.) civilizations appease and are aided by their relevant gods. Although seeing it as "embarrassing to admit," those gods made a lasting impression on him as a child because they

> spurred a fascination that there must be so many gods and it was really cool to me. I sort of believed in those gods at the time. We didn't believe in Jesus or God or whatever, but I believed in Thor and Loki and a god of darkness and a god of silence and stuff like that.

He notes that exactly because he was not brought up with religious belief and had "never been confronted with an openly Christian game," playing *Age of Mythology* "meant that I liked those gods and how I could use them in the game." Nico even exported such beliefs, recounting "instances when I would try and go downstairs and didn't want to wake anyone up as a child, so I prayed to those gods to silence my footsteps." Indeed, Nico might serve as a strong example of what has been termed digital games' "re-enchantment," introducing gods and magic – safely, within the boundaries of a cultural product – to atheist consumers who actually "want to believe" (Aupers, 2013).

Videogames can familiarize the religiously unaffiliated with religious environments and religious beliefs in different ways. James, for instance, described himself as a "very strongly" convinced atheist, living in "techy, atheist, [...] very rational, programmatic" California. Playing *Assassin's Creed*, James became fascinated with Islamic paraphernalia and architecture, noting how the game's "climate of religiousness within the world made it feel more realistic." It even helped him to take his world history class in the "real" world. The reason, James points out, is that religion in the game is made very concrete and visceral: it did not exaggerate religion to the level of "angels and demons fighting," but shows a humane, everyday city setting where "people just sort of stand up giving religious speeches throughout the city."

But games have also made James more sensitive and empathetic to religious believers. The game *That Dragon, Cancer*, an autobiographical project by Ryan Green and his family, deals with their youngest son's cancer diagnosis and the family's consequent struggle with their Christian faith. The game "left a lot of marks on [him]" because of its intimate, personal setting, making the religious Other relatable to him through the game's design. Firstly, the game creates a domestic setting, including voice-over work that "just *feels* very realistic. [...] It sounds like I'm listening in their house. And that make it really personal." This domestic setting includes the player as familiar: "The characters address you sometimes. They look at you," and as an onlooker "you can empathize with them." Most importantly, it is within this personal context that James concluded that "the creators are speaking about their own religious thoughts and feelings," rather than the "surface-level religious symbology" of other games, or a reduction of religion "to a set of beliefs." Instead of a set of rules and practices, the game shows both the hopes and uncertainties of religion, through the developers' personal experiences. In particular, this emphasis on personally "struggling with religion and questioning it," and the differences between Ryan and Amy Green in doing so, had the effect of "humanizing religious people" for James. He continues: "There is a lot of objectification of religious people within tech [culture] and games," whereas "this game does a very good job of humanizing them, and then creating empathy for them" (James).

Games such as these allow secular players like James, Grant, Phil, and Günther to identify with characters with different worldviews, convictions and beliefs than their own." As Grant puts it: "Just because I don't believe in this thing doesn't mean that I can't spend a day in someone else's shoes. [...] I relish the opportunity to role-play, to actually identify with the role of my character." According to Phil, specifically "with regards to religion, the major advantage is that the experience feels more like it happened to you rather than to someone else" (Phil). This temporary identification has consequences for one's own worldview: my atheist respondents confess that role-playing encourages, reinforces or strengthens their empathy for the religious Other.

## B.    "It's Like Indian Mythology": From Religious Tradition to Perennialism

Playing games with religious worlds and identities presented different challenges for religious players than it did for irreligious players. After all, the various fantastical, historical and global religions frequently present

different or exaggerated versions of the theologies and mythologies that fund these players' actual beliefs. Such players often found in games the ability to switch between worldviews – in the same way that secular players found a way to temporarily accommodate their worldviews to the religious worlds they inhabited. These worldviews could easily be switched between, from mono- to polytheistic, from theist to agnostic, and so on. Importantly, these worldviews are as much religious as they are cultural, geographical and temporal. Indeed, materialist approaches to religion emphasize that religion is not just determined by belief, but also, importantly, by its practices and material culture, such as architecture, media, objects (Meyer, 2006; Morgan, 2013; cf. Durkheim, 1995).

For instance, Bill has lived his whole life in Boston and identifies as a Roman Catholic. However, having spent some time as Altaïr in *Assassin's Creed*'s Holy Land, Bill recounts that he has grown familiar with its surroundings: "You hear the call to prayer, you see Muslims praying, you go through mosques." An environment he has familiarized himself with to such an extent that he confidently called it a "very accurate portrayal of what 99 percent of practicing Muslims go through on a regular basis." Bill emphasized that running around *Assassin's Creed*'s Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus gave a "kind of understanding [of] how in that time period religion played out and how people's everyday lives compared to today." Similar to El Nasr et al.'s comparative digital ethnography of the game (El Nasr et al., 2008), the authors' accounts – as well as Bill's – show two things. Firstly, that the game's environments are understood and experienced differently viewed from atheist, Christian and Muslim perspectives. Their meaning depends on whether players regard 12th century Jerusalem as just another digital tourist cityscape, as a "holy land" or indeed as something akin to the religious "journey of a lifetime, a dream" (El Nasr et al., 2008). In Bill's case, *Assassin's Creed*'s Jerusalem grants a Roman Catholic an insight into the everyday experience of Muslims. Secondly, these experiences show that the process of familiarizing with the otherness of games' environment is not just a religious one, but a cultural, geographical and temporal familiarization as well.

That the process works between cultures and worldviews is something another respondent, Swapan, attests to. He grew up in a north Indian town "where there was no internet, no library," and in a conservatively Hindu family. When arcades came to his neighbourhood, "videogames were like the medium that gave us an outlook towards the world outside." Through videogames, Swapan became familiar with the English language, with American, British and Japanese culture – and their religions. It showed him

worldviews, he explains, "that only videogames told me that exist" (Swapan). Likewise, Geoff also describes his 30-year-long gaming hobby as a string of

> multiple games where it's kind of been a theme of learning about different worldviews or different belief systems and just becoming aware of the existence of other belief systems. And that prompts a questioning of one's own belief system.

Geoff was raised a Roman Catholic but currently describes himself as New Age, "cobbl[ing] together my own version kind of a spirituality" in a "cafeteria-style religion." The first time he "encountered a religious-spiritual idea in a game that had an effect on [his] thinking" was in *Faxanadu* – a game that came out when Geoff first started playing games at the age of eight. Religion is intertwined with the function of the game:

> In order to save in-game progress [a] Guru would give you a mantra that you had to then repeat later on. [...] And it was just like a random string of characters you had to input to return to your save. But that was something that I hadn't encountered before. That term or idea.... What is a guru? It's not really a priest. It's more like a teacher.... That was a different way of thinking about religion than I had so far had up until that point of being raised Catholic and going to Sunday school.

While games started a fascination with Eastern religion for Geoff, Joan, Daniel and others, games had the opposite effect for Swapan. Instead of repeating mantras for gurus like young Geoff, Swapan instead encountered monotheism for the first time. He became "very much fascinated by the concept of pagan gods," particularly those that had been part of his family's everyday lives, because "according to Christians and Muslims, we Hindus have pagan gods." By being confronted with other ways of viewing the world and acting them out as characters in videogames, Swapan started to compare different religious stories. The difference, he argues, is that "pagan gods each have their own story and can be killed. It makes them like us. Whereas in Christianity you cannot question god."

   This kind of worldview switching and comparison were shared by vari-ously religious players. You might be able to engage in animism and "play a character that believes there is a living spirit in everything" (Eric), or if you are already familiar with that, to play games filled with Christian doctrines or Norse mythology. Swapan played consecutively through *Devil May Cry*, *God of War*, *Dante's Inferno* and *Viking: Battle for Asgard* – mechanically

similar games that draw from widely divergent Christian, Greek and Norse theo-mythological traditions. Swapan tellingly illustrates the kind of fascination and comparison this prompts by explaining "that last game got me interested into Norse mythology because I did not know about that before. And the more I read about it, the more I learnt that it's a lot like Indian mythology," effectively coming full circle.

Worldview switching, then, led Swapan and others to a form of religious relativism. More than that: experimenting with other traditions through role-play, led them to the conclusion that underneath the differences in traditional religious beliefs, doctrine, vocabularies and rituals, one may find a similar or universal kernel. Worldview switching, thus, may invoke a "perennial perspective" (Huxley, 1945) on religion. Importantly, beside narrative cosmologies, mythologies and so on, games' systems also promote this kind of worldview switching and perennialism. As various players hold, "every game in existence has a slightly different ethical system than real life" (Duke). The assertion that both games and religions propose (ethical) belief systems through rule-based presentations are both supported in academic literature (Geraci, 2014; Sicart, 2009; Zagal, 2009), as well as by other interviewees. Edward, too, compares religions in games to being "much like any system which appears to imitate another in the real world." Eric – who has been a Catholic, then a Mormon, and currently identifies himself closest to a Southern Baptist – is adamant in comparing both religion and games to rule systems, searching "until you find a rule system that is satisfying or whatever, where you like the way it works – it is the exact same thing with these systems as with religion." Religion in this view becomes a question of taste, comparison and optimization.

## C.    "Slipping into a Secular Mindset": Assumed Atheism

Religious players, aside from being able to compare other religious belief systems, similarly found ways of understanding and identifying with their *non*-religious other through games and their avatars. Much of the content, narratives and characters in games is secular or, at least, assumed to be informed by a secular, agnostic or atheist perspective according to various of my religious interviewees.

How do they deal with this assumed atheism of many games? In another sense of the word, how do they assume (take on) atheist identities, even if only to engage with much of the perceived "immorality," violence, hedonism and Godless nihilism in games? Duke, to begin with, is an outspoken Pentecostal and a youth priest, yet he "play[s] the characters in games

as functional atheists for immersion purposes, and that helps [him] to understand their actions a bit better." In *The Last of Us*, for instance, Duke can't see himself believably playing that game and its "very nihilistic atmosphere," in the role of

> a Christian, because it's hard to reconcile Joel's [the protagonist's] mindset with a Christian one. [...] His acts would be unjustifiable because his only motivation in the final area is his own desire to set the world the way he wants it.

The "final area" Duke is referring to, is a scene in which the protagonist makes a selfish moral choice on which the player has no influence. Although this kind of character-autonomy is difficult for Duke – particularly since he considers it an atheist and hedonistic scene – he tries to play *as* the character given him: "I will try to play the game consistently with that mindset, which would probably be secularly by default." In doing so, however, he increasingly identifies with secular ways of thinking: "Even though I struggle to get invested in games with strong religious overtones, I would say it's actually pretty easy for me to slip into a secular mindset during games. In fact, it feels necessary." Consequently, Duke argues that playing secular characters makes him "sympathetic to the atheists out there, [...] especially the (pretty rare) atheists who live in this part of the country that is incredibly religious."

Role-playing the secular other eventually allowed for self-reflection on the "immoral" atheist within oneself. After lying in a game, Duke found out that "it gave me a realization about myself: that I have a capacity for dishonesty." Eric states that temporarily acting like someone else eventually teaches him something about himself, "teaching [one]self to check constantly why and how you're doing what you're doing." By

> role-playing [...] the game character who does things differently to achieve their goal, *you're* being taught to self-monitor more actively, to check constantly, to compare your small decisions with your greater beliefs and your greater goal.

For some players, this type of reflection on one's religious tradition, beliefs and behaviour, led them to completely new insights. Whereas Duke and Eric emphasize their increased empathy towards atheists, Phil and Edward argued that games helped them to realize they were not religious at all – even motivating their deconversion.

Playing *Bloodborne*, Phil "noticed some peculiar parallels" between the Healing Church in that game and the Christian liturgy. Both share a ritual of communion, "the latter imbibing the flesh and blood of Christ, literally or metaphorically, to feel closer to Yahweh" and "the former drinking the blood of the Old Ones." To Phil, "this core idea of transcendence through blood drinking is something I was entirely accustomed to with Christianity, but repulsed by in *Bloodborne*." Edward, too, came to reflect on his own Christian belief through *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, precisely because its main religion, the Chantry, resembles Christianity. It resembles European depictions of (medieval) Christianity in its ritual practices, symbology and iconic churches, abbeys and chapels, as well as in its reverence of "the Maker" and the Christ-like figure of Andraste.

Such comparisons between real and fictitious religions installed doubt about the validity of one's own (Christian) tradition. Phil further worked through his doubt by playing games that feature eclectic religious iconography, such as *Xenoblade Chronicles* and *Persona 4*. Both examples are Japanese RPGs that heavily feature religious symbolism: *Persona 4*, for instance, includes figures from Christian, Hindu, Japanese and other theo-/mythologies, depicting Satan, Saint Michael and Shiva alongside Anubis, Quetzalcoatl and Amaterasu – all of whom "are shown more as myth than fact." To Phil, for the first time, religion was presented as "rooted in people, as a manifestation of human nature." Gods are "presented as masks one uses to face the world, manifesting as gods, angels, demons and devils," and rituals and religious practices "are portrayed more as superstitions and tradition than committed religions." At the end of the game, "you toss aside your glasses to see the world for how it truly is: which is what you make of it." *Persona 4*'s mundane and eclectic religiosity, Phil argues, taught him to regard religion as "subservient to the people [its] images are rooted in." Ultimately, he says, "this is what really helped me come to terms with my atheism. […] In fact, games showed me it was *okay* to be an atheist."

For Edward, the experience of playing through his religious struggles turned out to be therapeutic and transformative:

I was raised and frightened into only ever looking at religion from a single perspective: Christianity. Even considering another perspective was almost akin to sinning. […] But what *Dragon Age: Inquisition* allowed me to do was suddenly be able to come in as an outsider – I played an elf – and be forced to view it from the outside.

After Edward viewed Christianity from the perspective of "an outsider" –
through the eyes of an excluded elf – Edward investigated his religious identity.
He goes as far as to refer to his life as "post-*DAI*" [*Dragon Age: Inquisition*] as
the game "impacted how I think about religion" and "gave me the breathing
room to reflect." And yet, other games contributed to religious reflexivity as
well. An important influence was *The Talos Principle*. In that game:

> Your actions can be read as an adherent to a Christian-esque [...] mono-
> theistic God [who] tells you not to go up the tower since you don't need
> that knowledge. But you can choose to go up the tower. [...] I decided that
> if I went up that tower and defied Elohim [the God-voice], it would be
> like defying the God of real-life Christianity.

Going up the tower terrified Edward "in a very real way" and served as a way
of role-playing himself, practicing the kind of audacity it took to "defying
the God of real-life Christianity." Indeed, after Edward went up the tower:
"I felt freer. Nothing bad happened. [...] I felt better and more in control
of myself. I felt like I had more agency in life." As a consequence, Edward
decided to "take a break from Christianity," eventually coming to identify
himself as both transgender and atheist.

## Conclusion: Now You're Playing with Ultimate Meaning

Based on content analysis of religious representations (narratives, beliefs,
characters) in videogames, it is often implied that these contribute to a process
of Othering religiosity: a stereotypical, schematic and moral way of representing
religions that draws "symbolic boundaries" between "us" and "them" (Lamont
& Molnár, 2002) and reinforces a hegemonic (Western/civilized/male/secular/
Christian) identity by contrasting it with an imagined (non-Western/barbarian/
female/religious/Muslim) Other (e.g., Asad, 2003; Boletsi, 2013; Said, 1978). Argu-
ing that "dominant-hegemonic" representations in texts are always interpreted,
negotiated and "decoded" (Hall, 1980), and, particularly, that videogames are
not passively consumed but actively played, I asked: How does role-playing
the (non-)religious Other in games affect the worldview of players?
    Rather than seeing religion in games as representations of Othering, the
analysis demonstrates that players from different (non-)religious beliefs take
on different worldviews while role-playing the (non-)religious Other. In doing
so, atheists relativize their own position, open up to the validity of religious
claims or wilfully embrace its logic and ultimate meaning in the context

of the game world. In turn, Christians, atheists, Hindus and others switch between each other's beliefs, compare traditions and sometimes, based on this process, draw conclusions about the similarities underlying world religions. In other cases, they admit to "slip[ping] into a secular mindset," gradually turning toward the position of a secular Other.

In short, the analysis indicates that the perspective on religious representations in games as an Other is limited. When we consider games as *played* and *experienced* (rather than read or analyzed as narratives afterwards), they are multi-sided tools that afford the possibility of actually playing the Other – of temporarily "bracketing" or suspending one's own worldview and empathizing with the Other's perspective. In itself, this is not surprising: from an anthropological perspective, play has always been understood as a "temporary suspension of normal social life" (Huizinga, 1938, p. 12; cf. Caillois, 1961) – a "liminal zone" in which "serious" issues of everyday life, culture and politics are transgressed, reversed and re-negotiated (Geertz, 1972; Turner, 1982; van Bohemen et al., 2014). In recent research on play in videogames, however, this ritual function of play is often narrowed down to a psychological dimension. Game worlds are considered "laboratories" where adolescent players try out new personal identities (Turkle, 1995), safely express deviant emotions such as fear and aggression (Jansz, 2015) and "play with the controversial, the forbidden and subversive" through role-play (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015, p. 4).

Based on these findings I suggest that, instead, academics should pay more attention to the way role-playing games contribute to social-cultural dimensions of identity, or even citizenship in a multicultural Western society. "Personal identity," after all, is inherently "social" and always shaped in relation to the Other (Goffman, 1959; Jenkins, 1996; Mead, 1934). Games, from this perspective, may indeed be understood as "laboratories" for players to play the Other, but in a broader social and cultural sense beyond the individual: as a free space in which to experiment with worldviews and, in doing so, build up understanding and tolerance. By playing at being atheists, Christians, Hindus or Muslims in games, players may become aware that the absolute truths they were raised with are culturally contingent and replaceable by alternatives – both historical and fantastical. A thorough awareness of religious pluralism, sociologist of religion Peter Berger argued over 50 years ago, opens people up for relativism and tolerance:

> The pluralistic situation multiplies the number of plausibility structures competing with each other. Ipso facto, it relativizes their religious contents. More specifically, the religious contents are "de-objectivated,"

that is, deprived of their status as taken-for-granted, objective reality in consciousness. They become subjectivized. [...] Their reality becomes a "private affair" of individuals. (Berger, 1967, pp. 151–152)

Two nuances remain in order not to overstate the role of games in this religious relativism. First of all, a caveat of the argument and data presented here is that "games" are not a monolithic cultural category. While it is easy to find religion in game settings from the historical to sci-fi, and from genres of fantasy to the post-apocalyptic, not all games offer religious roles and characters to identify with. There is very little religious relativism to be found in games such as *FIFA*. Secondly, despite the overwhelming number of games that *do* depend on religious conventions of representation, players' transportation was explicitly contextualized by play, and while it has led to reflection, it is a clearly bracketed, temporary activity. Overall, it thus remains a question what the offline implications are of role-playing the religious Other in multicultural society as a whole. I have no interest in claiming games to be a magical tolerance device – they are only a way for millions of players to experience what it is like to view the world differently.

Nonetheless, I have argued in this chapter that many games offer players the chance of playing the Other. Berger claimed that the relativism of cultural pluralism, ultimately, had a secularizing effect on individual belief, since it undermined the plausibility of ultimate meaning. In contemporary "post-secular" society (Habermas, 2006, 2008), a contradictory emphasis is put on fundamentalism, religious conflict and mutual Othering: atheists, Christians and Muslims are taking sides in what can be referred to as a "clash of civilizations" (Eagleton, 2009; Huntington, 1996; cf. Mamdani, 2004). This underscores the societal relevance of further systematic and perhaps quantitative research on my theory about games, role-play and religious relativism. To paraphrase Nintendo's famous 1980s slogan, when players are afforded the chance to see the world from new perspectives: "Now you're playing with ultimate meaning!"

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