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Religious Cults in the Fictional Universe of the RPG *The Witcher*

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This paper deals with religions found in the fictional world of "The Witcher" video game. Within this fantasy universe, religious communities, institutions, and conflicts are not constructed around theological doctrines, nor do they refer to the issues usually associated with religious faith (such as cosmology, eschatology, ethics or worship). Instead, their depiction is primarily based on their position on violence and their attitude towards the Other. In many respects, this game is a typical product of contemporary pop culture; religions, religiousness, faith, and believers are portrayed here from a secular perspective. As a result, it is the question of religious cults' willingness to peacefully co-exist with each other and the world around them that comes to the forefront, while issues that are less interesting for non-believers are downplayed or ignored. This article aims to show one of the dominant strategies of representation of religions and believers in contemporary video games.

Introduction

IN recent years, the topic of religion and video games has developed rapidly; not only has the amount of research grown, but so too has the number of shared aspects (themes and questions) between religion and (video)games and digital culture more broadly. Like other related topics, the study of video games and religion is generally divided into the following categories:
- research on the representation of real religious phenomena in video games (e.g. the representation of Islam, shamanism, and believers, etc. . .);

- research on the attitudes of believers toward video games and their relationships with video games;
- research on the internal structure of the video game universe, for example, analysis of religion and mythologies as components of a fictitious world in a specific video game or video game franchise;
- the development of research methodologies to examine religion and video games, which is relevant given that game studies lacks a defined method, and thus, like religious studies and other interdisciplinary fields, it borrows and adapts from other disciplines.

There have been several recent works of note that examine video games and religion (Šisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2018). The work of W.S. Bainbridge, which considers concepts such as God, the soul, and death in video games; the work of C. Deitweiler, which examines a wide range of theological questions in video games; and a detailed analysis of religious components in the fictional worlds of *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* by R.M. Geraci (Bainbridge 2013; Deitweiler 2010; Geraci 2014; Linden Research 2003; Blizzard Entertainment 2004).

Currently, academic assessment of video games is poorly developed. This is because there is not yet a generally accepted methodology for analyzing video games. As a result, scholars rely on methods borrowed from other disciplines (e.g. film studies, literary studies, theater studies, etc. . .). Another important feature of scholarship on video games is that the objects of the analysis are often RPG or MMORPG[1] — two genres that are distinguished by an immense amount of content, and thus offer great opportunities to analyze virtually any theme. Since these genres have the greatest scope, they provide the researcher with much material, including textual material, which is more suitable for scholarly analysis because it does not require familiarity with media-specific metrics, which, as of yet, are nonexistent in game studies.

The media specificity of video games is expressed in what video game researchers, following Ian Bogost, call the procedural, that is, the interactive nature of video games that allows a player to perceive certain facts about a fictitious world by observing the game's reaction to their actions (Bogost 2010). For example, in a film a religious ta-

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1. RPG — Role-Playing Game — a computerized game, in which game play is based on the management of one or more characters, whose skills, abilities, morality, and actions vary based on a player's or user's actions. MMORPG — Massively multiplayer online role-playing game — an online multiplayer version of similar games.

boo can be depicted through dialogue about the existence of that taboo, or through the fact that none of the heroes perform the prohibited action. In a video game, all of the above is possible, but it is also possible for the taboo to be demonstrated through the players lack of technical ability to do what is forbidden, or through the presence of negative consequences for a player that performs the prohibited action.

Religion in Contemporary RPGs

This article analyzes religious cults in the first part of *The Witcher* trilogy from the studio "CD Projekt" (CD Projekt Red). Rather than examine how believers are analyzed in video games by examining specific religious communities, practices, texts, symbolic systems, etc. . ., this study uses the video game, *The Witcher*, as a case study to illustrate how contemporary Western pop culture depicts religion and people of faith in video games. If this article were examining modern popular literature or cinema such a question would be extremely problematic, if not irrelevant, because of the difficulty of identifying a typical representation of religion and believers. Video games, however, provide an opportunity to explore such a topic, since throughout their existence mainstream video games have maintained and expressed a purely secular view on religion, both its essence and its pragmatic aspects.

Since the author is not a religious scholar but a researcher of popular culture, the focus of this article will not be on the philosophy and history of religious concepts in video games but on the game's perspective on religious subjects. The analytical basis for this study is the concept of the "fantastic milieu," developed by Daniel Kirby (Kirby 2013). Based on Partridge's concept of the occulture and Campbell's "cultic milieu," Kirby proposed the "fantastic milieu" to depict the intertext composed by all objects identified as fantastic by popular culture in the current moment (Partridge 2005; Campbell 1972; Kirby 2013). A "fantastic milieu," which is revealed through a synchronous analysis of texts and works of art that report the meaning of mass culture and texts and practices produced by participants in thematic communities, reveals an ahistorical and egalitarian environment. It is ahistorical because the ordinary consumer is often unaware of the historical source of the cultural object (e.g. a druid, a totem, polytheism, the trinity, prayer, or church), is unaware of the relationship between them, and does not know when, why, and where it originated, how it changed historically, how it faded, or how it survived to the present day. It is egalitarian because, if there is an interior hierarchy among these objects, it

is mainly based on the principle of "more or less well-known." In other words, the significance of a particular object is determined by its popularity, not by its ontological characteristics.

Before starting an analysis of religious cults in *The Witcher*, I will briefly describe the dominant strategies for constructing religion, faith, and believers in the video game industry in general, and in the RPG genre in particular. By situating the work in a wider context, this study can more clearly observe the construction of religious groups in *The Witcher* and consider what is typical of the genre and what is unique.

First, I will outline the two main ways that religion is depicted in video games: religion as a delusion and religion as a recognized practice that interacts with magic and supernatural forces. Given these two modes of depiction, the veracity of a particular doctrine seldom comes into question because the protagonist (and thus the player) either knows for sure that it is real or true, or he or she has the task of proving that it is a hoax. In either case, the player and the characters they control demonstrate the validity or fallacy of a certain belief. Furthermore, most video games lack the typical features of religious criticism. In general, theology and everything related to it, such as the interpretation of sacred texts and theological debates, are absent from video games. In addition, cosmogony and eschatology seldom appear in video games because all the characters have knowledge about the origin of the world, the presence of intelligent life, etc. . . If, however, the plot features a religious group that deliberately misleads its adherents, then their cosmology (and more often eschatology) exists in order to be refuted. It is roughly the same with faith; when the existence of gods and other higher powers is not in question, there is no question of faith, but rather a question of proper worship. In fact, often the characters of the fictional world must choose to which forces to swear allegiance in exchange for certain benefits. In the other scenario, in which religion is a delusion, the result is much the same; people blindly believe in a lie (either disseminated maliciously or by mistake) that destroys their lives. Their actions, in this case, are not acts of faith but of excessive trust; they behave as they do simply because they do not verify the information they receive or analyze the situation critically.

As for the believers themselves, the video game industry typically uses the four most common archetypes.

1. The "hypocritical believer" is a character, who verbally proclaims the greatness and importance of certain dogmas, who masquerades as an authority on higher powers, and who claims to appeal to a greater good, but is, in reality, interested only in improving his or her own sit-

uation. Often this character uses religion as a cover or an instrument to achieve selfish ends. Such a character, as a rule, believes that the ends justify the means and does not shy away from deceit, violence, and betrayal. They also actively promote a certain system of principles or restrictions, despite the fact that they themselves violate them. Their goal is, quite simply, to create inequal opportunities that will enable them to rise above others to a position of privilege and power, and their standard role in the storyline is to manipulate others for their own benefit. This type of believer typically acts as an antagonist, who the player must expose.

2. The "fanatic" is a sincere believer of a certain religion. This character also believes that the ends justify the means, and as a rule, their role in the plot is to inflict violence on the other characters. This type of believer is also an antagonist, who the player must often defeat.

3. The "duped believer" is a person who certain religious institutions or figures (often of the previous two types) mislead. This type of believer functions as an exploited victim. They are often convinced by the previous two types to fight on the wrong side or to give them certain powers. Typically, this believer needs to be saved and enlightened by the player, and occasionally they become "collateral damage" in the protagonist's quest to defeat the main antagonist of the game.

4. The 'keeper of balance" is a believer who preaches pacifism, harmony, and tolerance. Often this character is a wise mentor, a keeper of knowledge, and a defender of the prevailing world order. Despite being peaceful, this character is able to fend for themselves and often takes up arms against threats to the status quo. This character is often the protagonist's teacher and an ally that fights against common foes. This mentor often functions as a source of information about the world and occasionally serves to ensure that the protagonist follows the right path.

The System of Religious Organizations in The Witcher

The Witcher is based on a series of Andrzej Sapkowski novels released in the 1980s and 1990s. The novels are a postmodernist bricolage of fantasy of the past and the future (old myths and futurist science fiction). These postmodernist works blend together a variety of elements from mythology and science fiction. Time travel is melded with witch-hunts and burnings, Celtic druidism, naiads and dryads (water and tree nymphs) from Greek mythology, Germanic paganism and runes, and much more. The video game, by and large, is true to its literary

heritage — in particular, its amalgam of ancient mythology and futurist science fiction.

The franchise is of particular interest for this research because of its importance and influence in the RPG genre and because its religious world is quite typical of the fantasy genre, allowing for this study's conclusions to be extrapolated to other mainstream works of the genre. At the same time, there is much that its unique. Religious organizations in *The Witcher*, unlike those in most video games, not only serve to embellish plot points and to stereotypically depict antagonists but are also sufficiently systematic and internally consistent to advance a specific political message. To examine religion in *The Witcher*, this study uses primary and secondary storylines, information about characters belonging to specific religious groups, game dialogue, the in-game encyclopedia (the so-called "Glossary"), as well as books that the protagonist discovers. This study focuses solely on the first installment of the video game trilogy. Information from other parts of the franchise and the card game will not be considered, largely because the depictions of these religious groups evolve significantly from one work to another.

The first installment of the franchise depicts six religious groupings, all of which can be divided into two groups — "religions of peace" and "religions of war." On the one hand, the "religions of war" are characterized by intolerance, aggression, racism, destruction, masculinity, and a cult of power, and are without exception the enemy of the protagonist. On the other hand, the "religions of peace" are inherently pacifist, cooperative, constructive, and tolerant. All of them are also united by their worship of female deities, their acceptance of both men and women priests, and their alliance with the protagonist.

I will consider each of the two groups, starting with the "religions of peace." This group is first represented in the game by a Druidic cult that worships Mother Nature. Such religious groupings, based on "ecological" mythologies, are common in modern fantasies, and typically combine romanticized elements of ancient Celtic, Scandinavian, and Greek mythology (e.g. druids, elves and fairies, sacred trees and forests, and naiads and dryads). Depictions of "ecological" druids in fantasy are influenced by the following elements: pop-cultural ideas about eco-spiritual practices (or Ecospirtuality) and larger religious movements, a set of fantasy elements related to nature, and the environmentalist agenda. As a result of all of these elements, druids appear to protect nature from "dirty civilizations," completely disregarding the fact that real druids by no means opposed civilizational

pollution. In popular culture, ecological philosophies are usually accompanied by ideas of balance and equilibrium, and hence egalitarianism and tolerance. Such depictions can be found in countless video games, and *The Witcher*, by and large, follows this pattern. In the game this cult is represented by one community of devotees (several druids and one dryad) living in a sacred grove. The sanctity of this place is manifested in the game by the fact that wild animals that typically attack the protagonist are not aggressive here. The aforementioned stereotype of the "keeper of the balance" is realized. The druids live in the sacred grove "in harmony with nature," are peaceful and tolerant, and their grove is open to all (e.g. man, elf, Witcher, wild beast, etc. . .). Moreover, the druids fight for equality by assisting rebels, who are fighting against the oppression of ethnic minorities.

The next group of interest is the Cult of the Lady of the Lake. Its original source is Greek mythology (the protagonist calls the Lady a "water nymph"), but it also draws significantly from Arthurian storylines, as evidenced by the Lady's name; the sword given to the main character; the presence of knights looking for the grail (the pseudonym of one of whom is the Fisher King); and a number of other small details that refer to Arthurian mythology. Like the druid cult, the Cult of the Lady of the Lake is associated with nature and peace. The Lady maintains peace between people and water, grants fertility to the fields, and ensures the prosperity of the village "Murky Waters."

The next group, the Melitele Cult, is similar to the previous two as is demonstrated by this in-game source:

> Melitele is the goddess of the harvest, fertility, and nature. Like nature, she brings peace and balance to everything she touches. This cult is very similar to the faith of the Druids; naturalness and harmony are characteristic of both faiths. The priestesses of this cult are famous for their therapeutic abilities (CD Projekt Red 2007).

In the game the player also finds the following text, allegedly written on behalf of a scientist from Nilfgaard, a country hostile to the northern kingdom.

> Among the numerous faiths of the Nordlings, the most widespread is the Cult of Melitele, a goddess in three forms: young girl, mature woman, and old hag. Melitele is a Mother Goddess, caring for her children. Primarily women pray to her, though men in need might also utter supplications. The religion is a vestige of the old matriarchy and testifies to

the weakness of the Nordlings — people who worship female deities are soft-hearted and incapable of preparing their sons for war" (CD Projekt Red 2007).

The Cult of Melitele is derived primarily from pagan fertility cults and to a lesser extent from Christianity and 20th century theories, developed by Margaret Murray and Robert Graves, about matriarchal Proto-Indo-European Europe (Murray 2012; Murray 2014; Graves 2013). Although the scientific community does not accept their argument, recent works on the triune Goddess, by the American archeologists and anthropologists Graves and Marija Gimbutas, argued that proto-Indo-European society was matriarchal, based on ideas of tolerance, equality, and peaceful coexistence, and was destroyed by the invasion of Indo-Europeans, who brought with them a warlike and intolerant culture (Gimbutas 1989; Gimbutas 1991; Gimbutas 2007). The concept of the triune Goddess has become widespread in neopagan thought, within the broader New Age movement, and to some extent in the feminist milieu. Furthermore, this concept is used in many fantasy works, for example, in George R.R. Martin's well-known *A Song of Ice and Fire* series.

Now it is time to consider the three remaining groups, the so-called "religions of war." These include the Cult of Dagon, the Cult of the Lionhead Spider, and the Cult of the Eternal Fire.

The Cult of Dagon is the antithesis of the Cult of the Lady of the Lake. The two share a common space (the altar of Dagon is on the same island, where the Lady lives) and a common flock (Dagon is also worshipped by people and an amphibious humanoid race) but have opposing agendas. Dagon was the name of an ancient Mesopotamian and Canaanite deity later appropriated by popular culture in the works of H.P. Lovecraft and the author's successors — Brian Lumley, August Derlet, and other popular writers, who referenced Lovecraftian mythology (e.g. Neil Gaiman, Stephen King, etc. . .). In addition to the name and amphibious-humanoid devotes, the game borrows from Lovecraftian mythology references to a giant staircase descending into the water; the destructive origin of the cult (its devotees believe that one day Dagon will emerge from the water and destroy the land); and the presence of a village of bricklayers, who do not attack the main character, but worship Dagon and dream of destroying the land (an obvious reference to Innsmouth and other "calm waters" from Lovecraftian storylines). Similar to the Lady of the Lake, Dagon links people and the water, but not for the purpose of coexistence; Dagon's

devotees want to help destroy the land. Dagon and the creature's amphibious-humanoid followers are openly hostile to both humans and other aquatic worshipers of the Lady of the Lake. Throughout the story they are enemies of the hero, and in the main storyline, the protagonist fights with Dagon and the creature's followers.

The Cult of the Lionhead Spider is more difficult to analyze. Initially, the developers planned to feature this group in several secondary storylines but abandoned these storylines and their related tasks and characters. In other words, unlike the other five religious groups considered, there is little information about the Cult of the Lionhead Spider. No information is received from other characters, the cult does not appear in the main plot, and the player has the opportunity to not encounter it at all. Nevertheless, several in-game objects, related to the group, remained in the game that the player can discover and on which he or she can form an impression of the cult. These include a situation where, upon searching the city sewer, the main character discovers a letter on the corpse of a knight with information about the group; a non-player character (NPC),[2] who curses the surrounding crowd, invoking the Lionhead spider; and a cave filled with hostile NPCs using the name "Priest of the Lionhead Spider." It is not known how these were to be tied into the initial plan for the group, but I will analyze the elements in the final version. Everything that the player learns about the cult from the release version of the game, without consulting third-party sources, is as follows: the cult is forbidden in the territory of the known kingdoms, it is associated with human sacrifices, it is practiced in secret, and its followers, by and large, only interact with the player's character in battle. There is only one character in the game, which based on a single remark, is a follower of the cult and friendly with the protagonist, however, this character's faith in the Spider deity remains a secret, one which is only revealed in one of the two possible outcomes in the final chapters of the game. Followers of the Lionhead Spider, as a whole, appear to be aggressive, impossible to understand, radical sectarians, who avoid dialogue with the player.

The last organization of interest — the Cult of the Eternal Fire — can be described as the most consistent with stereotypical representations of medieval Christianity in popular culture and fantasy. The Cult of the Eternal Fire is the only organization called a "Church," it has a spiritual and chivalric order, it engages in witch-hunts and burnings,

2. NPC — Non-Playable Character — any player in a game who is not controlled by a player.

and it is extremely intolerant. Here is how it is described in the afore-mentioned in-game book:

> In recent years, the Cult of Melitele has found a rival in the Cult of the Eternal Fire, which came out of Novigrad. Clerics of the Eternal Fire demonstrate fanaticism and almost compete devotion. The religion is hostile toward any form of otherness, including non-humans. The faith is based on the worship of the Eternal Flame. The embodiment of the flame is any manifestation of fire. According to the belief, the Eternal Flame is the essence of all living things. At the heart of the cult is the dominant masculine principle. This explains why the priestly posts are occupied by men. The order of the Flaming Rose is the cult's military arm (CD Projekt Red 2007).

It should be noted that it is only this religion that includes "hypocriti-cal" believers. The "religions of peace" are composed only of "keepers of balance" and the Cults of Dagon and Spider are composed only of fanatics. I will briefly describe one of the characters, who is positioned as a typical representative of the Eternal Fire, the Reverend Fura. Al-though the Reverend frequently speaks of kindness, the character's ac-tions demonstrate that those words are hollow. During the game, the main character learns that Fura protects local bandits that drove the hero's daughter out of the house and to prostitution; that Fura calls for the punishment of a man, whose guilt has yet to be proven; that Fura sells children to a dangerous gang; and that the reverend tries to kills the hero, even after the protagonist rescues the village and Fura from a monster. Over the course of the game, Fura is distinguished by a distrust of strangers and a tendency to blame problems on exter-nal enemies.

This cult needs to be considered in more detail, particularly its chivalric order, the Order of the Flaming Rose, since it is the prin-ciple antagonist in the game. The Order embodies a popular cliché, namely the Order considers itself or at least depicts itself as a neces-sary evil that is required to protect the world from greater evils. It is important to note that the Order was not always like this. It was orig-inally called the Order of the White Rose and, like the entire Cult of the Eternal Fire, lacked a well-defined system of morality, dogma, the-ology, or a cosmogony or eschatology. As numerous in-game sources proport the Order of the White Rose decayed over time and was sup-planted by the Order of the Flaming Rose, as its goal became the pro-tection of temples and clergymen. The Order became more immor-

al as well. According to the in-game text: "Masters and knights were equally corrupt, lacking in faith; they preferred a warm bed to fighting, street girls to prayer" (CD Projekt 2007). This change occurred when Jacques de Aldersberg became the Grand Master of the Order, renaming it the Order of the Flaming Rose and transforming its purpose. Publicly, its goal was and is to protect humans from monsters and rebels, but behind the scenes it strives to implement a secret plan that would guarantee salvation from the coming apocalypse. Jacques, who possesses strong magical abilities, has visions, in which the world is destroyed by global cooling. This eschatological concept — the only one in the game — preoccupies Jacques' mind, leading the Grand Master to search for a path of salvation, one which Jacques finds by creating a superhuman race that — under the Master's tutelage — can survive the apocalypse. This becomes storyline behind the key conflict of the game. Jacques is the only character in the game who acts on faith. Even though the vast majority of people place little credibility in the Grand Master's premonitions, Jacques believes them and works tirelessly, ultimately perishing in the effort to prevent the end of the world. Thus, the conflict between the main character and Jacques' Order is, in fact, the only religious conflict in the game, and the actions of the Grand Master (experiments on people, contract killings, and an attempted coup) can only be justified if the world is truly facing an apocalypse that would serve to vindicate Jacques' faith.

Thus, the game presents a spiritual binary between peaceful and militarist religions. In the absence of theological problems and the question of faith in deities, the choice of religion comes down to a choice between peace and war, tolerance and intolerance. While the main character is typically given the opportunity to choose sides in conflicts, the user is forced to be at peace with the "religions of peace" and at war with the "religions of war." This is consistent with how other games depict the religious environment. Religions are typically categorized based on whether the secular community considers them harmful.

It is also important to consider peaceful and militarist religions from a different angle. The "religions of war" (e.g. the Cult of Dagon, the Cult of the Lionhead Spider, and the Cult of the Eternal Fire) are revolutionary and seek to violate or alter the status quo, while good religious organizations defend it. This new state of the world or revolutionary change is brought about through violence. Without these enemies, who want to change the world, it would remain unchanged. The story uses traditional fairy tale tropes, whereby the antagonists vi-

olate the status quo and the hero's task is to restore it. This parallels secular society's views on religion, whereby religions are categorized by whether their believers practice their faith insularly, away from the eyes of "normal people," or whether they use their beliefs to actively shape the world around them.

The mobilizing power of the game's militarist cults lies in the promise of struggle, danger, and death, which may seem counterintuitive, but for many is more appealing than the stability, tranquility, and harmony promised by the peaceful cults. The call of the "religions of war" to forcibly alter the status quo enables the individual to be involved in bringing about revolutionary change. In other words, the appeal of such religions is that they allow an individual to feel like they have some influence over their world and their own situation. The preservation of the status quo — supported by the "religions of peace" — is, in fact, the struggle to ensure that nothing new occurs, and hence the individual is unlikely to be able to contribute to the course of events or to improve their own lot.

In the case of the knights of the Flaming Rose, revolutionary change should be understood literally because they strive to achieve a literal physical transformation. The question that arises is why their particular goal is unacceptable to Witchers; not only are the Witchers hybrids, they are the hybrids upon which the Order's mutants are based. The answer put forth by the game is that the Witchers were created not to change society, but to protect and preserve it from other supernatural threats that seek to transform it, such as the Order. With this in mind, Jacques is an existential enemy of the Witchers because the Grand Master seeks to fundamentally modernize society and the world. In the same vein, Nilfgaard — the modernized state in the south — is also an enemy of the Witchers because it promises to disturb the status quo by bringing its progress to all kingdoms through military conquest. Jacques, however, is a larger concern because the Master's eschatological project offers not simply the modernization of man and society, but also the transformation of time and history. Specifically, it implies that the history of the world is linear — approaching an apocalypse — as opposed to cyclical and repetitive. In accordance with this view of history and time, Jacques seeks to transform the knights to a new state of existence so that humanity can continue to live in the world. The protagonist rejects this linear view of the future, and upon defeating Jacques and the Order triumphs over the linear view of time, bringing the world back into cyclical time.

Conclusion

The system of religious organizations in *The Witcher* promotes a conservative message for the game. The fundamental question is not only about violence against people, but also about violence against the prevailing world order. When religious organizations try to transform the world order, the protagonist (a protector by profession) aligns with preservationist cults and aims to eliminate the existential threat and preserve the status quo that the religious revolutionaries try to undermine.

The video game's purely secular view on religion and people of faith becomes obvious. The fact that *The Witcher* like many other pop culture works presents only certain aspects of religions and not others is not an accident. Within the framework of Western secular ideology, non-believers value religions that are peaceful, that are tolerant of dissenters, that do not intervene in secular affairs, etc. . . In other words, the main question for non-believers seems to be whether religious practitioners will try to interfere in their lives. Theology, acts of faith, and many other religious practices for most non-believers are either invisible or unimportant. Therefore, when secularists create art forms that contain religious themes, they often depict them from a secular perspective. Thus, for the creators of *The Witcher*, religious groups are distinguished by their willingness to live at peace with Others.

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