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de Wildt, Lars

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6. Pop Theology

Abstract
This chapter concludes that there is a disjunction between the production and consumption of religion in videogames. On the one hand, the production of games leads to a commodification and "sameness" of religion in videogames, hollowing out the meaning of religious practice and belief. On the other hand, the consumption of games leads to meaningful public debate and individual (ir)religious experience, reasserting inter-religious conversation in the post-secular. This conclusion argues that religious signs are first turned into "simulacra" by game developers, and then played with and negotiated by players, resulting in a "pop theology." That is, an exchange of belief for play as *the* epistemological strategy for relating to religion in post-secular, mediatized societies. Videogames thus offer a ludic epistemology of religions as worldviews to be tried on, compared and discarded, rather than as sources for belief or disbelief in ultimate truths.

Keywords: pop theology, ludic epistemology, simulacra of the sacred, production and consumption of religion in videogames

What does religion have to do with videogames anyway?
– Anonymous *Assassin's Creed* developer (GDC, 2018)

As the introduction claimed, and as I have argued throughout the chapters above, the presence of religion in videogames is so common that developers and players alike forget the extent to which videogames depend on religious conventions. Various religious traditions, as has been observed by other scholars and throughout this book, are used by developers to add "gravitas" to games, or to explain game mechanics, or to draw players into worlds and characters apart from the disenchantment of modern life. I set out at the start of this book to look beyond what theologians, sociologists, game

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scholars and other academic writers had optimistically pointed out: that there are religious signs in videogames. "*So what?*" I have tried to ask as unceremoniously as possible, "What do videogames have to do with religion?" and "What does religion have to do with videogames anyway?" Or:

- Which choices lead game makers to use religion in their videogames?
- How do players make sense of and relate to these representations?

As a consequence of those questions, I ask in this conclusion:

- How should we theorize the appearance of religion in the largest cultural industry of the (supposedly) secularized West?
- What kind of religious change does this entail?

Production–Consumption–Disjunction

The "appearance" of religion in games is not a spontaneous – and presumably not divine – process. It comes from people making games, and other people then playing those games. There is, however, a disjunction between the production and consumption of religion in videogames. On the one hand, because of the way that videogame development is organized as a cultural industry, religious beliefs and practices are hollowed out into commodified signs and, in the most precarious niches of independent development, is standardized into conventional "sameness." On the other hand, the way that videogames are consumed by players leads to a reassertion of meaning that is experienced individually and then negotiated publicly.

To summarize the empirical chapters above, in Chapter 2 I argued that the logic of a commercial brand formed a "marketable religion" – based on fieldwork in Montréal, and 22 interviews there with developers on the AAA ("Hollywood"-style) *Assassin's Creed* franchise, among whom were the key creators of the franchise's decade-long history. The initial choice to use religion in *Assassin's Creed* was, on the one hand, one of personal conviction: Patrice Désilets and his core team wanted to make a game that depicted religious institutions as dogmatic systems of powerful manipulation. Subsequent choices made in marketing, production and editorial created a brand which commodifies religion to appeal to a global audience as wide as possible, without alienating or offending anyone. Religion in *Assassin's Creed*, as the example "par excellence" of commercially successful uses of religion in games, is thus used to create a nostalgic *belonging without*

believing for everyone to place themselves into an esoteric mystery "behind history," that is brought into a "rationalized" present of secular scientific logic. Chapter 3, based on 35 interviews with independent developers outside of the AAA system, showed that religious and irreligious developers alike were reluctant to put their own convictions into their games. Instead, they too contributed to a commodification of religious signs, in this case led by practical and economic considerations: by following the standardized conventions of Eurocentric religious representation in games.

Chapter 4 studied a hundred discussions that took place on the five most popular gaming forums, providing an overview of how player communities talk about religion in games from their own perspectives. I found that players variously either (1) "rejected" religious content as not fitting their established worldviews; (2) "debunked" games as trivial in relation to their established worldviews; (3) "debated" games as interpretable only according to their established worldviews; or (4) actively sought out games in order to "connect" to worldviews not already their own. In the process, their discussions showed that player communities are prompted by the games they play to conduct a collective "pop theology" on the nature of gods, and compare the meanings of fiction such as games in relation to sacred texts – thereby muddying the distinction between fictional and sacred texts. Looking further into their life-long engagements with games and the questions prompted, both Chapters 4 and 5 drew on 20 subsequent interviews to show that irreligious and religious players alike use games to experience how (fictional) religious Others see the world – whether it is to temporarily experience enchantment; to understand other religious systems than their own; or to try on atheism, in at least two cases leading to profound reflection and even conversions as a result.

Production: Ontological Simulacra of the Sacred

What commodification and sameness do, taken together, is that religious signs – their rituals, writings, aesthetics and architecture – are hollowed out as assets – into actions, scripts, lighting, level design – for the ambiance of gravitas and mystery. To put it more theoretically, the production of religion in videogame development changes religious substances ontologically. What religious substance *is* in videogames is reduced to a commodity. Again, with Arjun Appadurai: a commodity is "anything intended for exchange [...] *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political or personal transaction costs" leading to "the object-centred, relatively impersonal,

asocial" exchanges (Appadurai, 2005, p. 35). The result of this is a tendency toward similar and standardized forms of representing religion, or what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno once called "sameness" (*Ähnlichkeit*) (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 94): a process of standardization in cultural industries, regardless of the beliefs and intentions of the workers within that industry. They describe "sameness" as a process by which cultural industries are driven monotonously to commodify ideas, driven, on the one hand, by taboos on non-hegemonic groups and ideas (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 96; hooks, 2006) and, on the other hand, driven by a maximization of profit, achieved by appealing to the widest possible audience, by which "words change from substantial carriers of meaning to signs devoid of qualities" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 133). Briefly put: a reduction from (religious) substances to commodities.

Religion cannot thus be comfortably conceptualized in these empirical cases along either of the "substantialist" nor "functionalist" biases mentioned in the introduction. It is not (substantially) a connection to a supernatural substance (Marett, 1914; Spiro, 1966; Tylor, 1871) nor (functionally) a set of practices providing functions to societies and individuals (Bellah, 1964; Durkheim, 1995; Malinowski, 1925). Rather, what we see in videogames that use religion is a widespread encounter with mediatized commodifications of substances (depictions of gods, transactions with gods, metaphors of divinity), and – by extension – mediatized commodifications of rituals (initiations, meditations, summonings). What I mean by mediat*iz*ed, here, as opposed to mediated, is that these signs or their games do not function as objects mediating religious substances to the profane (in the way a human-made crucifix mediates Christ to a Christian [Meyer, 2006]), but that games present religious signs that exist only within their own, mediatized context.

This changes the sacrality of religious substance into what I want to call "simulacra of the sacred." Simulacra are a specific kind of signs that become too far divorced from their original signified to carry the same (in this case sacred) meaning. Religion is in such cases reduced to a self-contained, self-referential system of signs with no necessary connection to an original signified substance. Jean Baudrillard has already called this situation "hyperreal," in which signs no longer need to point to their referent to make sense in their own mediatized context (1994). Simply put, whereas most modernist conceptions of language stem from the idea that a sign has a signified (a tree, a boat, Jesus Christ, Shiva) and a signifier (a word or picture of a "tree," a "boat" or the plethora of signs and objects that signify Jesus Christ and Shiva) – we see in situations like this that the signified is

no longer necessary. Religious signs in videogames function as such: they are signifiers without needing a signified to function.

Instead, they are simulacra: copies that either have no original or have become so far divorced from an original that they become copies of copies without originals (Baudrillard, 1994). Disneyland provides an illustrative example for both Baudrillard ("a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra" [ibid., p. 12]) and Umberto Eco: "[W]e not only enjoy a perfect imitation, we also enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it" (1986, p. 46). Disneyland, in their example, no longer needs a clear connection to a reality or original signified. There *is no* original copy: all six Disneylands around the world are copies of each other, presenting copies of copies of original sources, i.e., combining copies of Viennese royal architecture, endless self-referential copies of a mouse-turned-cartoon-turned-merchandise, and a plethora of other historical and cultural "originals" from pirates to princesses, into something that presents itself as a "pure simulacrum," without a necessary relation to an underlying reality. There is no original underlying sign of Mickey Mouse; just as there is no necessary original for the combination of rituals and inventions of *Assassin's Creed*, nor the clichés and conventions of the healing Cleric, the safe church or the "wild" Shaman. Even if, as the enthusiastic theologian does, we attempt to retrace and collect the genealogical origins of those signs, their originals are not necessary for the signs to function.

Simulacra of the sacred function in themselves, in lieu of their religious origins, for game developers to use. In Baudrillard's words:

> It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of *substituting the signs of the real for the real*, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself. [...] A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary. (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 2–3; emphasis added)

In videogames, we see cultural products offering simulacra of the sacred much like Disney offers its reality: self-contained and divorced from tradition; without any vestige of the sacred, cultural or personal meanings that they carry for their believers.

Consumption: Socially Playing with Meaning

After games are made, sold and find their ways into players' homes, the way games are consumed leads to meaningful public debate and individual (ir) religious experience. This, perhaps surprisingly, reasserts inter-religious experiences in public and private spheres, as they are played with and negotiated by players. Thus the consumption of religion in videogames changes how religions function *socially*. Considering the decline of institutionalized, practiced religious belief and belonging, on the one hand, and considering the dominance of videogames as a cultural industry, on the other, it is straightforward to say that young people in the West are more likely to see religion in games than in a place of worship (cf. Newzoo, 2017; Pew, 2018). The industry has been able to fabricate communities of religious "belonging" that share collective meaning, morality and communal functions (Chapter 2; Chapter 4; Davie, 1990; cf. Geraci, 2014), but they do not necessarily share belief.

In fact, when fans come together to discuss and bond over their shared experiences, most of them end up doing so without changing their established worldviews (Chapter 4). If anything, how players interpret religion in games is first of all different from how other players interpret religion in games (*Assassin's Creed* is a deeply religious game; but *Assassin's Creed* is also a militantly atheist game), and second of all fundamentally unrelated to how developers intended to use religion in games (*Assassin's Creed* as Désilet's militantly atheist game; *Assassin's Creed* as Guesdon's universally religious brand for everyone). They are mere signs to be debated, and compared, but always in light of the player's own pre-existing cultural worldviews, which they bring to this temporary experience (Chapter 4; Chapter 5). They are opaque: the way in which religion is communicated through games (from developers to players), and around games (between players in huge communities of shared meanings), is more like a public projection screen than a transparent mediation of privatized experience.

This is a clear contestation of theories of "invisible religion" discussed above (e.g., Luckmann, 1967), in that religion is returned from privatized systems of belief to public debate. While these games may be understood by players in widely different ways, the "post-secular" public sphere is as a consequence abuzz with talk of religion, on gaming forums where players compare, contrast and criticize their mutually exclusive understandings of the games they each played (Chapter 4). As the analysis of players' public conversation showed, religion is a vital topic of discussion amongst players in the game community. On game forums, religion is defended and

attacked, found meaningful and trivialized, sought out, understood and misunderstood. Religious traditions are compared: Christian theology is put alongside knowledge of ancient pantheons, Meso-American mythology and the gods and rituals of *Skyrim* or *Zelda*.

Notwithstanding different positions, players are in dialogue about the "real" meanings of (in-game) religion and this shows that games inspire conversations on religion. It is important to note, however, that the arguments players are making in this conversation are neither non-committal nor arbitrary. Quite the contrary: what they express online about in-game content is strongly motivated by their (non-)religious identity in offline life. I therefore conceptualized this particular form of "textual poaching" (Jenkins, 2012) or "decoding" (Hall, 1980) of religion in games as a form of "public religion." By public religion I mean the public discussion of the truth and meaning of religion, god(s) and belief(s): i.e., *in* public and *by* the public, in groups of untrained and variously (ir)religious "amateurs" in offline or online environments.

How should we consider such vivid public discussions in the context of the academic debate on secularization or, more specifically, the proposed *privatization* of religion? Luckmann argued about half a century ago (1967) that religions do not necessarily disappear, but change: outside of established institutions and churches, individuals construct their privatized system of "ultimate significance" that are separate from the public sphere. By contrast, however, the involvement in this public "pop theology" on forums raises critical questions about the alleged non-institutional, socially insignificant and privatized nature of religion. First of all, the prominence of religion in popular media culture – film, television series and games – may already be understood as another kind of institutionalization of religion: that of religion as a commodity, packaged and sold by the cultural industry of producers and publishers, to be eagerly swept up by consumers in search of meaning (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Davidsen, 2018; Hoover, 2006; Schultze, 2003; Wagner, 2012).

Second, we cannot deny the collective and essentially public nature of the discussion about religion on online forums. Informed by offline worldviews and (ir)religious identities, I demonstrated that players fully immerse themselves in discussions and theological speculations about religion in the games they play. In her polemic with Thomas Luckmann, Kelly Besecke noted that we can visibly see religion in the public conversation about religion in self-help books, magazines and other mass media featuring religion and spirituality (2005). Digital media platforms facilitate such public debates even better: the non-hierarchical structure and "participatory

culture" of the internet (Jenkins, 2012) invites lay people and amateurs to voice their opinions on religion and worldviews.

Counter-intuitively then, videogames' commodified, standardized "simulacra of the sacred" prompt the active making and negotiation of meaning in players. When games prompt discussions on religion outside of churches; in public places, in media venues, and in online forums, this constitutes a truly public conversation. Anyone with an internet connection can partake. People participate not primarily as members of a religion, but from divergent religious and intersectional backgrounds and on their own accord. Prompted by in-game religion, they engage in heated conversation on how meaningful a game can be, for themselves and for others, vis-à-vis sacred texts and their own convictions: not privately, but publicly.

Pop Theology: Epistemologies of Play

This all results in a "pop theology." That is, a change from belief to play as *the* epistemological strategy for relating to religion in post-secular, mediatized societies. If theology is traditionally the systematic development of knowledge and theory on religious beliefs, videogames present a *pop* theology: a radical emancipation of religious meaning-making outside of the church and away from professional, academic theologians into the hands of the developers and players who play with religion.

I argue that this is the biggest theoretical implication for how we should understand or indeed "know" religion through games: the epistemological change from religion as a matter of belief to *play* as a way of relating to religion. Epistemologically, how religion is known and experienced in videogames is fundamentally changed by play's temporariness. Players may develop from their encounters with commodified religious simulacra a "kind of understanding" of being "in someone else's shoes" (Chapter 5), but it is only understood as them occupying the temporary worldview of playing the Other, a temporary playing at religion, in the same way that children play at being soldiers, at being a doctor, running a shop ("playing shop") or having a family ("playing house"). Hence, religions have meaning mainly within the delineated time and space of the videogame, and any knowledge presented within them is first and foremost true within their diegesis. This is why developers can take an amalgam of historically religious signs and stories and present them as a new, ahistorical religious experience. This is why, despite some players' reflections on their own religious lives *afterwards*, what is true or not about religion in the game is contained within

the hours of media use. The consequence is that such temporary, mediatized religious experiences take place outside the cultural context in which they are made and played. While in a game, we may play at being believers: we might be in fantastical, historical, sci-fi or wholly distinct worlds, acting in absolute certainty of the existence of gods – until we are not, because we have switched off our computer, or left the game to do something else, leaving behind the game's temporary world and worldview.

What this means for religious studies, the sociology of religion and game studies is foremost epistemological, i.e., that belief in sacred substances can be made into play-time with commodified simulacra and that age-old religious traditions can be tried on and discarded by players at will. This is a medium-specific theory, intransferable to other media no matter how playful they are theorized as (e.g., Hoover, 2006). As much or as little agency as players have been theorized to have within the medium (e.g., Raessens, 2005; cf. de Wildt, 2014b), they are at least able to appropriate and reconfigure what the game means *for them* and how they choose to interpret and understand it. Moreover, they apparently do so without a necessary connection both to how developers intended it, and to how other players understood their own experience. In many ways these findings are in line with literature on (non-digital) play as a temporary, delineated experience, starting as early as Huizinga and Caillois, the latter of whom writes:

> all play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a [...] imaginary universe. [...] The subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another. (Caillois, 1961, p. 19)

But can games "make" belief as Caillois states?

On the contrary, I argue that to call such a "temporary shedding of personality" a form of belief is reductive, and that in the case of religious belief it ignores the more common and theoretically productive observation that millions of gamers now *play* with what were once fundamental sources of ultimate meaning. Instead, religion finds a refuge in fiction – especially the enacted, embodied fictions of videogames – exactly because (young) people in the West do not believe anymore. So what do we make of, on the one hand, arguments by scholars like Caillois and Geraci that play is (virtually) equal to belief and, on the other hand, criticisms by scholars like Sutton-Smith and Raessens of modernist distinctions between play

and non-play as overly rigidly dichotomous? In the introduction, I briefly cited Rachel Wagner as continuing in Caillois' (and Huizinga's) footsteps by equating games to religion, and play to belief. In full:

> [There is] a fundamental similarity between religion and games, generally speaking: both are, at root, order-making activities that offer a mode of escape from the vicissitudes of contemporary life, and both demand at least temporarily that practitioners give themselves over to a predetermined set of rules that shape a worldview and offer a system of order and structure that is comforting for its very predictability. [...] [G]ames offer such ordered worlds on a temporary basis [whereas] religion attempts to make universal claims. (Wagner, 2014, p. 193)[1]

Here, my conclusions align only with Wagner's brief caveat against the similarity of games and religion, based on the temporariness of the structures of games vis-à-vis the universal, ultimate meanings of religion (although most of her work will go on to ignore this caveat in her argument). Religions, in the words of Peter Berger, do indeed "construct a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning, binding on everybody" (1967, p. 134), whereas games, as noted above, offer worldviews that are only temporary.

That is the difference between play and belief: games delineate a separate time and place. Sutton-Smith argued similarly that "what is a potential and yet unlimited promise in religion is an actual but temporary gift in play" (2009, p. 85). However, as Sutton-Smith and others have also argued, a structural distinction between play and non-play is a dichotomy that disregards the "ambiguity of play" (ibid.), or in Raessens' words: "[M]odernist thought, including that of Huizinga, leaves no room for ambiguities and seeks to dispel them. As a result, however, Huizinga becomes entangled in insoluble conceptual tensions. [...] The solution is to do justice to these ambiguities, because they are so typical for play" (2010, p. 12).

Similarly, the dichotomy between belief and disbelief does not apply to the epistemological attitude of play. The temporary meaning-making of (digital) play is not a "make-belief" or a "real belief" or even a "suspension of disbelief" in the life-long sense of belief as accepting ultimate meaning. Based on the empirical studies above I argue that games demand a more ludic epistemology from players which transcends this belief/disbelief binary: a pop theology – that is, of playful and popular engagements with religion,

1 For similar arguments, see Geraci (2014), and Leibovitz (2013).

as opposed to one of doctrines of belief (where belief is an acceptance of truths, especially those without proof).

A ludic epistemology implies that play is a way of engaging in temporary systems of meaning. Specifically, playing games allows players to enter a "real enough" (Hong, 2015), or a "liminal space" (Turner, 1982), in which religion even when seen as explicitly fictional can be accepted with a measure of irony and reflexivity at a "safe distance" to be played with, which has elsewhere been called a "lusory attitude" in general (Suits, 1978; cf. de Wildt, 2014a), or "playful religion" more specifically (Droogers, 2014). The consequence of this is that players either contain their religious engagement within the context of play or, as the empirical material in this book also shows, for players to reflect on their everyday (ir)religious attitudes in life outside of play – although belief is confined outside of it.

Playing at religion in games can thus sound to the sociologically educated reader like a type of "effervescence" in the way that Durkheim explains collective effervescence:

> [H]ow would experiences like these not leave [a person] with the conviction that two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds exist in fact? In one world he languidly carries on his daily life; the other is one that he cannot enter without abruptly entering into relations with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world and the second, the world of sacred things. It is in these effervescent social milieux, and indeed from that very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to have been born. (Durkheim, 1995, p. 220)

However, there are two major differences. Firstly, there are so many more of those worlds available to the 21st century player in my research, than there are to the indigenous Australian Warumungu that Durkheim studied. Rather than a collectively shared and co-constructed "world of sacred things," there are multiple (commodified, simulated, de-privatized) worlds to return to the profane from, or switch between. Secondly, the player's experience is digitally delineated in space and time, between them, the screen, and the computer's on and off button. As opposed to the kind of non-digital (role-)play that Huizinga, Caillois and Sutton-Smith write about, digital videogames offer closed-off, rule-based, audiovisual worlds that are encyclopaedic, freely explorable and – more importantly – kept in check by the technological means and calculations of a computer: their boundaries are clear and unnegotiable. It is clear when and where play ends and starts. The overwhelming majority of effervescent experiences in videogames still

take place within the clearly delineated space and time of a game's screen or VR-headset, and the combination of buttons used to play with or ultimately turn games' temporary worlds on and off.

Although this book did not set out to study anything but religion in games, this of course has theoretical implications for how we should understand both religion and videogames. A pop theology – which, I suggest, is the dominant way in which young Westerners now encounter and know religion – requires a fundamental rethinking of how we have thought about religion up to now. Religion is no longer just the domain of belief in ever-lasting, ultimate meaning based on sacred substances, mediated by rich traditions of elaborate rituals and objects. Religion has become a game. There is, furthermore, a potential to better understand how other worldviews are produced and consumed in similar games: whether they are invested with religious, political, ecological or other worldviews.

To stay within the stricter scope of this book, however: What does a pop theology entail for the production and consumption of religion in videogames?

Firstly, when developers produce such worldviews, they are reproducing conventions based on enchanted worldviews long lost to many. They commodify a world wherein gods are reduced to monsters or quest-givers, wherein rituals and sacred objects are reduced to quantifiable effects and wherein religious values are reduced to commodified experiences (for 60 hours and 60 euros). Their games present perfectly true worlds that do not just play with religion as an influence here and there. Instead, they can represent all the enchantment of religious traditions, but with the certainty of gods' existence and within the technical means and calculations of a predictable machine.

Secondly, when players take on these worldviews in the ways I have theorized above, they play with religion. They do not merely play with the idea of believing this or that, but they fully take on their roles as an "Other," playing at being religious, without all that pesky belief. Just as a child would play at being a doctor or at running a business, they are dabbling in religion, trying it on, dismissing it and casting it off – all the while acting on a played truth. Religion is thus playfully produced and consumed; it is temporarily connected with, debated and compared. But unless a player was already a believer in what is depicted, I contend that there is no mediation of belief, only a ludic epistemology. Who wants to go back to the uncertainty and worldview-changing convictions of religious belief in a world like that? Instead, millions of players choose to have all the possible religions in the world available to them as an experiment, playing with religion at the push of a button.

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