

Creeds, Souls & Worlds of Worship: Players' Appropriations of Religious Worldviews through Game Forums

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ABSTRACT

Every day, millions of players around the world engage in fictional worlds that appear profoundly religious, incorporating religious imagery, narratives and rituals. Despite living in an age of supposed secularization, they are playing *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007), *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) or other games across genres and platforms that delve into distinctly Christian worldviews, Hindu imagery, and esoteric, pagan and animistic traditions (Aupers, 2014). Notwithstanding this omnipresence of religion in games, however, a large part of gamers playing these games identify as atheists, agnostics or otherwise non-practicing (Hornbeck 2012). At the same time, players of manifold faiths engage in playthroughs that fit their beliefs.

This paper analyzes the ways in which players appropriate the narratives, affordances and aesthetics of game worlds in light of their own religious and non-religious backgrounds. Drawing its data from the internet's five most popular discussion boards, it furthermore grants insight into how players report and negotiate their sometimes contradictory experiences with games' worldviews in light of their own. More specifically, our research question is: how do players appropriate religious elements of games in relation to their own worldview; and how do they discuss these appropriations on internet forums? Starting with the perspective of Stuart Hall (1980) – emphasizing the active consumer's 'decoding' of media texts according to their background (including gender, class, religion, etc.) – we, first of all, aim to contribute to an understanding of player consumption in game studies by analyzing players' particular religious readings and reconfigurations of games. The study furthermore promises a contribution to sociology of religion, supporting findings of religion as not necessarily in decline (as secularization

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theory holds) but flowering outside of churches (Luckmann, 1967) and through playful use of popular culture (e.g., Possamai, 2005; Hoover, 2006; Aupers & Houtman, 2006).

Within each selected forum (GameFAQs, Gamespot, NeoGAF, IGN and various gaming-related subreddits), up to twenty of the most recent threads dealing with religious content were selected for analysis (for a total of 92) threads. A content analysis was performed according to a grounded theory approach, identifying themes across the corpus, developing from open into closed coding. Based on this analysis, several types of players emerge that illustrate ways in which players approach the religious contents of games and the backgrounds from which they do so. Firstly, because players engaging in these debates already set out to discuss religion, their posts readily offer up their religious positions (“I’m Christian but [...]”) – allowing a clear division between players identifying as religious (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, pagan, etc.) and non-religious (atheist, agnostic, etc.). Within these two groups, each shares three types of engagement: Debunking, Debating and Incorporating. Whereas both religious and non-religious Debunkers trivialize the importance of religious content in games, the first group does so by drawing a sharp *distinction* between faith and fiction (“I’m am [sic] devoutly religious, but seriously... it’s just a video game”); the latter rather tends to *equate* the “Angels and Demons” of religion with the “Trolls and pixies” of games. Similarly, while both religious and non-religious Debaters engage with the worldviews they discuss, they may draw completely different understandings from the same games, and can be seen to defend them in elaborate debate. Finally, Confronters of both groups recognize the epistemic friction they experience in play. Many non-religious Confronters, for instance, seek out and revel in worlds of gods and ritual, allowing the experience of faith without having to believe outside the liminal, temporary realm of play.

In all, we conclude that playing with religious worldviews in games provides a playful epistemic laboratory: an experimental space which affords free engagement with religion without the consequences of faith, i.e., without having to convert to doctrines, traditions or beliefs. We argue that this mediatized ‘religious play’ furthermore suggests an epistemological shift in the religious milieu: from dogmatic belief to playful engagement.

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