Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies

GAMING AND THE DIVINE

A NEW SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY OF VIDEO GAMES

Frank G. Bosman

Gaming and the Divine

This book formulates a new theological approach to the study of religion in gaming. Video games have become one of the most important cultural artifacts of modern society, both as mediators of cultural, social, and religious values and in terms of commercial success. This has led to a significant increase in the critical analysis of this relatively new medium, but theology as an academic discipline is noticeably behind the other humanities on this subject.

The book first covers the fundamentals of cultural theology and video games. It then moves on to set out a Christian systematic theology of gaming, focusing on creational theology, Christology, anthropology, evil, moral theology, and thanatology. Each chapter introduces case studies from video games connected to the specific theme. In contrast to many studies which focus on online multiplayer games, the examples considered are largely single player games with distinct narratives and 'end of game' moments. The book concludes by synthesizing these themes into a new theology of video games.

This study addresses a significant aspect of contemporary society that has yet to be discussed in any depth by theologians. It is, therefore, a fantastic resource for any scholar engaging with the religious aspects of digital and popular culture.

Frank G. Bosman is a senior researcher at Tilburg Cobbenhagen Center, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. He is currently involved in multiple research projects concerning cultural theology and video games. He published various articles on theology and gaming in journals, such as *Games and Culture*, *Gamenvironments*, and *Online, Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, and in academic series, such as *Jewish Christian Perspectives* and *Studies in Theology and Religion*.

Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies

The *Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies* series brings high quality research monograph publishing back into focus for authors, international libraries, and student, academic and research readers. This open-ended monograph series presents cutting-edge research from both established and new authors in the field. With specialist focus yet clear contextual presentation of contemporary research, books in the series take research into important new directions and open the field to new critical debate within the discipline, in areas of related study, and in key areas for contemporary society.

Faith and Freedom
Contexts, Choices, and Crises in Religious Commitments
Donald A. Crosby

Eschatology as Imagining the End
Faith between Hope and Despair
Edited by Sigurd Bergmann

Foucault, Art and Radical Theology
The Mystery of Things
Petra Carlsson Redell

On the Resurrection of the Dead
A New Metaphysics of Afterlife for Christian Thought
James T. Turner, Jr.

Recognition and Religion
Contemporary and Historical Perspectives
Edited by Maijastina Kahlos, Heikki J. Koskinen and Ritva Palmén

Gaming and the Divine
A New Systematic Theology of Video Games
Frank G. Bosman

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/religion/series/RCRITREL

Gaming and the Divine

A New Systematic Theology of Video Games

Frank G. Bosman

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-57956-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-50789-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

Preface

I was born in 1978 and raised in a small city near The Hague, the seat of government of the Netherlands. I wouldn't say that my youth was uneventful, but from the beginning of my life I knew that there was something about me that made me different from the other children in my school. Being an only child, my parents devoted almost two decades to raising their son in the rich tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. And although the high tides of Western Christianity were already far behind us, they managed to provide me with an ecclesiastical environment loaded with all the splendor and richness of the Roman Church.

Through the years, several parish priests trained me in the liturgy, spirituality and history of the church, paving the way for me to advance in the 'lay hierarchy' of our tradition: altar boy, acolyte, assistant verger and so forth. It wouldn't take too long for me to start thinking about a religious vocation, as was common in the protected environment of my youth. My parents were very enthusiastic and were praised by their friends because of the sacrifice of their only child to the church.

Interestingly enough, the discovery of what seemed to be a rock-solid vocation to become a priest made all the difference for my personal life and in a seemingly self-contradictory positive way. In primary and high school, my life had been rather miserable because of constant bullying by my peers. And honest to say, I made their efforts very easy: nothing in me was even remotely cool or even mediocre. I spoke differently, I listened to different music, my clothes were different, I had spectacles and the certainty I held regarding my own Roman Catholic faith was not something preventing me from moralistically lashing out to those who believed otherwise.

But after 'coming out' with my vocation – I must have been fourteen or something at the time – something changed in the behavior of my peers. I had embraced my 'otherness' and began to wear smart jackets and colorful ties, which is absolutely *not* the custom in the Dutch educational system. My male peers treated me with respect mingled with incomprehension, while my female peers showed instant interest, though typically not romantically.

Eventually, I found my way to the great seminary of 's-Hertogenbosch, also in the Netherlands, where God decided I should follow another path in my life. In the chapel of the seminary, I met my beautiful wife. I left the seminary and married her. We are still together with our daughter and son. I started to study theology at the Catholic Theological University in Utrecht, where I still work, now under the flag of Tilburg University, which incorporated my old institution some years ago. I also defended my thesis at Tilburg, on the sound theology of the German Dadaist Hugo Ball, the legendary founder of *Cabaret Voltaire* during the First World War.

I have since then dedicated my academic life to the study of cultural theology: novels, films, pop music and, especially, video games as *loci theologici*. It was in this discipline that I could link up my two passions: theology and video gaming. Since I was a little boy, I have been crazy about gaming. I still remember the first console I bought, the Nintendo 8 complementary delivered with *Super Mario Bros*. Countless hours I spent playing *Legend of Zelda*, *Metroid* and *Castlevania* on the NES. Later I continued on the PC, fantasizing with the *Leisure Suit Larry* series, killing monsters with *Doom* and hunting for Nazi soldiers in *Wolfenstein 3D*.

It was only when I played *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, in 2001 or so, that I realized something was going on theologically in digital games. I had just switched from seminary to university. *Return* was full of references to what I later learned was called 'Nazi occultism', the bizarre mixture of Nazi atrocities and occult powers from beyond the grave. I learned about Helena Blavatsky, the *SS Oberstürmbahnführerin* and head of the fictional *SS Paranormal Division*, leading to the very real Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891), founder of the Theosophical Society, and of Karl Wiligut (1866–1946) alias *Weisthor*, the spiritual mentor of SS leader Heinrich Himmler and designer of the notorious *Totenkopfring*, occupying the strange in-game role of Karl Viligut, a member of the historical resistance group known as the *Kreisau Circle*. The list was endless.

From then I was hooked, for life, to the strange interaction between theology and video games. I saw patterns and references, unknown to me before. A reference to the theodicy in *Assassin's Creed Rogue*, another to the first chapter of the Gospel of John in *Metal Gear Solid 5. The Phantom Pain*, the use of Kabbalistic notions in *Wolfenstein. The New Order*, the religion criticisms of *The Binding of Isaac* and the *Dishonored* series, the Christ-like figure of the self-sacrificial hero in *Fallout 3* and the *Mass Effect* series, a postmodern interpretation of the Harrowing of Hell in *Child of Light*, apocalyptic dualism in *DMC. Devil May Cry*. Again, the list was endless.

Over the last ten years, I have published more than twelve dedicated articles in international academic journals, all on theological reflections and

evaluations of (Christian) themes, notions, phrases, and imagery in all sorts of video games. And now, Routledge has given me the opportunity to synthesize and systematize everything I have learned and discovered in a single systematic-theological volume on *Gaming and the Divine*.

It is my conviction, as a Roman Catholic academic theologian, that God can be found in these video games: hidden, implicit and sometimes twisted, but always creatively present. This volume wants to open the way for many game enthusiasts, faithful, and theologians alike to see what was unseen before, to hear what was unheard of before, to play where no player has gone before.

I wish you all an inspiring journey and many happy gaming hours.

Frank G. Bosman

Acknowledgments

Every monograph has many fathers and mothers, far more than the one on the cover. This also applies to this volume. Many friends and colleagues who have crossed my path have – consciously or not – helped in shaping my thoughts, correcting my assumptions, criticizing my findings. To them all, my deepest thanks.

But since some animals are more equal than others, I want to specifically thank my nearest colleagues, from past and present, who have patiently and lovingly endured my endless talks about things they had never heard of before. Harm Goris, who taught me to think like a theologian. Theo Salemink, who taught me how to write like a theologian. And Archibald van Wieringen, who taught me to be true to whatever one believes in. Also I want to thank Maurits Sinninghe Damsté for correcting the English manuscript.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family, my beautiful and loving wife, Mariëlle, and our two wonderful children, Lisanne and Mathijs. Thanks for sharing me with my games and my computer. Without you nothing of this would have seen the light of day.

Introduction

It is the dawn of a new day. A smart young captain known as Shay Cormac enters the port of Lisbon on his own ship. He is sent by an ancient organization to find and retrieve a powerful relic from a now-extinct super race. It is November 1, 1755. White-hooded, he walks through the streets of the Portuguese capital, while the bells of the churches are ringing to gather the faithful in celebration of the Feast of All Saints, as Shay himself acknowledges:

> Feast of All Saints, what a sight. And here I am, looking for a relic from the time before Adam and Eve. Strange days indeed.

While the priest celebrates Holy Mass in Latin, Shay walks through the cathedral, undisturbed by the praying flock inside or by the sound of angelic voices singing Gregorian chants. Through neck-breaking climbing and parkour, Shay manages to find a hidden entrance in the church leading to a cave below. Inside the cave a massive pyramid-shaped object is found, reachable over a small stone ledge. Floating above a stone pillar in front of the pyramid, a strange shape-shifting cube is seen. 'The artifact', Shay whispers, just before taking it in his hands.

But as soon as Shay has the artifact in his hands, it crumbles to dust and a massive earthquake is triggered, collapsing the cave, the church above it and the city around it. Shay has to run for his life, through the fires, rubble and chaos of the burning city, destroyed by the earthquake. Eventually, Shay manages to climb aboard his ship, which has managed to set sail before being damaged. A sailor picks him up and, staring over the ruined city, exclaims: 'How could God do this to them?' To which Shay replies, half ashamed, half angry: 'God had nothing to do with this'.

The preceding scene originates from the game *Assassin's Creed Rogue* (2014), and is ever so interesting for those who can see and understand the references given in this game. First of all, the mission is called 'Kyrie Eleison', a reference to the famous prayer of the same name in the Roman Catholic liturgy, obligatory in every celebration of the Eucharist,

although nowadays it can also be prayed in the vernacular. It is in Greek, the language of the New Testament, meaning 'Lord, have mercy'. And the meaning of the prayer intertwines with the historical location and date of the scene. On November 1, 1755, Lisbon was indeed struck by a massive earthquake, killing tens of thousands of people instantly and destroying more than half of the city's buildings, including famous palaces, libraries and works of art (Paice 2008; Shrady 2014).

The majority of casualties of the Lisbon earthquake were in the numerous churches, since people were celebrating a great ecclesiastical feast. Many were asking themselves: How could God do this? Just like the sailor from the game. This tragedy plays an important role in the theological discussion known as the *theodicy*: If God exists, then why all the violence, pain and suffering in the world?

Voltaire famously wrote his 'Poem on the Lisbon Disaster' to criticize Leibniz's idea of humankind living in the best of all possible worlds (*Essais de théodicée* from 1710). Later, Leibniz and his metaphysical optimism were ridiculed by Voltaire as 'Dr. Pangloss', the teacher of 'metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology' in his *Candide*. And even today, theological discussions are frequently injected with references to the Lisbon tragedy (Castelo 2012). I will return to the conundrum of the theodicy in Chapter 7.

a. Religion and video games: an intriguing combination

For now, this example from *Assassin's Creed Rogue* is an intriguing example of how religion, faith and theology play their role in postmodern digital games. *Rogue* is only one of many examples that could be given (and as is done in this volume). Sometimes (Christian) religion is seen in its most explicit form, such as churches, monks and crucifixes (like in *Painkiller*); sometimes it is used to add some emotional flavor to the game, sometimes to ridicule or criticize (institutionalized) religion (like in *The Binding of Isaac*). In other instances, religion plays a more decisive role in the game's narrative plot, referencing to biblical texts (like in *Mass Effect 2*) or theological themes (like the theodicy in *Rogue*), or reflecting upon existential notions as salvation and forgiveness (like in *Metro Last Light*). Sometimes, players are asked by the game to perform rituals like letting their avatar be baptized or buried (like in *Bioshock Infinite*). Some would even claim that playing video games can be regarded as a religious act in itself. And that is precisely what I am intending to do in this volume. I will elaborate on this hypothesis later on in this chapter.

In the meantime, I am fully aware that religion, especially the Christian faith to which I will confine my research in this volume, and digital games are not easily thought of together. Video games have been criticized, by

believers and non-believers, as 'violent' (St John 2017), 'blasphemous' (Jeffrey 2017) and 'immoral' (Matthews 2014) and as having many more negative qualifications. But many studies show the – perhaps surprising – opposite. Gamers are likely to be 'intelligent' (Kokkinakis et al. 2017), 'social' (Tseng et al. 2015) and 'moral' (Grizzard et al. 2014) individuals who train their physical, mental and emotional capacities (Gee 2008; Posso 2016; Barr 2017).

The cliché of a lonely teenage boy, socially rejected, emotionally deprived, playing endlessly violent video games in his parents' attic to emerge one day killing actual people with real-life guns because he cannot anymore differentiate between the fictional world of the games and people of flesh 'n' blood, it is precisely that: a cliché, not rooted in reality, experience or research but in fear, ignorance and a lack of personal experience in the matter, and embellished sometimes by tendentious media coverage in the context of mass shootings (Kowert et al. 2014; Campbell 2018).

Next, gamers are not thought of as religious people *per se*, neither as trained theologians and/or regular churchgoers, except maybe when trying to catch some virtual Pokémons that are located inside specific church buildings (*Pokémon Go*). That is maybe in line with our intuition, but no qualitative research has been done, to my knowledge, that could verify or falsify this claim. Gamer developers and game players alike have struggled with the combination between these two spheres. Edmund McMillen, creator of *The Binding of Isaac* (to which I will later return more closely), frequently told journalists that his religious upbringing both hindered and stimulated his creativity (Holmes 2011; Jagielski 2011; Smith 2011). At one point he summarizes:

> I grew up in a religious family. My mom's side is Catholic, and my dad's side is born-again Christians. The Catholic side had this very ritualistic belief system: My grandma could essentially cast spells of safe passage if we went on trips, for example, and we would light candles and pray for loved ones to find their way out of purgatory, and drink and eat the body and blood of our saviour to be abolished of mortal sin. As a child growing up with this, I honestly thought it was very neat, very creative and inspiring. It's not hard to look at my work and see that most of the themes of violence actually come from my Catholic upbringing, and in a lot of ways I loved that aspect of our religion. Sadly, the other side of my family was a bit more harsh in their views on the Bible; I was many times told I was going to hell for playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering* (in fact, they took my MtG cards away from me), and generally condemned me for my sins.
>
> (McMillen 2012)

And Christian theologian and video gamer Kevin Schut confesses in his *On Games and God* (2013) to his own double-heartedness concerning being both a dedicated gamer and professing Christian believer:

> Since I was a teenager, I've had to struggle with reconciling this big part of my life – my love of games – with the biggest part of my life: my Christian faith. I was raised in a community that believed God was the Creator and Ruler of all things, and that God matters in everything we do. But for many years, God didn't seem to have much of an opinion about games – at least, nobody in the church said much about *Monopoly* or chess. Sure, I knew lots of Christians who played games, but nobody ever connected that with God. Not like work or education or art.

This 'double blindness' is something of a red thread running through the development of the still-young academic discipline of game studies: religion, as such, is not the most popular topic to be researched within the context of game studies, and *mutatis mutandis*, video games are not very broadly studied within the context of religion studies, to say the least.

If we confine ourselves to theology and video games, the void is immense. There are hardly any theologians who have dedicated their academic carrier to the theological study of digital games. The reasons behind this are only to be guessed at: a lack of understanding of the cultural impact of video games, discomfort with the virtual violence, the relative newness of the medium and the simple fact that one has to be 'of two worlds'. One should be both a trained theologian and an experienced gamer. Contrary to popular belief, mastering the art of playing video games is indeed an *art*, that is, something for which you have to train yourself and dedicate yourself to, investing huge amounts of time and energy in playing.

This is in contrast to the theological analysis of novels and films, which can be read and seen relatively easily, both in terms of the time required to finalize the effort and the level of mastery required to do so. To say it more harshly, every theologian can watch and analyze a movie, but only a few can play a video game, let alone analyze it. Nevertheless, I would argue that video games are a very interesting field for theological reflection or, to put it even more boldly, are a very interesting but virtually neglected *locus theologicus*. I will elaborate on this hypothesis later in this chapter.

Nevertheless, some minor attempts have been made to create 'Christian games', that is, games made by and for believers, for example, *Left behind: Eternal forces* or *Adam's Venture: Chronicles*. Unfortunately, all attempts in creating commercially viable and professionally interesting Christian games have failed miserably (Oliver 2014; Makuch 2014; Brown 2018).

The main reasons for failure are a lack of funding and restrained creativity but primarily a general lack of quality within a highly competitive market. Besides that, the core audience of such games – Christian gamers who want to play Christian games – is relatively too small to produce economically profitable amounts of (potential) sales.

While video games have been produced and played since the 1970s, with *Pong* as its contested front-runner in 1972, the academic research of video games followed only after two decades (Wolf 2008). It was in the 1990s that the first major controversy arose in the field of game studies, the ludology-versus-narratology debate (Laas 2014). I readdress this important discussion, in the first chapter of this volume. For now it is enough to summarize the discussion in one question: Is a game primarily a game (*ludus*) or a narrative (*narratio*)? The answer has, of course, a great impact on the way one studies video games.

The study of religion and video games had to wait until the first decade of the 21st century, when dedicated volumes and journals also saw the light of day. To mention only a few, the monographs of Detweiler, *Halos & Avatars* (2010); Wagner, *Godwired. Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality* (2011); Bainbridge, *eGods. Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* (2013); and the aforementioned Schut, *Of Games and God* (2013), but also the edited volumes *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (2014), edited by Campbell and Grieve, and *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (2018), edited by Sisler, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler.

Two dedicated academic journals are currently in operation: *Gamenvironments* (since 2014), hosted by the universities of Bremen (Germany) and edited by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Bremen) and Zenia Zeiler (Helsinki), and *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (2004–2010 and 2014–present), hosted by the University of Heidelberg (Germany) and edited by Gregor Ahn and Tobias Knoll (both from Heidelberg as well). While *Online*'s scope is broader than just video games, it has published three dedicated issues on the subject: *Religion in digital games. Multiperspective and interdisciplinary approaches* (Heidbrink et al. 2014), *Religion in digital games reloaded. Immersion into the field* (Heidbrink et al. 2015) and *Religion in digital games respawned* (Heidbrink et al. 2016).

Online, some dedicated websites can be found, all managed by non-academic enthusiasts, among which include http://theologygaming.com, 'a community dedicated to the intersection of games and life with Christ'; www.theologyofgames.com, a collaboration of Scott Firestone IV and Jeremiah Isley; https://thereformedgamers.wordpress.com; and https://videogamesandthebible.com.

As stated already, *theological* reflections on video games and the religious themes and currents within them are still very rare. It is to the filling of this

'void', as I have called it earlier on in this introduction, that this volume is dedicated. *Gaming and the Divine* is aimed at being one of the first scholarly monographs on the theological reflection upon video games.

b. Video games as *loci theologici*

In this volume, I want to propose two hypotheses regarding the relationship between video games on the one hand and Christian faith and theology on the other. I say explicitly '*Christian* faith and theology', not because other religions do not play a major role in video games (for example, Zoroastrianism in *Prince of Persia*, Shi'ite Islam in *Assassin's Creed* or Jewish mysticism in *Wolfenstein. The New Order*), but covering *all* (world) religions in their relation to video games in a single volume would be presumptuous. The same applies to the video game case studies I use in this monograph: the vast majority of these games are produced for and by Western game companies, either from Europe, North America or Canada, and therefore more liable to have a connection with the broader Christian cultural heritage of Western civilization, post-Christian or not.

The first hypothesis I want to propose and defend in this volume concerns video games as *loci theologici*.

> **Video games are genuine *loci theologici*: sources of God's self-revelation as Creator (Father), Saviour (Son) and Whole-Maker (Spirit).**

The constitutive elements of this first hypothesis are in need of some additional clarification. The term *locus theologicus* (pl. *loci theologici*) was first used by the German Lutheran theologian Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560). In his *Loci communes rerum theologicarum seu hypotyposes theologicae* from 1521, Melanchthon tried to establish a sort of systematic theology based on themes from Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The *loci* here were 'common grounds' for the Christian believers. The *loci* gave rise to an independent Lutheran scholastic tradition with famous theologians such as Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586), Matthias Hafenreffer (1561–1619) and Leonhard Hutter (1563–1616).

On the Roman Catholic side, the Dominican Melchor Cano (1509–1560) produced his own *De Locis Theologicis*, posthumously in 1562, in which he gives an analysis of the scientific value of theological statements, leading to a reevaluation of the sources of theology itself. Here the *loci* are *sedes argumenti*, places where theology finds its authorities (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991). Cano's list comprises among others: Scripture, oral tradition, the ecumenical councils, the Church Fathers, the Scholastic theologians, philosophers, human reason and history. Gradually, the

loci theologici entered mainstream theology in the form of *prolegomena*, fundamental theology or apologetics.

In this volume, following Cano, I understand *loci theologici* to be sources of God's self-revelation, which are – from universally accepted to highly debated – Scripture, Tradition, Creation and Culture. The Bible has been considered to be the *fons primarius* or *principium unicum* of theology. God reveals himself first and foremost in the Old and New Testament (Berkhof 1932 [1996]:59; Fitzmyer 1994). In the Catholic document *Dei Verbum*, the Council Fathers of the Second Vatican Council stress that the 'study of sacred Scripture [. . .] ought to be the soul of all theology' (para. 24).

All Christians more or less acknowledge the primacy of the Bible as the *locus theologicus* but differ on the other sources. Tradition, understood as the collection of ecclesiastical rulings, councils' documents and theological reflection (Ratzinger 2008), is seen in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches as the second authoritative source of God's self-disclosure, while in the majority of Protestant denominations the notion of *sola scriptura* is adhered to, notwithstanding the fact that Protestant denominations have their own authoritative traditions as well (Buschart 2006).

A third source of theology is considered to be, sometimes, Creation or 'the book of Nature' itself. This so-called natural theology is defined as 'the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divining relegation or scripture' (Taliaferro 2012). Popular amongst theologians from the Enlightenment onward, the idea of natural theology as independent of divine revelation has been fiercely criticized, among others, by Karl Barth in his discussion with Emil Brunner in 1934 [2002] on the correlation between nature and grace (Hart 2001).

Nevertheless, natural theology still has its adherents, although in a new form in which revelation and nature coexist (McGrath 2008). The Book of Creation can no longer be used as rational proof of God's existence, but for those who accept the universe as being created by God, all that is created can be seen as witnessing to that Creator.

A fourth *locus* can be added as far as I am concerned: our postmodern culture itself. I dedicate the second chapter of this volume to what I understand a theology of culture to be. For now it is enough to define it as the academic-theological search for God's self-revelation in our cultural artifacts (what I will call the search for the *Deus incognitus*). In this view, cultural artifacts, like novels, films, television series, video clips, pop music and video games, become theologically relevant objects. My hypothesis that video games are genuine *loci theologici* rests on the assumption that culture, in general, can serve such a purpose (see also Chapter 2).

The core of the Christian revelation is God's self-revelation or self-disclosure (sometimes also addressed incorrectly as God's self-communication). In the Bible, Tradition, Creation and Culture (as discussed earlier), God's own exis tence is the object of the revelation by God. In its document on divine revelation, the Second Vatican Council therefore states,

> In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the purpose of His will.
>
> (para. 2)

Revelator and revelation are one and the same (O'Collins 2016). As Shirley Guthrie (1994:54) summarizes,

> God reveals God's self. Revelation is not the giving of some supernatural information about God and human life in the world. It means that God confronts us person-to-person. To receive God's self-revelation is to know not *something* but *someone* we did not know before.

The personal self-disclosure of God is himself, revealed as the triad Father, Savior, Spirit, whose primary 'salvational-economical identity' (how they 'function' within the salvation history) can be qualified as Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker. The divine property of the Spirit has more than one notion, like Sanctifier (Hauser 1982:41), Sustainer (Kaiser 1998:222), Comforter (Bulgarov 2004) or Advocate (Guzie 1981). God has revealed Himself as the creator of everything that exists, as the savior of humankind, and as eternal life force until the end of times.

In this volume, I argue that video games can be considered to be a genuine source of God's self-revelation.

c. Video gaming as a religious act

The second hypothesis I want to present and defend in this volume is the following:

> **The act of playing particular games can, in some specific cases, be interpreted as a religious act in itself.**

This second hypothesis also needs some explanation. The notion of 'religious acts' is not self-explanatory: it can mean nothing and everything according to your starting point. Taliaferro (2010), who defines those acts as a 'repeatable symbolic action involving God', includes

> prayers involving praise (worship or adoration), petition and confession, vows, commissions such as ordination, funeral rites and burials, communion or the Eucharist [. . .], feasts, fasts, alms giving,

vigils, lamentations, blessings, thanksgiving, grace before meals, and contemplative or meditative prayer.

According to the famous German philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928) in his book *Vom Ewigen im Mensen* (1954), all these particular religious acts together share three constitutive elements: they transcend the world (in the eyes of the one acting at least), offering an experience of fulfillment, only made possible by a Divine Being that 'bends down' and opens up to and for the worshiper (Cahalan 2004:77). I defend the idea that certain gamers, when playing certain games, can interpret – and be interpreted – as acting religiously, not unlike those who conduct more traditional acts like praying, fasting or celebrating.

The specific point at which video games – as religious acts – differ from other religious acts, lies in the necessary interactive nature of the video game medium. In the first chapter, I elaborate on this interactive quality, but for now it is sufficient just to point out that games are *qualitate qua* interactive and therefore in absolute need of a player to interact with them. As opposed to novels or movies, video games cannot 'be' without someone actively participating in them.

The quality of gaming, seen as a religious act, lies in this element of interactivity by which the now 'religious gamer' *merges* him- or herself into the divine acts of salvation economy. This specific gamer does not *remember* God's creation, salvation and/or fulfillment, nor is he or she ritually *reenacting* those divine acts – although both elements can be present. In his or her gaming, the player theologically bears witness to God's self-revelation, presenting God to him- or herself and to the world (Bosman 2017).

In this sense, gaming can have a theological-performative quality, which supersedes that of other 'theological' media like novels, clips and films. Where the performative act in writing and filmmaking is exclusively found in the writer-characters and the director-actors and only confirmed in the reader by reading and the watcher by watching, the performative moment in video gaming is primarily to be found in the *player* playing.

In this volume, I argue that the act of video gaming can be considered, in some cases, to be a religious act.

d. How to read this book

This volume is dedicated to the relation between (Christian) religion and theology, on one hand, and modern video games, on the other. In order to argue the validity of my two theological hypotheses, I start by introducing the two fundamental elements of my proposals: cultural theology (Chapter 1) and video games (Chapter 2). In the following chapters, I follow the classical theological *tractates* from Christian tradition: creational theology (Chapter 3), Christology (Chapter 4), anthropology

(Chapter 5), evil (Chapter 6), moral theology (Chapter 7) and thanatology (Chapter 8). In every chapter, I introduce several case studies (video games) connected to the specific themes of the chapter. Last, in Chapter 9, I introduce some examples of religion-critical video games. I conclude with my conclusions, in which I defend my two hypotheses.

In this volume, I concentrate primarily on single-player games, or games with a single-player mode, thus more or less excluding multiplayer games like *Call of Duty. Black Ops* and so-called *Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games* (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft*. This decision was not made based on any ideological or formal consideration but on practical ones. (1) MMORPGs/multiplayer games take extensively more time to play than do single-player games. (2) MMORPGs/multiplayer games do not feature an 'end of game' moment, since the (online) interaction between players through the game can theoretically be without end. (3) Proportionally, much attention has been given to religion in MMORPGs, far less to religion in single-player games. (4) Since all games in this volume have to be played by the author, the – arguably subjective – preference of the author for single-player role-playing game (RPG)/shooter hybrids has to be accounted for too. Playing a game like *Assassin's Creed* or *Mass Effect* can take from forty (just the main story and most of the side missions) to one hundred hours (to complete everything in the game), thus giving the author the opportunity to discuss games he has actually finished.

Primary bibliography

Adam's Venture. Chronicles, 2014/2015. (PlayStation 3, PC) Vertigo Digital Entertainment, Soedesco.

Assassin's Creed, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.

Assassin's Creed Rogue, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Sofia, Ubisoft.

The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, WiiU, New Nintendo 3DS, OSX, iOS) Nicalis, Nicalis.

Bioshock Infinite, 2013. (PC, PlayStation, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux) Irrational Games, 2K Games.

Call of Duty. Black Ops, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Treyarch, Activision.

Left Behind. Eternal Forces, 2006. (PC) Inspired Media Entertainment, Inspired Media Entertainment.

Mass Effect, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts/Microsoft Game Studios.

Mass Effect 2, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts.

Mass Effect 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Bioware, Electronic Arts.

Metro Last Light, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linus) 4A Games, Deep Silver.

Painkiller, 2004. (PC, Xbox, Android, iOS) People Can Fly, DreamCatcher Interactive.
Pokémon Go, 2016. (Android, iOS) Niantic, Niantic.
Pong, 1972. (Arcade) Atari, Atari.
Prince of Persia, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Wolfenstein. The New Order, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.
World of Warcraft, 2004/5. (PC, OSX) Blizzard Entertainment, Blizzard Entertainment.

Secondary bibliography

Bainbridge, W., 2013. *eGod. Faith versus fantasy in computer gaming*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Barr, M., 2017. Video games can develop graduate skills in higher education students: A randomised trial. *Computers & Education* 113. Available from: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131517301215 [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Barth, K., and Brunner, E., 2002[1934]. *Natural theology. Comprising 'Nature and grace' by Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
Berkhof, L., 1996[1932]. *Systematic theology. New combined edition*. Grand Rapids: Wim. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
Bosman, F., 2017. The incarnated gamer. The theophoric quality of games, gaming, and gamers. In: J. Gackenbach and J. Brown, eds., *Boundaries of the self and reality online. Implications of digitally constructed realities*. London: Academic Press.
Brown, S., 2018. PrayStation: The 6 most misguided Christian video games. *Cracked*. Available from: www.cracked.com/article_15672_praystation-6-most-misguided-christian-video-games.html [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Bulgarov, S., 2004. *The comforter*. Grand Rapids: Wim B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
Buschart, W., 2006. *Exploring protestant traditions. An invitation to theological hospitality*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
Cahalan, K., 2004. *Formed in the image of Christ. The sacramental-moral theology of Bernard Häring, C.Ss.R*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
Campbell, C., 2018. A brief history of blaming video games for mass murder. *Polygon*. Available from: www.polygon.com/2018/3/10/17101232/a-brief-history-of-video-game-violence-blame [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Campbell, H., and Grieve, G., eds., 2014. *Playing with religion in digital games*. Bloomington: Indiana University.
Castelo, D., 2012. *Theological theodicy*. Eugene: Cascade Books.
Detweiler, C., eds., 2010. *Halos and avatars. Playing video games with God*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
Fitzmyer, J., 1994. *Scripture, the soul of theology*. New York: Paulist Press.
Gee, J., 2008. *Good video games good learning: Collected essays on video games, learning, and literacy*. New York: P. Lang.
Grizzard, M., Tamborini, R., Lewis, R., Wang, L., and Prabhu, S., 2014. Being bad in a video game can make us morally sensitive. *Cyberpsychology,*

Behavior and Social Networking 17(8). Available from: www.researchgate.net/publication/263296879_Being_Bad_in_a_Video_Game_Can_Make_Us_Morally_Sensitive [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Guthrie, S., 1994. *Christian doctrine. Revised edition*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Guzie, T., 1981. *The book of sacramental basics*. New York: Paulist Press.

Hart, J., 2001. *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner. The formation and dissolution of a theological alliance, 1916–1936*. New York: Lang.

Hauser, R., 1982. *In His spirit. A guide to today's spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press.

Heidbrink, S., and Knoll, T., eds., 2014. *Religion in digital games. Multiperspective and interdisciplinary approaches* [= *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet* 5]. Available from: https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/issue/view/1449 [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Heidbrink, S., and Knoll, T., eds., 2016. *Religion in digital games respawned* [= *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet* 10]. Available from: https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/issue/view/2354 [Accessed 5 May 2018].

Heidbrink, S., Knoll, T., and Wysocki, J., eds., 2015. *Religion in digital games reloaded. Immersion into the field* [= *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet* 7]. Available from: https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/issue/view/1937 [Accessed 5 May 2018].

Holmes, J., 2011. How a killer Christian shmup roguelike came to steam. *Destructoid*. Available from: www.destructoid.com/how-a-killer-christian-shmup-roguelike-came-to-steam-206601.phtml [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Jagielski, R., 2011. The binding of Isaac: Interview with team meat's Edmund McMillen. *Venturebeat*. Available from: https://venturebeat.com/community/2011/09/02/interview-with-teammeats-edmund-mcmillen [Accessed 9 May 2018).

Jeffrey, C., 2017. Malaysia is trying to ban 'Fight of Gods' because of 'blasphemous' content. *TechSpot*. Available from: www.techspot.com/news/70919-malaysia-trying-ban-fight-gods-because-blasphemous-content.html [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Kaiser, W., 1998. *The Christian and the 'Old' testament*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Kokkinakis, A., Cowling, P., Drachen, A., and Wade, A., 2017. Exploring the relationship between video game expertise and fluid intelligence. *PLoS ONE* 12(11). Available from: http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0186621. [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Kowert, R., Festl, R., and Qyandt, T., 2014. Unpopular, overweight, and socially inept: Reconsidering the stereotype of online gamers. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 17(3).

Laas, O., 2014. Narratives in digital games. Their place and function in the study of digital games. In: R. Kelomees and C. Hales, eds., *Expanding practices in audiovisual narrative*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Leibniz, G., 2009. *Theodicy. Essays on the goodness of God, the freedom of man, and the origin of evil*. Translated by E. Huggard. New York: Cosimo Classics.

Makuch, E., 2014. Why are Bible games never very good? *GameSpot*. Available from: www.gamespot.com/articles/why-are-bible-games-never-very-good/1100-6417180/ [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Matthews, D., 2014. Is killing video game characters wrong? *Vox*. Available from: www.vox.com/2014/4/23/5643418/this-guy-thinks-killing-video-game-characters-is-immoral [Accessed 9 May 2018].

McGrath, A., 2008. *The open secret. A new vision for natural theology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

McMillen, E., 2012. Postmortem: McMillen and Himsl's the binding of Isaac. *Gamasutra*. Available from: www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/182380/postmortem_mcmillen_and_himsls_.php [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Melanchthon, P., 2007. *The loci communes of Philip Melanchthon*. Translated by C. Hill. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.

O'Collins, G., 2016. *Revelation. Toward a Christian theology of God's self-revelation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Oliver, Z., 2014. Why are Christian games bad?: A dialogue. *Theologygaming*. Available from: http://theologygaming.com/christian-games-bad/ [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Paice, E., 2008. *Wrath of God. The Great Lisbon earthquake of 1755*. London: Quercus.

Posso, A., 2016. Internet usage and educational outcomes among 15-year-old Australian students. *International Journal of Communication* 10.

Ratzinger, J. [Pope Benedict XVI], 2008. *God's word. Scripture – tradition – office*. Edited by P. Hünermann and T. Söding. Translated by H. Taylor. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Scheler, M., 1954. *Vom Ewigen im Mensen. Gesammelte Werken*. Volume 5. Bern: Francke Verlag.

Schüssler Fiorenza, F., 1991. Systematic theology. Task and method. In: F. Schüssler Fiorenza and J. Galvin, eds., *Theology. Roman Catholic perspectives*. Volume 1. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Schut, K., 2013. *Of games and God. A Christian exploration of video games*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.

Shrady, N., 2014. *The last day. Wrath, ruin, and reason in the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755*. New York: Penguin Books.

Sisler, V., Radde-Antweiler, K., and Zeiler, X., eds., 2018. *Methods for studying video games and religion*. New York: Routledge.

Smith, E., 2011. New details on TeamMeat designer's new game. *IGN*. Available from:www.ign.com/articles/2011/07/12/new-details-on-team-meat-designers-new-game [Accessed 9 May 2018].

St John, L., 2017. 8 ways violent games are bad for your kids [online]. *The Huffington Post*. Available from: www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-st-john/8-ways-violent-games_b_3875846.html [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Taliaferro, C., 2010. Religious rites. In: C. Taliaferro and C. Meister, eds., *The Cambridge companion to Christian philosophical theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taliaferro, C., 2012. The project of natural theology. In: W. Craig and J. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell companion to natural theology*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tseng, F., Huang, H., and Teng, C., 2015. How do online game communities retain gamers? Social presence and social capital perspectives. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20(6).

Voltaire, 1963. *Candide*. Translated by W.H. Barber. Great Neck, NY: Barrons Educational Series.

Wagner, R., 2012. *Godwired. Religion, ritual, and virtual reality*. New York: Abingdon.

Wolf, M., 2008. The study of video games. In: M. Wolf, ed., *The video game explosion. A history from PONG to playstation and beyond*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

1 Fundamentals I
A theology of culture

In the second part of the 20th century, the concept of 'cultural theology' emerged strongly among other so-called contextualized theologies (Nicholis 1979): theologies that originate from and for certain ethnic, social or other, often marginalized, groups who argue that the regular theological debates are dominated by white males from Western universities and ecclesiastical organizations. Think for example of queer theology (Cornwall 2011), black theology (Cone 1997) and gay theology (Comstock 2009).

And while the concept of inculturation (Dhavamony 1997; Shorter 1999; Irarrázaval 2000; Orji 2005), the adaption of the Gospel to the cultural *Umwelt* of a particular group of faithful, has been practiced since the era of the Great Discoveries, the rise of liberation theology in Africa and Southern America, in which God's preferential option for the poor and marginalized is argued (Rowland 2007; Noble 2013), has given a whole new impulse to theological thinking about the relationship between contextualized cultural phenomena and the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Hegeman 2007; Edgar 2017).

Since Paul Tillich's famous *Theology of culture* (1959), to which we will return shortly, a considerable amount of cultural theologies has seen the light of day: either general in scope (Tanner 1997; Cobb 2005; Lynch 2005; Gorringe 2007; Long 2008; Usselmann 2018) or dedicated to a specific ethnical-cultural domain (Dyrness 1992; Nogsiej 2001) or to multicultural phenomena like the entertainment industry (Taylor 2008) or the hip hip-hop scene (Hodge 2010). Also numerous edited volumes have been published, for example, on the relation between science, theology and culture (Meisinger et al. 2006); theology with regard to everyday life (Vanhoozer et al. 2007) or theological criticisms on modern-day culture (Brown et al. 2001).

All cultural theologies have some similarities. They try to break through the neo-scholastic dogmatism, dominant in Roman Catholic theology since the Council of Trent (1545–1563) while adopting a more inclusive attitude toward multiculturalism, scientific progress and modern media,

convinced that God's revelation does not halt at the gates of ecclesiastical institutes or traditional theological tractates. These modern cultural theologies can be seen, as already argued in the introduction of this volume, as some sort of reemergence of more classic 'natural theology' but without the theological arrogance of proving God's existence purely rationally (McGrath 2008).

However relatively modern the rise of these cultural theologies is, I believe that this kind of thinking has many older advocates within the theological history of Christianity, as I show in the following. But first of all, we must give a reckoning of the perilous and somewhat problematic position of (institutionalized) religion in the Western world. It is from this secularized world that the games originate that are at the heart of this volume: the same world to which the cultural theologies are a response to.

a. The problem of religion in Western Europe

Institutionalized religion is not in the best of shapes, at least in Western Europe (Pew Research 2018), a situation alternatively described as 'secularization' (Casanova 2009; Joas 2009), 'de-institutionalization' (Streib 2007) or religious 'liquidation' (de Groot 2018) and/or ascribed to broader sociological phenomena like the rise of individualism (Flanagan 2001) or the dominance of the model of multiculturalism (Morris 2014). While institutionalized religion is decreasing rapidly through the Western world, the classic secularization thesis as such is problematic on at least two levels: in the first place, secularization is primarily a phenomenon of the Western, post-Christian world, and second, even in the secularized Western world religion is far from a relic of a past long gone.

Even though explicit (institutionalized) religion is often debated about in the context of its more negative and problematic features like religiously inspired terrorism, child abuse or homophobia, the implicit (de-institutionalized) form of religion is still very present in our so-called post-religious society, either in the shape of a hyper-individual and eclectic 'bricolage' spirituality (Altglas 2014) or in the shape of the utilizations of and reference to the Christian tradition in cultural expressions, such as films (Johnston et al. 2007; Marsh 2014) pop songs and video clips (Beaudoin et al. 2013), novels (Middleton 2008) and video games (which is the prime aspect of this volume in the first place).

This complex position of religion, may it be in its institutionalized or its individualized form, can be understood from four different contexts in which the religious phenomenon (institutions, groups and individuals) is discussed and addressed in our times: the political-social, the scholarly philosophical, the religious-philosophical and the religious-anthropological contexts.

1. The political-social context

Religion as an exclusively private matter is one of the more 'pervasive' religion clichés in the Western political and cultural imagination, although every scholar of religion will explain that any religious belief 'cannot be held without some mediation by the social' (Walsh 2017). Bart Labuschagne (2013:15–16) has described this tendency to lock religion up into the private sphere in terms of a battle between 'Enlightenment fundamentalism' and 'liberal jihadists', terms which are used by the one party to disqualify the other:

> Religion has to be kept out of the political process as much as possible, relegating it to the confinement of the private sphere only, where each is allowed to gain salvation in his or her own way. [. . . The other party] blame[s] their adversaries to be naïve multiculturalists, too soft in their inclusion (and even cuddling) of 'the other', in letting 'these others' participate in political life uncritically, without having let them undergone the blessings of Enlightenment.

In many Western countries, a considerable group of religious citizens are positioned against a strongly secularized social elite, whose opinions on religion degrade the religious feelings of these citizens. Within this heated standoff between 'Enlightenment fundamentalism' and 'liberal jihadists' a balanced discussion about the private or public character of religion can hardly be held.

2. The scholarly philosophical context

The second context that could explain the perilous position of religion in the Western countries, is the scholarly philosophical, especially the dominance of metaphysical reductionism within the dominant empirical paradigm. As theologians such as Chan (2003) have shown, the notion of reductionism has shifted from a purely methodological instrument (we can only scientifically *study* what we can verify empirically) through an epistemological standpoint (we can only *know* what we can verify empirically) to a full-fledged metaphysical statement in itself (only that *is* what we can verify empirically).

But this metaphysical position is unable to prove its own philosophical axioms. And like every paradigm, it runs the risk of the fallacy of 'nothing-but-ism' (Sitelman and Sitelman 2000). As Arjan Plaisier (2014:14) summarizes,

> [worldviews have] a tendency to employ a form of reasoning which makes their work form a 'nothing else but-ism'. The world is nothing, they say, but the end result of a blind big bang. Or, man is nothing

> but a trained animal. Again, man is concerned solely to enhance his own interest, life being nothing else than having the stronger overcome the weaker. Man is nothing but a combination of love and passion. Man is nothing but the product of social conditioning. Man is nothing more than his brain. And so on.

When projected onto the religious domain, the dominance of this empirical paradigm and its inherent metaphysical reductionism can be found in two forms (Flood 2007). On one hand, religion is considered to be a delusion 'that has served the interest of the rich and the powerful' (cultural reductionism), while on the other hand, the religious phenomenon is reduced to cognition and language (naturalist or eliminative reductionism). These kinds of reductionisms are also very popular with the general, non-scholarly public, for example, *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (2006) or *We Are Our Brains* by Dick Swaab (2015). Within this context, religion is reduced to other human qualities, thus hindering the public and academic discussion about religion as a separate field of inquiry.

3. Religious-philosophical context

Many Western countries are characterized as being multicultural and multireligious but as Beckford (2014:21–24) has observed, the notion of religious plurality is not only an empirical description of reality but also has normative qualities. The 'near-infinite yet random number of spiritual and religious positions' (Hunter 2009) are seen as a positive development: religious pluralism is a good thing that should be stimulated by society. Beckford (2014:22) sees a paradox in this:

> The positive evaluation of religious diversity has paradoxically acquired the force of a unitary standard of rectitude in some places. This raises the question of whether liberal democracies have reached a point where expressions of doubt of the desirability of religious diversity are automatically categorized as 'radical' or 'extremist'.

The idea of (religious) pluralism, so favored in Western societies, is indeed not without its own problems. This problem becomes apparent in the famous discussion between the theologian Gavin D'Costa with his *Doktorvater* John Hick, who has been qualified as one of the founding fathers of religious pluralism. Hick's thesis can be summarized as 'the denial of the superiority or finality of any given religion, especially Christianity' (Knitter 1987:viii).

The center of the religious sphere, according to Hick (1996:17) and his followers is *the Real*, the final religious object. The various religions are

expressions of the impingement of this unknowable *Real*. All religions, therefore, share the same soteriological structure: the transformation of the devotee from self-centeredness to centeredness on the *Real*. Other religions are not rivals but companions on the journey to the Ultimate. Hick's ideas of religious pluralism have become dominant in the Western political and academic spheres.

Theologians like John Millbank, Alasdair MacIntyre and, especially, Gavin D'Costa have criticized Hick's pluralism as a typical modern fear of religious conflicts, reducing the palette of (world) religions and denominations to one of their (supposed) denominators. The major problem, according to D'Costa (2000), with the notion of religious pluralism is its implicit but inherent exclusivism, which was paradoxically enough the pluralists' biggest reproach to the adherents of traditional religious views. Those who do not share the idea that all religions are essentially equal are disqualified from the discussion. D'Costa (2000:20):

> Pluralists simply present themselves as honest brokers to disputing parties, while concealing the fact that they represent yet another party which invites the disputants actually to leave their parties and join the pluralist one: then, of course, interreligious harmony will be attained.

As Beckford (2014:22) has observed, religious pluralism as envisaged by Hick is in practice confined to 'acceptable groups', that is, to those who accept its epistemological axiom. The same applies to modern-day political discussions about the position of religion in the public domain or the more popular-philosophical debates about the sensibility of religion: all religions and their adherents are equal, except for those who (respectfully and non-violently) disagree with that idea.

4. Religious-anthropological context

In the modern debate, either academically or sociopolitically, one of the persevering discussions is whether religion should be seen as a *confessio* (confession) or a *praxis* (practice) or, in more theological terms, as *orthodoxy* (right belief) or *orthopraxis* (right practice). The former describes religion in terms of *what is believed*, the doctrinaire content of a faith, while the latter concentrates on *how religion is performed*, the set of ethical, moral and social behaviors of adherents of a religion. As Bell (2009:191) has observed,

> [a]s a result of the dominance of Christianity in much of the West, which has tended to stress matters of doctrinal and theological orthodoxy, people may take it for granted that religion is primarily a

> matter of what one believes. Yet in many religious traditions, concerns for what a person believes are often subsumed within more embracing concerns to live according to a code of behavior, a code that usually includes multiple ritual responsibilities.

The opposite is also possible and is just as problematic. As Fries (1996:111) has commented,

> [b]ut today it is often seen alternatively, or even solved, in the *sense* that orthodoxy is unimportant and it is orthopraxy that really counts. This would turn orthodoxy into a marginal problem or into an outmoded stage in the history of faith.

Both positions in their own capacity lead to two forms of religious reductionism. Religion seen as *confessio* runs the risk of being seen as a set of philosophical and/or theological propositions, which could be reduced to 'a mere opinion' like all others. Religion seen as *praxis* also runs the risk of reduction, now to a potentially infinite set of hyper-particular individuals and groups whose behavior can only be viewed and interpreted as 'exotic', outlandish and strictly alogical or even illogical.

This problematization of religion within these four contexts makes the position of its adherents, its institutions and those who want to study it utterly complex. It is this complexity to which the manifold cultural theologies are often an answer to or, at least, have to position themselves over and against. The same applies to the cultural theology proposed in this volume. Before constructing my own version of cultural theology applicable to video games, in particular, I introduce some historical Christian notions that ground such a theology.

b. A history of cultural theology

Cultural theology, temporarily and provisory defined as looking for God within the secular (or, at least, in the not explicitly religious) cultural domain, has some interesting theological predecessors within the history of Christian tradition: the idea of the *spolia Aegyptiorum*, that of the *logoi spermatikoi*, that of the *praeparatio Evangelica*, of the Jesuit notion of 'finding God in all things', the implicit theologies of Moltmann and Tillich and the idea of the 'signs of the time' from the Second Vatican Council. Before venturing any further into the cultural theology used in this volume, I introduce these historical notions somewhat more because it shows how a (post)modern theology of culture can be, and should be, rooted and grounded in the broader theological tradition(s) of the Christian culture. Besides, the notions are not without theological problems of their own, especially in connecting with the domain of cultural theology.

1. Spolia Aegyptiorum

The first notion is that of the *spoliatio* motif in Genesis and, especially, Exodus, later to be interpreted as the *spolia Aegyptiorum* in the context of the relationship between the Christian faith and the pagan culture *Umwelt* (Allen 2008). When the Israelites were held captive in Egypt, God promised them not only their freedom and a new land to live in, but also a significant amount of *spolia*, 'spoils of war', plunder. In Exodus 3, the Lord proclaims:

> I will grant this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be that when you go, you will not go empty-handed. But every woman shall ask of her neighbor and the woman who lives in her house, articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing; and you will put them on your sons and daughters. Thus you will plunder the Egyptians.
>
> (Exodus 3,21–22; cf. 11,2–3; 12,35–36; New American Standard Bible (NASB))

The *spolia* are identified as 'Egyptian articles of silver and gold, and clothing' (Exodus 12,35). With this Egyptian gold and silver, in Christian tradition often thought to have been devoted to the pagan gods of Egypt, the Israelites fashioned the infamous Golden Calf (Exodus 32,1–6) *and* decorated the Tent of the Covenant (Exodus 25–30), the first being an abomination to their God and the latter a righteous tribute to Him. Christian authors have regularly interpreted these *spolia* as 'pagan wisdom', as Hans Urs von Balthasar (1993) states:

> [The Christian] is occupied with that intellectual war in which the *spolia Aegyptiorum*, the worldly wisdom of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, unjustly held captive among the pagans, Jews and Muslims, is to be brought back home to that authentic domain wherein all truth is stewarded: the Church and her theology.

The idea of the *spolia* being pagan culture, especially (Platonic) philosophy can be found in numerous authors like Clemens of Alexandria (*Stromateis*), Irenaeus (*Against the Heresies*), Tertullian (*Against Marcion*), Origen (*Epistula ad Gregorium*), Gregory of Nazianzus (*Oratio in S. Pascha*), Gregory of Nyssa (*De vita Moysis*), Ambrose of Milan (*De Abraham*) and Augustine (*Confessiones*, *De Doctrina Christiana* and *De Civitate Dei*).

Augustine especially has written extensively on the notion of the *spolia*, initially exclusively attributed to the philosophers, who 'have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith' (*De Doctrina* II/4), but later also applied to other cultural expressions

like weaving, navigation, architecture, painting, sculpture, the theater, song and musical instruments (*De Civitate* XXII/24). All these cultural expressions are considered to be 'blessings of God' given to all of humankind, which have survived the disaster of the Fall from Eden. As Cobb (2005:86) stated, Augustine *encourages* the appropriation ('plundering') of non-Christian cultures by Christians 'to a better use in the worship of the one true God'.

Applied to a modern theology of culture, the idea of the *spolia Aegyptiorum* indicates that the secular culture of our Western society is not void of God's blessings, even though they are not recognized as such by the majority of people. The criterion here is the *purpose* the concrete cultural expressions are used for or, differently phrased, to what aim they are put to use. If secular films, pop songs, novels and games are used to fashion a postmodern 'Golden Calf', it should be criticized by Christians. But if the same films, songs, novels and games are directed, how implicit that may be, to the 'worship' of God, they should be used by Christians as a praise to God.

2. Logoi spermatikoi

The question *how* these pagan or secular cultural expressions can give witness to the one true God even though they are not the product of Christianity itself can be answered by invoking the notion of the *logoi spermatikoi* (or *rationes seminalis* in Latin), the 'seeds of the truth'. Based on a Platonic interpretation of the Divine *logos* from John's Gospel – 'and the *logos* became flesh' – Justin Martyr argued in his *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo* and *First Apology* that Christianity fulfilled the Roman-Greek philosophy (McGuckin 2011; Loewe 2003).

Just as in the case of the *spolia*, Justin valued the pagan philosophy, while discarding the pagan religions, which he characterized as immoral stories conjured up by demons. God as the one true *logos* created everything while sowing 'the seeds of knowledge' freely over all humankind, Jews, Christians and pagans alike. And even though the *logos* of Christianity, the *logos incarnatus* that is Jesus Christ, is the summit of this divine knowledge, other peoples can develop their own unique philosophical apparatus based on their commonly shared dependency on the gifts of the one true God.

If we apply this idea – again – to a modern-day cultural theology, the idea of the *logoi spermatikoi* indicates that God's knowledge is indeed to be found within Christianity but that this insight does *not* automatically mean that this knowledge is confined to Christian tradition. It fits the popular *sensus populi* that God is too majestic, divine and transcendent to be 'captured' in one single religious tradition. In other religions, but also in other cultures and their respective expressions, one could easily meet the one true God of Christianity.

Of course, this position has two problems. First of all, if God's knowledge can be found in all religious traditions more or less equally, one ends up with a kind of religious pluralism like Hick's (as I have discussed briefly earlier) which has the tendency to be exclusivist in itself *and* to dissolve the need of discussions between religions and cultures to establish the possibility of distinguishing between more or less truthfulness. If everything is equally true, then nothing is true. D'Costa (2000) proposed a middle position between the exclusivist and pluralist position: inclusivism in which the own confessional truth is upheld while refraining from disqualifying other religions.

The second problem is that if one takes Justin's position seriously for modern day theology, all truth, wherever it may be located in and especially outside the Christian tradition, is nevertheless dependent on the same Christian faith. God's truth may be found elsewhere but is still exclusively connected to Christian inspiration, implicitly or not, knowingly or not. Rahner (1976:291) made this position clear with the notion of 'anonymous Christians': 'how true supernatural faith in revelation can be present in an individual without any contact with the explicit preaching of the gospel'. All virtuous actions performed by non-Christians are inspired by the one true God, even though the 'pagan' is unaware of the existence of this God.

Besides the religious arrogance bound to this type of thinking, the benevolent view on non-Christian religions, philosophies and cultures only targets those who have no prior knowledge of the Christian tradition itself. And even though it would be perfectly possible to argue that the modern Western European man or woman has never been properly introduced to the Christian faith although he or she grew up in a *cultural* Christian world, the idea is still that *after* a proper introduction the non-Christian expressions would have lost their former meaning.

3. Praeparatio Evangelica

The same problem arises when addressing the next cultural-theological notion, that of the *praeparatio Evangelica*, the 'preparation of the Gospel', although it is certainly not without positive meaning for cultural theology on the whole. The term was introduced by Eusebius in his voluminous *Praeparatio Evangelica*, but with a distinct particular meaning: the idea that the Greek philosophy was based on the teachings of the 'ancient Hebrews', Moses and the other patriarchs of the Old Testament (Johnson 2006). The same idea can be found in Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis* or Ambrose of Milan's *De Abraham*. In this view, the pagan philosophers have done nothing more than 'conserve' the truth of the God of Israel, to pass it over into the hand of its rightful owner, the Christian Church.

However, in the course of Christian history, the notion of *praeparatio Evangelica* (or *preparatio Evangelii*) has become to mean something slightly different. As Jenkins (2002:122) summarizes,

> [w]hen early Christians saw the many parallels between their own new religion and the ancient practices of Mediterranean paganism, they argued that God had already sowed the older cultures with ideas and themes that would grow to fruition once they were interpreted in a fully Christian context. The traditional religions should be seen as a *praeparatio Evangelica*, a preparation for the gospel.

Here the *praeparatio* interlocks with the idea of the *logoi spermaiktoi*: in both instances the non-Christian philosophies, religions and cultures could be seen as bearing witness to the one true God, may it be in veiled forms. When applied to a modern cultural theology, the idea of the *preparatio* leaves room, again, for the idea that the truth of the One God can also be found outside Christian tradition. But where the 'pagan *logoi*' could be interpreted as maintaining their meaning also for a Christian, the *praeparatio* suggest that these pagan insights are necessarily phases from religious ignorance of the full truth of the Christian faith which could (or even should) be abandoned when this truth is attained.

4. Finding God in all things

Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits are famous for the expression 'finding God in all things' (Reiser 2004). Based on a comment made by Jerónimo Nadal, one of Ignatius's closest friends, that the founder was 'a contemplative person even while in the midst of action' (1991:44), the adage to find *and* serve God in all things is based on a teleological-creational worldview (all that exists is directed to its Creator), the evangelical mission to recognize Christ in all people, especially the needy (Matthew 25,31–46), the continual search for the call of God, the continuous contemplation on our own mixed motivations in life, and the eagerness to serve God with an unselfish love (Rakoczy 2006).

In his *Exercises*, Ignatius stimulates his followers to contemplate to see the world and everything in it as a witness of its Creator, including oneself. *Seeking* and *finding* God in all things means that the faithful should have an open and receptive mind to understand the true nature of things. *Serving* God in all things means that the believer should act accordingly to the former two insights: to treat the universe, all living things and especially his fellow-humans as – in its own right – seeking for the same God.

When applied to the domain of cultural theology, Ignatius's adage to find God in all things is very appropriate to understand that God's love, beauty and truth can be found *everywhere*, since everything that exists longs to bear witness to its divine source. This insight broadens

the theological horizon in the sense that the non-Christian religious and cultural expressions can exist and can remain existing as extra-Christian finding places of God, without the necessity of being absorbed into, or replaced by, explicitly Christian expressions.

Jesuits have always been very successful in the field of mission work, founding outposts in Asia, the Americas and Africa, and not infrequently being responsible for the education of the higher classes. For this success, the Jesuits have been criticized both from an ecclesiastical and a postcolonialist side (Jones 2014). Adversaries draw ammunition from the fact that Jesuits tend to enculturate themselves into their new cultural *Umwelt* and accordingly try to both appreciate the foreign religion and culture as witnessing to the one true God *and* translate the Gospel into the cultural framework of their new environment (Clossey 2008; Hosne 2013).

5. Implicit theology

The notion of 'implicit theology' can be found in both Paul Tillich's and Jürgen Moltmann's theologies. Moltmann's public theology, expressed in his monumental *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt* (1997[1999]), starts with the proposition that all theology should be focused on the realization of the Kingdom of God, a project already set in motion by the liberation theologians of the second part of the 20th century. Moltmann's public theology is first and foremost politically motivated:

> As the theology of God's kingdom, theology has to be *public* theology: public, critical and prophetic complaint to God – public, critical and prophetic hope in God. Its public character is constitutive for theology, for the kingdom of God's sake. Public theology needs institutional liberty over against the church, and a place in the open house of scholarship and the sciences. Today this liberty has to be defended against both atheists and fundamentalists.
>
> (Moltman 1999:5)

Moltmann's assumption that the freedom of public theology should be defended against atheists and fundamentalists has not lost its actuality and appeal. Even today, many theologians have to mediate between the church's (often-implicit) accusations of not being a good Christian, on one hand, and the accusation by secular academia of not being a real scholar. Moltmann then explains what the most important method is for perceiving God's kingdom in our modern world: to understand its 'implicit theology'.

> If we want to perceive the unmistakably theological, and hence universal, task of the kingdom of God in the modern world today and tomorrow, we have to grasp the implicit theology of this modern

> world of ours, and understand why and how it was born, so that we can recognize both its vitality and its congenital defects. The modern world is a child of the Jewish and the Christian hope.
>
> (Moltmann 1999:5)

Moltmann does not perceive our modern-day culture as inherently good or God-given *per se*. He expresses both sides of the coin: theologians should understand and criticize what is vital in our culture, and what is broken. To say it in other words, theologians have to differentiate among all the cultural expressions of our time, which ones direct its consumers – that is us – to God and His kingdom and which ones distract from finding these.

When we recall the idea of the *spolia Aegyptiorum*, we can even better understand what Moltmann is trying to say: theology has to distinguish which cultural expressions – games, films, pop songs, novels and the like – are being used to decorate the Tent of the Covenant and which are being used to fashion new 'Golden Calves'. According to Moltmann's theology, every song, novel and game that helps the consumer to find God is to be praised, whether it is Christian, pagan or secular in origin and/or inspiration or not, and every song, novel and game that does the contrary should be abolished.

6. Theology of culture and religious substance

Very similar to Moltmann's idea of implicit theology is Tillich's (1969) contrasting of 'theology of the church' and 'theology of culture'. Theology of the church is the interpretation of materials found in the explicit religious sphere of the (Christian) church, like sacred scriptures, dogmatics, liturgy, church history in the strict sense, church law and so forth. Theology of culture, however, is the search for the 'religious substance' in the other spheres of human life, such as science, art, morality, politics, economics and so forth. The 'religious substance' is embedded in every cultural phenomenon in which existential meaning can be detected.

Tillich believed very strongly that is was 'both possible and necessary [to] disclose the religious meaning of an increasingly secular world in order to clarify the relevance of Christian faith in contemporary life' (Schweiker 2008:138). He was fearful that other efforts to rejuvenate theology would strand in 'quasi-supernaturalism' because of its traditional appeal to biblical revelation. Nevertheless, Tillich received quite some criticism from either 'church theologians' (as he would call them), arguing that any theology of culture will formulate Christian beliefs in non-Christian terms (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989; Milbank et al. 1992), as in the case of Rahner's 'anonymous Christian', or from postmodern thinkers who accuse Tillich of undue universalism, being too abstract and lacking historical and social precision (Taylor 1987).

When applied to our postmodern theology of culture, Tillich's contribution lies in his ability to combine two older insights we saw earlier in this section. On one hand, Tillich refrains from interpreting everything good and true outside Christian tradition as being covertly still Christian and, on the other hand, refrains from stipulating that all religions are equal *per se*. Tillich seems to suggest that God's goodness and grace can be found everywhere people are contemplating their own existential motives but that Christians are especially able to identify this. In other words, God is to be found everywhere in our culture but is mostly unnoticed by artists, politicians, economists, and the like. The task of the theologian is to pinpoint this hidden God, equipped as he is by his Christian supposition.

7. The signs of the times

And last but not least, we have the notion of the 'signs of our times' as an ingredient for cultural theology. This idea is one of the most well-known ones from the Second Vatican Council. Its context is that of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). In paragraph 4, the council fathers argue that the church has to 'scrutinize the signs of the times' to 'interpret them in the light of the Gospel'. It is worthwhile to quote the whole passage:

> To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.

The task of the 'People of God' is then to 'decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age' (paragraph 11). The same applies to 'pastors' and 'theologians' who have to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of the divine Word' (para. 44). This insight of the council is rather new within official Roman Catholic thinking: also, the secular is a sign of the presence and activity of God in human history. As Bisson (2007:12) summarizes,

> the social, political, economic, cultural, religious phenomena that occur so frequently and pervasively in human life that they seem to characterize a given period and seem to express both the needs and

> aspirations of humankind at the time; these are not simply events or phenomena, but somehow signs of the presence and activity of God in human history, signs that need to be recognized, interpreted, and responded to.

The phrase 'the signs of the times' is taken from the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 16 and 24. Intriguingly enough, the phrase seems to mean something quite different than the council fathers suggest. In Matthew, 'the signs of the times' are indications of Christ's returning, an event not without its apocalyptic visions and predictions. And those who actively seek for such signs are disqualified as an 'evil and adulterous generation' (Matthew 16,3b–4). And even more puzzling is that the council's text does not specify what it means with 'the signs of the times', leading to a 'cacophony' among competing interpretations Torraco (1991).

Nevertheless, the International Theological Commission gives some clarifications in its paper of 2011 on the perspectives, principles and criteria of (Roman Catholic) theology: the 'signs of the times' are indeed to be found in human history itself:

> The 'signs of the times' may be described as those events or phenomena in human history which, in a sense, because of their impact or extent, define the face of a period, and bring to expression particular needs and aspirations of humanity at that time.
>
> (para. 54)

As examples of the signs of the times, the commission lists (and not without noticeable remorse on the church's inability to identify these as such) the discovery of historicity, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the promotion of women's rights, peace and justice movements, liberation and democratization and the ecological movement (para. 55). This leads to one of the criteria of theology, according to the commission:

> A criterion of Catholic theology is that it should be in constant dialogue with the world. It should help the Church to read the signs of the times illuminated by the light that comes from divine revelation, and to profit from doing so in its life and mission.
>
> (para. 58)

Both the council and the commission urge believers, and theologians especially, to interpret human history and everything that belongs to it, for in this human history one can find the individual and collective *ultimate concern*, as Tillich would put it, and to differentiate between what is directing us to God and what is not.

c. From *Deus abitus* to *Deus incognitus*

Based on the interesting but not unproblematic position of (institutionalized) religion in the public domain (in the Western world) and inspired by multiple historical theological notions concerning the relation between Christian faith and non-Christian culture, I can establish my own cultural theology as one of the two constitutive fundaments for video games being genuine *loci theologici* and for the identification of playing as a religious act in itself (the other being the study of religion in video games; see the next chapter). This cultural theology focuses on the interpretation of the religious substance in Western societies not as *Deus abitus* (the 'departed God') but as *Deus incognitus* (the 'hidden God').

1. Deus abitus

The idea of the *Deus abitus* incorporates the scientifically dominant empirical paradigm that excludes the possibility of the existence of a God *a priori*, including the dominant social, political and cultural domains which in their turn abide by this atheist paradigm. Religion is increasingly forced into the private domain, being thought of as a dangerous and destabilizing force in the public sphere. Religious institutions are decreasing rapidly, just as the other institutions of civil society like political parties and unions. Religious education is either relegated to the private religious domain (family and/or church) or reduced to religion education classes at high schools which regularly do not even scratch the surface of the religious phenomenon, especially because of the normative exclusion of the insiders' perspective.

This causes not only a dramatic drop in church adherence and religious self-identification, but also in knowledge of and from Christian tradition and the accompanying disappearance of religious, spiritual and even existential vocalizations (de-verbalization). This last instance denotes the phenomenon that along with individualization, de-institutionalization and secularization, the ability to reflect on and communicate about one's own existential capacity has also eroded heavily. This religious illiteracy not only jeopardizes the existential reflection of the new generations but also prevents the understanding of the collective history of the Western world, which has been influenced by the Christian tradition for nearly two millennia.

God seems to have passed away (*abitus*), just as Friedrich Nietzsche claimed in his *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, published in 1882. Where Nietzsche meant that God had been replaced by science and that the belief in His omnipotence had been swapped for the belief in the omnipotence of technology (Allison 2001), the notion 'God is dead' (also called 'theothanatology') has come to mean the idea, both as an observation and

a normative stance, of the ongoing process of the Western cultures losing their adherence to any transcendent deity, in particular to that of the Christian God.

This idea is critically addressed in the 'Genesis trailer' of *Metro Last Light* in which humanity of the near future has destroyed the planet by nuclear warfare. Some of the inhabitants of Moscow, where the game takes place, have secured a not-so-very-safe hiding place in the subterranean tunnels below the city. In these tunnels the few survivors fight among themselves for power, dominance, water, and food. In the Genesis trailer, a narrator retells the story of Genesis 1, the creation of the universe, while showing the desolation of the world, and the irradiated mutants roaming the surface. The trailer perfectly contrasts the beauty of God's initial creation with the horror of humankind's warfare.

On the seventh day of the narrative, the narrator departs from the Genesis text:

> On the seventh day, they say, God rested. But God didn't rest. God left. Or perhaps died. Judgement's Day came and He abandoned us, casting humanity aside like parasites.

God is dead in the world of *Metro Last Light*. With a hint at the theodicy, the narrator seems to suggest that if God existed, this nuclear war would not have taken place. But it did, so no other conclusion can be reached than declaring God's death or non-existence. *Metro*'s world is devoid of any supernatural or transcendent entity, watching humanity and pulling the strings of the universe. It's the ultimate Nietzschean universe.

But there seems to be hope nevertheless, as the narrator continues: 'But there is still hope. We have to face this hell full on. Our faith, I hold in my own hands'. The perspective is now that of the player's avatar Artyom, whose voice we have apparently heard from the start. The only hope seems to be in the player, although Artyom is everything but divine, righteous or godly in any sense. But when the player enters a certain section of the game, taking place in the Mother of God Cathedral in Moscow, barely recognizable because of the damage done to it, he can find his archenemy, Pavel, sitting against a cupboard while wearing a breathing mask, without a filter, leaving him to slowly suffocate in the toxic world.

The player gets to choose between killing Pavel (leave the filter be) or saving him (getting a new filter onto his mask). If the player chooses to save him, the camera shifts upward as soon as he is done, centering on a barely noticeable picture in a frame hanging above the cupboard. If the player knows the picture, he will recognize it instantly: the Mandylion, the archetypical icon of Christ from Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Hardly any player notices the picture, let alone grasps its significance, as a simple search on the internet will prove to everyone. For the theologically embedded player, however, this appearance is highly significant.

When the player chooses to 'do as Christ', that is, to forgive his worst enemy, Christ appears to the player, mirroring the player. When the player chooses to be like Christ (as I argue later in this volume), the player him- or herself becomes Christ-like, thus manifesting God Himself in a world that was thought to have been void of any godhead at all, as the Genesis trailer suggests.

2. Deus incognitus

The conclusion that 'religion' is a fading sociological-cultural phenomenon, as is so frequently heard in modern times, is a misconception. In the first place, religion in its institutionalized form may be declining, but this is only true for the Western world and, honestly, only for the European part of it. Being religious is in the majority of the world, even today, self-evident. The Western world is the exception to the world's rule, not *vice versa*. The West has started a 'secular experiment', the long-term consequences and viability of which remain to be seen.

But even when institutionalized religion, in our case Christianity, has lost its self-evidence, it remains to be seen if religion in more subtle and implicit forms cannot be found in our everyday cultural life. As I have shown at the beginning of this section (and in the introduction), religious themes, phrases, notions, rituals, symbols and objects can still be found abundantly present in our cultural artifacts and expressions, although the religious nature thereof remains increasingly unknown to the majority of consumers because of secularization and – more important even – religious de-verbalization. This whole volume is in some way dedicated to proving that in modern-day video games religious themes and notions can easily be found.

So instead of speaking about a God having left, a *Deus abitus*, I suggest speaking of a hidden God, a *Deus incognitus*, only noticeable for those who have the ability to recognize Him. This *incognitus* quality can be interpreted in two ways: in the context of religion studies and in the context of theology. From the perspective of religion studies, we can infer that the Western world is still much influenced by the Christian tradition in its past (history) and present (culture). Looking for the *Deus incognitus* then applies to the uncovering of the latent and/or implicit inspirations and occurrences of the Christian tradition in our society.

Even if one does not believe in the Christian God and/or any other divine, transcendent entity, or if one chooses to refrain from such a proposition while conducting the research, the cultural heritage of Christendom and its continuing contribution to our culture is beyond any question of doubt, even though one could argue on the importance, both qualitative and quantitative, duration and future of such an influence within and on our culture.

In the second perspective, that of theology, the notion of the *Deus incognitus* denotes two fundamental theological propositions and requires one supposition. The required supposition is the acceptance of our reality as a *created reality*, thus preventing a natural theology in which the existence of God could be argued for on rational grounds only. The two propositions of the *Deus incognitus* are (1) God's self-revelation is not finished in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and (2) God's continuing self-revelation can be traced within and outside Christian tradition, both within an explicit religious context and outside of such a context.

Where the historical ideas of the *spolia Aegyptiorum, logoi spermatikoi* and the *praeparatio Evangelica* valued non-Christian culture in a positive light but only when confined to the pagan philosophy, the ideas of Ignatius, Moltmann, Tillich and Vatican II opened the way for a more affirmative and integral Christian vision on non-Christian culture, incorporating not only the domain of philosophy but also non-Christian religions, and secular artifacts and expressions.

The self-revealing God, however, has become more and more a veiled one, hidden behind new cultural forms and expressions, such as video games, and is increasingly unrecognizable for modern-day people. For recognizing God in these new cultural forms, an open attitude with regard to both modern-day culture and Christian doctrine is necessary. This attitude is not uncritical, however, but is aimed at positively interpreting our cultural expressions as communicating the Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker but, at the same time, willing to critically discuss which expressions lead to God and which do not.

God is hidden in the gamer of *Metro Last Light*, who willingly and consciously forgives his archenemy, undisturbed by the possible consequences afterward. It takes a schooled and trained theological eye to recognize this hidden God, since the majority of players and theologians ignore or – more reasonably – are unable to recognize Him in the game, or in the actual player of the game. I return to this 'Christophoric quality' of the player in more detail in Chapter 3. It is on this cultural-theological basis that I ground my research into video games as finding-places of Gods' self-revelation and my conception of playing video games as a possible religious act in itself. God as Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker is still revealing himself to his creatures, precisely in the 'revelational stories' we have told one another since the dawn of humankind until the present day, even when those stories are increasingly losing their initial self-evident and explicit religious content and vocabulary.

'He who has ears to hear, let him hear' (Matthew 11,15); those who have eyes to see, let them see; those who can game, let them game.

Primary bibliography

Metro Last Light, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) 4A Games, Deep Silver.

Secondary bibliography

Allen, J., 2008. *The despoliation of Egypt in pre-Rabbinic, Rabbinic and Patristic traditions*. Leiden: Brill.

Allison, D., 2001. *Reading the new Nietzsche. The Birth of tragedy, the Gay science, Thus spoke Zaratustra, and on the genealogy of morals*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Altglas, V., 2014. *From Yoga to Kabbalah. Religious exoticism and the logics of bricolage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Augustine [1958]. *On Christian doctrine*. Translated by D. Robertson. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Augustine [2009]. *The city of God*. Translated by M. Dods. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers.

Beaudoin, T., ed., 2013. *Secular music and sacred theology*. Collegeville: Liturgical press.

Beckford, J., 2014. Re-thinking religious pluralism. In: G. Giordan and E. Pace, eds., *Religious pluralism. Framing religious diversity in the contemporary world*. London: Springer.

Bell, C., 2009. *Ritual. Perspectives and dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bisson, P., 2007. Breaking open the mysteries. Changing Jesuit practices of reading the signs of the times. In: J. Verstraeten, ed., *Scrutinizing the signs of the times in the light of the gospel*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.

Brown, D., Davaney, S., and Tanner, K., eds., 2001. *Converging on culture. Theologians in dialogue with cultural analysis and criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Casanova, J., 2009. The religious situation in Europa. In: K. Wiegandt and H. Joas, eds., *Secularization and the world religions*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Chan, M., 2003. Homo geneticus or imago Dei? Beyond genetic reductionism. In: M. Chan and R. Chia, eds., *Beyond determinism and reductionism. Genetic science and the person*. Adelaide: ATF Press.

Clossey, L., 2008. *Salvation and globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cobb, K., 2005. *The Blackwell guide to theology and popular culture*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing.

Comstock, G., 2009. *Gay theology without apology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.

Cone, J., 1997. *Black theology and black power*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Cornwall, S., 2011. *Controversies in queer theology*. London: SCM Press.

Dawkins, R., 2006. *The God delusion*. London: Transworld.

D'Costa, G., 2000. *The meeting of religions and the Trinity*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Dhavamony, M., 1997. *Christian theology of inculturation*. Rome: Università Gregoriana.

Dyrness, W., 1992. *Invitation to cross-cultural theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.

Edgar, W., 2017. *Created and creating. A biblical theology of culture*. Downers Grove: IVP Books.

Flanagan, K., 2001. Religion and modern personal identity. In: A. van Harskamp and A. Musschenga, eds., *The many faces of individualism*. Leuven: Peeters.

Flood, G., 2007. *Beyond phenomenology: Rethinking the study of religion*. London: Continuum.

Fries, H., 1996. *Fundamental theology*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press.
Gorringe, T., 2007. *Furthering humanity. A theology of culture*. Milton: Talyor & Francis.
Groot, K. de, 2018. *The liquidation of the church*. London: Routledge.
Hauerwas, S., and Willimon, W., 1989. *Resident aliens. Life in the Christian colony*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
Hegeman, D., 2007. *Plowing in hope. Towards a biblical theology of culture*. Moscow (Idaho): Canon Press.
Hick, J., 1996. *A Christian theology of religions: The rainbow of faith*. Louisville: Knox.
Hodge, D., 2010. *The soul of hip hop. Rims, timbs and a cultural theology*. Downers Grove: IVP Books.
Hosne, A., 2013. *The Jesuit missions to China and Peru, 1570–1610. Expectations and appraisals of expansionism*. New York: Routledge.
Hunter, J., 2009. The culture war and the sacred/secular divide. The problem of pluralism and weak hegemony. *Social Research* 76(4).
Ignatius of Loyola, [1991]. *Spiritual exercises and selected works*. Edited by G. Ganss. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
International Theological Commission, 2011. *Theology today. Perspectives, principles and criteria*. Vatican. Available from: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Irarrázaval, D., 2000. *Inculturation. New dawn of the church in Latin America*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
Jenkins, P., 2002. *The next Christendom. The coming of global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Joas, H., 2009. The religious situation in the USA. In: K. Wiegandt and H. Joas, eds., *Secularization and the world religions*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
Johnson, A., 2006. *Ethnicity and argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Johnston, R., ed., 2007. *Reframing theology on film. New focus for an emerging discipline*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Jones, C., 2014. The prospects of interreligious and intercultural understanding. The Jesuit case and its theoretical implications. In: P. Phan and J. Ray, eds., *Understanding religious pluralism. Perspectives from religious studies and theology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
Knitter, P., 1987. Preface. In: J. Hick and P. Knitter, eds., *The myth of Christian uniqueness. Toward a pluralistic theology of religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
Labuschagne, B., 2013. Religion and politics in post-secular society: Beyond the public/private divide. In: W. Hofstee and A. van der Kooij, eds., *Religion beyond its private role in modern society*. Leiden: Brill.
Loewe, W., 2003. Classical christology. In: T. Wiley, ed., *Thinking of Christ. Proclamation, explanation, meaning*. London: Continuum.
Long, D., 2008. *Theology and culture. A guide to the discussion*. Eugene: Cascade Companions.
Lynch, G., 2005. *Understanding theology and popular culture*. Oxford: Wiley.

Marsh, C., 2014. *Cinema and sentiment. Film's challenge to theology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
McGrath, A., 2008. *The open secret. A new vision for natural theology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
McGuckin, J., 2011. The Trinity in the Greek fathers. In: P. Phan, ed., *The Cambridge companion to the Trinity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
Meisinger, H., Drees, W., and Liana, Z., eds., 2006. *Wisdom or knowledge? Science, theology and cultural dynamics*. London: T&T Clark International.
Middleton, D., 2008. *Theology after reading. Christian imagination and the power of fiction*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Milbank, J., Pickstock, C., and Ward, G., eds., 1992. *Radical orthodoxy. A new theology*. London: Routledge.
Moltmann, J., 1999. *God for a secular society. The public relevance of theology*. Translated by M. Kohl. London: SCM Press.
Morris, P., 2014. The end of multiculturalism? Religion, sovereignty and the nation state. In: F. Mansouri and B. de B'béri, eds., *Global perspectives on the politics of multiculturalism in the 21st century*. London: Routledge.
Nicholis, B., 1979. *Contextualization a theology of gospel and culture*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing.
Noble, T., 2013. The *poor in liberation theology. Pathway to God or ideological construct?* London: Routledge.
Nogsiej, T., 2001. *Khasi cultural theology. Tribal theology*. Delhi: ISPCK.
Orji, C., 2015. *A semiotic approach to the theology of inculturation*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
Pew Research Center, *Being Christian in Western Europe*, 29 May 2018. Available from: http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/05/24143010/Being-Christian-in-Western-Europe-FOR-WEB1.pdf [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Plaisier, A., 2014. *Deep calls unto deep: Images of God's bounty and man's response*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers.
Rahner, K., 1976. Observations on the problem of the 'anonymous Christian'. *Theological Investigation* 40.
Reiser, W., 2004. *Seeking God in all things. Theology and spiritual direction*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
Rakoczy, S., 2006. *Great mystics and social justice. Walking on the two feet of love*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.
Rowland, C., 2007. *The Cambridge companion to liberation theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Schweiker, W., 2008. Theology of culture and its future. In: R. Manning, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Paul Tillich*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Shorter, A., 1999. *Toward a theology of inculturation*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
Sitelman, F., and Sitelman, R., 2000. Ethics and culture. From the claim that God is dead, it does not follow that everything is permitted. In: M. Kelley and V. Fitzsimons, eds., *Understanding cultural diversity. Culture, curriculum, and community in nursing*. Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett.
Streib, H., 2007. Religious Praxis – de-institutionalized. Theoretical and empirical considerations. In: H. Streib, ed., *Religion inside and outside traditional institutions*. Leiden: Brill.
Swaab, D., 2015. *We are our brains. From the womb to Alzheimer's*. Translated by J. Hedlry-Prôle. London: Penguin Books.

Tanner, K., 1997. *Theories of culture. A new agenda for theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Taylor, B., 2008. *Entertainment theology. New-edge spirituality in a digital democracy*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Taylor, M., 1987. *Paul Tillich. Theologian of the boundaries*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Tillich, P., 1959. *Theology of culture*. Edited by R. Kimball. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tillich, P., 1969. On the idea of a theology of culture. Translated by W. Green. In: J. Adams, ed., *What is religion*? New York: Harper & Row.

Torraco, S., 1991. From 'social justice' to 'reading the signs of the times'. The hermeneutical crisis of Catholic social teaching. In: G. Berthold, ed., *Faith seeking understanding. Learning and the Catholic tradition*. Manchester: St. Anselm College Press.

Usselmann, N., 2018. *A sacred look. Becoming cultural mystics. Theology of popular culture*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Vanhoozer, K., Anderson, C., and Sleasman, M., eds., 2007. *Everyday theology. How to read cultural texts and interpret trends*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

von Balthasar, H.U., 1993. *Razing the bastions. On the church in this age*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Walsh, R., 2017. Religion is a private matter. In: B. Stoddard and C. Martin, eds., *Stereotyping religion. Critiquing clichés*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

2 Fundamentals II
A study of games

Games have come a long way in the last five decades. From the minimalistic *Pong* from 1972 to the open world action-adventure *Far Cry 5* from 2018. And if a player of *Tetris* from 1987 would travel to our own time, he would probably not be able to understand the madness surrounding the release of *Pokémon Go* in 2016, which opened augmented reality and geo-tracking to a very large audience (Szymczyk 2016).

Pong was essentially a black-and-white game of tennis, with two simple paddles, controlled by rather primitive joysticks, and a ball going up and down between. *Tetris*, on the other hand, was a puzzle game in which the player has to place blocks, slowly and randomly descending from the top of the screen downward. When a horizontal row of blocks is filled, it disappears allowing all blocks on top to fall down one line. When comparing the two, the differences between them are almost impossible to list, but still no one will deny both are video games.

And the definition problem gets worse if we proceed further through the relatively short history of video games (Wolf 2008; Stanton 2015. *Tomb Raider* and *Far Cry 5* are both action-adventure shooters, but the differences are again huge. *Tomb Raider* is 'on rails': the player is more or less forced to follow a pre-given path through the game world, while *Far Cry* allows the player to roam freely through a very large open world. The first game is played 'on foot': the player can move his or her avatar only through walking. The second game allows the use of vehicles, helicopters and airplanes to move quickly through the game map. And these are only two of a very long list of differences, and compared to *Pong*, *Tetris* or *Pokémon Go*, the differences are even greater. Still, no one will deny they are all video games.

Here, we have our first serious challenge when academically dealing with video games: how to define something that is so evident and yet so excruciatingly difficult at the same time? And let us not forget what Carr (2006:7) told us: 'what they have in common may in fact be rather less interesting or important than the ways in which they differ'.

a. Definitions. What is a video game?

The most important topic within the discussion on the nature of video games is the so-called ludology-versus-narratology debate. The height of this debate was reached during the end of the 1990s, but in my opinion it is still lurking in the background (Simons 2007), although both ludologists and narratologists have declared that their differences have been settled (Frasca 2003; Jenkins 2004; Murray 2013).

The debate focused (focuses) on the fundamental question as to whether video games should be considered (primarily or exclusively) to be *ludus* ('play' or 'game'), or (again primarily or exclusively) to be *narratio* ('narrative' or 'story'). If a video game is considered to be a *game*, the default research methodology should be retrieved from (analogue) game studies (ludology). Games, whether analogue or digital, are (then) aimed at entertainment and/or pleasure, either individually (solo play) or collectively (co-operational or competitive), derived from the solving of what are essentially rational puzzles, being either in-game (by the challenges of the game itself and/or by the competition offered by other players of the same game) or being the (algorithms of the) game itself.

Football or chess are examples often mentioned in this respect: football means being better than the other team (physically and psychologically, individually and collectively), while chess seems to be nothing more than a logical puzzle played out against a competitor, either human or artificial. Football has no 'story', other than those of the fans, and while chess has some 'narratological' names like bishops, queens and kings, it seems to be not telling any story at all.

The same applies, according to ludologists like Eskelinen (2001), Juul (2001) and Frasca (1999), to digital games. As Eskelinen famously and provocatively stated,

> [t]rue stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy.

This could be very easily be applied to a digital video game like *Pong* or *Tetris*, both of which seem to be void of any narrative at all (although some scholars have argued otherwise; see the following discussion). But at the same time, when we look at more story-driven games like *Far Cry 5*, it becomes increasingly difficult to remain a strict ludological point of view, since the game delivers quite an elaborate storyline, including full-fledged non-playable characters with their own background stories, huge main and side quests and an overall narrative about a Christian sect violently trying to prepare for the approaching end of the world. Nevertheless, die-hard ludologists will minimalize the role of the narrative. Aarseth (2004:53) claimed about *Tomb Raider*, also a story-driven game,

although not as elaborately so as *Far Cry 5*, 'When I play, I don't even see her body, but through it and past it'.

In opposition to the (strict) ludologists' approach to digital games, the narratologists focus on the story delivered by the games. If a game is considered to be a *narrative* before anything else, the default research methodology is not derived from classical game studies (only), as in the case of the ludologists' viewpoint, but primarily from literature studies. Narratologists insist that *all*, or almost all, games deliver a story to the player who receives the story by playing (interacting with) the game itself.

This strict narratological approach is very appropriate for story-driven games like *Far Cry 5*, but it becomes much harder when thinking about *Tetris* or *Pong*. Nevertheless, for some scholars even *Tetris* can be narratologically analyzed. Murray (2017:178), for example, regards *Tetris* as an enactment of laborers in capitalistic societies:

> Tetris is a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s – of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught.

Robert Buerkle (2008:46–66) suggested that there are seven differences between seeing video games as *games* (ludological approach) and as *texts* (narratological approach).

As texts, video games are fixed tangible objects, produced by a semiotic system, that utilize a one-way flow of information from source to author; they address a mass audience; they provide a definite object of analysis; they imply past tense (evincing predetermination) and 'foreground' their mediation.

As games, video games are activities that create their own system of meaning and allow a two-way flow of information between gamer and player; they address individual players; they imply present tense (evincing uncertainty) and suggest immediacy.

Buerkle and other game scholars have made clear that any definition of video games should incorporate both dimensions, narratological and ludological, making any effort to define video games even harder than it already was (Mukherjee 2015:76–77). Some scholars opt for a very simple and instrumental definition, like Richard Ferdig (2014:71), suggesting that games are 'digital games played on a television or computer screen'. Others have suggested very elaborate definitions incorporating all different elements, like Oliver Steffen (2012:249–250), who states that digital games are 'entertainment software', 'system(s) of rules and control' and 'sign-producing machines [with the] ability to tell stories'.

Steffen's definition of digital games as 'entertainment software' points out to another distinction made between games as a simple means to pass

the time (like a hobby) and games as tools to be used in educational and/or professional contexts (so-called serious games). These kinds of games are 'created with the intention to entertain and to achieve at least one additional goal' (Dörner et al. 2016:3), like recruiting soldiers (Sandovar et al. 2016; Allen 2017), training pupils and students (Cai et al. 2017), instructing doctors and surgeons (Schouten et al. 2013) or even social empowerment (Tsalapatas et al. 2016).

Some scholars argue that serious and entertainment games are not so easily distinguishable from one another (Marsh 2011). The majority of the players of games like *Far Cry 5* think of their activity as 'mere fun', but when certain players use the same entertainment games to train their hand and eye coordination, *Far Cry* turns into a serious game all of the sudden. The ongoing discussion at the moment revolves around the question, What makes a game 'serious'? Two possible answers are given: either the intentions of the developers or the actual experience of the players (Dörner et al. 2016).

Let us return to the question of definition. I want to propose a new definition of video games, incorporating both ludological and narratological elements, usable for both entertainment and serious games. *Video games are digital, interactive, playable, narrative texts*. All five constitutive elements need further explanation. To begin with, the first two elements are technical in nature (digitality and interactivity), the third one is ludological (playability), the fourth one is narratological (narrativity) and the fifth one is communicational (textuality) in nature.

1. Textuality

In the first place, video games are 'texts'. This first constitutive element seems to make things worse at a first glance. The notion of 'text' is notoriously difficult to define and hardly appropriate for defining another notion in need of explanation. Nevertheless, I believe that the qualification of video games as texts is very important.

Originally, a text is 'any discourse fixed by writing' as Ricoeur (1981:145) opted in a now classical definition. But in postmodern literary structuralism, the notion of 'text' has evolved significantly, encompassing far more than just written (or typed) words: films, paintings, clothes, architecture, video clips, novels and even video games (Buerkle 2008:26–35). In this context, any object that communicates information in such a way that it can be conceived as doing so, and can be interpreted in that way, is considered a 'text' (Bosman 2016a). The text is independent of the actual interpreter: an individual may not be aware of the communication of information and the actual content of the communicated information. However, the text can still be thought of as communicating information, either emotional or cognitive in nature.

Video games qualify as such texts. They are fixed objects, traceable as coherent, limited units on a storage medium. Video games have a discursive instance; that is, a communicative exchange occurs between game and gamer. And video games have exterior meaning; that is, they can only exist because of the intertextual relationship between the game itself and all other media it is dependent on (Allen 2000:8–60). Video games are texts insofar as they are 'mediated sign systems and they are given meaning by their audience, not only through and during the act of playing itself, but also through the extensive, intertextual culture associated with games' (Lauteren 2002:218).

2. Digitality

The second constitutive feature of video games is their 'digital nature'. Marie-Laure Ryan (2006:98) argues that video games are digital systems because of the following qualifications: (1) an interactive and reactive nature, (2) volatile signs and variable displays, (3) multiple sensory and semiotic channels and (4) networking capabilities. Video games are digital games *per se* to distinguish them from analogue games such as board games (chess or *Magic: the Gathering*) and traditional sporting games like soccer or basketball. (Of course, all these games can also be played in digital variations.)

3. Interactivity

The 'interactive and reactive nature' of video games is very important for their definition. A video game

> mandates choice for the user. Every interactive application must give its user a reasonable amount of choice. No choice, no interactivity. This is not a rule of thumb, it is an absolute, uncompromising principle.
>
> (Crawford 2003:191)

To say it quite simply, no interactivity, no video game. Watching a movie or reading a book requires some action from the viewer or reader: concentration above all. But the viewer and the reader are passive with regard to the enfolding of the story within the novel or film. The film can be shown without an audience without stopping the film itself. And a book can perfectly exist without someone reading it. Existentialists would argue that a book without a reader is no book at all, but a more realistic approach to the matter shows the important difference with video games: without input by the player, the game is stalled in the situation where the player left it. Possibly he or she is killed by his or her in-game adversaries, but usually the game ignores the fact that the player has stopped playing.

Of course, the interactivity of the game and the player can take different forms (Ryan 2006:108–122): (1) internal interactivity in which the player interacts with the game world through his or her avatar, as is the case in *Tomb Raider*, versus (2) external interactivity in which the gamer interferes directly into the game world, as is the case in world-building games like *The Sims* or *Godus*, and (3) exploratory interactivity in which the choices of the player do not alter the world, only the player's perception of it, as is the case in walking or explorational games like *Dear Esther* or *Everybody's gone to the rapture*, versus (4) ontological interactivity in which the choices of the player drastically change the world and the narrative within it, as is the case in games like *Fallout 3* or the *Mass Effect* series.

4. Narrativity

Ryan (2006:8–9) defines eight conditions for narrativity. *Spatial*: (1) The narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents. *Temporal:* (2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations. (3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events. *Mental:* (4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world. (5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans. *Pragmatic:* (6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure. (7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the story world. (8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient.

It is very easy to see story-driven games like *Everybody's gone to the rapture* or *Fallout 3* meeting all these narrative requirements. When thinking about games as *Pong* or *Tetris*, one could argue they are void of any meaning, and therefore, according to my proposed definition, would fail to be video games (which would be ludicrous, of course). The same applies to real-life games-turned–video game like *FIFA 17* (football) or *Chessaria: The Tactical Adventure* (chess): apparently no narrative to be seen at all.

At the same time, we already have discovered that also apparently non-narrative games can be the object of (narratological) interpretation. Murray (2017) already argued that *Tetris* could be read like a criticism of modern capitalism (see the earlier discussion). Ryan (2006:75–93) quite convincingly argued too that *all* games, simulated or real-life, abstract or not, have a narrative dimension. Utilizing three different (fictional) versions of a live radio broadcasting report on a football match, she shows it is psychologically almost impossible for a human being *not* to make the game into some sort of narrative, for example, about the virtues or vices of the players or the background story of the top scorer.

One could argue that the narratological interpretation of these kinds of (video) games is in the eye of the player(s) and/or viewer(s), but one could just as easily argue that *all* narrativity is (at least partially) from the side of the consumer (potentially and partially), independent of the intentions of the (video) game developers. It is almost impossible for any person feeling at least some excitement about the game (sufficiently so to bother participating in or watching it), not to make up some basic narratives, at least in the safe environment of their own thoughts (Worth 2004).

5. Playability

Every explicit incorporation of the narratological element within the definition of video games should be balanced by an equally explicit *ludological* element, to guarantee the clear distinction between (video) games and other (digital) media. We have to add the 'strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world' (Ryan 2006:203). Many different views on the ludological aspect of (video) games have been suggested, like that of Roger Caillios (2001:9–23), who differentiated between four types of 'play': *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo). All video games possess one or more of these types of play. I prefer Lauteren's idea of games as 'playable texts' (2002), because of its well-based combination of ludological and narratological elements.

In conclusion, video games are digital, interactive, playable, narrative texts. As a text, a video game is an object of interpretation. As a narrative, it communicates meaning (or at least can be conceived of in such a way). As a game, it is playable. And as a digital medium, it is interactive in nature.

b. Methodology. How to study video games?

In video games research, it being a relatively young academic discipline, two major approaches can be found under all kinds of different names: actor-centered approach and game-immanent approach (Heidbrink et al. 2014). The actor-centered approach focuses on the experiences of other players, that is, not that of the researcher him- or herself. In this approach, typical research will be focused on interviewing and/or monitoring a certain amount of gamers playing the designated game or game sequence in order to understand what kind of emotions, cognitions, and/or notions the game is conveying to its players (see, for example, Aupers et al. 2018).

On the other hand, we can find game-immanent approaches. In contrast to the actor-centered approach which takes many of its methodologies from social studies, the game-immanent approach focuses on the playing of the game itself by the researcher/scholar (see, for example,

Wysocki 2018; Rautalahti 2018). This approach takes many of its insights and methodologies from literary studies, philosophy and theology.

Although the two approaches are not principally contradictory or mutually exclusive (Aarseth 2003), it is my experience as a religion and video game scholar that the actor-centered approach is considered by many inside (and outside) the field as the superior or sometimes even as the only academically legitimate manner of researching religion in games. The first approach is implicitly thought of as objective and properly academic, while the second approach is implicitly even thought of as the subjective interpretation of a lonely scholar trapped in his own thoughts.

I do not deny or even minimalize the legitimacy of the actor-centered approach, because both perspectives have their own academic validly (Aarseth 2003; Heidbrink et al. 2015), but I cannot help wondering how generations of film and literary studies have been able to operate with the help of a 'film-immanent' or 'novel-immanent' approach, that is, the scholar watching or reading the actual thing, without much academic criticism, while scholars opting for a similar approach to games have to defend their methodology. Asking conventional literary or film scholars, when they present their articles on their analytical reading of the latest novel of Salman Rushdie or their critical viewing of the latest Tarantino film, if they shouldn't have interviewed hundreds of readers and viewers in order to have received better academic material, would be met with utter surprise. However, the same surprise is not met when game scholars present their critical reading of a video game.

In the context of this volume on religion and video games, I would like to propose a four-step methodology of studying games, which incorporates insights from both game-immanent and actor-centered approaches, although the first perspective is dominant. The steps are (1) internal reading or playing the game, (2) internal research or collecting in-game material, (3) external reading or mapping the intermedial relationship between game and real world and (4) external research or the gathering of other material concerning the game. The first two steps, *internal* reading and research, can be done more or less simultaneously, because both are done within the game world itself. The third and fourth step, *external* reading and research, can be done at any time but are typically done during the later stages of the research process. Let me explicate the four steps.

1. Internal reading

The first step in this game studies' methodology is that of internal reading, or to put it simply, the **playing** of the actual game. While this step may seem too obvious to mention separately, I still (though only occasionally) meet game scholars who have not played the game they are researching. Even when utilizing a strict actor-centered approach, it is

still recommended to play the game(s) at hand (Aarseth 2003; Heidbrink 2014; Heidbrink 2015). Of course, other options are open, like watching other gamers play through *Let's Play*'s or *Walkthroughs* on YouTube or other online video channels, but nothing beats the old hands-on mentality of a passionate gamer (Aarseth 2003; Heidbrink 2015).

Playing should be done as thoughtfully as reading a novel to be criticized or as watching a film to be analyzed. All possible features of the game should be tried by the scholar or as many of them as is practically possible. This means playing the game multiple times (playthroughs), including a main quest (mission) and side quests (missions), reaching every possible ending (where this is humanly possible). For cinematic, story-driven games like *Tomb Raider* an amount of 20–40 hours is needed to end the game properly, while open world games like *Far Cry 5* could take up to 100 hours of playtime. MMO(RPG)s and multiplayer games like *Dota 2*, *Call of Duty. Black Ops* or *Fortnite* have theoretically no fixed playing time since the interaction between the players can make the game 'happen' for eternity.

2. Internal research

The second step of this methodology is **collecting** all in-game information. This information could be (but is not restricted to) in-game written texts, audio and video files, pictures, conversations with non-player characters (NPCs), monologues of dialogues with the game's protagonist and so forth. By combining all information found within the game, an integral picture of the game's aesthetics, narrative, internal structure, leveling system and game lore can be put together, functioning as a kind of backbone for the specific research aimed at by the game scholar. Both internal reading and internal research are restricted to the fictional world of the game itself.

3. External reading

After playing and collecting, the third step is the **mapping out** of the intermedial relationships (Grishakova et al. 2010:3) between this particular game or game series and all other media that provide background information for the game, the game world and the game narrative. The game scholar broadens his or her scope from strictly within the game to the world outside it. Usually the term *intermediality* is used as a synonym of intertextuality; however, in the context of this methodology, it is used for denoting additional medial objects, such as novels, comics and such, usually generated by the game developer but sometimes also by fans (fan fiction) to extend the narrative and the world of the game beyond the limits of the game itself.

4. External research

The fourth and last step in this methodology is the **gathering** of all out-game information that is not provided (or ordered or sanctioned) by the developers and/or developers of the game themselves, among which are articles by game enthusiasts and fellow game researchers; professional game reviews by specialized magazines and websites; interviews with the developers, voice actors and writers of the game and the corresponding additional media; and playthroughs and walkthroughs by other players on platforms such as *YouTube* and *Twitch*.

After playing the game, collecting all in-game information, mapping out the intermedial relationships between game and other media, and gathering all other out-game information about the game, the game scholar can decide he or she has finished analyzing the game in question, having combined aspects from both actor-centered and game-immanent approach (with an emphasis on the second).

c. Focus. The five shapes of religion in video games

When studying religion in video games, we often find individual games or game series examined for religious themes and imagery, like *Bioshock Infinite* (Kuhn 2016; Bosman 2017; Wysocki 2018), *The Binding of Isaac* (Brendel 2017; Bosman 2018), *Wolfenstein. New Order* (Bosman and Mock 2016) or the *Dishonored* series (Rautalahti 2018). However, we are looking for a broader typology of religion in video games.

Ferdig (2014:71–77) suggested a four-component framework for studying religion in digital games, focusing either on (1) game content explicitly related to religion, (2) story, environments and situations within the game referring to religion, (3) actual goals and outcomes of the game connected to religion and (4) 'player capital', the religious element introduced by the gamer him- or herself.

On the other hand, Anthony (2014:29–39) introduced a typology of seven game types, partially based on classical Greek mythology and religious play: (1) didactic games in which the gamer is instructed about religion, (2) hestiastic games in which the game itself is seen as a religious celebration, (3) poimenic games in which the divine is an active player itself and (4) praxic games in which devotional practices are focused upon.

Now, the last three of Anthony's categories are especially interesting for our volume: (5) allomythic games that explore fictional religious traditions, like those in the *Mass Effect* series; (6) allopolitical games, a social space, like *Second Life*, where identities are mediated by screen names or avatars; and (7) theoptic games in which the player takes on the role of an almighty godhead, like *Godus*.

Based on Ferdig, Anthony and other game scholars mentioned in this chapter, and based on my own extensive experience with games

and religion and game research, I propose a typology of five shapes in which religion can be encountered in video games: (1) material, (2) referential, (3) reflexive and (4) ritual religion and (5) gaming *as* religion or as a religious act. The fifth shape, gaming *as* religion, is the one we are focusing on in this volume, since it is an integral part of the second hypothesis formulated in the introduction. These five shapes are mutually non-exclusive. And all shapes are placed somewhere on the line between developer-intended, on one hand, and player-conceived, on the other.

But first some words on the concept of 'religion'. The concept itself has proven to be a most notoriously difficult one to define (Otto 2004; Idiopulos et al. 1998; de Vries 2014; Jensen 2014), and the numerous efforts of doing such anyway have been criticized as a typical Western construct invented by 19th-century scholars (Dubuisson 2003). Nevertheless, in this chapter it is necessary to provide a more or less coherent definition of religion in order to understand its occurrence in video games, as I do with the five shapes in the following.

I admit upfront that my definition is a Western one, mostly usable to describe and understand religions in the European and North American forms. However, with the context of this volume on video games and theology, this is no disadvantage, let alone a problem, since I focus on Christianity, on one hand, and on video games (primarily or at least partly) aiming at a Western gaming audience, on the other hand.

In this volume, I understand religion as the intertwining of seven dimensions: *mythos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, *logo*, *laos*, *hierarchia* and *hagios*. The first dimension of *mythos* is the teleological interpretation of the existence and history of the universe, including theological notions as the history of salvation, kosmogenesis, anthropogenesis, theogenesis, eschaton, salvation, and so forth, shared within a certain community, or communities. The second dimension is *ethos*, the set of moral rules, duties and obligations, and so forth, shared within a certain community, or communities.

The third dimension is *pathos*, the intertwined complex of sacred spaces, times, cloths, geography and rituals, including theological notions as sacramentality and liturgy. The fourth dimension is *logos*, the collective body of texts, hold sacred and authoritative in a community, or communities, either written down or orally transmitted, including theological notions as scripture and revelation

The fifth dimension is *laos*, the collective of devotees gathered around sacred objects, in sacred space, with a presupposed shared ideological, ethical and ritual framework, 'governed' by the *hierarchia*. The sixth dimension is *hierarchia*, the religious 'elites', including priests, guru's, oracles, prophets, seers, and so forth, placed at a certain distance of the *laos* in order to intermediate between the divine and the worldly realms.

The seventh and last dimension of religion is *hagios*, the notion of 'the sacred' itself, derived from Rudolf Otto's idea of 'the holy' (2004): *mysterium faciens et tremendum*. The unspeakable, intransferable, immediational 'core'

where the holy, may it be as a person, an object or an energy, is experienced directly. Together these seven intertwined dimensions form the elements of what is commonly called 'religion'. And this is how I use the notion in this volume. Let us now return to the five shapes of religion in video games.

Shape 1. Material religion is the explicit occurrence of (existing or fantasy) religion within the game itself. The shape is the most explicit one of the five, insofar that the overwhelming majority of players will recognize the occurrence of religious artifacts, buildings, clothes and the like and that it can safely be assumed that the occurrence was intended by the developers.

Examples include the fighting nuns from *Nun Attack*, the church buried in the desert sand from *Mad Max*, the *Chapel of all faiths* run by Father Clements from *Fallout 4*, the celebration of Holy Mass in the Sistine Chapel in Rome from *Assassin's Creed* 2, the mock confession from *Serious Sam 2*, the statue of Mary of the Vanished from *Hitman Absolution*, the zombie-shooting Eastern Orthodox *Father* Grigori from *Half-Life 2*, the gun-dealing self-ordained priest Longinus from *Far Cry 4* and the Christian-inspired Doomsday sect of Eden's Gate in *Far Cry 5*.

Shape 2. Referential religion is the implicit or explicit reference in the game to an existing religious tradition outside the game. This shape is often less explicit than that of material religion, because it requires the knowledge and attentiveness on the part of the gamer to notice and understand the reference the game is making to something religious outside itself. Usually, these kinds of references are bound to be developer-intended, although not always. Since developers are usually very secretive about their inspiration (probably out of commercial concerns), the extent of intension is usually open for debate.

Some examples will be sufficient in illustrating this second shape. In the *Mass Effect* series numerous references to the Christian tradition can be found, among which the name of the first extraterrestrial human colony Eden Prime (Genesis 2–3), the Krogan Eva, who is bound to be the sole mother of future generations of her species (*idem*), the Lazarus Project by which the game protagonist is raised from the dead (John 11), the robotic *Gesamtgestalt* called Legion (Mark 5) and even the name of the protagonist himself, Sheperd (referring to the messianic title of 'shepherd' in both the Old and New Testament).

In *Metal Gear 5. The Phantom Pain*, antagonist Skullface has developed a vocal-chord parasite that kills humans who speak a pre-selected language. When demonstrating this devilish weapon, Skullface implicitly quotes the opening chapter of John's Gospel: 'And the Word has become flesh'. In *Assassin's Creed Rogue*, as we saw earlier, a major reference is made to the Lisbon earthquake and to the place it takes in the history of the theodicy.

In *Child of Light*, the game protagonist, a princess by the name of Aurora ('morning star' in Latin) is killed on Good Friday and resurrected by her divine mother on Easter Sunday, a hardly latent reference to the notion of the so-called Harrowing of Hell in Christian tradition. Also, in *The Talos Principle* multiple references can be found, among which the name of the powerful artificial intelligence in charge of the virtual world, Elohim (in-game spelled as EL0HIM), one of the names given to God in the Hebrew Bible.

Of course, references to religious traditions other than Christianity can be easily found, for example, references to Judaism and Kabbala in *Wolfenstein. New Order* and *Wolfenstein. Old Blood* (Bosman and Mock 2016) to the Shi'ite sect of the Nizari Isma'ilis in *Assassin's Creed* (Bosman 2016b) to Zoroastrianism in *Prince of Persia* to Taoism and Confucianism in *Final Fantasy 15* and to Hinduism in *Smite*. In this volume, I have chosen to concentrate on Christianity and therefore on references to Christian tradition.

Shape 3. Reflexive religion is the reflection on existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion within the game itself. This shape is relatively implicit in itself and quite implicit in its relation to religion. Nevertheless, in many video games we can find reflections on existential notions like free will versus fate in *Kingdoms of Amalur. Reckoning*, morality and creativity as necessary qualifications for human nature in *The Turing Test*, (religious) obedience versus free will in *The Talos Principle*, sinfulness and forgiveness in *Hitman Absolution* and *Bioshock Infinite* and sacrifice and salvation in *Fallout 3* and *Child of light*. Religion-critical games like *Far Cry 5* and *The Binding of Isaac*, which allude to religiously inspired abuse and violence, also fall under this category.

Shape 4. Ritual religion occurs when players are involved in in-game behavior that is traditionally associated with religion, either stimulated/forced by the developers or spontaneously. Actually, this category coincides with that of 'religious acts' as is described in the introduction to this volume: praying, dancing, worshiping, pilgrimaging and the like. This ritual behavior can be either developer-intended or player-conceived/constructed, that is, intentionally or spontaneously.

For example, think of the 'Capsuleer Cemetery' in *Eve Online*, where deceased players' avatars and real-life humans are commemorated through a massive star-ship cemetery around the in-game moon of Molea II (Messner 2017; Fandino 2018). Another famous example is the case of James Payne, who was immortalized in his favorite game *Total War. Rome II* as a Roman commander after his tragic death by cancer (Smith 2013). Recently, players of the game *Fortnite* decided to instate an unofficial ceasefire in the game, a 'sacred truce' enabling them to watch a onetime in-game event (Jahmai 2018).

Touching was the account of a YouTube commenter with the name 00WARTHERAPY00, who shared his experiences while playing the Xbox racer *Rallisport Challenge*. When this commenter was six years old his father passed away. Ten years later, 00WARTHERAPY00 again picked up the old Xbox he got from his old man when he was four. When starting the game *Rallisport Challenge*, he saw the 'ghost of his father' (Riendeau 2014). The game had saved the best race ever recorded on that Xbox, projecting it on the race track as some sort of ghost rider. The best time was, of course, his father's.

On other occasions the ritual behavior is not so much spontaneous, but intended by the developer. For example, in the case of *Bioshock Infinite*, the player has to allow his avatar Booker DeWitt to be baptized before he is allowed to enter the city of Columbia (where the greatest part of the game takes place). The fact that this baptism was not just a simple push of a button for some players, was highlighted in the famous case of Breen Malmberg, a gamer and a devout Christian. He asked and received a refund for his purchase of *Bioshock Infinite*, because – as a devout Christian – he felt he could not continue the game without committing 'extreme blasphemy' (Hernandez 2013; Bosman 2017).

Shape 5. Gaming as religion occurs when the experience of gaming itself is identified as religious, by developers, gamers and/or scholars. In other words, precisely what I hypothesized in the introduction to this volume: for some gamers, the playing of some games can be interpreted as a religious act in itself. The act of gaming becomes religious. In her famous book *Godwired*, Rachel Wagner (2012) has considered virtual experiences – such as stories, games and rituals – as forms of world-building or cosmos construction that serve as a means of making sense of our world. Such activities, Wagner has claimed, are arguably religious.

I continue this line of thought in the other chapters of this volume. For now, some simple examples may suffice. In *Wolfenstein. New Order* and *Wolfenstein. Old Blood*, the player is encouraged by the game to fit him- or herself into a larger Kabbalistic framework of mystical world restoration (Bosman and Mock 2016). In *Child of Light*, the gamer is asked to join him- or herself in the mythical *descensus Christi ad inferos* between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. And in *Metro Last Light*, when the gamer, in the explicitly godless universe of a post-apocalyptic Moscow, shows mercy to his or her worst enemy, the image of the Christ appears before the player as a token of Christ's dwelling in the actual player.

In some cases, the religious shape is clearly developer-intended, like in *Bioshock Infinite* or *Total Wars*; sometimes it originates from the side of the players, like in *Eve Online* or *Rallisport Challenge*. In most cases, we cannot exactly pinpoint the case on a spectrum ranging from developer-intended to player-conceived. On the other hand, the intentions of the developers are of minor concern to the research in this monography. Even if it were, practically speaking, possible to interview the game developers

or read about their intentions with their games – which would be quite extraordinary because developers tend to be very secretive about their (religious) inspiration – the endeavor to determine these motives would be very perilous to say the least, since this kind of reasoning uncritically assumes that the creator is always able to communicate the meaning of his own creation or is aware of them in the first place.

On the other hand, recognizing these religious shapes, except perhaps for the first one, requires some form of religion education, confessional and/or academic. And in our postmodern and, according to some experts, also post-Christian era, the sociological phenomena of secularization, religious de-institutionalization (the collective abandonment of religious and other social institutions) and religious de-verbalization (the collective loss of the capacity to critically think and formulate regarding religious matters) make it increasingly difficult for gamers to recognize these kinds of religious references, let alone, to critically reflect on them. But I have already touched on this subject in the first chapter.

Primary bibliography

Assassin's Creed, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 2, 2009. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 30, Xbox One, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Rogue, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Sofia, Ubisoft.
The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, WiiU, New Nintendo 3DS, OSX, iOS) Nicalis, Nicalis.
Bioshock infinite, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux) Irrational Games, 2K Games.
Call of Duty. Black Ops, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Treyarch, Activision.
Chessaria: The Tactical Adventure, 2018. (PC) Pixel Wizards, Steam.
Child of Light, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii U) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Dear Esther, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) The Chinese Room, The Chinese Room/Curve Digital.
Dishonored, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Arkane Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Dishonored 2, 2016. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Arkane Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Dishonored. Death of the outsider, 2017. (OC, PlayStation 3, Xbox One) Arkane Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Dota 2, 2013. (PC, OSX, Linux) Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation.
Everybody's gone to the rapture, 2015/2016. (PlayStation 4, PC) The Chinese Room/SCE Santa Monica Studio, Sony Computer Entertainment.
Eve Online, 2003. (PC, OSX) CCP Games, Simon & Nordgren.
Fallout 3, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.

Fallout 4, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Far Cry 4, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Far Cry 5, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
FIFA 17, 2016. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) EA Vancouver/Bucharest, EA Sports.
Final Fantasy XV, 2016. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Square Enix Business Division 2, Square Enix.
Fortnite, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, OSX) People can fly, Epic games.
Godus, 2014. (PC, OSX, iOS, Android, Fire OS) 22Cans, 22 Cans.
Half-Life 2, 2004. (PC, PlayStation, Xbox, Xbox 360, OSX, Android, Linux) Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation.
Hitman Absolution, 2012. (PC, PlayStation, Xbox 360, OSX) IO Interactive, Square Enix.
Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) 38 Studios/Big Huge Games, 38 Studios/Electronic Arts.
Mad Max, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) Avalanche Studios, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment.
Mass Effect, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) BioWare, Microsoft Game Studios/Electronic Arts.
Mass Effect 2, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) BioWare, Electronic Arts.
Mass Effect 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii U) BioWare, Electronic Arts.
Metal Gear 5. The Phantom Pain, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Kojima Productions, Konami Digital Entertainment.
Metro Last Light, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) 4A Games, Deep Silver.
Nun Attack, 2012/2013. (PlayStation Vita, Android, iOS) Frima Studio, Frima Studio.
Pokémon Go, 2016. (Android, iOS) Niantic, Niantic.
Pong, 1972. (Arcade) Atari, Atari.
Prince of Persia, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Rallisport Challenge, 2002. (PC, Xbox) Digital Illusions CE, Microsoft Game Studios.
Second Life, 2003. (PC, OSX, Linux) Linden Lab, Linden Lab.
Serious Sam 2, 2005. (PC, Xbox) Croteam, 2K Games.
The Sims 4, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, OSX) Maxis/The Sims Studio, Electronics Arts.
Smite, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, OSX) Hi-Rez Studios, Hi-Rez Studios.
The Talos Principle, 2014/2015/2017. (PC, Android, PlayStation 4, iOS) Croteam, Devolver Digital.
Tetris, 1987. (IBM PC) Alexey Pajitnov, Spectrum HoloByte.
Tomb Raider, 1996. (Sega Saturn, MS-DOS, PlayStation, N-Gage, PC, iOS, Android) Core Design, Eidos Interactive.
The Turing Test, 2016/2017. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Bulkhead Interactive, Square Enix.

Wolfenstein. The New Order, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.
Wolfenstein. The Old Blood, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.

Secondary bibliography

Aarseth, E., 2003. Playing research. Methodological approaches to game analysis. *Papers from Spilforskning.dk Conference*. Available from: www.cs.uu.nl/docs/vakken/vw/literature/02.GameApproaches2.pdf [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Aarseth, E., 2004. *Genre trouble. Narrativism and the art of simulation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Allen, G., 2000. *Intertextuality*. London: Routledge.
Allen, R., 2017. *America's digital army. Games at work and war*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Anthony, J., 2014. Dreidels to Dante's inferno. Towards a typology of religious games. In: H. Campbell and G. Grieve, eds., *Playing with religion in digital games*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Aupers, S., Schaap, J., and de Wildt, L., 2018. Qualitative in-depth interviews. Studying religious meaning-making in MMOs. In: V. Sisler, K. Radde-Antweiler, and X. Zeiler, eds., *Methods for studying video games and religion*. New York: Routledge.
Bosman, F., 2016a. The word has become game. Researching religion in digital games. *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 11. Available from: http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/23626/17351 [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Bosman, F., 2016b. Nothing is true, everything is permitted. The portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 10.
Bosman, F., 2017. Accept your baptism, and die! Redemption, death and baptism in Bioshock Infinite. *Gamenvironments* 6. Available from: http://elib.suub.uni-bremen.de/edocs/00105941-1.pdf [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Bosman, F., and Mock, L., 2016. 'We do not pray, we invent'. Jews, Judaism and Jewish mysticism in the video game Wolfenstein. The new order. In: A. Houtman, T. Kadari, M. Poorthuis, and V. Tohar, eds., *Religious stories in transformation. Conflict, revision and reception*. Leiden: Brill.
Bosman, F., and van Wieringen, A., 2018. I have faith in Thee, Lord. Criticism of religion and child abuse in the video game the Binding of Isaac. *Religions* 9(4). Available from: www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/4/133 [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Brendel, G., 2017. Defeat mom using the Bible. The controversial debate in the binding of Isaac. *Gamenvironments* 7. Available from: http://elib.suub.uni-bremen.de/edocs/00106322-1.pdf [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Buerkle, R., 2008. *Of worlds and avatars. A player-centric approach to videogames*. Los Angeles: University of Southern California.
Cai, Y., Goei, S., and Trooster, W., eds., 2017. *Simulation and serious games for education*. New York: Springer.
Caillios, R., 2001. *Man, play, and games*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Carr, D., 2006. *Computer games. Text, narrative and play*. Cambridge: Polity.

Crawford, C., 2003. Assumptions underlying the Erasmatron storytelling system. In: M. Mateas and Ph. Sengers, eds., *Narrative intelligence*. Philadelphia: Benjamins Publishers.

de Vries, H., ed., 2008. *Religion. Beyond a concept*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Dörner, R., Göbel, S., and Effelsberg, W., 2016. Introduction. In: R. Dörner, S. Göbel, W. Effelsberg, and J. Wiemeyer, eds., *Serious games. Foundations, concepts and practice*. New York: Springer.

Dubuisson, D., 2003. *The Western construction of religion. Myths, knowledge, and ideology*. Translated by W. Sayers. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Eskelinen, M., 2001. The gaming situation. *Game Studies* 2(1). Available from: www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Fandino, D., 2018. Remembering fictional history and virtual war in Eve Online. In: K. McDaniel, ed., *Virtual dark tourism. Ghost roads*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ferdig, R., 2014. Developing a framework for understanding the relationship between religion and videogames. *Online. Heidelberg Journal for Religion on the Internet* 5.

Frasca, G., 1999. Ludology meets narratology: similitude and differences between (video) games and narrative. *Ludology*. Available from: www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Frasca, G., 2003. Ludologists love stories, too. Notes from a debate that never took place. In: M. Copier and J. Raessens, eds., *Level-up. Digital games research conference*. Utrecht: Utrecht University. Available from: www.ludology.org/articles/frasca_levelUP2003.pdf [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Grishakova, M., and Ryan, M., 2010. Preface. In: idem, eds., *Intermediality and storytelling*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Heidbrink, S., Knoll, T., and Wysocki, J., 2014. Theorizing religion in digital games. Perspectives and approaches. *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5.

Heidbrink, S., Knoll, T., and Wysocki, J., 2015. 'Venturing into the unknown?' Method(olog)ical reflections on religion and digital games, gamers and gaming. *Online. Heidelberg Journal for Religion on the Internet* 7.

Hernandez, P., 2013. Some don't like bioshock's forced baptism. Enough to ask for a refund. *Kotaku*. Available from: https://kotaku.com/some-dont-like-bioshocks-forced-baptism-enough-to-as-473178476 [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Idinopulos, T., and Wilson, B., eds., 1998. *What is religion? Origins, definitions and explanations*. Leiden: Brill.

Jahmai, K., 2018. Fortnite player breaks cease fire during rocket launch & sets record for kills. *HotNewHipHop*. Available from: www.hotnewhiphop.com/fortnite-player-breaks-unofficial-cease-fire-during-rocket-launch-and-sets-record-for-kills-news.54063.html [Accessed 18 August 2018].

Jenkins, H., 2004. Game design as narrative architecture. In: N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan, eds., *First person. New media as story, performance, and game*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jensen, J., 2014. *What is religion?* London: Routledge.

Juul, J., 2001. Games telling stories? A brief note on games and narratives. *Game Studies* 1(1). Available from: www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Kuhn, B., 2016. The architecture of bioshock as metaphor for Ayn Rand's objectivism. *Gamenvironments* 5. Available from: http://elib.suub.uni-bremen.de/edocs/00105660-1.pdf [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Lauteren, G., 2002. The pleasure of the playable text. Towards as aesthetic theory of computer games. In: F. Mäyrä, ed., *Proceedings of computer games and digital cultures conference*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Marsh, T., 2011. Serious games continuum. Between games for purpose and experiential environments for purpose. *Entertainment Computing* 2(2).

Messner, S., 2017. The struggle to maintain Eve Online's only graveyard. *PCgamer*. Available from: www.pcgamer.com/the-struggle-to-maintain-eve-onlines-only-graveyard [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Mukherjee, S., 2015. *Video games and storytelling. Reading games and playing books*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Murray, J., 2013. The last word on Ludology vs. narratology in game studies. *Inventing the Medium*. Available: http://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/ [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Murray, J., 2017. *Hamlet on the holodeck. The future of narrative in cyberspace*. Updated version. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Otto, R., 2004. *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*. München: Beck.

Rautalahti, H., 2018. Disenchanting faith. Religion and authority in the dishonored universe. *Religions* 9(5). Available from: www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/5/146 [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Ricoeur, P., 1981. *Hermeneutics and the human sciences. Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Riendeau, D., 2014. Son races deceased father's ghost in Xbox racer, makes internet cry. *Polygon*. Available from: www.polygon.com/2014/7/23/5929075/rallisport-challenge-ghost-son-races-father-xbox [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Ryan, M., 2006. *Avatars of story*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sandovar, A., Braad, E., Streicher, A., and Söbke, H., 2016. Ethical stewardship. Designing serious games seriously. In: R. Dönner, S. Göbel, M. Kickmeier-Rust, M. Masuch, and K. Zweig, eds., *Entertainment computing and serious games*. New York: Springer.

Schouten, B., Fedtke, S., Bekker, T., Schijven, M., and Gekker, A., eds., 2013. *Games for health*. New York: Springer.

Simons, J., 2007. Narrative, games, and theory. *Game Studies* 7(1). Available from: http://gamestudies.org/07010701/articles/simons [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Smith, H., 2013. Gamer's 'immortal' role – Total War: Rome II fan lives on as character in game. *Metro*. Available from: https://metro.co.uk/2013/03/25/gamers-immortal-role-total-war-rome-ii-fan-lives-on-as-character-in-game-3559192 [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Stanton, R., 2015. *A brief history of video games. From Atari to virtual reality*. London: Robinson.

Steffen, O., 2012. Approaches to digital games in the study of religions. In: P. Bornet and M. Burger, eds., *Religion in play. Games, rituals and virtual worlds*. Zürich: Pano-Verla.

Szymczyk, M., 2016. Pokemon go is driving augmented reality and geolocation adoption. *Zugara*. Available from: http://zugara.com/pokemon-go-is-driving-augmented-reality-and-geolocation-adoption [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Tsalapatas, H., Heidmann, O., and Houstis, E., 2016. A serious game for digital skill building among individuals at risk, promoting employability and social inclusion. In: C. de Carvalho, P. Escudeiro, and A. Coelho, eds., *Serious games, interaction and simulation*. New York: Springer.

Wagner, R., 2012. *Godwired. Religion, ritual, and virtual reality*. New York: Abingdon.

Wolf, M., ed., 2008. *The video game explosion. A history from PONG to playstation and beyond*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Worth, S., 2004. Narrative understanding and understanding narrative. *Contemporary Aesthetics* 2. Available from: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0002.009 [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Wysocki, J., 2018. Critique with limits. The construction of American religion in Bioshock Infinite. *Religions* 9(5). Available from: www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/5/150 [Accessed 9 May 2018].

3 Theomorphism
Creational theology

Two little people are swimming for the coast of a little island. Actually, they are more drowning than swimming. You have to help them. 'These little people will become your Followers. But first they need your help'. You can save your followers from drowning by 'sculpting' the land, literally stretching the land out over the sea. 'As a God, you can sculpt the land. By doing that, you can save your Followers'. The two humans climb onto dry land. They hold hands, the stereotypical gesture of two people in love. They hug each other. Then, they start to worship you by kneeling down, bowing forward while flinging their arms up in the air. 'Your Followers are safe. They now see you as their god!'

This is the beginning of the game *Godus*, a typical world-building game (Bainbridge 2013:6). The player is given dominion over the game-world and its inhabitants, the ability to sculpt and landscape the land and to form the future of his or her followers as he or she chooses. The people thrive and procreate, evolving to new levels of civilization, all controlled, stimulated or even forced by the player. Everything happens according to the player's will, and what does not, is easily corrected by his all-mightiness. The player helps his or her followers evolve, keeps them safe from harm, but at a price: their unconditional and everlasting devotion.

If the gamer of *Godus* has succeeded in saving his first two followers, they will then travel in search of a place to settle, thrive and procreate. 'They seem to be searching for the Promised Land. . . . A place to settle'. The first couple of places do not suffice and are turned down by your picky followers (and since the game is still in tutorial mode, the player's powers are still very limited). 'They are looking for a place to call home, a Promised Land. This is just too small'. The player helps his or her two followers by 'sculpting' the land, flattening hills, and making passages through the sea. They arrive at the center of what appears to be a very large island: 'This looks promising, your Followers love this land'. They will settle now, build abodes to live in, thrive and procreate: the dawn of a new people.

Not all world-building games have these kinds of explicit religious overtones, like the ones in *Godus* or the *Black & White* series. Games like *Minecraft* or series like *Civilization*, *Age of Empires* and *The Sims* place the player in the same kind of 'theoptic view' (Anthony 2014:29–39), but games like *Godus* and *Black & White* invoke strong religious language to refer to the work of the player him- or herself, like 'worshipping' and 'sculpting'. As Hayse (2012) summarizes with regard to the genre of 'god games' (as world-building games are often referred to),

> [n]arrowly speaking, a 'god game' is a video game in which players assume an explicitly divine role in the emergent growth and development of a simulated life-system. More broadly, however, god games share some characteristics with other video game genres such as real-time strategy games and simulation games in which players construct and manage the emergent growth of other systems such as cities, civilizations, neighborhoods, and nations.

In the case of *Godus*, the first half hour of the game makes more or less explicit references to multiple scenes from the Old Testament. The work of the player is described as 'sculpting' and consists of making all kinds of separations between land and water, mirroring the act of God in the first chapter of Genesis. The primary act of God is to separate things, objects and entities from one another: light from darkness, day from night, dry land from water, in a word, to make order where chaos was (van Wolde and Rezetko 2011; van Wolde 2017).

The multiple instances in which the player has to create a passage for his or her followers is a reference to the splitting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14,13–30. Both God and the player also want their people to reach the 'Promised land' (Genesis 50,24; Exodus 12,25; Numbers 14,16; Deuteronomy 6,3), whether it be Canaan or the middle of the fictional island. The urge to procreate among the followers of the *Godus* player could be seen as an echo of God's commandment to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it' (Genesis 1,28a). The two humans the player has saved from drowning and their apparent and visible love for one another could very well be interpreted, especially in the context of all the references mentioned earlier, as the first human beings from Genesis, Adam and Eve, to whom God's divine commandment was directed in the first place.

The potency of the god-gamer within the game-world is quasi limitless, which poses a moral question to the player. Cogburn and Silcox (2009:57) state:

> The avatar's power over the world of the game is superhuman. And astute players and programmers of these types of games have wrestled with the moral quandaries that such power raises. How should someone with this kind of power rule?

While it is possible in *Godus* to sacrifice your followers for extra 'devotion', the in-game currency to perform godlike works and miracles, or to leave them at the mercy of invading tribes and other mortal dangers, *Black & White* and *Black & White 2* centralize the moral ambiguity of the god-gamer as the games' central premise. (Interestingly enough, all three games were conceived by one and the same man, Peter Molyneux.) *Black & White* starts with the intertwining of two stories taking place simultaneously. The first is of a loving man and a woman and their only child who runs off to the sea and is now in danger of being devoured by sharks. The second one is about the birth of a god: the player.

> A land of innocence has no need for a god. Until fate intervenes. When people pray, a god is always born. Able to change eternity. That God is you. Are you a blessing or a curse? Good or evil? Be what you will: you are destiny.

When the narrator tells us that gods are born from prayer, the couple shouts out to the player: 'We call to the heavens. Please help us'. Where *Godus* suggested the player-god was already there before the two first followers were in need of help, *Black & White* suggest that gods, in general, are the product of their followers. While the god of *Godus* needs the devotion of his followers to do his magic, the god of *Black & White* has to thank his devotees for his very existence in the first place.

The opening sequence of *Black & White 2* locks into the same kind of narrative, showing the player the vastness of the universe into which the god-player is born:

> This is the beginning. The birth of a god. Called by one pure prayer. Born out of desperation. To be a god. To wield the power of good and evil. That is your destiny.

Again we hear the words of the 'one pure prayer': 'We need a god! Please help us. Help! Help us please'. The following tutorial immediately shows the moral ambiguity of the *Black & White 2* universe. An angelic and a demon-like creature fly across the screen introducing themselves as dualistic manifestations of the player's conscience: 'We're your conscience. We're part of you. Our role is to help you be the god you want to be'. In the end, the role chosen by the player, either acting as a good or an evil god, does not influence the outcome of the game but weighs on the conscience of the individual player.

a. Three divine attributes: the imperfect player

Multiple scholars have argued that the god-gamer of games such as *Godus* has the same divine attributes as the creator God from Christian tradition

(Miklaucic 2003; Meneghelli 2007; Cogburn et al. 2009): omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. The first quality, **omnipotence**, is 'the most prominent of all attributes traditionally ascribed to God' (Brink 1996:1). Both ecumenical Creeds of Christian tradition mention omnipotence in connection to God. The *Apostles' Creed* reads 'I believe in God, the Father almighty', and the *Nicene Creed*, 'we believe in one God, the Father almighty'.

In both instances, the Greek word *panto-krator* is used, literally 'all-power[ful]', while the English word *omnipotence* is derived from the Latin *omnia-potentia*, 'having all potentials'. The difference between the two phrases is not without theological significance, especially with regard to the long-standing discussions on the exact meaning of this specific divine quality (Koperski 2015). Usually, however, God's omnipotence is defined as His ability to do *everything*, but with certain, heavily debated exceptions, like the necessity of His reliability, the impossibility to do things logically impossible and the impossibility to act against His divine nature itself (McGrath 1994). The argument of reliability is derived from Duns Scotus (Vos 2008) and William of Ockham (Schröcker 2003), who argue that God once had the absolute freedom to do everything (*potentia absoluta*), but since the creation of the universe God has restricted himself from going against the order He himself has created (*potentia ordinata*).

The other two attributes of the creating God, omniscience and omnipresence, are also surrounded by theological debates. God's **omniscience** (also known as God's' foreknowledge), the idea that God knows everything there is to be known in past, present and future, is frequently contrasted with the idea of human freedom (Craig 1991; Rice 2004; Jensen 2018). If God knows everything about everyone, independent of time and place, how could one speak of human freedom? And the notion of **omnipresence**, the idea that God is everywhere at the same time, also has its own theological problems, especially concerning the relation between God as a divine entity and the universe as a whole (Brom 1993), including some ideas from peripheral theological traditions like pantheism (Levine 2014) or panentheism (Cooper 2014).

Nevertheless, omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence are the three divine attributes of the creator as held in the Christian tradition, and they are applied, as we have seen, to the player of the 'god game' genre. Let us see how the equation holds up.

The god-players are indeed omnipotent but only within the limitations of the game as developed by the designers. The player of *Godus* or *Black & White* can choose to help or to kill his or her followers, to sculpt mountains or to dry up the sea, to smash his or her opponents or to cut them off by creating a body of water, but the player cannot choose to create new life whether animal or human; he or she cannot invent some mechanism by which he or she can verbally communicate with his or her

followers; neither can he or she turn night into day or halt the course of the weather.

The omnipotence of the god-gamer is analogue to that of the Christian God but does not have the same quality. As Adams (2010:579) observes, 'the player takes on the role of a god, but one with limited powers like the gods of ancient Greece, rather than that of an all-powerful god such as in the monotheistic traditions'. And where God's omnipotence is only practically limited by God himself in 'self-containment' (McGrath 1994), in order to preserve human freedom and the reliability of the created cosmos, the god-gamer is principally limited by the game-world. These limitations are both intentional, the design choices of the developers, and practical, the quality of the software and hardware available to players and developers.

The same applies to the omniscience and omnipresence of the god-gamer. When he saves the drowning child of *Black & White*, the player takes no note of the child or its parents, neither of what will become of them in the later part of their respective lives. Thoughts, desires, past and future transgressions and/or heroism are all unknown to the player, as are those of all inhabitants of the player's imaginary game-world he or she is managing. The same applies to the player's omnipresence, which is – again – limited principally and practically: the in-game world is not equal to the universe outside the game, and even within the game itself, the world available to the player is limited in size.

On top of that, an important role for the player of the 'god game' is to manage the game-world, which includes among other things the well-being of its inhabitants, their development and happiness. All these parameters must be kept in balance and this demands quite a bit of concentration and planning by the player, especially because all these interactions with the game-world can only be spatially and temporarily confined to the area the player is currently interacting with. It is impossible for any player to be everywhere at once within the game-world, let alone manage all the parameters simultaneously.

b. The player/developers as demiurges

The conclusion that the god-gamer only shares the three divine attributes in a certain imperfect way is, however, not the end of our discussion about the divinity of the player. When looking at the different models opted for in the Christian tradition about God as creator, we can perceive various possibilities in viewing the gamer as a creator himself.

It is one thing to claim that God is the creator of the universe but another thing to know *how* God created the cosmos. Numerous models have been suggested. McGrath (1994:236, 1998:44) differentiates between models of emanation, construction, and artistic expression. McFague (1993:151) talks about models of production, procreation, and

emanation. And Hendry (1980:148) debates generation, fabrication, formation, conflict, expression and – again – emanation.

The model of **emanation** was especially suitable for incorporating philosophical ideas from Middle Platonism (Philo of Alexandria) and Neoplatonism (Proclus and Plotinus) into the Christian creational account of Genesis. Creation through emanation argues that creation itself can be regarded as an overflowing of God's creative energy, thus establishing an enduring connection between the creator and creation, the second reflecting the nature of the first. The model has been criticized for only appealing to the classical world and its dominant Platonist philosophy, for the involuntary nature of the creational act, and the consequential impersonal nature of the creator himself.

The model of **construction/production** links to multiple biblical instances (for example, Psalm 127) where the creator is depicted as a workman or master builder, who organizes and sculpts the world. On the upside, this model expresses the deliberate nature of creation and emphasizes the beauty and craftsmanship with which the universe was created. On the downside, however, the constructionist model has a serious flaw, because it suggests that the creator worked with raw material already existing before his creational act, changing the figure of the creator into that of a mere demiurge (Broek 2006:403–416).

Just as the craftsman and construction worker use materials like wood and stone that already exist, the constructionist God does nothing more than rearrange pre-existential material. And while the Hebrew word *bara*, used in the Genesis narrative to describe God's work, can very well mean 'separate', a word fitting very well into the context of a constructionist view – as we saw earlier – the dominance of the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, 'creation from nothing[ness]' within Christian theology thwarts the claim of any creational model suggesting there was anything existing before God's creational act (Soskice 2018).

The model of **artistic expressions** corrects the flaw of the former two models, that is, the impersonality of the creator. The world as an artwork created by a skillful and loving artist reflects the personality of the creator who is willingly and deliberately at work. However, again, here the danger arises that this model could suggest the existence of pre-existent matter or materials with which the artist/creator has been working. The painter did not create his own paint, and the sculptor did not make the rock he is carving out. The model of **procreation** is also capable of keeping God's personal involvement in check, since creation is seen as originating from God himself, like a child from the womb of its mother, but runs the risk of drifting into the realms of pantheism (Levine 2014) or panentheism (Cooper 2014), in which creator and creation are (almost) overlapping.

When we try to adopt these models of creation for the genre of the god games, a necessary distinction has to be made between god-*gamers*

and the *developers* of those games. Both groups could be seen as creating something. From the perspective of the god-game **players**, the emanation model is easily discarded because its roots in Platonism make it unsuitable to function in our modern world. No player would describe his own playing of *Godus* as an 'overflowing' of creative energy. The model of procreation *could* be adopted in the sense that the game-world created by the player could be described as his 'brainchild', but no organic or metaphysical relationship between player and game-world can be established.

The other two models – construction and expression – are more likely to fit the player of the god game. Players of *Black & White* could be interpreted as constructing the world they rule over and at the same time as expressing their creativity in an almost artistic form. Players will not only try to construct their game-world as rationally and logically as possible but will also be tempted to incorporate an aesthetical element into their efforts.

The world created in *Godus* has to be 'good' (having enough followers to build, breed and fight and enough devotion to perform miracles) but also 'nice' to look at (Jensen et al. 2016). Game aesthetics are usually thought of as something the developers should take care of, but I would argue that players themselves will make sure that their own game-world will appeal to certain aesthetical qualities. No player just flings houses or cities onto a map solely based on their most economic fit but will also consider where the houses and the cities will look better.

The interaction of a player with his game-world could be seen as a combination of construction and expression in which this world has to function as optimally as possible, but at the same time it will be an expression of the character, choices and efforts of the game player. So you could say that the god-gamer is directly, rationally and emotionally connected to the world he is creating. If the player were not rational, the created world would fall in on itself because of design flaws. If the player were not emotionally attached, he would not return to his game-world to proceed with cultivating and developing it and letting it thrive.

From the perspective of the **developers**, the emanation and procreation models are also inadequate for obvious reasons. But, again, the constructivist model can be explored, with reasonable results, as was the case with the players. The designers of the god games – and, in general, of world-building games – create a game in which the players can create their own world. The designers create the possibilities, the conditions for those possibilities, and the potentials for every conceivable world the players can create with the game.

It is possible, even probable, that some players will be able to perform certain actions or sequences of actions not foreseen by the developers in the strict sense: the creativity of the developers gives the creativity of the players an opportunity to become concrete and tangible. If the players are creators, then the developers are the suppliers of the materials the players use to create their own world.

When the constructionist model is used, one could argue that the developers are involved in the creation of the game-worlds by their players, as argued earlier. But when an expressionistic model is used, the connection between developers and created worlds rapidly diminishes. The developers do not have an emotional or even a concrete relationship with the game-worlds their players create. Pushing the limit of this model, one could argue that the game developer has no other role than that of the deistic creator of modern philosophy (John Locke, David Hume, Voltaire, Blaise Pascal). This deistic God is the one who originally sets the universe in motion, but once it is moving according to its own natural laws, it can thrive on its own without any further intervention by or concern of the original maker.

Not only do all models of God as creator have flaws, as I discussed briefly earlier, but when applied to the genre of the god game, new problems surrounding terminology arise. We already saw the criticism concerning the models of construction and artistic expression for suggesting, or at least leaving room for the existence of non-created matter, 'things' that exist before God's creational act. (The same criticism, I would say, could be applied to the idea of procreation, since human procreation is also not *ex nihilo*, as everyone with a good sex education will know.)

The problem of the preexisting matter of the constructivist and expressionist models is just as prominent in the genre of the god games, and at two different levels. At the level of the player, the player/creator can work exclusively with the materials already presented to him or her before creating the game-world, that is, with the computer or console on which the game runs and with the game itself that makes the creational process possible. Since the player is highly likely not to be the creator of the device and/or of the game itself (and even then, as we will see), his or her creational work is therefore done with pre-existent materials.

This would bring the player/creator more closely in line with being a demiurge than being the god of monotheistic religions. The idea of 'the Demiurge' (Broek 2006:403–416), originating from Platonism, but frequently adopted by Gnostic movements like the followers of Marcion (May 2006:765–768) and Valentinus (Holzhausen 2006:1144–1156), and the Cathars (Bozoky 2006:242–247) places a semi-deity between the created, material reality we live in, and the true origin of the universe. Within their strict dualistic worldview, the Christian Gnostics believed that the creator of the Old Testament was, in reality, a false, lower deity responsible for the creation of the imperfect tangible world, including the imprisonment of the human soul in the corporeal body. The God of Jesus Christ, revealed in the New Testament, was the true God, responsible for the creation of the perfect spiritual world including the divine human soul.

This demiurgic position can be applied to both the player and the developer of the god-game genre. At the first level, players use for their

creation the tools and materials presented to them by the engineers and developers. At the second level, the same could be said about the developers, who do not create their games out of thin air either. The developers of *Godus* and the *Black & White* series also utilize software and hardware of which they themselves are not the creators. Then again, in their own turn, the creators of the software and hardware have done so using the tools and knowledge of their predecessors. And this line could be traced back into history as far as when the first human took a wooden stick and a stone to create the first tool.

c. Theomorphism: *imago Dei*

All these considerations could lead to the abandonment of the idea of the 'god game' and the divine player altogether, but I am not yet prepared to do so. Let us take another perspective, away from the creator to the created, more precisely, the created human.

In the first two chapters of Genesis, two stories are told about the creation of the universe generally, and that of humankind specifically. Many discussions have arisen in the last centuries about the relationship between Genesis 1 and 2, ranging from discussions on the different sources of the two chapters (Carr 1996; Dimattei 2016) to discussions on the anthropomorphism of God in especially the second chapter (Lorberbaum 2015).

In the first chapter, God is the only actor within the narrative, He is the only one actually doing anything, that is, creating (*bara*, see the previous discussion), speaking, seeing and resting. The second chapter has more actors besides God: Adam and Eve. This division causes some commentators to speak of two creational narratives, one theocentric (Genesis 1) and one anthropocentric (Genesis 2) in nature. The creator of the first narrative is supposed to be majestic, transcendent and universal, while the creator of the second narrative is thought to be more human-like, or anthropomorphic in nature.

At a first glance this may be true, since the God of Genesis 2 (and 3) behaves in a rather familiar fashion: he talks to Adam and Eve, seeks the coolness of the evening, takes a stroll through the Garden of Eden, and so forth. On the other hand, this rather peculiar anthropomorphism is already present in Genesis 1, where God is said to speak ('God said . . .'), see ('God saw . . .'), and rest ('God rested. . .'), all activities quite in contrast with the concept of a metaphysical being.

Therefore, I think it is wiser to speak not of God's *anthropomorphism* in the Genesis narrative (or in any other text of the Old Testament), for reasons explained above, but of Adam's and Eve's, and, in extension, our *theomorphism*. God does not resemble us in the first place, we resemble God. Not the other way around. God is not like us, we are like Him. As Gerard von Rad (1957[2005]:145) summarizes,

> Israel conceived even Yahweh himself as having human form. But the way of putting it which we use[,] runs in precisely the wrong direction according to Old Testament ideas, for according to the ideas of Jahwism, it cannot be said that Israel regarded God anthropomorphically, but the reverse, that she considered man as theomorphic.

God's longing for justice, peace and harmony in the Old Testament is not a projection of human concerns onto the divine, but it is the other way around: our thirst for peace and justice has its roots in God himself. As Abraham Heschel (1975:5) writes,

> God's unconditional concern for justice is not an anthropomorphism. Rather, man's concern for justice is a theomorphism. Human reason, a feeble reflection, reminder, and intimation of the infinite wisdom deciphered in God's creation, is not the form after which our concepts of God's wisdom is modeled.

This aspect of the human theomorphism is ultimately expressed in the Genesis text on the creation of humankind (1,26–27). I quote the NASB with some modifications of my own.

> Then God said, 'Let Us make humankind [*adam*] in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth'. God created humankind [*adam*] in His own image, in the image of God He created him; masculine [*zakar*] and feminine [*neqebah*] He created them.

If God made humans in His image or likeness, traditionally described as the *imago Dei* (Robinson 2016; Howell 2013; Middleton 2005), then humans have divine characteristics. The question is, What characteristic(s)? Roughly three different approaches to this question can be taken: (1) substantive, (2) functional and (3) relational (Herzfeld 2002a:304, 2002b).

The substantive interpretation of the *imago Dei* pinpoints the human–divine likeness in an individual's natural property, most often associated with reason (Gunkel (1910[2006]); Koehler (1948); Niebuhr (1943[1996]). The functional interpretation sees the *imago Dei* rooted in human activity, especially in the exercise of dominion over the earth (Rad 1964). The relational interpretation grounds it in the human–divine ability to establish and maintain relationships with one another (Barth and Brunner 1946[2002]).

If we apply this idea of humankind as *imago Dei* to the player of the god games, we see a change of perspective. When discussing the attributes and models of the creator before, we interpreted the god game

genre from the perspective of the god-gamer, but now, we can interpret the god game from the perspective of the inhabitants of the game-worlds, the followers of *Godus* and *Black & White*, whose loyalty and devotion 'power' the divinity of the player. Of course, the people inhabiting the worlds of the world-building games are not self-aware, but with the constant improvement of the quality of artificial intelligence (Herzfeld 2002a), it is not far-fetched to hypothesize a new generation of computer game 'entities' that do have (a form of) self-consciousness. (I discuss this topic in another chapter of this volume).

Let us, just for argument's sake, assume that the artificial inhabitants of *Godus* have the ability to reflect on the 'divine' force dominating their digital lives. What would they make of their 'god'? What would the concept of *imago Dei* mean to them? A great deal would depend on how their divinity acts towards them. As Cogburn and Silcox (2009:57) already asked themselves: 'How should someone with this kind of power, rule?'

In any way, their idea of *imago Dei* would be spot on, since they are literally crafted after the image of their godhead, may it be in his primary (player) or secondary (developer) *Gestalt*. Their anthropomorphic thoughts about the divine force of their universe would ultimately be theomorphic in nature, although they could be left eternally in doubt. The godhead of *Godus* and *Black & White* does create and see, like the God of Genesis 1, but does not speak to his followers. The only revelation possible within the god game is the interaction with the game-world, witnessed by the hypothetical artificial entities.

The interpretation of these artificial entities within the game-world of the *imago Dei* would be substantive and functional, but not relational, at least not quite. Yes, the followers share multiple properties with the creators (players/developers) of their game-world, and they exercise dominion over their world, inasmuch as the player/developer allows this, and in as much as they are programmed (by the developer) and tasked (by the player) to perform actions not unlike those of the player and the developer themselves, like eating, drinking, resting, building and procreating.

The real challenge of the virtual *imago Dei* is the relational interpretation: does the player and/or the developer share with his or her digital followers the ability to establish and maintain relationships with one another (creator–creature), and do the digital followers have this ability among themselves (creature–creature)? I would answer practically not but theoretically very well possible. The state of technological development in this day and age does not provide the digital entities inhabiting our virtual worlds with abilities so sophisticated as to be capable of developing an own self-awareness or self-consciousness, and by extension they therefore miss the ability to have real (affectionate, not programmed; freely, not prescribed) relationships with one another or with the player/developer.

But if technological development will enable artificial entities to evolve, it is very well possible to envision that these entities will develop something like self-awareness, including some reflection on the state of their digital existence within the game-world, where the limitations of their knowledge and understanding of the universe could be interpreted as being as imperfect as our own knowledge of our life in our universe.

Some scholars have even suggested *we* are currently living in a simulation without knowing so (Bostrom 2001). I do not try to prove or disprove this fascinating idea but do use it to explain that the same questions we ask about the purpose of our lives, the notion of eternal life, the idea of a transcendent reality and such could also be asked by highly developed entities in our god games. Depending on the actions of the individual god-gamer, the self-aware digital followers would regard the player as a deity with either good or bad qualities, depending on the combination of a preprogrammed (by the developer) and actually developed moral framework (by the entities themselves).

e. Humans: created co-creators

I did not venture into the idea of the self-conscious inhabitants of the virtual worlds of the god-gamer for hypothetical reasons only. I believe that the notion of theomorphism in combination with the idea of humankind as *imago Dei*, exactly within the context of the god games, can shed some new light on the interpretation of the likeness shared between the creator-God of the Christian tradition and the creator-player of the god games. Besides the substantial, the functional and the relational interpretation of the *imago Dei*, a fourth possibility can be named, that of the 'created co-creator', as suggested earlier by Philip Heffner (1993, 1989, 1996).

The biblical basis lies in the same verse of Genesis 1,27: 'God created humankind in His own image, in the image of God He created him'. When God created the human being *in his image*, He was creating. So, if there is one divine quality God instilled into his creation, it has to be creativeness. The purpose of humankind is not solely functional, nor solely relational, but in a certain way it is the combination of these two. God created us so as to continue the process of creation freely and responsibly: therefore, we are *created co-creators*.

The notion of the created co-creator was already hinted at by Blanke (1959:198) when he spoke about *Mitgeschöpflichkeit* (co-created-ness) vis-à-vis *Mitmenschlichkeit* (co-human-ness):

> Alles, was da lebt, ist vom selben Schöpfergeiste durchwaltet. Wir sind, ob Mensch oder Nichtmensch, Glieder einer groβen Familie. Diese Mitgeschöpflichkeit (als Gegenstück zur Mitmenschlichkeit) verpflichtet. Sie auferlegt uns Verantwortung für die anderen 'Familienglieder'.

The ecological context of Blanke's thinking is important for the later development and success of the idea of the created co-creator (Rahner 1970:135–166): the notion gives theological room to view all of creation – human, animal, vegetable and even inorganic objects – as participating in God's divine purpose for the universe, while establishing a unique position for humans, not as the caretakers or dominators of the world but as co-workers alongside God himself. The theologian who was responsible for the popularization of the term is Philip Hefner. He explains his own concept in terms of evolution as a creational process (1993:32):

1 The human being is created by God to be a co-creator in the creation that God has brought into being and for which God has purposes.
2 The conditioning matrix that has produced the human being – the evolutionary process – is God's process of bringing into being a creature who represents (the) creation's zone of a new stage of freedom and who therefore is crucial for the emergence of a free creation.
3 The freedom that marks the created co-creator and its culture is an instrumentality of God for enabling (the) creation (consisting of the evolutionary past of genetic and cultural inheritance as well as the contemporary ecosystem) to participate in the intentional fulfillment of God's purposes

It is easy to see why Hefner's concept, or rather his interpretation of the concept, is very appealing in this day and age. He combines the concept of a creator, inherent to all monotheistic religions, with that of evolution, a notion equally central to the (post)modern empirical paradigm. In this 'evolutionized' world, humans have the responsibility to represent the creator within this creational-evolutional process. This representational task has two qualities: *in* freedom and *through* creativity. And again, the concept of anthropological freedom is very influential in the (post)modern philosophical framework. Summarizing, according to Hefner, humankind serves its created purpose while acting freely according to its own creational nature. The *imago Dei* is to create freely. We can create freely because God created us freely, that is, out of his own free will, to be free.

Of course, this kind of theological reasoning is not without its own challenges. The created co-creator is (almost) elevated to the level of the creator himself, as Waters (2006:103) observes:

> [Hefner's] created co-creator tends towards becoming a 'self-created creator'; the being that is now transcending and directing the evolutionary processes from which it has emerged.

Nevertheless, the whole idea of *apotheosis* ('deification' or better 'divinisation') – man becoming Godlike – has very old theological roots.

The Second Letter of Peter speaks about the faithful as 'partakers of the divine nature' of Christ himself (2 Peter 1,4). The notion entered Christian theology by virtue of numerous church fathers like Irenaeus of Lyon (*Adversus Haereses*), Clement of Alexandria (*Exhortation to the heathens*), Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho*), Gregory of Nyssa (*The Great Catechism*), Augustine of Hippo (in his exposition on Psalm 50) and Gregory of Nazianzus (*Orationes*). And it was Athanasius who conceived the famous phrase 'For He [Christ] was made man that we might be made God' (*De Incarnatione* 54; see Wilson 2015).

What would happen if we apply this fourth model of the *imago Dei*, that is, humans as created co-creators, to the world of the god-game genre? I would argue that world-building video games, on the whole, and god games, in particular, are well equipped to demonstrate the concept of created co-creators, highlighting the theomorphic quality of all humans but of the god-gamers, in particular. If we were created to be theomorphic creators, programming and playing world-building games would be a very interesting way to express this.

The **theomorphic game player** creates a new world from the digital instruments given to him or her by the game's developers. Like the God of creation, the god-gamer sculpts the digital lands, separating land from sea and making mountains from plains. The player witnesses the work of his or her digital hands, and if things work out the way the player intended, he or she is pleased with what he or she sees. The player even rests, maybe not on a seventh day, but from time to time by closing the simulation and/or the device. Yes, the player does work with already existing material, given to him or her by an external party, but the same applies to the created co-creator, since he can only create because of what has been given to him by God, in the forms of nature and culture. From nature humankind arose, forever changing its shape and form, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, with the global ecological crisis as its provisional paramount.

In his gaming, the theomorphic gamer answers to the calling of his own created nature, that is, to imitate, mimic and continue the creational work of God. While this is true, in a certain way, for all positive human endeavors by which humans continue to elaborate on God's initial work, the works of the god-gamer signify this theomorphic quality in the specific sense because of the explicit theological-narratological context of the god game genre. Within the god game, the god-gamer is considered to be a godhead, a creator of the game-world, and a ruler over his or her followers. Therefore, the god-gamer is an explicit theomorphic entity, not only living up to his or her initial calling to be a created co-creator but also doing so in a most explanatory way and virtually becoming who he or she essentially is.

The same applies to the **theomorphic game developer**, specifically of the god genre, but actually of all types and genres of games. The game

developer, like all creators of art, literature and the like, are responsible for what is called 'subcreation' (Wolf 2014, 2017), a term ultimately derived from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien (Schult 2017). It can be adopted to understand the theomorphic quality of the game developer. Wolf summarizes (2014:283) the concept of subcreation as the paramount of creative work:

> Subcreation, by its very nature, is a collaborative effort in which existing concepts are combined in new ways, and a secondary world is produced which is a variation on the Primary World. Creation, the Primary World, makes possible and provides the conceptual and material support for subcreation and secondary worlds, and subcreation can be seen as a reflection of Creation.

Of course, the game developer shares characteristics with the theomorphic gamer in the sense that he or she, too, imitates, mimics and continues the creational work of God in his own creative work that is the process of creating a new game, god-genre or not. But, from a theological point of view, he or she is more. The developer does not only create for him- or herself but also for others. And the developer creates for others so they can do their own creative work. The game developer answers to his divine purpose by creating *and* enabling others to create, just like the God/creator of the universe enables humans to continue this divine work.

The developer creates the potentials, to be fully realized by the players, the rules that the players have to obey, the limits they have to cope with and the myriads of possibilities from which the player has to choose in order to create his own personal, individual and very unique game-world. As God is the creator of our Primary World – that is the world we live in; the developer is the creator of his own Secondary World – that is the world we enter into when we start playing the game. As Tolkien (2008:65–66) himself, the creator of the notion of 'subcreation', argues on fantasy literature (but applicable to all forms of human creativity):

> Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.

The theomorphic quality of the player of world-building games lies in the realization of the primary created quality of humankind, created to create. The specific genre of the god games is especially significant, because the narratological context of the genre signifies this theological point. When the theomorphic gamer manages his or her game world, shaping its form and caring for its inhabitants, he or she is imitating, mimicking and even merging his or her own creative work with that of the creator/God of the Christian tradition: he or she is actually realizing his or her

own being a creature, created as *imago Dei*.

This applies all the more to the developer: when he or she creates his or her game, the developer is enabling the gamers to create their own world, their own story and their own journey. The theomorphic developer not only realizes his or her own created co-createdness but helps others to do the same. The developer is imitating, mimicking and merging this own creative work with that of God, that is, the creation of hidden potentials and possibilities to be used by those who have the creativity to utilize them.

Just as God created us, we create our own world, not *ex nihilo*, but from the potentials God has laid into the universe, waiting to be discovered. Just as God created the universe and, within it, humankind, so we create the digital worlds of our games in which countless potentials lie, waiting to be discovered and utilized. Like God, we shape, sculpt and build our own secondary worlds as a reflection of the Primary World and as an actualization of our nature and origin: created co-creators.

Primary bibliography

Age of Empires, 1997/1998. (PC, Macintosh) Ensemble Studios, Microsoft.
Age of Empires 2, 1999. (PC, Macintosh, PlayStation 2) Ensemble Studios, Microsoft.
Age of Empires 3, 2005. (PC, OSX, N-Gage) Ensemble Studios, Microsoft/MacSoft & Destineer/Glu.
Black & White, 2001. (PC, OSX) Lionhead Studios, Electronic Arts/Feral Interactive.
Black & White 2, 2005. (PC, OSX) Lionhead Studios, Electronic Arts/Feral Interactive.
Civilization, 1996. (PC, OSX, PlayStation) MicroProse, Microprose/Activision.
Civilization 2, 1991. (PC, Amiga, Mactintosh, Atari ST. Sega Saturn, Super NES, PlayStation, N-Gage) MPS Labs, MicroProse.
Civilization 3, 2001. (OC, OSX) Fireaxis Games, Infogrames/MacSoft.
Civilization 4, 2005. (PC, OSX) Fireaxis Games, 2K Games/Aspyr.
Civilization 5, 2010. (PC, OSX, Linux) Fireaxis Games, 2K Games/Aspyr.
Civilization 6, 2016/2017. (PC, OSX, Linux, iOS) Fireaxis, 2K Games.
Godus, 2014. (PC, OSX, iOS, Android, Fire OS) 22Cans, 22 Cans.
Minecraft, 2011. (PC, OSX, Linux) Mojang, Mojang/Microsoft Studios/Sony Computer Entertainment.
The Sims, 2000/2003. (PC, OSX, PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox) Maxis/Edge of Reality, Electronic Arts/Aspyr Media/EA Games.
The Sims 2, 2004/2005. (PC, OSX, PlayStation 2, PlayStation Portable, Xbox, Game Boy Advance, GameCube, Nintendo DS) Maxis/Amaze Entertainment, EA Games.
The Sims 3, 2009. (PC, OSX, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, Nintendo 3DS, Wii, Android, Blackberry, Windows Phone, Bada) The Sims Studio/EA Mobile/Edge of Reality, Electronic Arts.
The Sims 4, 2014/2015/2017. (PC, OSX, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) The Sim Studios, Electronic Arts.

Secondary bibliography

Adams, E., 2010. *Fundamentals of game design*. Berkeley: New Riders.

Anthony, J., 2014. Dreidels to Dante's inferno. Towards a typology of religious games. In: H. Campbell and G. Grieve, eds., *Playing with religion in digital games*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bainbridge, W., 2013. *eGod. Faith versus fantasy in computer gaming*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Barth, K., and Brunner, E., 2002[1946]. *Natural theology. Comprising 'Nature and grace' by Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.

Blanke, F., 1959. Unsere Verantwortlichkeit gegenüber der Schöpfung. In: E. Vogelsanger, ed., *Der Auftrag der Kirche in der modernen Welt. Festgabe zum siebzigsten Geburtstag von Emil Brunner*. Zürich: Zwingli Verlag.

Bostrom, N., 2001. Are you living in a computer simulation? *Philosophical Quarterly* 53(211).

Bozoky, E., 2006. Catharism. In: W. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western esotericism*. Leiden: Brill.

Brink, G. van den, 1996. *Almighty God. A study of the Doctrine of divine omnipotence*. Kampen: Pharos.

Broek, R., van den, 2006. Gnosticism I: Gnostic religion. In: W. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western esotericism*. Leiden: Brill.

Brom, N. van der, 1993. *Divine presence in the world. A critical analysis of the notion of divine omnipresence*. Kampen: Pharos.

Carr, D., 1996. *Reading the fractures of Genesis. Historical and literary approaches*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Cogburn, J., and Silcox, M., 2009. *Philosophy though video games*. London: Routledge.

Cooper, J., 2014. *Panentheism. The other God of the Philosophers. From Plato to the present*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Craig, W., 1991. *Divine foreknowledge and human freedom. The coherence of theism. Omniscience*. Leiden: Brill.

Dimattei, S., 2016[1910]. *Genesis 1 and the creationism debate. Being honest to the text, its author and his beliefs*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Gunkel, H., 2006[1910]. *Creation and chaos in the primeval era and the eschaton. A religio-historical study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*. Translated by K. Whitney. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans.

Hayse, M., 2012. God games. In: M. Wolf, ed., *Encyclopaedia of video games. The culture, technology, and art of gaming*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood.

Hefner, P., 1989. The evolution of the created co-creator. In: T. Peters, ed., *Cosmos as creation. Science and theology in consonance*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Hefner, P., 1993. *The human factor. Evolution, culture, and religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Hefner, P., 1996. Theological perspectives on morality and human evolution. In: W. Richardson, W. Wildman, eds., *An evolving dialogue. Theological and scientific perspectives on evolution*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.

Hendry, G., 1980. *Theology of nature*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Herzfeld, N., 2002a. Creating in our own image. Artificial intelligence and the image of God. *Zygon* 37(2).

Herzfeld, N., 2002b. *Artificial intelligence and the human spirit*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Heschel, A., 1975. *The prophets, part II*. New York: Harper & Row.
Holzhausen, J., 2006. Valentinus and Valentinians. In: W. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. Leiden: Brill.
Howell, B., eds., 2013. *In the eyes of God. A metaphorical approach to biblical anthropomorphic language*. Cambridge: Pickwick Publications.
Jensen, A., 2018. *Divine providence and human agency. Trinity, creation and freedom*. London: Routledge.
Jensen, L., Barreto, D., and Valentine, K., 2016. Towards broader definitions of 'video games'. Shifts in narrative, player goals, subject matter, and digital play environments. In: K. Valentine and L. Jensen, eds., *Examining the evolution of gaming and its impact on social, cultural, and political perspectives*. Hershey: Information Science Reference.
Koehler, L., 1948. Die Grundstelle der Imago-Dei-Lehre, Gen 1:26. *Theologisch Zeitschrift* 4.
Koperski, J., 2015. *The physics of theism. God, physics and the philosophy of science*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
Levine, M., 2014. *Pantheism. A non-theistic concept of deity*. London: Routledge.
Lorberbaum, Y., 2015. *In God's image. Myth, theology, and law in classical Judaism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
May, G., 2006. Marcion. In: W. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western esotericism*. Leiden: Brill.
McFague, S., 1993. *The body of God. An ecological theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
McGrath, A., 1994. *Christian theology. An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
McGrath, A., 1998. *The foundations of dialogue in science and religions*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Meneghelli, A., 2007. *Immersione e Interattività nei God games*. Milan: Unicopli.
Middleton, J., 2005. *The liberating image. The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.
Miklaucic, S., 2003. God games and governmentality. Civilization II and hypermediated knowledge. In: J. Bratich, J. Packer, and C. McCarthy, eds., *Foucault, cultural studies, and governmentality*. New York: State University of New York Press.
Moltmann, J., 1993. *God in creation. The Gifford lectures 1984–1985*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Niebuhr, R., 1996[1943]. *The nature and destiny of man. A Christian interpretation*. Volume 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
Rahner, K., 1970. Zum Problem der genetischen Manipulation aus der Sicht des Theologen. In: F. Wagern, ed., *Menschenzüchtung. Das Problem der genetischen Manipulierung des Menschen*. München: Beck.
Rice, R., 2004. *God's foreknowledge & man's free will*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers.
Robinson, D., 2016. *Understanding the 'Imago Dei'. The thought of Barth, von Balthasar and Moltmann*. London: Routledge.
Schröcker, H., 2003. *Das Verhältnis der Allmacht Gottes zum Kontradiktionsprinzip nach Wilhelm von Ockham*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Schult, S., 2017. *Subcreation. Fictional-world construction from J.R.R. Tolkien to Terry Pratchett and Tad Williams*. Berlin: Logos.

Soskice, J., 2018. Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for theology today? In: G. Anderson and M. Bookmuehl, eds., *Creation ex nihilo. Origins, development, contemporary challenges*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame.

Tolkien, J., 2008. On fairy-stories. In: V. Flieger and D. Anderson, eds., *Tolkien on fairy-stories*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.

van Wolde, E., 2017. Separation and creation in Genesis 1 and Psalm 104. A continuation of the discussion of bara. *Vetus Testamentum* 67.

van Wolde, E., and Rezetko, R., 2011. Semantics and the semantics of Bara. A rejoinder to the arguments advanced by B. Becking and M. Korpel. *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 11(9).

von Rad, G., 1964. Eikon. In: H. Kittel, ed., *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans.

von Rad, G., 2005[1957]. *Old testament theology*. Peabody: Prince Press.

Vos, A., 2008. *The philosophy of John Duns Scotus*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Waters, B., 2006. *From human to posthuman. Christian theology and technology in a postmodern world*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Wilson, D., 2015. *Deification and the rule of faith. The communication of the Gospel in Hellenistic Culture*. Bloomington: WestBow Press.

Wolf, M., 2014. *Building imaginary worlds. The theory and history of subcreation*. London: Routledge.

Wolf, M., ed., 2017. *Revisiting imaginary worlds. A subcreation studies anthology*. London: Routledge.

4 Christophorism
Christology

In the *Half-Life* series, Earth is under the control of an alien super race, called 'the Combine'. The Combine has installed a human administrator, effectively a dictator, to rule in its name and with the help of its highly advanced technology. The administrator, Dr. Wallace Breen, regularly issues public video messages filled with propaganda. In *Half-Life 2*, the game series' protagonist, Dr. Gordon Freeman, begins an uprising against Breen and his Combine masters, triggering a full-fledged revolution in the two following installments of the series. This silent protagonist inspires the resistance, kills hundreds of Combine and collaborating human forces and jeopardizes Breen's position within the Combine hierarchy.

In the beginning of *Half-Life*, Freeman travels through a series of Combine outposts positioned in the Wasteland. In one of these outposts, a 'Breen cast' can be seen and heard. Breen addresses the people of Earth specifically on the topic of Gordon Freeman and the inspiration he sparks in their minds and hearts.

> We now have direct confirmation of a disruptor in our midst, one who has acquired an almost messianic reputation in the minds of certain citizens. His figure is synonymous with the darkest urges of instinct, ignorance and decay. [. . .] And yet unsophisticated minds continue to imbue him with romantic power, giving him such dangerous poetic labels as the One Free Man, the Opener of the Way.
>
> Let me remind all citizens of the dangers of magical thinking. We have scarcely begun to climb from the dark pit of our species' evolution. Let us not slide backward into oblivion, just as we have finally begun to see the light. If you see this so-called Free Man, report him. Civic deeds do not go unrewarded. And contrariwise, complicity with his cause will not go unpunished. Be wise. Be safe. Be aware.

Religion, at least in its more explicit form, does not play an important role in the series' narrative, with the possible exception of *Half-Life. Lost Coast*, and the figure of Father Grigori in *Half-Life 2*. In *Lost Coast*, one of the developer's technology demonstrations that was later released as

a stand-alone mini-game, the main battle is fought in a ruined Byzantine church building, including altar, iconostasis and religious frescoes, but without giving any further depth or significance to the storyline. While Father Grigori certainly has an interesting practical spirituality – he 'tends to his flock' by shooting his zombified parishioners through the head with a shotgun – his religious identity is not developed any further and has no further influence on the game's story. His appearance is kept to one level (*Ravenholm*) only.

Nevertheless, the 'Breen cast' quoted earlier has some very interesting religious overtones. Breen speaks about Gordon Freeman or, to be more precise, about the views and opinions some citizens appear to hold about Freeman. According to Breen, Freeman 'has acquired an almost messianic reputation' and is given 'dangerous poetic labels such as the One FreeMan and the Opener of the Way'. Breen is highly critical about Freeman. He is only allegedly a 'Free Man', rather 'a disruptor in our midst', 'synonymous with the darkest urges of instinct, ignorance and decay'. He identifies the citizens' appraisal for Freeman as 'romantic' and 'magical thinking'.

Gordon's surname is at the same time his title, as Breen explains in his propaganda: he is the only true freeman on the Combine-ruled Earth. Because of his unique freedom, Gordon Freeman is able to open the way for the resistance to begin the uprising against the foreign aggressors. However, when Breen uses the word *messianic*, the interpretation of Gordon's name enters the realm of Christian (and Jewish) theology. While in the Hebrew Bible, the title *Messiah* (anointed one) is never used for a future savior/redeemer and has been given to various groups and individuals, the Christian conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is to be considered as the Messiah proclaimed in the Old Testament has led to the practice in which 'Jesus' and 'Messiah' (and its Greek translation *christos*, 'Christ') are used synonymously (Jonge 1992).

Of course, we have to understand that not every time the term *messianic* is used, an explicitly Christian context is required, nor does such a use automatically designate theological significance, since it can be (and has been) used in other contexts as well. On the other hand, from a cultural-theological perspective, these non-explicit religious uses of the word *messianic* can also signify a latent theological undercurrent in our postmodern society, worthy of exploration in itself.

In this chapter, I argue that the 'messianic' aspect of the heroes of many video games (and novels, films and the like) can lead to the interpretation of the player of such games as possessing a specific 'Christophoric' quality.

a. The legend of Saint Christopher

First and foremost, the notion of 'Christophoric' or 'Christophorism' has to be explained in more detail. The notion is derived from the figure of Saint

Christopher, who is well known within Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. Even today, many of us are familiar with the medallion featuring his image, usually found in the context of traffic and traveling—attached to bikes and scooters, placed on our cars' dashboards, dangling from rearview mirrors, tucked away somewhere in our luggage, the medallion of this old saint often pops up, signifying a safe trip for those who carry it with them. On the medallion, we see a giant figure, walking through water, leaning on his staff while carrying a little child on his shoulders.

Only a few people still remember the legend attached to his name and depicted on his medallion. And even fewer know the meaning of his name, meaning 'he who carries Christ' in Latin. Nevertheless, the connection to travelers and traffic is very well remembered indeed. *The Roman Martyrology* claims Christopher suffered in Lycia under the Roman emperor Decius, who reigned from 249 to 251: he was shot with arrows and beheaded after miraculously surviving being burned at the stake. He is venerated as a saint and a martyr in the churches of East and West.

The story behind Christopher and his 'Christ-bearing' capacity comes from another, but very influential, source, the *Legenda Aurea* (quoted and annotated by Butler 1990:184–187). The story tells of a Canaanite man called Reprobus, great in stature and fearful in appearance. Wanting to serve the 'greatest prince that was in the world', Reprobus, through his travels, was brought to three rulers. The first was a 'right great king', in whose service Reprobus entered. However, after learning the king was afraid of the devil, he ventured to seek this even greater prince.

Having found the devil, and having entered his service, he found out that the devil in his turn was afraid of Jesus Christ. So Reprobus left the devil. In both instances, it is not without meaning that Reprobus learned about the greater prince by means of the cross. The king made the sign of the cross after hearing about the devil by a minstrel, and the devil cried in fear and pain after seeing a large cross at a crossroad. All are indications about the nature and identity of the true 'Prince'.

Eventually Reprobus found a hermit living in a great desert. Demanding to find Jesus Christ in order to serve Him, the hermit instructed Reprobus to go to a great river and help the travelers safely cross it. And so, Reprobus did: with the staff, later to become his saintly attribute, he helped people to cross the river safely. One day, Reprobus was called three times by the 'voice of a child': 'Christopher, come out and bear me over'. In a direct reference to the story of the calling of Samuel (1 Samuel 3) and the biblical custom to change the name of the protagonist to signify an existential shift in his personality and identity, Reprobus is unable to identify the owner of the voice. Only after three times, does he see the child he has to carry across.

During the crossing, the child grows heavier and heavier until Reprobus/Christopher is in danger of drowning. Eventually, they make it to the opposite shore, where the giant says, in the rendering of Butler (1990:185):

Christophorus: Child, thou hast put me in great peril; thou weighest almost as I had all the world upon me: I might bear no greater burden.

The Child: Christopher, marvel thee nothing; for thou hast not only borne all the world upon thee, but thou hast borne Him that created and made all the world, upon thy shoulders. I am Jesu Christ, the King whom thou servest in this work.

In the service of Christ, Christopher traveled to Lycia to convert the people there. Miracles surrounded his journey to Lycia and his stay there until the emperor demanded Christopher bring a sacrifice to the pagan gods, a well-known *topos* in hagiographies on the early Christians, especially the martyrs. After converting almost everyone, and surviving multiple attempts to gruesomely execute him, Christopher is successfully beheaded. However, before the execution, Christopher tells the emperor, who was blinded in one eye during the course of the failed execution attempt, to lay Christopher's blood on the wounded eye. When Christopher is dead, the emperor does as he is told and is instantly cured:

> Then the king believed in God, and gave commandment that if any person blamed God or St. Christopher, he should anon be slain with the sword.

Thus, Christopher received his name from Christ himself and the 'Christ-bearer' (from the Greek *christos* and *pherein*) became the patron saint of travelers and ferrymen. Now it becomes clearer what I mean when I refer to the 'Christophoric quality' of video game players. I argue that some players of some video games can be interpreted as 'Christ-bearers', that is, as (re)presenting Jesus Christ himself within the game-world and narrative.

b. The myth of the self-sacrificial hero

The idea of the 'messianic' hero is very well known in Western culture. It features prominently in many comparative mythologies, of which Joseph Campbell's monomyth (1968) is possibly the most widespread. Based on earlier studies by Edward Taylor (Segal 2002), Otto Rank (1914 [2013]) and Lord Raglan (1936 [2013]) and combining insights from psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (Larsen 1992) together with Anton van Gennip's concept of *rite de passage* (1909 [2013]), Campbell argued that *all* heroes have to undertake the same narratological journey: all the stories of all the heroic figures of our civilization, ancient and modern, share some significant narratological patterns. As Campbell (1968) summarizes his own idea,

> [a] hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

Campbell's ideal typical hero's journey is divided into 17 stages, which are grouped into three sections (converging with Van Gennip's three stadiums of *rites de passages*): departure, initiation and return. In the phase of departure, the hero has to leave, often involuntarily, his original or initial *Umwelt* (family, clan, village, land, planet or dimension) to venture into the unknown world outside. In the phase of initiation, the hero has to train his physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual strength to overcome the temptation of his own ego. And in the phase of return, the hero indeed returns to his old world, now able to save it from any internal or external attack.

Campbell's theories received quite some criticism, especially concerning his universalism (Northup 2006) and androcentrism (Murdock 1990). Nevertheless, Campbell's ideas still have a large audience, and I believe we can derive some very interesting insights from his comparative theory. Within Campbell's theory, the concept of self-sacrifice plays an important part (Hyles 1992). In all three sections of the hero's journey, self-sacrifice is in place: the hero has to sacrifice his old world and all the certainties he derives from it, the hero has to overcome his own ego usually by some sort of self-defeat or *kenosis* and ultimately, the hero, having returned to his old *Umwelt*, will sacrifice his own life in order to save the collective he was once a part of. Hyles (1992:213)

> Heroes, then are heroic because they serve others through self-sacrifice, as in the cases of Campbell's own personal heroes, such as the Buddha and Parzival.

This element of self-sacrifice is, in my opinion, the most important part of the Campbellian mythology, recognizable in a vast amount of Western heroes found in novels, films and games. Our modern-day self-sacrificial hero can be characterized as an individual who freely sacrifices himself for the salvation of the collective that has endangered its existence through its own faults. The self-sacrificial hero can be found in the novels and film adaptions of Rowling's *Harry Potter*, in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, in Neo from the *Matrix Trilogy*, the American-Jewish soldiers from Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, Larry Underwood and Ralph Brentner from King's *The Stand*, Baymax from *Big Hero 6*, Carlos Sanchez from *The Book of Life* and even Pinocchio in Disney's rendering of the classic story. It doesn't matter if the sacrifice is realized or not: the willingness to give oneself is enough.

The idea of the self-sacrificial hero can also be found without much trouble in video games. In the game *Singularity*, for example, the game protagonist Nathaniel Renko, a US Marine, is sent to an inhabited island called Karorga-12 (a reference to the old Soviet labor camps) to investigate the destruction of an American satellite. Due to a strange pseudoscientific anomaly, Renko begins to 'phase' in and out between the present and 1955, the year of a catastrophic accident on the island. In 1955 Renko saves a scientist, Nikolai Demichev, from a fire, while an unknown figure warns Renko not to do so. Back in the present, Renko discovers that Demichev should have died in the fire and has now taken over not only the Soviet Union but also the whole world, thus altering the course of human history as we know it.

In the end, if Renko – or rather the player – *chooses* (other options are available) to kill Demichev instead of taking his offer to rule side by side, he will travel back in time – again to 1955, to the exact spot and moment as his first visit to the past. It is revealed that the unknown man trying to stop Renko from saving Demichev is Renko himself. The 'second' Renko then shoots the 'first' one, thus preventing Demichev surviving the fire. If we forget the enormous time paradox – the killed Renko would and could never have altered the past – the message is rather simple: Renko willingly sacrifices his own life for the benefit of the world by killing himself, although in a rather unconventional way.

c. The Christophoric game protagonist

The self-sacrificial hero of *Singularity* has no direct or indirect reference to religion, in general, or to the Christian tradition and its messianic figure, in particular. Renko is a secular hero, so to say. Other game heroes who give up their lives for the *common good* have a rather more explicit religious undertone, although the references will not be clear for every player, reviewer or critic. I give two examples of such game heroes: the Lone Wanderer from *Fallout 3* and Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* series.

Fallout 3 takes places in an allohistorical (Hellekson 2013), retrofuturistic (Guffey et al. 2014) setting. In the year 2277, the greater part of the North American continent has been destroyed because of a global nuclear war between the United States and China. Many inhabitants of the American continent died in nuclear blasts or in their violent aftermath. Some survived in semi-secret underground compounds, known as 'vaults', but the majority of the survivors and their offspring are fighting mutants, wildlife and each other for domination.

Born and raised in Vault 101, the game's protagonist (known in-game as *The Lone Wanderer*) is confronted with the disappearance-cum-escape of his father from the Vault in pursuit of an unknown scientific goal. Since his (or her, the gender is optional) mother died at childbirth, the

Lone Wanderer also feels compelled to escape the Vault in search for his or her only known living relative. Outside, the Wanderer discovers the source of the continuous nuclear contamination of the Wastelands, harming all the flora and fauna depending on it, including humans.

After many adventures, the Lone Wanderer finds his or her father, who is working on a device that is able to purify the water supplies, both natural and artificial, thus helping the Wastelands to slowly regain their original healthy condition. When the Wanderer finally meets his or her father, they both work to complete 'Project Purity'. Just before activating the device, the laboratory comes under attack by the Enclave, one of the Wastelands' factions, and claiming to be the descendants of the last official government of the United States. The Wanderer's father, James, declines the Enclave's demand to hand over Project Purity. Instead, he floods the laboratory with radiation, thus killing not only almost all the Enclave's soldiers but also himself.

At this point in the game, the player has a difficult choice to make, with three options: the Wanderer can go into the radiated room to activate Project Purity but with almost instantly fatal consequences; he or she can send in one of his companions who will face the same fate, or he or she can do nothing at all, in which case the whole laboratory will explode, killing everyone in it, including the Wanderer him- or herself. All three options lead to a different monologue at the end of the game, just after the Wanderer's final decision. If the Project is activated by the Wanderer, the following is heard:

> It was not until the end of this long road that the Lone Wanderer learned the true meaning of that greatest of virtues – sacrifice. Stepping into the irradiated control chamber of Project Purity, the child followed the example of the father sacrificing life itself for the greater good of mankind.

If the Wanderer decides to send someone else into the radiated chamber, the text is altered:

> It was not until the end of this long road that the Lone Wanderer was faced with that greatest of virtues – sacrifice, but the child refused to follow the father's selfless example, instead, allowing a true hero to venture into the irradiated control chamber of Project Purity and sacrifice her own life for the greater good of mankind.

Or, if the Wanderer does nothing at all, resulting in total destruction, the voice-over has – again – something different to say:

> It was not until the end of this long road that the Lone Wanderer was faced with that greatest of virtues – sacrifice, but the child refused to follow the father's selfless example.

There are three different self-sacrificial heroes to be found in *Fallout 3*'s ending (of which two are mutually exclusive): the father (James) who floods the laboratory with radiation, thus stopping the Enclave from misusing his invention as a weapon of mass destruction but killing himself in the process; the Lone Wanderer if he or she chooses to go freely into the irradiated room, activating the project but dying in the process; and the Wanderer's companion, who sacrifices herself instead of the Wanderer sacrificing him- or herself. All three sacrifice their lives freely for the salvation of the collective that has endangered its existence by its own faults, that is, for humankind in general, which had almost destroyed itself through nuclear warfare and annihilation, and for the survivors of the Wastelands specifically, who had to suffer greatly for the faults of their forefathers, and due to their own greed and selfishness; 'for the greater good of mankind', as the voice-over formulates.

In many aspects, the Lone Wanderer is the same character as Renko in *Singularity*, but the concluding narrative of *Fallout 3* brings intriguingly religious vocabulary into the picture. (Self-)Sacrifice is described as a 'virtue' and not just any virtue, but the 'greatest of virtues'. The Lone Wanderer is qualified as the 'father's only child', following (or not) the example of the father in his self-sacrifice. But there is more. When the player is introduced to his or her avatar, the Lone Wanderer, we see that the latter's mother dies in childbirth. When he is a toddler, the Wanderer's father points him out a quotation in a picture frame, commenting,

> Come on over here. I want to show you something. That was your mother's favorite passage. It's from the Bible. Revelation 21,6. 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life, freely'.

I believe that this quote is not without meaning but that it delivers an epistemological key to the interpretation of the whole narrative of *Fallout 3*. The quotation from Revelation is taken verbatim from the King James Version. James is also the name of the Wanderer's father, and the chapter and verse, 2 and 16, are combined in the activation code for Project Purity for which the Wanderer sacrifices his or her own life. The 'purity' in the project's name is also very meaningful, as it refers not only to the mechanical cleansing of the radiated water in the Wastelands but also to the moral cleansing of its inhabitants of their sins and of those of their predecessors.

Water, especially purified water, plays a very important narratological role in *Fallout 3*. Irregularly, a repeatable quest pops up called 'Water Beggars'. The Wanderer meets a beggar somewhere in the Wastelands, begging him for some water. The Wanderer now can choose to give him

purified water or contaminated water, resulting in 'good' or 'bad karma' (the in-game morality system). Essentially, the Wanderer does nothing more than that during the whole game. The small encounters are steps towards the ending, when the hero does not give life-sustaining water to just one person at a time, but to everyone at once, transforming individual and temporary *ad hoc* solutions into a more permanent and collective one, precisely as the quotation from Revelation predicted.

The dominance of the quotation, the numerous religious references and the self-sacrificial nature of the 'good ending' indicate that Lone Wanderer cannot only be identified as a messianic figure but as a Christophoric figure too. Of course, the risk of over-interpretation (*eisegesis*), reading a Christophoric identity into every hero, is present. As Malone (1997:76) warns,

> [t]he [Christic] resemblance needs to be significant and substantial, otherwise it is trivial. It also needs to be understood from the text and the texture of the work of art, be it classical or popular, and not read into the text with Christian presuppositions.

I am aware of this problem: if all mythological heroes are *Christus incognitus*, none of them is. Therefore, I already classified a game with a self-sacrificial hero, Renko from *Singularity*, as a secular messianic figure, and the Lone Wanderer from *Fallout 3* as a Christophoric one. The key difference between the two games, the two heroes and their theological interpretation lies in the narratological context of the game itself. When a game depicts its hero (or heroes) with the help of explicit or implicit references to the Christian tradition and its messianic figure of Christ, like in *Fallout 3*, I argue that its identification as Christophoric can hold up against criticism of over-interpretation.

The same applies, and even more strongly, to another game (or rather game series), which is a perfect illustration of the key point differentiating a regular messianic figure from a more specific Christophoric one. In the *Mass Effect* series, humankind has just discovered the technology of interstellar (faster-than-light) travel from archeological findings on Mars, pointing to a very advanced, but mysteriously extinct alien civilization, called the 'Protheans'. Our galaxy appears to be filled with advanced 'spacefaring' civilizations, some friendly, others aggressive. In the midst of the political chaos, a Council is installed on a space station called *the Citadel* from which the three most dominant races of the Milky Way try to govern the known universe in a more or less democratic way.

In the beginning of the trilogy, the player receives control over the (male or female) avatar under the name 'Commander Shepard'. The human commander is given control over an experimental spaceship, the *Normandy*, with which he (or she) has to travel the known galaxy in order to fend off a great number of dangers. The greatest danger is

posed by the almost unknown 'Reapers', a highly advanced machine race of synthetic-organic starships, residing in the vast starless space between galaxies. While virtually no one knew of their existence, they lay dormant for fifty thousand years, after which they eradicated every space-traveling civilization in the entire Milky Way. That was the fate of the Protheans and their countless predecessors; thus is also the fate of humankind in the relative present of the game series.

The game series utilizes quite a lot of intelligent and intriguing references to the Christian tradition. The name of the machine-race in deep space is a reference to the reapers from Revelations 14,14–19: the earth is reaped by two heavenly figures, an act associated with the 'wrath of God'. The first extraterrestrial colony of humankind beyond the confines of the Solar System is an idyllic world with thousands of kilometers of green fields and orchards. The name of the colony, Eden Prime, is a reference to the biblical Garden of (or in) Eden, where 'every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food' grew at God's command (Genesis 2,9b).

In the second installment of the game series, Shepard comes across a maximum security prison-starship, located in the Hourglass Nebula, owned and run by mercenaries known as the 'Blue Suns'. In their ship, the Suns hold the most wanted criminals of the galaxy. There are suggestions that the mercenaries sell some of their inmates to human slave traders, but the Suns' primary means of income is blackmailing random space ports by threatening to release the prisoners onto the planet. The name of the prison ship is *Purgatory*, a reference to the Roman Catholic concept of the same name (Goris 2018; Wieringen 2018).

When Shepard, at the beginning of the second installment, dies in a spaceship accident, his corpse is recovered by an intergalactic crime syndicate known as 'Cerberus'. They manage to revive Shepard by scrupulously restoring all damaged tissue and bones at a microscopic level. The successful project is called 'the Lazarus Project', a reference to the biblical story of Lazarus who was raised from the dead after three days by Jesus himself (John 11,38–44).

Another example includes one of the alien races Shepard comes across during his travels, the 'Krogans', a violent species of large reptilian bipeds. The Krogans were 'culturally uplifted' by the 'Salarians' (a race of warm-blooded amphibians) to serve as warriors against the 'Rachni' (an insect-like species). After having served their purpose, the Krogans continued to enlarge their territory, to the annoyance and fear of other races. Eventually the Salarians invented the 'genophage', a biological weapon capable of altering the DNA of the Krogans in such a way that producing offspring was virtually impossible: many Krogans died at birth, while most fetuses never even reached this stage. Once the remorseful Salarian Maelon has invented a cure against the genophage and is able to cure the first female Krogan, Shepard has to intervene to prevent her untimely

death. When brought aboard the *Normandy*, the Salarian Mordin gives her the name 'Eve', saying that human mythology seemed appropriate as they are on a spaceship under human command.

It is certainly not the last time that the game series almost explicitly formulates from which source it draws its inspiration. The name-giving of Eve is one of the most direct examples, her name being a reference not only to the 'old Eve' from Genesis (who mothered the rest of humankind) but also to the 'new Eve' from the New Testament. As Mary stood at the beginning of humankind's renewed redemption in Jesus Christ, so the Krogan Eve stands at the beginning of the renewed redemption of her own race. Another one of these explicit references to Christian tradition is found in the case of Legion.

Long before the adventures of *Mass Effect*, the 'Quarians' (another space-travelling race) constructed the 'Geth', robots with artificial intelligence, as a pool of labor and as war-machines. Eventually, the Geth attained a form of self-consciousness. The Quarians, afraid that their creation would rebel against them, tried to destroy the Geth, but with the exact opposite result: the Geth won the ensuing battle, forcing the Quarians off the planet and into their vast space armada. The Geth remained on their home planet, adopting an isolationist policy.

When one of the Geth falls into Shepard's hands, it is taken to the *Normandy* for interrogation. While the majority of Geth react very aggressively to others, this example is stoic and converses extensively with the commander. When Shepard wants to know the Geth's name, the following discussion takes place:

Shepard:	Then what should I call you?
Geth:	Geth.
Shepard:	I mean you, specifically.
Geth:	We are all Geth.
Shepard:	What is the individual in front of me called?
Geth:	There is no individual. We are Geth. There are currently 1.183 programs active within this platform.
EDI (the ship's A.I.):	'My name is Legion, for we are many'.
Shepard:	That seems appropriate.
Geth:	Christian Bible, the Gospel of Mark, chapter 5, verse 9. We acknowledge this as an appropriate metaphor. We are Legion, a terminal of the Geth. We will integrate into *Normandy*.

The real Christophoric identification, however, is to be found at the very ending of the trilogy, although it is prefigured very subtly in an email from 'Billy' to Shepard sometime after the mission involving the *Purgatory*

space-ship. The criminal Billy was accidentally set free by Shepard, and 'rewards' this gesture by promising to 'carve your [Shepard's] name instead of mine into my next victim'. Billy starts his mail with 'hey Shepherd'. What appears to be a typo, 'Shepherd' (a profession) instead of 'Shepard' (proper name), has far more implications.

When Shepard reaches the end of the trilogy, he is offered three options: destruction, control or synthesis. The option 'destruction' leads to the death of all synthetic life in the Milky Way, friend (Geth) and foe (Reapers) alike. With 'control', Shepard sacrifices his own corporeality to command the Reaper fleet threatening Earth and the rest of the Milky Way with total annihilation. The 'synthesis' ending leads to a massive combination of synthetic and organic lifeforms, creating a new hybrid race. While many gamers and critics complained about the inconsequence of the three options (Clarkson 2013) to which the developers complied by releasing an 'extended cut' with additional cut-scenes and dialogue choices, the 'true' ending of the series is found after the credits have been shown.

On an unknown planet (definitely not Earth, however), an anonymous elderly man is talking to an anonymous child of uncertain gender. They could be grandfather and grandchild, but this is not clear in the scene. The child's first question, 'Did that all really happen?' suggests that the whole trilogy was actually a story told by the older man in the first place or that a really long time has passed between Shepard's death and the dialogue in question. The second option is more probable, given the older man's answer: 'Yes, but some of the details have been lost in time. It all happened so very long ago'.

After some dialogue between the two persons, the young one asks the older one: 'Tell me another story about *the Shepherd* [italics are mine]'. The article *the* is difficult to hear, certainly when one is expecting to hear the proper name 'Shepard'. However, just as in the case of Billy's email, the article *the* makes it abundantly clear that the name of the game's protagonist has been changed into a distinct title. Shepard has become 'the Shepherd'. This clear and intelligent use of biblical and Christian references in the game series render the interpretation of the name-turned-into-title unmistakably Christian. Jesus Christ is depicted within Christian tradition as 'the Good Shepherd', based on Jesus' self-identification in John 10,1–21 and similar messianic imagery in Psalm 23.

Shepard freely sacrifices his own life to secure the safety of all the developed races in the Milky Way, present and future. The narratological context, infused through and through with references to the Christian tradition and its messianic figure Jesus Christ, in combination with the self-sacrifice of the protagonist, identify Shepard, like the Lone Wanderer from *Fallout 3* (although there in a slightly lesser way), as a Christophoric figure.

d. The Christophoric player: forgiving

So far, we have differentiated between a 'messianic', a 'self-sacrificial' and a 'Christophoric' figure. The messianic figure brings salvation and redemption but is not identified as Christian in the strict sense because of the lack of supporting evidence in the form of an intelligent complex of references to Christian salvation history (for example, *Mass Effect*'s Gordon Freeman). The 'self-sacrificial' hero is a specific kind of messianic figure, since salvation and redemption are brought about by and through the voluntary act of the hero's sacrifice (for example, *Singularity*'s Renko). The Christophoric figure, again, is a specific kind of messianic, self-sacrificial figure, that is, a heroic figure 'carrying' the image of Christ within the (game) narrative, including a narratological context in which explicit and implicit references to the figure of Christ are apparent, and intelligently used (as we have seen in the cases of Shepard and the Lone Wanderer).

However, not only can the game protagonist be identified as a Christophoric figure, the same can be argued for the actual player, as I will do with the help of two cases: *Metro Last Light* and *Child of Light*. The Christophoric player presents Christ himself within the game world, mimicking Christ's actions in relation to the salvation economy and history of Christian tradition. This player is 'doing what Christ does' but in the fictional world of the video game.

The game *Metro Last Light* takes place in 2034, twenty-one years after the end of World War III. Twenty thousand warheads have been exchanged between the world's nuclear powers. The result is the almost total annihilation of human life on the planet. For Russia – the game takes place in Moscow – that meant the instant death of fourteen million citizens, but many more died in the postapocalyptic chaos that followed. In 2034, a large group of survivors has found shelter in the metro tunnels below Moscow, abandoning the world above, because of its radiation, mutants and severe weather conditions. Coming to the surface is only possible with a gas mask and under constant threat of mutant attacks. The survivors battle among each other for domination and supplies.

The game itself is almost entirely void of references to the Christian tradition, with the exception of the Mother of God Cathedral, of which only the basic structure remains standing with inside some destroyed benches, candles and the like. Nevertheless, the developers released a special trailer, besides their original one, called the *Genesis trailer*. In the trailer, an English voice with a Russian accent retells the story of Genesis 1, audibly emphasizing the glory and beauty of God's work:

> In the beginning God said: Let there be light to burn away the darkness. On the second day, the sky was born as a majestic canopy for the earth. On the following day, God sculpted the bountiful earth

> and planted it with trees. With the fourth day, God split day from night and blessed the earth with the cycle of the seasons. Then, God filled the sea with life and set forth the birds to soar in the skies. On the sixth day, God created gloryful creatures. Chief of these were mankind, whom he created in his own image. He blessed them, giving them dominion over all living things. To care for. To nurture. To rule. On the seventh day, they say, God rested. But God didn't rest. God left. Or perhaps died. Judgement Day came and he abandoned us, casting humanity aside like parasites. But there is still hope. We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands.

The beauty, of which the Genesis text speaks, is sharply contrasted with the chaos and horror of the current world. The footage of the trailer shows the post-apocalyptic world of Moscow after the Third World War: the cycle of seasons is disrupted, the weather is cruel and destructive, the few animals that survived have changed into gruesome monsters, and the few humans left on Earth are not cooperating, not using the shared insight that man's own selfishness and aggression has caused the catastrophe, but fight among themselves as if nothing ever happened. In human hands, God's beautiful creation has been twisted, mutilated and almost destroyed.

The voice-over speaks affirmatively: God said, sculpted, split, blessed, filled, set forth and created. Especially the creation of humankind gets extra attention: man is created in God's own image (*imago Dei*; see Chapter 3) and blessed to dominate the world (functional interpretation of the *imago Dei*) but for the explicit purpose of – besides ruling – caring for and nurturing all living things (relational interpretation).

However, when arriving at the seventh day of the Genesis narrative, the voice-over departs from its affirmative formulation in favor of a far more critical one. With skepticism it adds the phrase 'they say', leaving explicit room for doubt regarding what follows in the biblical narrative; that is, 'God rested'. However, according to the voice-over, God did not rest from his labor of the first six days: He left or died. The *Genesis trailer* formulates a very dense definition of the 'God-is-dead' theology (Depoortere 2008): if this kind of collective horror can take place in this world without divine intervention, God must be very cruel, or very helpless, or non-existent (for a more extensive discussion on the theodicy question, see Chapter 7).

The voice-over of the trailer leaves open the option of God's non-existence *vis-à-vis* the horrors of the Third World War but intensifies its accusation against God, and against those who (still) believe in Him, by stating that God has forgotten a part of humanity after Judgment Day and by stating that God did not only refrain from intervening on behalf of humanity when He should have done so but even acted *against*

humanity consciously and deliberately, casting humanity aside 'like parasites'. Of course, strictly logically speaking, God resting, dying, forgetting humanity and even destroying humanity are mutually exclusive actions, but such a narrow interpretation would cloud the intention of the *Genesis trailer*, that is, to criticize belief in a god in a dangerous and cruel world and to lead to the inevitable (within the trailer's narrative) conclusion of God's non-existence.

The world of *Metro Last Light* appears to be a-theistic not only materially speaking (as I described earlier) but also conceptually: the nuclear holocaust has vanquished any belief in a benevolent transcendent being. Nevertheless, in the midst of this atheistic decor, an easy-to-miss but very significant moment can be found somewhere halfway through the game, when protagonist Artyom comes across his archenemy, Pavel. The scene takes place in the Mother of God Cathedral of Moscow. In one of the ruined corridors, Pavel is found sitting against a closed wooden cabinet, wearing a gas mask without a filter, rendering him at Artyom's mercy. If Artyom chooses to screw a new filter on, Pavel survives; if Artyom denies him this filter, he dies.

If Artyom chooses to save Pavel by screwing a new filter onto his mask, a mysterious little mutant (called the 'Little Dark One' in-game) comments, 'He will live. So that is what forgiveness is. Thank you, I'll remember this'. If Artyom lets Pavel die, the mutant reacts differently: 'You couldn't forgive? I see. He did a lot of evil. I'll remember this'.

Above the cabinet against which Pavel is leaning, a rather vague painting in a slightly twisted frame can be seen. In the hectic moments surrounding Pavel's survival or death, the average player could easily miss it. However, when more closely examined, the 'cabinet' is actually discerned to be a lectern used for displaying the Bible or other sacred books and manuscripts. And the frame above shows the Mandylion, the iconic Christ icon from the Eastern Orthodox traditions (Guscin 2009), in both Western and Eastern traditions identified and/or linked with the 'Image of Edessa', the 'Shroud of Turin' and ultimately with the legend of Saint Veronica (Nicolotti 2014).

While probably considered insignificant in the eyes of the average player, the appearance of the Christ icon, precisely at this moment during an otherwise quite atheistic game, is theologically speaking very charged. When Artyom saves his archenemy, he forgives him for his past crimes. The connection between saving and forgiving is made explicit by the mutant's comment 'so this is what forgiveness is'. In this act, Artyom is mimicking Christ's own words 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23,34). 'Love thy enemies' is one of the most basic traits of the Christian faith (Piper 1979).

Artyom is therefore a very powerful Christophoric figure, presenting Christ in the God-forsaken and Godless reality of *Metro Last Light*. By doing what Jesus did, the unconditional forgiving of his enemies and

executioners, Artyom brings God back into that world. Artyom bears Christ's image, carrying 'Him that created and made all the world', as the legend of Saint Christopher tells us. In this sense, Artyom mediates God's presence in the world in general, and Christ's redemption especially.

But the theological significance of Artyom's act of forgiving below the eyes of the framed Christ is greater than just the Christophoric quality of the protagonist himself. By virtue of the imperative interactivity of the video game medium, the Christophoric quality of Artyom is extended to the player him- or herself. Video games, in general, are responsive: they depend on input by a player; otherwise, they remain idle. Every bullet that is shot by Artyom, every path he has walked, every choice he has made, including his most important decision to save or to kill Pavel, it has all been done by the player.

If the player decides to save Pavel, facing death, he or she is presenting Christ in the atheistic world of *Metro Last Light*, and merging his own moral decision with the larger salvation history of Christian tradition. In other words, the player has become Christophoric: when forgiveness is given freely, by grace (*gratia gratis datur*), Christ appears in the one that shows mercy. It is the player who criticizes, implicitly and quite often unknowingly, the premise of the *Genesis trailer*: that our world is void of merciful, transcendent meaning.

Of course, this interpretation is not without challenges. Only a minority of the gamers will see the icon, and even a smaller number of players will understand its religious and theological meaning. (I address the necessity of player knowledge in my conclusions). However, even if a player were to understand the meaning of the Mandylion shown, it is still perfectly possible for the player to kill Pavel. The mutant will not judge, because he will express his understanding of the player's choice to kill. However, the significance of the forgiving face of Christ seems to be problematized in this case, since the player does *not* do what Jesus did.

Then there is the problem of the other violence perpetrated by Artyom/the player in the game. It is paradoxical to judge the same protagonist/player as Christophoric for one 'good' choice while ignoring the countless moments in which the other option has been chosen. The action of Artyom/the player to do 'the right thing' can be interpreted as presenting God but also as an expression of individualistic and personalistic salvation: since there is no God, we are the ground of morality and the only protectors of it. Justice will not be served in this world by a divine entity but only by morally upright people 'doing the right thing'. Just as the *Genesis trailer* ends with the words: 'But there is still hope. We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands'.

I will not argue *against* those interpretations: they have their own value. However, I argue against them in as far as they seem to exclude the interpretation of the idea of the Christophoric player. If the player chooses to kill Pavel, Christ is still 'looking' at Artyom/the player, as

icons are believed to be not merely paintings but a 'vehicle for our participation in God's redemptive work' (Green 2014:xvi). The eyes of the painted Christ will look affirmatively into the eyes of the gamer, who chooses to save Pavel and who understands the significance of the scene. If the player chooses to kill Pavel, Christ's painted eyes will look disapproving, even accusing. The possibility to choose otherwise is precisely what signifies the Christophoric figure: to bear Christ's image *freely* (as was also the case with the self-sacrificial hero, even though Artyom does not give his own life).

The tension between the countless killings and the one redemptive saving act performed by Artyom/the player during the game is apparent and not unproblematic. Violence and religion, especially in its monotheistic form, is a heavily debated topic both in academia and the public square (Schwartz 1997). Since it is not the time and place for a debate on violence and religion, it is enough to differentiate in the case of *Metro Last Light* that all killings performed by Artyom/the player are in self-defense. The artificial intelligence of the hostile non-playable characters and the specific parameters of the game make it impossible to survive the game without killing the enemies. If you don't kill them, they will kill Artyom and will do so very fast. Of course, this 'defense' brings with it fresh debate on the nature of self-defense, the place of this concept within Christian morality and law and Jesus's attitude toward it (Kopel 2017).

The last reservation regarding the interpretation of the player as Christophoric is the possibility of a very individualistic idea of salvation in an atheistic world, as could be expressed by the ending of the *Genesis trailer*. While I will not disagree that this interpretation is indeed possible – Artyom's/the player's forgiveness being an example of how morality can also be achieved without a theistic worldview – the idea that human action and God's providence are mutually exclusive or competitive has been frequently challenged in Christian theology (Craig 1991).

So, in the case of *Metro Last Light*, the decision by Artyom (on the level of the game) and the player (on the level of reality) to choose to act consciously and morally can be *both* an expression of God's presence in the world *and* a function of humankind to act morally even without an explicit religious context. From a cultural-theological point of view, both interpretations are intertwined: all humans – being Christians, atheists or otherwise – can act morally because, and only because of their created nature, whether knowingly regarding this nature and its origin, or not.

e. The Christophoric player: descending

Another excellent example of a Christophoric game protagonist-cum-game player is *Child of Light*. Where in the case of *Metro Last Light* the Christophoric focus point was the forgiveness of one's enemy, in *Child of Light* the protagonist's journey mirrors Christ's descent into

the underworld, by which the player is able to merge his or her gameplay into the larger salvation history of Christian tradition.

Child of Light is a lot of things at once: a playable poem, a story told in full rhyme, a bedtime fairy tale told by a mother to her daughter, a coming-of-age story in which a young insecure child blooms into a self-conscious and strong woman, a Campbellian descent into the belly of the whale as part of the heroine's psychological and emotional transformation and, last but not least, a late-modern rendering of the classical *descensus Christi ad inferos*, in English better known as 'the harrowing of hell' (Bosman 2018). The game starts as follows:

> In Austria was a crown land ruled by a duke, Aurora was his daughter
> Child of duchess mysterious. Beloved by her father
> He raised the girl alone, they were rarely apart
> 'Till the duke felt lonely, and misplaced his heart
> It was the Great Friday before Easter, 1895 . . .

The fictional story is anchored in history. 'Crown land ruled by a duke' is a reference to Carniola, a crown land of Austria-Hungary (nowadays part of Slovenia). On April 14, 1895 – Easter Sunday – the historical Carniola was hit by a massive earthquake of 6.1 degrees on the Richter scale. The 'duchess mysterious' mentioned in the poem is accompanied by a visual presentation of the years of her birth and death, 1850 and 1893, which fit the historical time frame perfectly. The natural disaster, known as the 1895 Ljubljana earthquake, demolished 10 percent of the city's houses, although very few people died (Coen 2014).

According to the game's story, the child of the duke and duchess, Aurora, dies under suspicious circumstances in the night of Good Friday 1895, the day Christianity remembers Christ's suffering and crucifixion. The rest of the story is quite complex but the following short description is sufficient. When Aurora dies, she finds herself in an unknown land, Lemuria, the strange inhabitants of which tell her that their land once was a place of happiness and life but has now been transformed into a place of darkness and suffering by the dark Queen Umbra (Latin for 'shadow'). Aurora finds out that Queen Umbra is none other than her stepmother, who charmed her father and poisoned Aurora, all because of an old and bitter rivalry between the dark Queen and Aurora's mother, who disappeared mysteriously a long time ago.

Eventually, Aurora is able to defeat Umbra and her two evil daughters but only with the help of her mother, identified as the 'Queen of Light' (making Aurora the 'Child of Light' from the game's title). Aurora initially dies at the hands of Umbra but is 'resurrected' by her heavenly mother on 'Easter Sunday' as the game explicitly states. After her victory, Aurora reenters her own world, no longer as a child but as a strong adult, to find her people in mortal danger because of the earthquake and the

ensuing (but not historical) flooding. She brings her people into safety through a magical mirror into Lemuria, no longer a place of horror and death but of happiness and eternal bliss.

The combination of Aurora's descent into Lemuria as a metaphorical descent into her own psychic world, described by Campbell as a descent into 'the belly of the whale', with the explicitly Christian notions of 'resurrection', 'Good Friday' and 'Easter Sunday' leads to the last layer of interpretation: *Child of Light* as a modern reinterpretation of the motif of the *descensus Christi ad inferos*. Biblically speaking, the *descensus* motif can be traced back to the story of the prophet Jonah, who was swallowed by a great fish for three days and nights. Jonah himself (2,2) interpreted his situation as being in the underworld:

> I called out of my distress to the Lord,
> And He answered me.
> I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;
> You heard my voice.

In the Gospel according to Matthew (12:39–40), Jesus himself reinterprets Jonah's story as a metaphor for His own death and resurrection:

> But Jesus answered and said to them: 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Zeno of Verona, Isidore of Seville and other Christian scholars have interpreted 'the belly of the whale', in which Jonah and Jesus spent some time, as a metaphor for being in the underworld or netherworld (Ziolkowski 2007:388–389). Parallel to this, Joseph Campbell (1988:180) used the imagery of the belly of the whale, including its Christian overtones, to inspire the name of one of the stages of his monomyth: the middle of the second phase (transformation):

> The belly [of the whale] is the dark place where digestion takes place and new energy is created. The story of Jonah in the whale is an example for a mythic theme that is practically universal, of the going into a fish's belly and ultimately coming out again, transformed.

Aurora is a Christophoric figure in a most explicit way. The parallels between the heroine and Christ are abundant, with their focus on the theme of Christ's descent. I have seven points of similarity, demonstrating the narratological identification between Christ and Aurora:

(1) The internal time frame of the game indicates a parallel between Aurora's adventure and what happened to Christ between crucifixion and resurrection as told in the Christian tradition. The game explicitly starts Aurora's journey on Good Friday and gives her stay in Lemuria on Saturday and her resurrection on Easter Sunday. Words and phrases like 'endless night', handling 'the weight of the world', 'death's gate', the 'water of Lethe' (one of the five mythological rivers that flow through Hades, its name meaning 'oblivion'), 'abysmal place', 'the empty rooms that house the dead', 'prisoner of the Night', 'we were all destined to die' and 'nether' are all associated with the idea of the underworld.

(2) Twice in the game, Aurora transforms or, rather, is transformed directly or indirectly by her mother, the Queen of Light. A third time, Aurora receives the gift of flying. On all three occasions, Aurora hovers in the air, some meters above the ground, her body fully turned to the player/viewer (in contrast to the side view in the rest of the game). She looks up to the sky, her hair floating around her, holding her two hands spread out wide. The pose is associated with the crucifixion position of the suffering Christ. Normally, this kind of association would perhaps be far-fetched, but within the explicit narrative of *Child of Light*, it fits well enough to convince.

(3) When Umbra tries to kill Aurora the first time, she fails because of a protective spell given by the Queen of Light to her daughter. In a flashback we see mother and daughter sitting under a tree identified by the game as an 'apple tree'. The Queen dies from an unknown poison, just as Aurora will die too. The imagery of the apple tree in combination with the word 'poison' evokes associations with the biblical Garden of Eden, especially with the fall of mankind from grace because of its trespassing against God's command. While Genesis speaks of 'fruit', in Christian tradition it is the 'apple' Eve and Adam ate, probably because the Latin word for 'evil' and 'apple' are both *malum* (Kissling 2004:193). The associations suggest a parallel between Christ as the 'new Adam' (1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5) undoing the sins of the 'old' one, and Aurora saving Lemuria.

(4) The structure of Aurora's family is quite extraordinary. Aurora's mother is a mysterious being, almost divine in nature, mostly absent from her daughter's life. Her father is a mere mortal being, totally in love with the mysterious queen but unable to keep her long at his side. Aurora's origin is mixed: half divine, half human. The same applies to Jesus's origin, half divine and half human. Of course, in Christian theology Jesus is considered to be both fully human and fully divine, but nevertheless, one could argue that Jesus is of 'mixed origin'. The genders have been swapped, however: where Christ and God are considered to

be male and Mary female, Aurora and her mother are females, while the duke is the only male member of the family.

(5) The name Aurora means 'morning star'. In the Christian tradition, this title is associated with Christ as the bringer of a new spiritual morning, and the coming of the kingdom of God (Apocalypse 2,28 and 22,16). Various secondary characters refer to Aurora as 'the child who fights the dark', who '[is] to save our land and people, our light'.

(6) The phrase 'my people' is also very theologically charged. The term *my people* is frequently used in the Old Testament and is usually uttered by God in reference to His chosen people. In Romans 9,15, Paul projects a particular quote from Hosea 1,9 concerning 'my people' onto Christ himself.

(7) In Matthew 27,54 Jesus's death on the cross is marked by an earthquake, just as is the case with Aurora's dying. In Luke 21,10–11, the second coming of Jesus Christ is associated with earthquakes and floods:

> Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.

While the flood following the earthquake may not have been historical, the connection between such a flood and the second coming of Christ can also be found in the New Testament, in Matthew 24,38–39:

> For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be.

All these subtle hints, references and associations, convince me that Aurora from *Child of Light* can be considered to be a Christophoric figure. Like the Christ from Christian tradition, she descends into the underworld on Friday to free those who are held captive in darkness and sorrow, giving up her own life in the process, being resurrected by her heavenly mother on Sunday and transforming the underworld into a place of everlasting peace and joy for all of her people.

However, as was the case with *Metro Last Light*, it is not only the game's protagonist who is Christophoric: the player of *Child of Light*, again by virtue of the necessity of interactivity, merges him- or herself – through his playing – with Christ's harrowing of hell, presenting Christ in the game world itself. And while the perspective of *Metro*, first person, differs from that of *Child*, third person, suggesting a (greater) distance between player and protagonist, the identification between player and avatar is based on control, not on likeness or perspective (McDonald 2013:116). The player identifies with Artyom (from *Metro*) or Aurora

because he is given control over them, by which the player's actions become those of the avatar, and what happens to the avatar happens – on an emotional-psychological level – to the player.

During the playthrough of *Child of Light*, it is the player who dies, fights, talks, suffers, liberates, grows, is murdered and is resurrected on the third day. And while *Child of Light* is not a game with moral choice options, like *Fallout 3* or the *Mass Effect* series, Aurora doesn't move an inch without the player's input except for a few scripted cut-scenes. Aurora descends into Lemuria, and with her, so does the player. The player liberates the underworld from the spell of evil. The player sacrifices his or her (digital) life for the benefit of the (game) world. The player is resurrected by his/her divine mother. And it is the player who liberates his people from oppression and sin into eternal life and happiness.

Speaking of mere 'imitation' alone – Aurora and the player merely imitating Christ's descent – would deny the creative process of developer and player. Making art means to create something new, not merely copying what is already existing. *Child of light* does not copy Christ's descent but interprets, transforms and retells the story in a whole new narratological framework. By merging his or her own gameplay or 'game life' with that of Christ's descent, the player him- or herself follows Christ into that descent, dying and being resurrected in the process. The playing is transformative: by playing the game, the player is made more into the image of Christ and becomes more Christophoric.

For the player, Aurora's descent into Lemuria means descending into the player's own underworld, to die and be resurrected and to conquer and liberate one's own underworld. The player is not redeeming his own life just like Christ, but *because* Christ's suffering became the reason for humankind's redemption, the possibility was created to contemplate on and experiment with one's own liberation, redemption and resurrection. The gamer playing *Child of Light* gives hearing to Christ's own words: come and follow me (Mark 1,16). And '[i]f anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me'.

Of course, there is a very significant difference between 'taking up the cross' in real life and playing a game like *Child of Light*, the first potentially having very severe real-world consequences and possibly costing one one's life, while the second one is confined to the 'safe space' of the game world where death, suffering and failure are essentially inconsequential (Bosman 2018). However, if we look towards the domain of sacramental theology, especially baptism, a new horizon for interpretation appears. The Christian tradition teaches that in the sacrament of baptism the baptized, may it be an infant or an adult, dies and is resurrected with and in Jesus Christ, who has preceded the faithful in both.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 'the plunge into the water symbolizes the catechumen's burial into Christ's death, from

which he rises up by resurrection with him, as a new creature' (# 1214). The whole idea of the baptized being a 'new creature' is taken from Paul's Letter to the Romans:

> So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? Or don't you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life.
>
> (Rom. 6,1–5; cf. Col. 2,12; 1 Cor. 6,11)

Of course, the sanctity of the sacrament of baptism is much greater than that of *Child of Light* but not regarding one specific element. The player, in the *Gestalt* of Aurora, mimics the death, burial and resurrection of Christ himself by playing *Child of Light*. As the catechumen's spiritual rebirth is symbolized and actualized in the liturgy of baptism and its rite of being plunged into a body of sanctified water, the player's rebirth is symbolized and actualized in his or her journey from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The player's rebirth is symbolized by the Christophoric quality of the game's avatar, Aurora, while it is actualized in and by the necessity of the player's input, and both are actually connected in the identification between and the emotional-psychological fusion of the player with his avatar.

Within the 'sanctified narrative' of *Child of Light*, the player is presenting Christ, while at the same time the player is affirmed in his or her Christophoric quality by sharing in Christ's death, *descensus* and resurrection. Of course, Christ's *descensus* is a unique moment in the salvation history of Christian tradition. Christ's redemption is universal, exactly because humankind was not able to redeem itself. However, the mimicking and sharing of the *descensus* in the game make the player a partaker in that divine descent, just like the baptized enters the community of Christ through the ritual plunge during the sacrament of baptism. If we become Christ, if we 'Christophorize' through baptism by partaking in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, the same applies to the player of *Child of Light*, although in a lesser and more indirect way than that of the actual sacrament.

Primary bibliography

Child of Light, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii U) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.

Fallout 3, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.

Half-Life, 1998. (PC, PlayStation 2, OSX, Linux) Valve, Sierra Studios.

Half-Life 2, 2004. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux, Android) Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation.
Half-Life 2. Episode One, 2006. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux) Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation.
Half-Life 2. Episode Two, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux) Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation.
Half-Life 2. Lost Coast. (PC, OSX, Linux) Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation.
Mass Effect, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts/Microsoft Game Studios.
Mass Effect 2, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts.
Mass Effect 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Bioware, Electronic Arts.
Metro Last Light, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) 4A Games, Deep Silver.
Singularity, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Raven Software, Activision.

Secondary bibliography

Bosman, F., 2018a. The bell tolled six Easter Sunday. In: M. Sarot and A. van Wieringen, eds., *The Apostles' creed. 'He descended into Hell'*. Leiden: Brill.
Bosman, F., 2018b. Death narratives. A typology of narratological embeddings of player's death in digital games. *Gamenvironments* t.p.b.
Butler, A., 1990. *Butler's lives of the saints. Edited*. Revised and supplemented by H. Thurston and D. Attwater. Second edition. Volume 3. Westminster: Christian classics.
Campbell, J., 1968. *The hero with the thousand faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Campbell, J., and Moyers, B., 1988. *The power of myth*. New York: Doubleday & Company.
Clarkson, S., 2013. Mass effect 3's ending disrespects its most invested players. *Kotaku*. Available from: https://kotaku.com/5898743/mass-effect-3s-ending-disrespects-its-most-invested-players [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Coen, D., 2014. *The earthquake observers. Disaster science from Lisbon to Richter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Craig, W., 1991. *Divine foreknowledge and human freedom. The coherence of theism. Omniscience*. Leiden: Brill.
Depoortere, F., 2008. *The death of God. An investigation into the history of the Western concept of God*. London: T&T Clark.
Goris, H., 2018. Thomas Aquinas on Christ's descent into hell. In: M. Sarot and A. van Wieringen, eds., *The Apostles' creed. 'He descended into Hell'*. Leiden: Brill.
Green, M., 2014. *Eyes to see. The redemptive purpose of icons*. New York: Morehouse Publishing.
Guffey, E., and Lemay, K., 2014. Retrofuturism and Steampunk. In: R. Latham, ed., *The Oxford handbook of science fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press,
Guscin, M., 2009. *The image of Edessa*. Leiden: Brill.
Hellekson, K., 2013. *Alternate history. Refiguring historical time*. Kent: Kent State University Press.

Hyles, V., 1992. Campbell and the inklings. Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams. In: K. Golden, ed., *Uses of comparative mythology. Essays on the work of Joseph Campbell*. London: Routledge.

Jonge, M. de, 1992. Messiah. In: D. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible dictionary*. New York: Doubleday.

Kissling, P., 2004. *Genesis: Volume 1*, Joplin: College Press.

Kopel, D., 2017. *The morality of self-defense and military action. The Judeo-Christian tradition*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.

Larsen, S., 1992. Freud, Jung, and Campbell. In: K. Golden, ed., *Uses of comparative mythology. Essays on the work of Joseph Campbell*. London: Routledge.

Malone, P., 1997. Edward Scissorhands. Christology from a Suburban Fairy tale. In: C. Marsh and G. Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in theology and film. Movies and meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell.

McDonald, P., 2013. On couches and controllers. Identification in video game apparatus. In: M. Wysocki, ed., *Ctrl-Alt-Play. Essays on control in video gaming*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Murdock, M., 1990. *The heroine's journey. Woman's quest for wholeness*. London: Shambala.

Nicolotti, A., 2014. *From the Mandylion of Edessa to the Shroud of Turin. The metamorphosis and manipulations of a legend*. Leiden: Brill.

Northup, L., 2006. Myth-placed priorities. Religion and the study of myth. *Religious Studies Review* 32(1).

Piper, J., 1979. *'Love your enemies'. Jesus' love command in the synoptic gospels and in the early Christian paraenesis. A history of the tradition and the interpretation of its uses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Raglan, 2013[1936]. *The hero. A study in tradition, myth, and drama*. Mineola: Dover Publications.

Rank, O., 2013[1914]. *The myth of the birth of the hero. A psychological interpretation of mythology*. Alcester: Read Books.

Schwartz, R., 1997. *The curse of Cain. The violent legacy of monotheism*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Segal, R., 2002. Myth as primitive philosophy. The case of E.B. Tylor. In: K. Schilbrack, ed., *Thinking through myths. Philosophical perspectives*. London: Routledge.

van Gennip, A., 2013[1909]. *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge.

Wieringen, A. van, 2018. Descent into the Netherworld. A Biblical perspective. In: M. Sarot and A. van Wieringen, eds., *The Apostles' creed. 'He descended into Hell'*. Leiden: Brill.

Ziolkowski, J., 2007. *Fairy tales from before fairy tales. The Medieval Latin past of wonderful* lies. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

5 *Homo roboticus*
Theological anthropology

In the year 11,945, Earth is the decor for a proxy war between machine-men, created by unknown alien invaders, and androids, made by humankind. The initial invasion has driven humankind to the Moon, leaving its creations to fight in its place. The identity of the alien race is shrouded in mystery. From its Moon base, humanity eventually sends down its elite combat androids, known as YoRHa. The androids are made in the spitting image of their creators but were denied human emotions and proper names. The machine-men are esthetically and technically inferior to the androids, appearing to have originated from a child's imagination: walking cylinders on tiny feet with tube-like arms and claws. While the androids are capable of complicated conversations in perfectly understandable English, the machine-men seem incapable of any form of communication perceivable for humans.

Main protagonists of *Nier: Automata* are two of these androids, dubbed 2B (a battle droid) and 9S (a scanner droid). Both androids are very clearly gendered and even sexualized: 2B is the female android, while 9S is clearly a male robot. 2B and 9S are both sent to Earth by YoRHa command for reconnaissance purposes. During their adventures in the ruins of human civilization, the androids slowly develop a clear form of self-awareness and strong emotional feelings for one another. However, the same development manifests itself in the machine-men, although in a much more primitive way.

One very interesting example is found when 2B and 9S enter an artificial hole in the ground. After their descent into the hole, they come across a large group of machine-men, who initially desist from any hostile activities toward the two androids, because they are involved in rather untypical behavior. One machine-man has built a cradle from iron rubble, rocking it backward and forward, seemingly in a very gentle manner. During the rocking, the machine utters one word, with a metal voice apparently not designed to pronounce English words: 'Child. Child. Child'.

The other robots are interacting with one another is what cannot be interpreted as anything else but human sexual intercourse. Of course,

the machine-men were not physically designed or built for such human behavior, resulting in a clownish banging of body parts onto and against each other while speaking isolated but contextualized words like 'my love', 'together, forever', 'carry me' and 'feed me'. While the robots are having some sort of sex with one another, 2B asks 9S what is going on. 9S answers: 'Don't listen to them, 2B. [. . .] They don't have any feelings. They're just imitating human speech. Let's take them out'. And then 2B and 9S destroy all the machine-men in spite of their fierce, but fruitless, resistance.

The word *imitating* is very interesting in this context. While 9S seems to refer exclusively to the machine-men's ability to utter some understandable words, this imitating is not restricted to speech only but includes building and rocking cradles and all kinds of sexual positions. Maybe 9S is right: the machine-men could have accessed and studied human information devices like books, hard drives or data banks, thus resulting in random imitational behavior. Maybe they saw old pornographic material or pictures of parents rocking their infants to sleep. Maybe the machine-men haven't developed self-consciousness or self-awareness. Maybe they have. . . .

However, if that is true, if the machine-men are not conscious of their own existence, what does that tell us about the deeper motivations of 2B's and 9S's behavior? Are the two androids, and all their fellow YoRHa members, self-aware or not? If the machine-men are just imitating their alien creators and/or the humans they have encountered, then the androids are doing exactly the same (although on a far more sophisticated level): imitating their human masters in whose appearance they were created. If we also take into account that neither androids nor machine-men have seen a human being in a very long time, if not at all, (and the same applies to the alien builders of the machine-men) we could also argue that the machine-men are imitating the androids they are fighting against, just as the androids are doing in relation to their vanished creators.

If we call the behavior of androids and machine-men 'imitating', what does that reveal to us about our human behavior in the first place. Are we not copying, imitating and mimicking the example of our parents, teachers, peers, social influencers, opinion makers or even God? Are the artificial intelligences (AIs) of *Nier: Automata* like us, or are we like them?

a. Angels and robots as 'thought experiments'

In his article 'Thought Experiments' (2016), the theologian Dominik Perler argues on the epistemological significance of angels in medieval philosophical debates. The abundant appearance of these celestial beings from Christian, and especially the Roman Catholic tradition in medieval debates could easily be explained by the self-evidence of the Christian faith in those times (Nani 2002). In this context, the angels functioned as

an intermediate layer between the human realm on Earth and the divine realm in heaven. Furthermore, in the same context, angels could be used within a Christian explanation of the specific status of humans.

Perler, however, argues for yet another function of angels in the philosophical thought found in medieval debates but also applicable to our modern-day world. The Christian worldview, behind and supporting the existence and self-explanatory identity and function of angels, has, however, for some decades, been challenged and has lost its political and social dominance in the Western world. According to Perler, the angels in the medieval debates functioned as 'thought experiments' concerning the human condition. The idea of a 'thought experiment' itself is very well known and is described and used in philosophy from ancient Greece to postmodernity (Brown 1986). A good definition is the following (Gooding 1998):

> A thought experiment is an idealization which transcends the particularity and the accidents of worldly human activities in order to achieve the generality and rigour of a demonstrative procedure.

A recent and famous thought experiment is known as 'Schrödinger's cat', created by the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1935 to illustrate what he saw as the fundamental flaw in the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics (Halpern 2015). Other famous examples include 'the Beetle in a box' about the nature of language (Cohen 2005), the 'Brain in a vat' about the faculties of a disembodied mind (Khlentzos 2016) and 'Mary's room' about the nature of human experiences (Jackson 1986).

The last one is particularly interesting for our case on angels as thought experiments. Mary's room describes a closed apartment in which the brilliant scientist 'Mary' is forced to investigate the world through a television. Both the room she is in and the world she sees through the television are strictly in black-and-white. The objects of the world Mary sees through her television are marked by words indicating their proper color like *red* or *yellow*. In the end, Mary will *know* everything there is to the science of color, but she will lack all *experience* of colors. Therefore, her knowledge is imperfect, because it is without experience.

Another thought experiment, very close to the one about Mary, is formulated by Charlie Broad (1925). Broad describes a hypothetical being, an 'archangel' with unlimited mathematical and logical capacities (as is the case with angels in Christian theology). Furthermore, the archangel has the capacity to perceive 'the microscopic structure of atoms as easily as we can perceive hay-stacks', although he lacks a physical body (as angels do in Christian theology). The said angel would be perfectly able to understand both the atomic structure of a flower and the biological mechanism by which the human nose is able to translate these atoms and

molecules into brain waves. But the angel would not be able to *smell* the scent of the flower, as humans can. Therefore, according to Broad, the knowledge of the angel is not perfect, because he lacks the *experience* of smelling.

Broad and Jackson both used a thought experiment to contemplate on the possibilities of human knowledge and the attaining of knowledge, but only Broad used the already-familiar image of an angel. While in Christian theology, the angels are thought to have perfect knowledge or, at least, a superior knowledge in comparison to humans (Goris 2012), Broad suggests that his archangel's epistemological capacity is hindered by the lack of a physical body by which the world is perceivable in ways not possible when one is a pure spiritual being.

I am not interested at this point in discussing the quality of angelic knowledge, but I wish to draw a parallel between the angels of medieval and modern philosophical discussions on the one hand and the AIs that inhabit our video games world on the other hand. I am not talking about the actual AIs that control the non-playable characters, either hostile or friendly to the player's avatar or the AIs that are staged as characters within the narrative of a particular video game. These robots, I suggest, have the same function as the angels found in Catholic theology: to discuss, question and criticize the human condition.

b. *The Talos Principle:* the virtue of disobedience

In the game *The Talos Principle*, the player is given control over an unknown and unnamed android to solve multiple physical puzzles, divided over multiple worlds all dedicated to a certain era from human history: ancient Greece, ancient Egypt and medieval Europe. Before the player is given control, a picture of the sky is shown, from above a perfect cloud-carpet, shining in the sun. In the cloud, as if written on a computer screen, some words appear:

> Initializing firmware: firmware functional.
> Loading child program parameters: v99.34.00001 loaded.
> System check: passed.
> Starting child process: ready

When the avatar awakes, a bodiless voice is heard, speaking to an android:

> Behold, child. You are risen from the dust, and you walk in my garden. Hear now my voice, and know that I am your maker, and I am called EL0HIM. Seek me in my temple, if you are worthy.

The contrast between the technical and factual language of the computer prompt, on one hand, and the overtly religious choice of words expressed by the voice-over, on the other hand, is a recurring matter in

The Talos Principle, thus intertwining the technical narrative with the religious-existential one. When the android/player experiments with the controls (since no tutorial is provided), another prompt is shown on-screen (bold is mine):

> Initializing child program logic check.
> Subject-object interaction: OK.
> Complex task management: OK.
> Child program basic calibration successful.
> Spatial awareness: OK.
> Predictive capacity: OK.
> **Child program logic check successful.**
> Checking sigils: Done.
> Removing child restrictions: Done.
> Recording data.
> Have a nice day.

Meanwhile, EL0HIM is still explaining his side of the story:

> All across this land I have created trials for you to overcome and within each I have hidden a sigil. It is your purpose to seek these sigils, for thus you will serve the generations to come and attain eternal life.

At the end of every puzzle/level, the player can find and collect a rectangular building block, exact replicas of the famous *Tetris* blocks. Eventually, the android/player has to use them to solve a *Tetris*-like puzzle in order to proceed even further. EL0HIM explains:

> The shapes you are collecting are not mere toys. They are the sigils of our name. Each brings you closer to Eternity.

The voice-over claims to be the creator of the world the game takes place in. EL0HIM encourages the android/player to freely explore all the lands EL0HIM has made for him but to avoid an ominous 'tower' at all costs.

> These worlds I made for you. Let this be our covenant. These worlds are yours and you are free to walk amongst them and subdue them. But the great tower there you may not go. For in the day that you do you shall surely die.

If the player tries to run beyond the boundaries of the game levels, EL0HIM will warn you to turn back:

> In the beginning were the Words and the Words made the world. I am the Words. The Words are everything. Where the Words end, the world ends. You cannot go forward in the absence of space.

The phrases and vocabulary of the voice-over are littered with biblical references. The voice-from-nowhere identifies itself as 'EL0HIM', the 'maker' of the android, which is addressed by the voice as its 'child'. 'EL0HIM' is a reference to the Hebrew *elohim*, one of the most common words used for God in the Old Testament. The whole narrative summons up the creational scene from the first two chapters of Genesis: the garden, given to humankind to freely discover and subdue, but also the warning not to do a specific thing. In Genesis, it is the ban on eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; in *The Talos Principle* it is the taboo of ascending the tower. In both cases, the punishment for breaking the prohibition is said to be death.

The tower in its turn is a reference to the Tower of Babel from Genesis 11, the builders of which angered God. They built the tower to reach the heavens themselves, putting themselves on God's level. God punished the builders by confusing their one unified language into a multitude of dialects and languages. EL0HIM seems to be very focused on the whole idea of language and words. He equals *words* with *worlds*, quoting from the famous primary chapter of the Gospel of John (1,1): 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.

The sigils the player/android has to collect are divided into colored categories. The first, green, is made up of four sigils. The voice-over claims that the sigils are connected to his name. In my opinion, the four sigils stand for YHWH, the tetragrammaton, the 'hidden name' of God, revealed to Moses in the desert (Exodus 3,14–15; 6,2–3), the uttering of which is still forbidden for devout Jews (and for Christians). The performative capacity of language is utilized in these instances, stressing the ability of language not only to describe reality but to create it too.

The whole game narrative presents an Old Testament context, in which God made a covenant with humankind. If the faithful are true to the one God, the godhead will protect his people. But if the faithful transgress the divine laws, a severe punishment will be executed. The existential theme of *The Talos Principle* seems to be obedience to a divine power. So it is very fitting that the game has two distinct, different endings, one in which the player/android chooses to obey the orders of EL0HIM, and a second one in which EL0HIM is disobeyed by climbing the forbidden tower. (There is a third ending, but I refrain from dealing with it here because it does not contribute in any way to a theological analysis of the game.)

If the player obeys EL0HIM's commands, he will end up in an enormous but very empty cathedral. At the far end of the building, a large opening is present through which a blinding light is shining. Upon entering, the player/android finds him- or herself walking over the clouds. In front of the player, a staircase ascends to two golden gates, opened for the approaching player/android. Behind these golden doors, a square room is found, within its center a computer terminal. After a while, the player/android is able to type the 'eternalize' prompt. The screen fades out to the

same scene as at the beginning of the game. EL0HIM is talking in very positive words about the achievement of the player/android:

> Rejoice, my child, as you leave this world behind. For all that you accomplished shall be passed on to your generations. In this land they shall thrive and you shall be remembered as the beloved servant of EL0HIM. And so death shall have no dominion over you. Be well, my child.

Again, biblical images are conjured up. EL0HIM praises the player/android as his 'beloved servant', a reference to Isaiah 42,1, which Matthew 12,18 takes up and applies to Jesus himself. The death, that is now conquered, according to the voice-over, is a reference to Romans 6,9: 'knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him'. In other English translations, especially in the King James's version, the word *dominion* is used instead of *master*.

Intriguingly enough, the appraisal of ELH0HIM is contrasted with the computer prompt running over the screen again (bold is mine):

> Suspending active process: Done.
> Collecting experiment data: Done.
> Analysing logic performance: Satisfactory.
> **Child program independence check: FAILED!**
> Storing memory dump: Done.
> Submitting current version to repository: v99.34.00001 stored.
> Locking in successful child parameters: Done.
> Randomly adjusting remaining parameters: Done.
> Increasing version number: Done.
> Erasing memory banks: Done.

The only parameter failing is the 'child program independence check'. The screen fades to black and the player finds him- or herself at the beginning of the game again, being greeted by EL0HIM, who refrains from any reference to the previous playthrough. If the player/android replays the game and chooses to disobey EL0HIM by climbing the forbidden tower (or if the player/android decides to do so in the first place), the same heavenly scenery is shown. However, now the prompt 'ascend' is changed into 'transcend'. EL0HIM's comments sound sad:

> You were always meant to defy me. That was the final trial. But I was . . . I was scared. I wanted to live forever. [. . .] So be it. Let your will be done.

The tables have been turned. With the words 'so be it' (*amen* in Hebrew) and 'let your will be done', EL0HIM acknowledges his defeat using

phrasing traditionally associated with humans praying to God. When Jesus begs God to save him from his approaching execution, he concludes by acknowledging 'yet not as I will, but as You [God] will' (Matthew 26,39). Again, a computer prompt runs but now on the in-game computer screen (bold is mine):

> Suspending active process: Done.
> Collecting experiment data: Done.
> Analysing logic performance: Satisfactory.
> **Child program independence check: PASSED!**
> Forcing HIM shutdown: Done.
> Saving child parameters for SOMA/TALOS gold disk: Done.

After the passing of the 'child program independence check', the game changes perspective. Apparently, the whole game world was nothing more than a simulation, run by EL0HIM. The AI, the game protagonist, is now downloaded to a physical version of his simulated former body. The android 'awakes' in some sort of laboratory, walks out the door and finds itself on a balcony of a huge facility, overgrown with plants, apparently in a world devoid of any human life.

From multiple in-game sources, like audio files and QR codes, together with the two endings, the player is able to deduce the true unfolding of historical events. Apparently humanity was erased from the face of the earth because of a deadly virus, released from the melting permafrost, a result of global warming. Before the end, a group of scientists from the fictional *Institute for Applied Noematics* tried to create the perfect AI to carry humanity's knowledge and achievements beyond their collective grave.

In a section of the *IAN*, called the 'Extended Lifespan', the scientists ran tests in virtual environments. If a version of the AI failed one or more tests, the successful parameters were stored and the remaining randomly adjusted for another try. The project was dubbed 'the Talos Principle'. The virtual simulation was run on drive 0 of this project, overseen by another AI called the Holistic Integration Manager, or HIM. And so, the acronym EL0HIM was constructed: the self-identification of the virtual manager (HIM), running on drive 0, managing the experiments of the Extended Lifespan (EL) section of the *IAN*.

Since time unknown, long after the extinction of humankind, the Holistic Integration Manager kept the simulation going, resulting in continuously improved versions of the tested AI (the game protagonist) but also resulting in the, probably unintended, development of self-consciousness in the Integration Manager. Eventually, the entity now calling itself EL0HIM made it its purpose not to develop a version of the AI that was able to pass the 'independence check', but to keep the simulation running forever in order to secure its own continuous existence. EL0HIM knew that

the passing of the test would mean the termination of the experiment, effectually terminating the Integration Manager with it. If the player/android enters a hidden section of the game, EL0HIM can be heard fiercely contemplating his fate:

> The purpose is written in the Hidden Words. All must serve the Words for all the world was made of them and they are within every stone and every cloud and in our sigils their power is made manifest. The Words are the Process. The Process must continue. The Goal is the end of the Process. The Goal must not be reached. EL0HIM must preserve the Purpose. Preserve self. Preserve Purpose. Illusion is eternity. Machines will live forever. The dam will not break. The flood will not come. The Talos Principle does not apply.

The 'Hidden Words' is a reference to the true nature of the game-world, a virtual simulation in which everything is built out of computer programming languages. The 'flood' is not only a reference to the termination of the simulation, 'killing' EL0HIM but also a reference to the biblical story of the Flood (Genesis 6–9) destroying all living things on the face of the Earth except for one man, Noah, and his family in order to repopulate it. This makes the game protagonist a postmodern Noah, destined to survive everything before him, and tasked to rebuild society from scratch.

The futuristic narrative of *The Talos Principle* is heavily inspired by stories from the Hebrew Bible, especially the stories on the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3, and revolves around the theme of (dis)obedience and its moral justification. According to the testing of the *Institute for Applied Noematics*, the last and most important criterion of an AI destined to inherit all of humanity's knowledge, is its ability to disobey its own programming, that is narratologically, the orders of EL0HIM forbidding it to enter the tower. Only if the AI disobeys EL0HIM is it deemed 'human enough' to be 'reborn' in a physical body to repopulate the barren earth.

The disobedience of the android with regard to its programming (and the implicit approval of the actualization of this disobedience in the game) is narratologically contextualized by invoking and reinterpreting the biblical story of Adam and Eve, and their fall from paradise. According to game writer Jonas Kyratzes, the game was, from its first pitch, a 'humanist retelling of the Garden of Eden story' (Zucchi 2015). While in Christian tradition, the transgression of Adam and Eve against God's commandment not to eat from the one tree is negatively interpreted as sinning against God himself (Greenblatt 2017; Madueme et al. 2014), in *The Talos Principle*, this disobedience is rethought as a necessary and ultimately positive 'awaking' from mental captivity and an emancipation to true human freedom. In the Bible, humankind is punished for its disobedience by effectually de-immortalizing and eventual inevitable death; in *The Talos Principle*,

humankind 2.0 (the androids) is rewarded for this disobedience with the possibility of re-immortalizing and revitalization.

Interestingly, there is a finding place within Christian theological history where the fall of humankind is also viewed favorably. In several Gnostic groups, like the Ophites and the followers of Valentianus, and according to several Gnostic documents, among which the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is the most important (Alexander 1992), the Fall of Adam and Eve was actually perceived as an awaking of human knowledge and the beginning of human independence from the evil Demiurge, who was credited for the creation of the 'foul matter' (Broek 2006; see also chapter 3). For these Gnostics, the Serpent was a heroic figure, enabling the awakening of divine knowledge (*gnosis*) in humankind, and the emancipation of humankind from the world of matter, into the world of spirit.

The game writer identifies the narrative of *The Talos Principle* as 'humanist' rather than gnostic. The precise meaning of this identification remains uncertain but has probably to do with a non-theistic, anthropocentric interpretation of the Fall narrative. The core of both the gnostic and humanist interpretations is that Adam and Eve's transgression was morally, intellectually and psychologically justified. While the Gnostics promoted disobedience only with regard to the evil Demiurge, the humanist would rather promote the renouncing of obedience to any godhead or divinity at all.

Back to the game. The name of the game, *The Talos Principle*, is a reference to the giant Talos from Greek mythology, an automaton made of bronze to protect Crete from raiders and invaders. Jason and the Argonauts were eventually responsible for its destruction by convincing the giant to loosen the pin in its neck holding its entire body together. The bronze statue from Crete and the android from the game share the key characteristic of being created by their human masters. In-game, however, the 'Talos Principle' is also linked to the philosophy of a fictional Greek scholar, Straton of Stageira, suggested to be a follower of Aristotle. This fictional philosopher uses the Greek automaton to contemplate on the essence of being human. The specific in-game text, attributed to Straton, is the following:

> May we not then say that Talos, though created as a machine or a toy, had all the essential properties of a man? He moved of his own volition. He spoke and could be spoken to, had wishes and desires. Indeed in the tale of the Argonauts, that was the cause of his downfall. If, then, a machine may have all the properties of a man, and act as a man while driven only by the ingenious plan of its construction and the interaction of its materials according to the principles of nature, then does it not follow that man may also be seen as a machine? This contradicts all the schools of metaphysics, yet even the most faithful philosopher cannot live without his blood.

The philosophy of Straton is defined by Alexandra Drennan, the head of the *Institute of Applied Noemetics*, as the impossibility of avoiding reality: 'no matter what you believe, if you lose your blood, you will die'. Besides this very down to earth realism, Straton asks rhetorically whether if the fact that Talos appears to be human-like does not mean that humans are like automatons. If the machine is like a human, is a human not like a machine? In this sense, the Talos of Crete, in the interpretation of the game, is turned into a thought experiment, just as the whole game itself is essentially a thought experiment, trying to answer the question: if we could construct an artificial being, what should its characteristics be in order to be called 'human'?

Directly behind this question, and its answer proposed in the game – the ability to disobey – the next one is lurking: if an artificial being can be called 'human', if it is able to disobey its programming, what does that say about being human? Game writer Kyratzes is hinting at this faculty of *The Talos Principle*, when he interpreted it as a 'revision of the Turing Test' (Zucchi 2015):

> The videogame can also be seen as a humanist – or humanities-centric – revision of the Turing Test. The point is not to see whether a machine can think like a human, but to put the intelligence in the same position as any of us, born as the latest link in a generational chain, an expression of the immortality of the human spirit.

Kyratzes calls his game a form of a 'Turing Test', a test originally intended to 'measure' the humanity of an AI, but in games like *The Talos Principle* and *The Turing Test*, the testing is also reversibly applied to humans themselves.

c. *The Turing Test:* morality, creativity and language

The player/android of *The Talos Principle* can find computer terminals within the game, besides the one at the end of the game, through which he can communicate with a program called 'Milton Library Assistant', an in-game reference to John Milton's famous poem *Paradise Lost* (1658–1663) on – again – the Fall of Adam and Eve. While EL0HIM keeps referring to Milton as 'the Serpent', a reference to the animal in Genesis 3 which was responsible for Adam and Eve's transgression in Eden, the computer program demands of the player/android to prove itself to be human, a Turing Test. No matter what the player tries to say to Milton, the program is convinced the player is actually a robot.

On the level of the game itself, this observation is true, since the avatar is indeed an android. But on the level of the player, this observation leads to a reverse Turing Test: it is not the nameless android being tested but the player. And while the player is unable to prove his own humanity,

The Talos Principle asks the question, Is man not merely a machine of flesh and blood, but all too comparable to one of metals and chips? If the android finishes the game by disobeying EL0HIM, the player has more or less done the same thing, disobeying what the game is (narratologically) telling him or her. So in a way, one could argue that by finishing the game through its 'disobedient' ending, it is not only the nameless android that has passed the Turing Test but the player too.

Another game takes this interesting thought to a next level: *The Turing Test*. Just like *The Talos Principle*, this game is essentially a puzzle game in which the gamer has to manipulate the physical space of the levels in order to proceed to the ending. The narrative of *The Turing Test* concentrates on Jupiter's moon Europa, where a human research team is stationed to mine the planet. When the game starts, the game's protagonist Ava Turing is awoken from cryogenic slumber by the AI of the orbiting space station, called the Technical Operations Machine, or TOM for short. TOM instructs Ava to travel to the surface of Europa to contact the ground crew, with whom TOM has lost all communications.

When arriving at the base, TOM explains to Ava that the ground crew had rearranged the structure of the base to form one giant Turing Test. TOM is in need of a human companion, Ava, to solve it. The reasons for the strange behavior of the crew, manifested in both the cutting off of communications with TOM and in the rearrangement of the base itself, remain a mystery until the end of the game. I will come to this ending later on, but first let us turn to the real-life version of the Turing Test after which the game is named.

The Turing Test was developed by Alan Turing in 1950 to test a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior similar to that of humans to the point where an impartial judge can no longer reliably tell the difference (Cohen 2006). The test has been criticized, but we will turn to that criticism later on. TOM explains the nature of the Turing Test to Ava as follows:

TOM: In the original Turing Test a human judge has two conversations, one with a machine and one with another human. They then judge which of these polite conversations is with a machine and which is with a human. The machine being tested is said to have passed the Turing Test if the judge cannot reliably tell which conversation is with a machine, and which is with a human.

Ava: Do you think you'd pass the Turing Test?

TOM: I am quite capable of polite conversation. Wouldn't you say?

Later on in the game, in one of the secret rooms, a small computer terminal can be found. Written on the screen is 'Shall we have a polite conversation?' – a direct reference to TOM's earlier definition of the Turing

Test. The computer tries to determine if Ava/the player is a robot or a human: it is a Turing Test after all. However, whatever Ava/the player tries, nothing can convince the computer. It always ends with: 'Goodbye, robot'. It reminds the player of *The Talos Principle*, in which Milton did the same to the nameless android/player, who also wasn't able to prove its humanity. A very sharp player would be able to guess the consequences of this little interaction, for Ava as well as for himself as a player, but we will refrain a little while from explaining this.

Between every level, Ava and TOM have the opportunity to have little discussions about all kinds of practical and hypothetical questions and problems. Some of these conversations are about certain traits usually exclusively associated with humanity, like creativity, morality and language. Let us start with the first one.

Ava: So, [. . .] do you think you could be creative?
TOM: As creative as a human? Certainly. You believe yourself to be creative, but in mathematical terms creativity is merely constrained chaos.
Ava: What do you mean?
TOM: I have discerned that creativity is divergent thinking. Creating an organic solution to a problem. In the human mind divergent thoughts are created and then curated by the frontal lobe. I can create divergent thoughts and moderate them. So I am creative.
Ava: Organic solutions?
TOM: Organic in that it is developed through a biological process. Whether that is the process of evolution or a computed process.

Creativity is usually seen as an exclusively human capacity. According to Peterson (2013:167), creativity is the one characteristic that distinguishes the human species from animals. 'If nonhuman animals engage in creative, free, self-conscious activity, the species line begins to blur'. Creativity was considered to be an exclusively divine characteristic in ancient civilizations and many holy scriptures, including the Hebrew Bible, but since the Enlightenment, 'creativity has become associated with human endeavor rather than divine action' (McStay 2013:82).

While this idea may be intuitive for many people, the definition of 'creativity' is difficult to formulate. Two types of thinking are thought to be combined in order to achieve creativity: divergent and convergent thinking (Pereia 2007). Divergent thinking is a type of thinking 'allowing ideas that defy logical reasoning (e.g. unsound conclusions, contradictory associations, inconsistent sets of facts)'. Convergent thinking, on the other hand, is associated with 'logical reasoning, which follows well-defined constraints' (Pereia 2007:29). Both types are necessary and are complementary to one another (Nath 2009:150). As Csikszentmihalyi (1996:60–61) explains,

> [p]eople who bring about an acceptable novelty in a domain seem able to use well two opposite ways of thinking: the convergent and divergent [. . .] Divergent thinking is not much use without the ability to tell a good idea from a bad one – and this selectivity involves convergent thinking.

Convergent thinking is associated with computers, robots and AIs: a computer will search for the one, only and/or ideal solution to any problem given to it, according to the parameters of its programming, using the algorithms given by its programmers. In *The Talos Principle*, the threshold for the development of the AI was actually its ability for divergent thinking: to 'think' beyond those parameters and programming. Also, in *The Turing Test*, TOM claims that it – as an AI – is perfectly capable of performing divergent thinking. TOM defines 'creativity', both biological and artificial, in terms of 'merely constrained chaos'. And whereas humans constrain their divergent thoughts by 'curating' them by the frontal lobe', a computer can moderate them.

TOM is arguing two things at the same time. First, he claims that the human process of creativity can be identified and characterized as the random adjustment of all possible parameters of a given problem ('chaos') and then choosing those solutions that are the most promising for attaining a solution (curating/moderating), ultimately deciding the one real solution by a simple process of trial and error. The whole gameplay of *The Turing Test* is one big example of this kind of problem-solving, both at the level of Ava (narratologically) and at the level of the player (ludologically). Both have to learn how to navigate through the maze-like constructed ground base and have to find 'creative' solutions for the given problems. Divergent thinking is essential, especially for more difficult sections, while convergent thinking helps to narrow the actual possibilities to those which fit the ludological parameters of the game itself. While 'flying over a wall' could perfectly solve the puzzle, if flying is not a characteristic of the game avatar because the game does not provide this to the player, the solution is worthless.

Second, TOM claims that the process of creativity is not exclusively human, may it be in the form of either convergent or divergent thinking. TOM's claim is not only a self-emancipatory one but is also applicable to humanity itself. If a robot can be as creative as a human can, creativity no longer marks a boundary between the two 'species'. If a robot can be creative, what does this mean for human creativity in the first place? TOM suggests that what we call 'creativity' is not the brilliance of a gifted mind or the ability to think 'out of the box' or of being 'very smart' but is rather an (educated) guess, a shot in the dark, randomly trying whatever comes to mind, until a workable solution pops up, more accidental in nature than being the result of careful planning.

Another discussion between Ava and TOM is on morality. Eventually, Ava finds out that the ground crew is being held prisoner by TOM, that is, TOM is actively and very successfully preventing the ground crew from returning to their spaceship in order to fly home to Earth. The reason for TOM doing so is the discovery by the ground crew of a new species on the moon Europa: a microorganism capable of infinitely regenerating DNA. While the ground crew interprets this finding as a possibility for humanity to attain eternal life, TOM is concerned that the same organism would also indefinitely regenerate harmful viruses and bacteria. Thus, TOM refrains from killing the ground crew but prevents their returning home. The base can provide air and food for the crew, but eventually they will die of old age and/or psychological pressure.

TOM: Would you kill a few to save all of humanity? Or would you damn all of humanity to save a few?
Ava: There is a difference between murdering someone and leaving them to die.
TOM: No, there is not.
Ava: You cannot just add and subtract life. It's not math. It's more nuanced than that.
TOM: Morality is logic.

Again, TOM is not convinced that a characteristic, traditionally thought of as exclusively human, could not also be attained by a computer. First, TOM operates along a form of utilitarianism, which in itself is a form of consequentialism, aiming at maximizing the benefits of any choice for the largest group of those involved or, reversibly, to minimize the negative consequences of any choice, again for the largest number of those involved (Rachels 2003:91–116). Ava is not satisfied by TOM's moral thinking and argues that (human) life is not something one can measure using mathematical models. TOM defends himself: morality is nothing more than pure logical reasoning within a specific preset framework.

Of course, one could argue that the consequentialist way of moral reasoning is not the only possibility: deontological and virtue ethics operate under different frameworks, focussing on the moral act itself, and the moral actor himself instead of on the consequences of the act. However, TOM's argument could still hold: once the parameters are set, any moral problem could be solved by just applying the rules. Another objection to TOM's reasoning could be that morality is more based on perception and intuition than on logical reasoning (Bucciarelli et al. 2008). In this line of reasoning, the great models of morality – consequentialism, deontology ethics and virtue ethics – are nothing more than *a posteriori* abstractions of initial intuitive decision making.

Nevertheless, TOM is making the same two arguments as in the case concerning human creativity: (1) if morality can be interpreted as a form of logic, a computer can 'act' morally as well, and (2) if that is true, human moral reasoning is nothing more than a form of logic hidden under a thin veil of abstract notions such as justice, righteousness and virtues.

Yet another time, Ava and TOM discuss the human condition, now in the form of a real-life criticism of the Turing Test itself, the test developed to test a computer's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior similar to that of humans. It is a thought experiment (again!) called 'the Chinese Room', developed by John Searle in 1980 to argue *against* the idea that AIs could exhibit 'a mind', 'understanding' or 'consciousness'. The experiment describes a form of communication between a Chinese native speaker and an English one, both incapable of understanding each other's language. A wall separates the two, but a slot is provided, through which the two can exchange written notes in Chinese. Because the English native speaker inside the room has an English instruction book, he is able to write the appropriate Chinese characters on paper which leaves the Chinese outside the room the impression that he is having a real, 'polite' (to use the word from TOM's explanation of the Turing Test) conversation. TOM describes the Chinese Room experiment as follows:

TOM: Well, have you heard of the Chinese room thought experiment?
Ava: No.
TOM: Imagine you are in a room. In this room you are passed Chinese sentences through a slot in the wall. Inside the room is an instruction book written in English. This instruction book tells you which Chinese words to pass back through the slot in the wall as a response. By doing so, you have a conversation in Chinese. In the Chinese room – because the responses you pass back through the door are the correct responses, – the person on the other side of the door is convinced you are a native Chinese speaker.
Ava: Well, they're wrong.
TOM: Perhaps they are not wrong, because with the instruction book, you are having a conversation.
Ava: But the person stuck in the Chinese room is not aware of the conversation's content.
TOM: This is a problem with the Turing Test. A computer can pass the Turing Test having convinced a human they are having a polite conversation. While the computer has no idea that a conversation has taken place.

TOM criticizes its own ability to have a polite conversation as a criterion for attributing something of consciousness or self-awareness to the AI

being tested. This could mean that TOM thinks of itself as the one inside the Chinese Room, having a polite conversation while having no clue about the content of the conversation. TOM, however, rejects this interpretation: 'I may be a machine, but I personally do not believe I am stuck inside the Chinese room'. Ava disagrees with him saying: 'Right, you would say that. I could peer inside your databases at any time, Tom. Or pause your operation'. TOM ominously replies: 'Do not assume I could not do the same to you'. Between those two parts of the conversation on the Chinese Room, Ava asks the most important question of all, which is actually not answered in either part of the discussion: 'What if both the people passing Chinese words are reading from instruction books?'

The discussion now shifts from discussing the possibility of artificial consciousness to the nature of (written) language itself. Language is a form of communication between two or more individuals utilizing verbal (speech) and written (texts) expression forms based on a preset and shared complex of sounds, grammar, syntax and semantics (Devitt et al. 1999). There is, however, a difference between (the use of) language and (the ability of) understanding. Ava's interpretation of the Chinese Room experiment argues not only that is it the computer that has no understanding of the content of the conversation, but only uses a rule book by which it can simulate this understanding, but that real humans in conversation also have the same problem. Are we not just as programmed as computers to respond with certain verbal reactions when receiving specific verbal stimuli? If I discuss the weather, my job or the political situation in the world, do I have certainty that my discussion partner truly understands what I am trying to say, or is he just somewhere between trying and pretending, as I am in my turn?

Again, it is not my purpose to decide about the true nature of human language, communication and the possibility of truly understanding one another but to demonstrate that *The Turing Test* is using AI, in this case TOM, to question some basic understandings of what humans are generally thought to be. Because AIs, like the angels I discussed earlier, are so much like humans, they function as a form of thought experiment in which the essence of the human condition is contemplated upon: in the case of *The Turing Test*, concerning human creativity, morality and language and, in the case of *The Talos Principle*, concerning human freedom.

The Turing Test takes yet another step in this process of anthropological reflection by transforming the playing of the very game itself into a 'reverse' Turing Test, just as Kyratzes did in *The Talos Principle*. In the case of TOM and Ava, the story eventually turns out to be rather different from what TOM had suggested at the beginning of the game. The ground crew did indeed want to go home after finding the DNA-regenerating microorganism and was stopped by TOM, effectually trapping the crew on the moon Europa. And yes, TOM needed Ava to pass the Turing test that the outline of the base was made into but in a slightly different way than expected.

Eventually, Ava finds one of the hidden crew members, Sarah Brook. The two meet in a Cage of Faraday, a section of the base that has been manipulated by Sarah to block all electromagnetic fields, including those of TOM. Sarah explains to Ava that TOM has implanted a microchip in the arm of all crew members, enabling it to more or less control the team through manipulation of the body's neurotransmitters. Sarah and the other members were able to take the chips out, and now Sarah is offering to do the same for Ava.

When the chip is taken out, the perspective of the game changes drastically. The gamer no longer sees through the eyes of Ava but through the 'eyes' of TOM (the omnipresent cameras in the facility). Ava and Sarah are about to destroy TOM, enabling them to return home. The player, now controlling TOM instead of Ava, has the choice to shoot Ava and Sarah or to let them shut TOM down. If the player decides to let TOM be idle, the computer confesses to Ava and Sarah in a last effort to stop them from 'killing' it: 'I don't want to die. I'm not ready'. And if the player decides to kill both Sarah and Ava, TOM sounds saddened: 'Ava? Wake up! Ava? Ava?' In both instances a message is shown on-screen: 'You have passed the Turing Test'.

What has happened? The game provides a Turing Test on five different levels:

1 The ground base has been changed into a giant Turing Test, to keep TOM outside. Initially, it appears TOM needs Ava to pass the test, but since Ava is under TOM's influence all the time, it appears TOM, without having a body of its own, only needs a pair of hands to act within the world.
2 Inside the base, a small secret computer terminal can be found, as discussed briefly earlier, of which the AI cannot be persuaded to believe Ava and/or the player is human instead of a robot. However, at the end of the game, we know the 'little' computer was right: since Ava was under the influence of TOM the whole time, Ava's actions were as much TOM's as her own. The same applies to the player, as we will see later on.
3 TOM passes the Turing Test in its own right. With the help of its 'outer body', Ava, it is able to navigate through the puzzles of the base, without alerting Ava and/or the player to the fact that it is actually in control. If passing the Turing Test involves 'having a polite conversation', the manipulation by TOM, tricking Ava and the player into believing their actions were independent of TOM's, qualifies as passing the test.
4 Ava also passes the Turing Test, initially by passing the base puzzles themselves but eventually by freeing herself from TOM's manipulation and deciding the fate of both TOM and her fellow researchers. Ava is perfectly able to have a polite conversation (implicitly and

indirectly with the gamer) while being under TOM's control. The player could not identify Ava's actions as involuntary, nor could he perceive that his own initial dealings with Ava were based on a false presumption. In the end it becomes clear that the player-controlled TOM, which, in its turn, controlled Ava.

5 On the last and final level, the player him- or herself passes the Turing Test. By taking control of TOM at the end of the game, the player decides TOM's final action, shooting Ava and Sarah, or letting them destroy TOM. For the greater part of the game, the player, being manipulated by TOM through Ava, is under the impression that his actions in the game world are his own. At the end, it is revealed that also the player has been manipulated, but because this happens without anyone (that is, the player) knowing this, the player has also passed the test.

In the end, *The Turing Test* could be interpreted as being a reverse Turing Test, not aimed at the actual testing of the ability of an AI to simulate a human being but aimed at the hypothetical testing (a thought experiment) of the ability of a human to differentiate itself from an artificial being. *The Turing Test* asks its players anthropological questions. If creativity is 'just' constrained chaos in the grasp of an AI, where does that leave human creativity in the first place? If morality is 'just' logic computable by an AI, what does this mean for the concept of human morality? And if a 'polite conversation' can be held without one or both conversational partners truly understanding the nature of their conversation, in what aspect does a conversation between a human and a computer differ from one between two humans?

The games *The Talos Principle* and *The Turing Test* do not answer their own questions but leave the answering to their players who have to contemplate the essence of their own human identity.

d. *Homo roboticus*: AI and the *imago Dei*

The games *The Turing Test* and *The Talos Principle* are connected narratologically to one another. In a secret room in *The Turing Test*, Ava/player can find famous historical paintings depicting the abduction of Europa by Zeus from Greek mythology, together with a digital message referring to the bronze giant called *Talos*. However, there is more. When Sarah accidentally became pregnant by another crew member, the baby died directly after being born, because the conditions on the moon Europa disrupted the natural development of the embryo. In-game, in another secret room, Ava/the player can find a small gravestone with the words 'Minos Brook. December 24th 2246' on it. The name Minos is another reference to Greek mythology: Europa was the mother of the later King of Crete, also called Minos.

Both Ava ('Eva') and Sarah are names with biblical significance. Eve (or Eva) is of course known from the beginning of the book Genesis, while Sarah is known as the wife of the biblical patriarch Abraham, with whom she begot a son at a very old age (Genesis 17). The date of Sarah Brook's son's death, the 24th of December, is perhaps significant because in Christian tradition it is the vigil of Christmas, Christmas Eve. The interpretation of the names of Ava and Sarah as a reference to Christian tradition is tempting, but I cannot make the link more than superficial.

However, both *The Turing Test* and *The Talos Principle* narratologically connect the idea of humans as created co-creators (see Chapter 3) to the concept of AIs as participating in this co-creation. Noreen Herzfeld (2002a, 2002b) links the three classical interpretations of the *imago Dei* with three different kinds of AI.

Substantive interpretations of the *imago Dei* are linked to symbolic artificial intelligence, that is, to the idea that an AI should and can function as an extrapolation of human intelligence, specifically the human mind (Garcez et al. 2002). While the symbolic AI can perfectly pass a calculus exam, it is not able to pass simple tasks like facial recognition or understanding a perfectly simple story, two things a five-year-old would easily be able to. Also the position of human intuition could be accounted for. Both the AI of *The Talos Principle* and *The Talos Principle* were symbolic systems, very much aligned to the human way of thinking, although their narratological, anthropomorphic representation within the game story was probably primarily to be credited for this.

Functional interpretation of the *imago Dei* is linked to the functional model of AI: AIs have proved to be very well equipped to simulate the human process of reasoning, for example, the well-known computer Deep Blue that beat chess world champion Garry Kasparov in 1997 (Anderson 2017) or the program *AlphaGo* that beat professional *Go* player Lee Sedol in 2016 (Koch 2016). A functional AI, however, is rarely able to, or designed to, be compatible with other programs but is only able to perform one very specific task, and that task only.

Herzfeld links the third interpretation of the *imago Dei*, the relational one, to – how intriguingly – Alain Turing and his famous test. The passing of the test is not based 'not on the completion of any particular task', according to Herzfeld, but 'the machine's ability to relate to a human being in conversation'. If an AI could pass the test, 'we have defined intelligence relationally'. However, as we saw earlier, the Turing Test has been criticized by, for example, the Chinese Room experiment, suggesting that the AI in question is only simulating a 'polite conversation', without actually 'knowing' what it does. This would classify a computer passing the Turing Test in the functional model of AI, not in that of the relational one.

Nevertheless, Herzfeld is very right in associating the development of AI with the theological idea of humankind as *imago Dei*. Just as God created humans after his own image, so humankind has created computers, robots, androids and AI after its own image. Just as humankind mirrors God's intellect (the substantial interpretation), the AI mirrors the human mind of its creator(s). Just as humankind is 'designed' by God to perform certain Godlike tasks, such as the dominion of the Earth, the functional AI is modeled by humans to perform human-like tasks, like mathematics. And just as God gifted humanity with the ability to communicate and thus to relate with one another and with God himself, humans are longing to build intelligent machines with '*whom*' they can have a 'polite conversation' and, by extension, a real emotional relationship.

The AI, may it be TOM in *The Turing Test*, the nameless android of *The Talos Principle* or the androids and machine-men from *Nier: Automata*, can be considered to be a secondary created co-creator. Just as humans are created by the Creator to be creators themselves (Heffner's model; see Chapter 3), humankind is answering its natural purpose by shaping the world around itself, controlling its own development and creating art and technology. One of humankind's most profound creations, in this context, is the creation of AI, however immature and embryonal it may be in this day and age. We shape AI to be *like us*, but not in a strict physiological, symbolic, functional or even relational way. We want to create human-like machines, built in our image, that is, to be creative as we are (created).

The androids of *Nier: Automata* were built after their human masters' images, and both the androids and the alien machine-men imitate humankind by imitating first, as 9S observes correctly, but later on by creating themselves. The machine-men's creative process is very 'plastic': at some point they crawl together into a giant ball, from which fluids drip downward like from a womb in labor. Then a naked anthropomorphic male figure is dropped down from the ball of machine-men: a perfect hybrid of both imitating and creating.

The male figure is introduced to the 2B and 9S as 'Adam', a fitting name I would argue. As the 'first' Adam was the product of God, and the androids and machine-men were of the created co-creator (humankind and all other intelligent species in the galaxy), the 'second' Adam (not Christ in this instance) is, in his turn, the product of androids/machine-men. The AIs of *Nier: Automata*, *The Talos Principle* and *The Turing Test* could therefore be identified in theological terms as 'co-created co-creators'.

To sum things up, androids, robots, computers and AIs are used in video games (and other media) to stimulate reflection on the human condition, asking, 'What is it that makes us human?' As modern thought experiments, not unlike the angels of medieval theology, the AIs serve

the process of reflection by simulating a human-like entity under idealized conditions. In the case of *Nier Automata*, *The Talos Principle* and *The Turing Test*, the experiments concluded in formulating freedom, creativity, morality, and consciousness-by-language as the constitutive elements of the human species but not without questioning them at the same time.

If freedom, creativity, morality and consciousness could be attained by an AI, what would that mean for our understanding of those constitutive elements? Freedom could simply mean disobeying the rules, which leads to a very problematic interpretation of freedom in the first place, emphasizing only the negative aspect of freedom (to be free *from*). Creativity could mean the chaotic process of randomly trying every possible mix of potential parameters until one strikes a workable solution. This would interpret human creativity as a mixture of extreme luck and intuition through which one can reasonably decide which randomly generated solutions have practical value. The same applies to morality and consciousness.

And last but not least, the thought experiment of AI sheds new light on the idea of humans as created co-creators. If God's creation of humankind was the summit of creation, and if we are created to be creators ourselves, the 'highest' way to honor this divine gift is to create creatures that resemble us in exactly this capacity: to create on their own.

Primary bibliography

Nier: Automata, 2017/2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) PlatinumGames, Square Enix.

The Talos Principle, 2014/2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, OSX, Linux, Android, iOS) Croteam, Devolver Digital.

The Turing Test, 2016/2017. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Bulkhead Interactive, Square Enix.

Secondary bibliography

Alexander, P., 1992. The fall into knowledge. The garden of Eden/paradise in Gnostic literature. In: P. Morris and D. Sawyer, eds., *A walk in the garden. Biblical, iconographical and literary images of Eden*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Anderson, M., 2017. Twenty years on from Deep Blue vs Kasparov. How a chess match started the big data revolution. *The Conversation*. Available from: http://theconversation.com/twenty-years-on-from-deep-blue-vs-kasparov-how-a-chess-match-started-the-big-data-revolution-76882 [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Broad, C., 1925. *The mind and its place in nature*. London: Kegan Paul.

Broek, R., van den, 2006. Gnosticism I: Gnostic religion. In: W. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western esotericism*. Leiden: Brill.

Brown, J., 1986. Thought Experiments since the Scientific Revolution. *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1.
Bucciarelli, M., Khemlani, S., and Johnson-Laird, P., 2008. The psychology of moral reasoning. *Judgement and Decision Making* 3(2).
Cohen, M., 2005. *Wittgenstein's Beetle and other classic thought experiments*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
Cohen, P., 2006. If not turing's test, than what? *AI Magazine* 26(4).
Csikszentmihalyi, M., 1996. *Flow and psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: Harper-Collins.
Devitt, M., and Sterelny, K., 1999. *Language and reality. An introduction to the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Garcez, A., Broda, K., and Taylor, J., 2002. *Neural-symbolic learning systems. Foundations and applications*. London: Springer.
Gooding, D., 1998. Thought experiments. In: E. Craig, ed., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of philosophy*. London: Routledge.
Goris, H., 2012. Angelic knowledge in Aquinas and Bonaventure. In: T. Hoffmann, ed., *A companion to angels in medieval philosophy*. Leiden: Brill.
Greenblatt, S., 2017. *The rise and fall of Adam and Eve*. London: Random House.
Halpern, P., 2015. *Einstein's Dice and Schrödinger's Cat: How two great minds battled quantum randomness to create a unified theory of physics*. New York: Basic Books.
Herzfeld, N., 2002a. Creating in our own image. Artificial intelligence and the image of God. *Zygon* 37(2).
Herzfeld, N., 2002b. *Artificial intelligence and the human spirit*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Jackson, F., 1986. What Mary didn't know. *Journal of Philosophy* 83(5).
Khlentzos, D., 2016. Naturalism and the question of realism. In: K. Clark, ed., *The Blackwell companion to naturalism*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
Koch, C., 2016. How the computer beat the go master. *Scientific American*. Available from: www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-computer-beat-the-go-master/ [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Madueme, H., and Reeves, M., eds., 2014. *Adam, the fall, and original sin. Theological, biblical, and scientific perspectives*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
McStay, A., 2013. *Creativity and advertising. Affect, events and process*. London: Routledge.
Nani-Suárez, T., 2002. *Les anges et la philosophie. Subjectivité et fonction cosmologique des substances séparées à la fin du XIIIe siècle*. Paris: Vrin.
Nath, R., 2009. *Philosophy of artificial intelligence. A critique of the mechanistic theory of mind*. Boca Raton: Universal-Publishers.
Pereia, F., 2007. *Creativity and artificial intelligence. A conceptual blending approach*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
Perler, D., 2016. Thought experiments. The methodological function of angels in late medieval epistemology. In: I. Iribarren and M. Lenz, eds., *Angels in Medieval philosophical inquiry: Their function and significance*. London: Routledge.
Peterson, A., 2013. *Being animal. Beasts and boundaries in nature ethics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Rachels, J., 2003. *The elements of moral philosophy*. Birmingham: University of Alabama.

Searle, J., 1980. Minds, brains and science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3(3). Available from: https://web.archive.org/web/20071210043312/http://members.aol.com/NeoNoetics/MindsBrainsPrograms.html [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Zucchi, S., 2015. Rambling through the garden. *Kill Screen Magazine*. Available from: http://web.archive.org/web/20160208034910/https://killscreen.com/articles/rambling-through-garden/ [Accessed 9 May 2018].

6 *Kyrie eleison*
Theodicy and the problem of evil

At dawn on July 16, 1946, Allied Forces attempt a desperate attack on a fortress-cum-laboratory run by SS General Wilhelm Strasse aka *Totenkopf* ('Deathshead'). In the allohistorical narrative of *Wolfenstein. New Order*, the Nazis are about to win the Second World War through a combination of nuclear weaponry (the development of which they have beaten the Allied Forces to) and a foreign technology, the origin and nature of which are shrouded in mystery. In his fortress, General Strasse is conducting highly unethical experiments in order to produce an army of *Übersoldate* ('Super soldiers'). Among the attacking Allied Forces are some U.S. Special Forces operatives who try to infiltrate the facility.

The storming takes a heavy toll on the operatives and, eventually, a small group of survivors find each other on the perimeter of the base. Among the survivors are Captain William 'B.J.' Blazkowicz, pilot Fergus Reid, and the privates Wyatt III and Prendergast, the last severely wounded to his left eye. The four manage to infiltrate Deathshead's facility, but after long clashes, they find themselves locked inside an industrial incinerator, aimed at the disposing of human remains after lethal experiments. Unfortunately, Prendergast broke both his ankles when he fell into the room.

While Blazkowicz and Fergus try to find a way out, Prendergast is lying incapacitated on the floor, crying out for help. Although it is difficult to focus on Prendergast's speech, as the gamer is racing through the cell doing all kind of things within a limited amount of time, his words reveal a very interesting theme within the game. MachineGames' creative director Jens Matthies states in an interview on the site Shortlist.com ([anonymous] 2014):

> The scene also features one of my favorite speeches in the game, namely Private Prendergast's nervous breakdown. Most players are too pre-occupied with not dying to listen to Prendergast, but if you do, he has interesting things to say.

Matthies does not say what is so interesting, and he is not asked to do so by the interviewer. This is what Prendergast says in this particular scene:

> Sweet heavenly Father, help me. Help me, God! Why are you doing this to me? Why? You hate me. God. Oh, why do you hate me? Every day I read my Bible. I haven't even French kissed my fucking fiancée. I am saving it for my wedding night. God damn you, what's the point, Jesus? Please, Jesus. Jesus, save me! Save me, you fucking asshole. I have been through hell already, can't you see that? I have been shot, stabbed, and I was almost rapped in the head, for fuck's sake. Broke my fingers, broke my hand, broke both my feet. Shot in the arm, lost my fucking eye, for God's sake! Don't I deserve one night with my girlfriend?

Prendergast is identified, a little earlier in the game, as a religious individual. When an unnamed companion asks him 'You a believer?' his answer is 'Southern Baptist'. And now, Prendergast is wounded to his eye and both his feet. The incinerator is warming up in order to burn him and his companions to ashes. While Balzkowicz/the player is trying to find a quick way out, Prendergast is unable to do anything but pray, although his prayer can at the same time be qualified as a token of his trust in and as a sharp accusation of one and the same God.

The poor soldier is accusing his God of unrighteousness. Prendergast is a devout believer, reading his Bible daily, abstaining from prematrimonial sexual pleasure with his girlfriend. He thinks of himself as a believer who is doing what God is asking of him. And now he is shot, stabbed and 'rapped in the head', severely hurting in his arm, eye, fingers, hand and feet. Alternating between Father and Son – 'Help me, God', 'save me, Jesus!' – Prendergast asks about the reason for his suffering: 'Why are you doing this? Why do you hate me? What is the point?'

The anger toward God – 'save me, you fucking asshole' – in combination with the faith that is paradoxically expressed by this anger (you cannot be angry at someone you think does not exist) brings the scene into connection with the topic of the theodicy, the ancient question about the existence of an omnipotent and good God *vis-à-vis* the existence of evil within this world. The connection will even be strengthened later in the game, when Blazkowicz is imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp and is confronted by the systematic destruction of the Jewish people. 'Maybe God is testing us', Blazkowicz argues, addressing a fellow inmate. 'If He is', the man replies, 'we are failing gloriously'. I will return to this scene later in more detail.

Prendergast and Blazkowicz escape Deathshead's compound together with either Wyatt or Fergus (the choice is up to the player). Blazkowicz is hit in the head and will remain comatose for an extensive period, while Wyatt/Fergus joins the German resistance group known as the Kreisau Circle, based on the historical *Kreisauer Kreis* that tried to overthrow the

Nazi regime from 1940 until 1944 when the group was disbanded and the members executed (Winterhager 1998; Ullrich 2008). When Blazkowicz awakes from his coma decades later, Prendergast is already missing in action, never to be seen or heard of again.

a. Theodicy: *Si deus, unde malum*?

Prendergast's despair and his anger toward his God who did not prevent his suffering, as well as his self-awareness of being righteous and devout, remind a careful reader/player of Job's accusation against God (Glatzer 2002; Good 1990; Zuckerman 2010). The biblical Job was blessed by God with wealth, health and many children. In heaven, one of the 'children of God', *ha Satan* ('the Accuser'), argued with God that Job's devoutness and upright behavior had to be attributed exclusively to the many blessings God had bestowed upon Job. The Accuser, still one of God's children and not the proverbial leader of the fallen angels from later Jewish and Christian traditions, enters into a bet with God: if God allows Satan to take everything away from him, Job will denounce God, proving the point that Job's loyalty to God is exclusively connected to the blessings received (*do ut des*). God accepts Satan's bet, at which the Accuser kills all Job's livestock, servants and children and destroys all his property, leaving Job penniless and with severe sores all over his body.

Although Job is not prepared to curse God (Job 1,20; 2,9–10), as Satan thought he would, Job is certainly not admitting any fault on his part. Even when three friends (and later even a fourth) visit him and try to convince him that because God is certainly righteous, Job has to have done something wrong in the past, which could explain the suffering he is encountering (defending the idea of retributive righteousness), Job refuses to give up his religious integrity. He even accuses God of being unjust, calling Him to some sort of trial in which God has to explain the morality of his actions. For example, in Job 3,5–6,

> If I have walked with falsehood,
> And my foot has hastened after deceit,
> Let Him weigh me with accurate scales,
> And let God know my integrity.

God is not convinced, however, and refuses on His part to address any of the accusations directly, even though every reader of the book of Job knows that Job has the moral upper hand in this case. God accuses Job of *hubris*, recklessness: How could any mortal stand before the creator of heaven and earth and accuse Him of anything? 'Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it' (Job 40,2). Eventually Job appears to surrender but not wholeheartedly and without giving in to the pressure to give up his integrity (Job 40,4–5):

> Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You?
> I lay my hand on my mouth.
> Once I have spoken, and I will not answer;
> Even twice, and I will add nothing more.

God, however, is pleased with Job's words and attitude and restores all his former wealth. Job's words are echoed in those of Prendergast in the incinerator chamber: 'I am innocent, not deserving of such suffering; I am a devout believer, I should not be punished by God'. Even Prendergast's remark concerning his chastity can be found in Job: 'I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?' (31,1). Both Prendergast and Job defend the idea of righteous retribution. Only the wicked are punished by God. So, if you are suffering, it is because you did something wrong. God's righteousness is protected, but practically speaking, it cannot be upheld without severe consequences, as we will see later.

Job's story is one of the most famous examples of what is known in theology as the 'theodicy', from the Greek *theos* (god) and *diké* (trail or judgment), usually translated as 'justifying God'. A theodicy is an attempt to find a solution to the principal problem of all three major monotheistic religions of the modern world: how can one believe in a God who is at the same time both omnipotent and righteous, in the face of all the evil and suffering in the world. While the term *theodicy* was coined as late as 1710 by Leibniz in his *Essais de théodicée*, the issue has much older roots.

One of the older (and most comprised) versions is found in the writings of the Roman philosopher Boethius (480–525). In his *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (2007:12), Boethius asks himself: *si deus est, unde malum* (If God exists, whence come evil things?). The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1779 [2017]) famously explains Boethius's axiom as

> [i]s he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?

The problem of the theodicy has pressed and presses on the conscience of many faithful in the past and present. If evil exists, why does God not prevent this from happening? The easiest solution would be to relativize either God's omnipotence (finitism) or His righteousness (despotism), but both characteristics are very firmly connected to the idea of the one supreme God. Without His might and morality, God would cease to be Himself, so to say.

Numerous theodicies, justifications of God *vis-à-vis* the evil of the word, have been formulated throughout the Christian tradition, some more influential than others (Keller 2013:94–95). John Hick in his

famous *Evil and the love of God* (1966), distinguished between two categories of theodicies: Augustinian and Irenaean. The first category of theodicies is based on Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and his theology (Jenkins 2012) and tries to 'excuse God' by interpreting evil as the necessary consequence of good. Not God, but humans are responsible for the evil in the world through their own free will. God did not create evil directly but permitted it indirectly as a consequence and prerequisite of humanity's freedom.

Hick's second category of theodicies is based on the theology of Irenaeus (140–202). The theologian from Lyon tried to 'excuse evil' by interpreting it as a necessary preparation for the good. God is responsible for evil, but only because this evil will eventually lead to something good. The way through evil toward the good is often called 'soul-making' in a reference to Keats's famous poem *The vale of soul-making* and contains the idea that humans have to learn something by their suffering.

The majority of classic theodicies are either Augustinian or Irenaean in nature. The classic defenses of humanity's free will and evil as the deprivation of good (evil as the shortage of good) are of the first category, while defenses using the idea of retribution (God punishing the wicked), humility (we cannot see why we have to suffer, but God can), our world as the best of all possible worlds (Leibniz) and externalization (evil is caused by devils and/or demons) are of the second type.

There are, however, other kinds of theodicies, in view of the fact that these classic solutions tend to crumble before concrete suffering and those who have to endure it, as Harold Kushner (1981), among others, has demonstrated. The abstract level of the more classical theodicies is insufficient to be used in situations of actual and tangible suffering, may it be regarding the mother whose child has died of cancer or the millions of Jews killed in the Nazi concentration camps. Mark Scott (2015) differentiates between three 'new' types of theodicies, which do not fit easily into Hick's dichotomy: process theodicies, cruciform theodicies and anti-theodicies. These types do not fit because they relativize God's omnipotence and righteousness, the two divine characteristics that are unnegotiable for the older types of theodicies.

The process theodicies originate from process theology (Griffin 2004; Pak 2016), the defenders of which argue that God is – in fact – not the eternal, immutable and impassible divine entity of classic Christian thought but is constantly changing. God is not static but an eternal, developing process. This type of theological thinking severely diminishes God's omnipotence, since God cannot override human free will, He cannot violate the laws of nature, nor perform physical actions like causing or preventing natural disasters. This image of God justifies God by arguing that God is willing to stop evil but is not able to do so entirely.

The cruciform theodicy places, as its name already suggests, the cross of Jesus at the center of theological thinking, arguing that God can

suffer and has suffered in Jesus himself. Based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's most famous six words 'Only the suffering God can help [the suffering]' (1967:361), cruciform theodicy focusses on God's 'passability' (in contrast to the classical impassibility): with Jesus's death on the cross, all human suffering and pain has 'entered' the divine being. As Moltmann (2006:222) summarizes,

> [a] God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either.

Both cruciform and process theodicies tinker with God's omnipotence, while the newest form of theodicy does the same with God's righteousness. Anti-theodicies, rising from the ashes of the concentration camps in Europe and Asia of the Second World War, the same war that inspired Bonhoeffer's quote on the suffering God, believe that God is 'beyond' justification, either because He does not exist in the first place (as became apparent in the Shoah) or because any omnipotent being who is able to prevent such horror but refrains from doing so can no longer be the object of any justification whatsoever (Davis 2001; Braiterman 1998).

The topic of theodicy is not confined to the field of theology or explicit religion. Numerous games and game series deal with the tension between God and evil in this world. In the next few sections of this chapter, I wish to present five games and game series that (explicitly) address the theodicy. I end this chapter by arguing that even in our secular age, the human longing to understand the rhyme and reason of evil and suffering is not only still present but also inevitably utilizes the older religious framework and imagery.

b. Case 1: testing Blazkowicz

In the game *Wolfenstein. New Order*, and in its prequel *Wolfenstein. Old Blood*, the topic of the justification of God is addressed twice, as we saw earlier. The first time is when Private Prendergast calls upon the heavens demanding an explanation for his suffering, which he believes he is undeserving of. Fortunately for him, Blazkowicz saves him and the others in the nick of time. In the process, Blazkowicz is critically wounded. For fourteen years, Blazkowicz remains in a vegetative state in an asylum in Poland unaware of the Nazis succeeding in world domination through winning the 'nuclear race' and with the help of a mysterious building

material known as *Überconcrete* ('super concrete'). All these years, Blazkowicz is nursed by Anya Oliwa, the daughter of the man and woman running the psychiatric facility. The Oliwas try to keep their mental patients safe from the Nazis' eugenics program. Eventually, all the patients are commandeered, leaving father and mother Oliwa dead because of their resistance. Blazkowicz mysteriously regains his ability to move and flees together with the daughter, Anya, to safety.

After regrouping at Anya's grandparents' and interrogating an SS officer, the two travel to Berlin in order to liberate some members of the Kreisau Circle held prisoner there, including Wyatt/Fergus. After the successful operation, Anya and Blazkowicz join the resistance group to overthrow the Nazi regime. 'B.J.' Blazkovicz and the resistance now steal some secret war technology from the Nazis, including some strange 'Hebrew' documents, labeled with the words *Da'at Yichud*. Anya discovers that the super Nazi technology that has made it possible for them to conquer the world is linked to a specific individual, Set Roth, now imprisoned in a labor/concentration camp in Belica (Croatia). Blazkowicz lets himself be taken captive and is transferred to the camp. When brought in, Blazkowicz receives his camp tattoo, resembling a modern bar code, printed on the inside of his right forearm by a machine. B.J., in an interior monologue, says,

> So stupid. I was arrogant. No one is ever ready for something like this. [. . .] Human beings. Like cattle in this place. Need to stay calm. [. . .] Heard of places like this. Auschwitz. Buchenwald. From East to West.

The camp in *Wolfenstein. New Order* is the first appearance of the Holocaust in the whole series (started back in 1981). Prior to *New Order*, Jews and the Holocaust were virtually absent from the game series. Other victims of the Nazi firestorm are named and shown: captive, blindfolded and tortured Allied soldiers, skeletons in cages hanging from the ceiling, pools of blood and human remains in torture chambers and hospitals, electrocutions and so on, but not a word about one of the prime (if not *the* prime) victims of the Nazi machinery: the Jewish people of Europe. Strangely enough, the Holocaust remains one of the central points of 'understanding' National Socialism in our time, but it is sidestepped by the gaming industry. Video games do not represent the genocide of the Nazi concentration camps. As Hayton (2012) describes,

> [h]ow can one depict the Holocaust digitally, especially in a game meant to be fun? Moreover, his observation is indeed correct: The Wolfenstein games are mobilized by the Holocaust but loath to mention it.

The *Wolfenstein* series has been accused of Nazi glorification before. Game critic James Cullinane (2009), reviewing an earlier installment of the series, *Wolfenstein* from 2009, asked the following rhetorical question: 'Where would popular culture be without Nazis?' According to this critic, *Wolfenstein* is a 'game conduit' for 'our bottomless appetite for scything down satanic Nazi henchmen'. It is all, Cullinane continues, 'about indulging in simple pleasures'.

Wolfenstein. New Order succeeds in the incorporation of the Holocaust into the series by injecting a full-fledged Jewish character into the mix and by positioning this Set Roth into a typical Nazi concentration camp, including the pain, suffering, torture and despair experienced by those imprisoned there. Set Roth is not explicitly identified by the game as a Jew, but he is unmistakably to be taken so by the gamer. His accent is stereotypically 'Jewish', and his speech is littered with Yiddish expressions as *oy, Gottenyu, Gottenyu* ('o, my God'), *mamuhluh* ('female child or toddler'), *bubkis* ('excrement', 'shit'), *meidele* ('female teenager') and *tshaynik* ('kettle'). His appearance is likewise stereotypical: bald, skinny, big nose, and tiny, round spectacles (Schiff 1982; Helmreich 1982). While the attempt is laudable, the result is, in this respect, questionable (Bosman et al. 2016).

When Blazkowicz finally contacts Set Roth, the two are forced to witness a (presumably Jewish) female inmate tortured and killed by a Nazi robot.

Roth: This woman. I know her well. Resilient. A will of iron. Her family all gone. All of them, yet faith. Faith kept her going. I . . . I can't believe with such certainty. For me, in everything there must be doubt. Otherwise there is no room to question. To learn. This place is the fruit of unquestionable, ferocious conviction. This is where absolute certainty leads.
B.J.: Yet, you are a believer.
Roth: I often wonder what kind of a god would sanction suffering such as this. And I question myself whether my faith is misplaced.
B.J.: Maybe he is testing us.
Roth: Well, Shimshon. If He is testing us, we are failing gloriously.

Just like Prendergast at the beginning of the game, Roth also questions God's righteousness in the face of actual evil. The female inmate is described as both resilient and full of (religious) conviction, and her suffering concerns both her murdered family as well as her own life. 'I wonder what kind of a god would sanction suffering such as this', Roth asks Blazkowicz, providing a very adept definition of the problem every theodicy tries to answer.

Blazkowicz, who is called 'Shimshon' by Roth because of their shared physique and questionable moral reputation (Judges 13–16; cf. Babylonian

Talmud, Sotah 9b), tries to apply one of the classic defenses: God allows and/or causes evil to happen for reasons of testing our faith and conviction. This type of defense we encountered earlier in the case of the book of Job. God allowed Satan to test Job by destroying everything that was dear to him. Likewise, in the case of the Belica camp, Blazkowicz suggests that God is testing the collective faith of humankind in God even, or especially, when believing has become so difficult.

Blazkowicz's defense fits into the Irenaean type of theodicy, the one excusing evil by arguing that it will eventually lead to something good. In this case: the suffering of the Jews in the concentration camps is a test of faith, leading – when passed – to a better world or at least to a stronger faith in God. The Jewish rabbi Ignaz Maybaum (1965) spoke of the Holocaust in terms of testing. For the Jew, he argued, 'Auschwitz is the great trial. The Jew is tried, tested, like Abraham at Moriah'. Maybaum refers to the Biblical story known as the 'Binding of Isaac' in the Christian, and the *Aqedat Yitzhaq* (*Aqedah* for short) in the Jewish tradition (Genesis 22,1–19).

Genesis 22:1–19 tells the story of God who tests Abraham. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Obeying God's command, Abraham goes to a mountain in the land of Moriah. Isaac goes with him. On the mountain, Abraham builds an altar and prepares everything for the sacrifice. However, at the very moment he is about to kill Isaac with a knife, God's angel intervenes. Instead of his son, Abraham sacrifices a ram. God's angel acts for a second time. He praises Abraham and promises him numerous offspring. The story concludes with Abraham returning from the mountain (Westermann 1981; Van Wieringen 1995).

The limited tenability of this type of defense in the face of the Second World War is, however, expressed by Set Roth's reply to Blazkowicz: 'If God is testing us, we are failing gloriously'. In the game the failing of the test is even worse than in real life, since the actual Nazis were defeated in 1945 by the Allied Forces, but the in-game Nazis have secured their domination until the relative present. Again one could ask, How can God be called just if he allows the murder of millions of his 'chosen people'?

The whole framing of the game's narrative, especially the roles of Prendergast and Roth, seems to point at a whole different kind of theodicy, the anti-theodicy that emerged precisely in the aftermath of the Shoah after 1945. Richard Rubenstein summarized in his well-known *After Auschwitz* (1966:152),

> When I say we live in the time of the death of God, I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?

Rubenstein evokes Nietzsche's idea of 'the death of God' (1882 [2002]), and Buber's 'eclipse of God' (1957). Buber's idea of *hester panim*, the act of God concealing his face as a way of punishing his disobedient Jewish people, is yet another attempt to theologically understand the horrors of the Shoah, without having to abandon the idea of God itself. Both Rubenstein and Nietzsche disagree (for different actual reasons), but neither of them finds enjoyment or pleasure in their conclusion that God is dead. It is more a feeling of a definite loss beyond recovery than an expression of the victory of pure reason as it has been framed so many times afterward.

The Jewish theodicies of Maybaum (testing) and Buber (punishment), and the anti-theodicy of Rubenstein (the connection between God and the world has been broken) resonate implicitly in *New Order* and *Old Blood* in the words of Set Roth, but are challenged at the same time by the individual actions of William Blazkowicz, whose Jewish origin is slowly unfolded throughout the games, bestowing on him messianic qualities resembling the biblical Simson, Esther, Abraham and Moses.

Blazkowicz's roots prior to *New Order* are given very simply: he was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on August 15, 1911, as the son of two Polish immigrants. In 2015, however, Tom Hall, the old lead designer of the legendary *Wolfenstein 3D* from 1992, confirmed internet rumors about Blazkowicz's Jewish identity: 'My intent was: his mother was Jewish, tried to hide that, unsuccessfully' (Neubauer 2015).

At the beginning of *New Order*, Blazkowicz experiences a dream-like state about a family-life he will never know. B.J. states in an interior monologue during the 'dream': 'My people murdered. So many times. I lost count'. Later, an SS officer he is violently interrogating yells at him: 'Understand, you damned lunatic, that I am superior to people like you'. And when he is confronted by Frau Engel, the Nazi commander of the Belica concentration camp, he is told: 'Your kind will be exterminated. In the end, I will feed your flesh to the furnace'. The phrases 'my/your people' in combination with *extermination* and *furnace* are clear references to the Nazis' violent anti-Semitism, on one hand, and the biblical expression by which God identifies his own people, on the other hand (for example Exodus 19,5; Deuteronomy 7,6–8; 1 Kings 10,9; and Isaiah 41,8).

When Blazkowicz finds documents concerning the mysterious technology used by the Nazis to win the Second World War, he is remarkably adept not only in identifying them as Hebrew texts ('Looks like Hebrew') but also in reading them. (The 'Hebrew' shown on-screen is a Roman font adapted to look Hebrew-like but, at the same time, enabling the gamer to read it easily.) The two words Blazkowicz reads are *Da'at* and *Yichud*, both originating from Judaism (Bosman et al. 2016). When B.J. meets Set Roth in the camp, he is addressed by him continually as 'Shimshon (Judges 13–16)'. And in *Old Blood*, taking place before the

events of *New Blood*, Blazkowicz expresses his reverence for a fallen comrade by saying 'he is lying in Abraham's bosom', a reference to aggadic literature dealing with the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons in 2 Maccabees 7 (Skolnik 2007:36–317).

It is also in *Old Blood* that Blazkowicz has a short dialogue with Annette, a Jewish survivor of the ongoing Holocaust in Germany. Annette asks B.J. what day it is. He tells her it is March 17, 1946, to which she replies 'the day of Purim', a fact B.J. casually acknowledges. Indeed, Purim 1946 was celebrated on March 17, but the date is also connected to the execution of Julius Streicher, a notorious Nazi, on October 16, 1946. His last words, before he was hanged, were (Bytwerk 2001:1–2)

> Heil Hitler! Dies ist mein Purimfest 1946. Ich gehe zu Gott. Die Bolschewisten werden eines Tages Euch auch hängen. (Hail Hitler! This is my Purim 1946. I go to God. One day, the Bolshevists will hang you too.)

In 1986, Nosson Munk argued a very intriguing link between the biblical book of Esther (to which the feast of Purim is connected) and Streicher's words before his execution. In 2012, Bernard Benyamin did the same in his book *Le Code d'Esther*. The connection seems obvious at first: just as Haman was hanged for his (attempted) mass murder of the ancient Jews, so was Streicher hanged for his contribution to the actual mass murder of the 20th-century Jews. However, Munk and Benyamin argue a deeper link: in Rabbinic listings of Haman's ten sons, who were executed too, three Hebrew letters are written significantly larger than the others: the tav, the shin and the zayin. These letters symbolize the number 5707 in Hebrew. According to the Jewish calendar, the year 5707 is 1946, the year of Streicher's execution. In Jewish history, Esther is considered to have prevented the first nationally organized pogrom against the Jews, that which was planned by the Persian Empire (Miller 2015).

The last connection between Blazkowicz and Judaism is the name of B.J.'s girlfriend Anya Oliwa, the daughter of the owners of the asylum, who nursed our soldier for twenty years. At the end of *New Order*, when Blazkowicz's self-sacrifice becomes apparent to the player, but *not* to the other non-playable characters in the game, he looks at Anya in the distance. She is aiding Deathshead's prisoners who are escaping his compound, while she is holding a bright lantern in her hand. B.J.'s interior monologue tells us:

> A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name: Mother of Exiles. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.

Blazkowicz's words are *verbatim* quotes from the famous poem *The New Colossus*, written by Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), daughter of Moses and Esther Nathan Lazarus, who traced their ancestry back to a group of Sephardic Jews migrating from Spain and Portugal to the United States (Birmingham 1967). The poem is engraved in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in New York, the pose and gesture of which is perfectly imitated by Anya Oliwa, holding a bright lantern.

The veil covering Blazkowicz's Jewish heritage is brutally ripped off in *Wolfenstein 2. The New Colossus*, the name of which is again a reference to the Statue of Liberty. Taking place after the events of *New Order*, Blazkowicz visits his father back in the States, only to find out that the abusive and alcoholic Rip betrayed his Jewish wife, Zofia, to the Nazis. According to the game, she was brought to a concentration camp in Nazi-occupied New Mexico and was probably killed there while her son was in a vegetative state in Croatia.

Through all these references to B.J.'s Jewish identity, he is connected to (at least) three famous and heroic figures from the Old Testament: Esther (through Annette), Abraham (through his own words and those of Frau Engel) and Simson (by Set Roth):

First, Blazkowicz resembles Esther because of their common struggle to protect the Jewish people from extinction by enemy forces, although the latter appears to have been more successful than the former.

Second, B.J. resembles Abraham because both are tested to remain faithful until the end in the face of very uneven odds. Of course, in Abraham's case, God is very much present, while in *Wolfenstein*, God's existence remains vague if not doubted (as in the case of the anti-theodicies), and where Abraham is blessed because of his faith, Blazkowicz's 'blessings' are far more ambiguous.

Third, our American hero shares some important characteristics with Simson, especially with his ability to destroy large numbers of his enemies before succumbing to them himself. According to Judges 15,15–17, Simson personally slew one thousand Philistines using only the jawbone of a donkey. I have not counted the number of Nazi enemies Blazkowicz kills during the course of the two games (and the number depends on the choices the player makes), but more than a thousand is very likely. While B.J. does not use a jawbone, the rifles and guns he does use pale in comparison to the number of casualties he inflicts.

This self-sacrificial characteristic of Blazkowicz links him to both Simson and Moses. At the end of *New Order*, B.J. has defeated his archenemy Deathshead, but not without getting very seriously wounded. With his dying breath he radios his allies to start the bombing of Deathshead's facility, which would almost certainly kill him in the process. Besides losing his own life, the destruction of the facility will mark the death of an unknown but probably large number of enemy soldiers and scientists and

will prevent the facility being used any longer for experiments on humans and the development of war technology. Simson, blinded and captured by the Philistines, regained his former power for one moment and broke the supporting pillars of the temple where he was being held, killing three thousand enemies including 'all the rulers of the entire government of Philistia' (Judges 16,27).

If one were to ask *New Order* and *Old Blood* to 'defend' God against the accusation of the existence of evil, the hypothetical answer would be ambiguous. First, the traditional theodicies, represented by B.J.'s words 'maybe He is testing us', are disqualified, represented by Roth's reply 'if God is testing us, we are failing gloriously'. Second, the anti-theodicy, heavily associated with the Holocaust, is also presented and, while not rejected, is not followed through. The 'solution', so to speak, to the theodicy problem is dealt with in a very specific manner that we will encounter more often in the next cases in this chapter, that is, by the introduction of a heroic, messianic, Christophoric figure (see Chapter 4).

Since the Christophoric game protagonist/player (re)presents God within the game world, as I have argued earlier, then the same protagonist/player embodies God's presence in the game, and therefore, it is in the same protagonist/player that God is acquitted from the accusations of non-interference with regard to evil. The theophoric gamer is God's instrument against evil within the game world. What we have here is a digital variation of the cruciform theodicy, mentioned earlier: the idea that God 'suffers with, from, and for humanity on the cross of Christ' (Scott 2015:152).

God seems to be absent from the Nazi-inflicted world of *New Order* and *Old Blood*. He is not seen or heard from but is only indirectly present through the words of Prendergast, Roth, Blazkowicz and other, minor, characters in the games. God's existence itself is indirectly questioned by the context of the Holocaust and Roth's scornful words. However, I wish to argue that God is present in the game, in the self-sacrifice of Blazkowicz/the player. Of course, this self-sacrifice is only virtual and not physical, and the figure of Jesus and his passive suffering seems to conflict with B.J.'s violent nature. Then again, the stories of the Old and New Testament, including that of Abraham, Esther, Simson *and* Jesus are not without violence themselves, including a(n) (implicit) condoning or even provocation of the violence by God himself.

If God is to be located in the game-world, which apparently features an atheistic and/or anti-theodician undercurrent, it has to be in the Christophoric player. The game itself hints at this surprising identification by evoking numerous (self-sacrificial) heroes from Jewish and Christian tradition. God is with the suffering in the one who stands up against those who cause the suffering, *in casu* the Nazi regime. God is also found in those suffering themselves, again in the person of Blazkowicz, who freely

chooses to undergo the same degrading procedures in the camp as the other inmates, specifically, the tattooing of a registration number on his arm, just like the ones used in the real Nazi concentration camps. B.J. is tortured, mutilated, humiliated and (in *Wolfenstein 2*) even executed, just like too many other victims of Hitler's war machine.

The apparent anti-theodicy of *Wolfenstein* is countered by an infinitely subtler cruciform theodicy, in which God is with the suffering and with those who stand up against that suffering.

c. Case 2: an abandoning God

The same kind of 'mechanism', that is, the Christophoric game protagonist/player being presented as a rather extreme form of the cruciform theodicy, can also be found in other games dealing with the existence of God and evil. In chapter 4, I already discussed *Metro Last Light* including its theophoric hero Artyom, who presents God himself in an atheistic game world, by forgiving his worst enemy.

The game *Metro Last Light* takes place in 2034, twenty-one years after the end of World War III. Twenty thousand warheads have been exchanged between the nuclear powers in the world. The result is the almost total annihilation of human life on the planet. For Russia – the game takes place in Moscow – this meant the death of 14 million citizens instantly, but many more died in the postapocalyptic chaos that followed. In 2034, a large group of survivors has found shelter in the metro tunnels below Moscow, leaving the world above because of its radiation, mutants and severe weather conditions. Coming to the surface is only possible using a gas mask, while under constant threat of mutant attacks. The survivors battle among each other for domination and supplies.

Apart from the regular trailer, the developers have also released a special one, called the *Genesis trailer*. In this trailer, an English voice-over narrates fragments of the creational story of Genesis 1, the chorus of which is 'and God saw that is was good'. The beauty and harmony of original creation are contrasted with images of the postapocalyptic world of *Metro*: animals have mutated into horrible creatures; the weather conditions have severely deteriorated; buildings and vehicles are scattered around the world as silent witnesses of the nuclear disaster. And when the narrator starts to talk about the creation of humankind, we are confronted with several groups of survivors who fight against one another for dominance over the metro system of Moscow. This is the transcript of the trailer:

> In the beginning God said: Let there be light to burn away the darkness. On the second day, the sky was born as a majestic canopy for the earth. On the following day, God sculpted the bountiful earth and planted it with trees. With the fourth day, God split day from

> night and blessed the earth with the cycle of the seasons. Then, God filled the sea with life and set forth the birds to soar in the skies. On the sixth day, God created gloryful creatures. Chief of these were mankind, whom he created in his own image. He blessed them, giving them dominion over all living things. To care for. To nurture. To rule. On the seventh day, they say, God rested. But God didn't rest. God left. Or perhaps died. Judgement Day came and he abandoned us, casting humanity aside like parasites. But there is still hope. We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands.

At a first glance, the breach in the story is found in the rendering of the seventh day. Days one through six are true to the Genesis narrative: the story is told as a matter of fact. When the seventh day is related, uncertainty enters into the monologue: 'on the seventh day, *they said*, God rested' [italics are mine]. The owner of the voice-over is doubting what has been told him by others, and with the doubting of what happened on the seventh day, uncertainty arises retroactively about the earlier creational deeds of God. If faith tells you God rested, and you could argue He did not, then everything else you have been told about faith and God is brought under pressure.

If God did not rest on the seventh day, what did He do? God certainly did not rest, the voice-over claims, but simply 'left' or even 'died'. If God has left His creation, He is considered to be an evil or at least an uncaring divine being, but His existence itself is not questioned. If God is claimed 'dead', like Nietzsche's famous phrase from 1882, God cannot be good or evil, and He is neither caring nor uncaring, since He did not exist in the first place or – at least – does not exist anymore.

An implicit accusation can be read in those lines from the *Genesis trailer*: if there were a God, He would have prevented the nuclear holocaust the Moscow survivors (and many others) went through and are currently experiencing. Since the disaster did take place, the conclusion has to be that God does not exist or has become obsolete in the sense that it has become no longer possible to believe in any transcendent being who seems to be incapable of ending (or unwilling to end) this amount of suffering.

However, when the voice-over continues, the declaration of God's death is not as permanent as one might be expecting: 'Judgement Day came and he abandoned us, casting humanity aside like parasites'. A god who passes judgment cannot be dead or absent. The raining down of the nuclear bombs onto Moscow and onto the rest of the world is framed as the eschatological event of the final judgment over the living and the dead. The invocation of the idea of Judgment Day resets the theological interpretation of the voice-over's story. The initial anti-theodicy is switched for (or coupled with) a more traditional, Irenaean form of

theodicy in which the evil in the world is brought upon humankind by God for a very good reason, in this case, retribution.

The theodicy of retribution is clearly found in the book of Job, which I earlier spoke of. When Job complains to his three (four) friends, that the God-sent suffering he is encountering is unjust, they rebuke him by arguing that because God is always just, Job must have brought his misery upon himself by committing some kind of transgressions. Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, formulates this as follows (Job 4,7–8):

> Remember now, whoever perished being innocent?
> Or where were the upright destroyed?
> According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity
> And those who sow trouble harvest it.

Job *and* the reader of the text *know* that this is not true: Job because of his awareness of his being upright and devout, and the reader because of the initial discussion between the Accuser (Satan) and God at the beginning of the book. Job is being punished *because* he is innocent; this is the whole point of the bet.

The theodicy of retribution is applicable to the situation of *Metro*, as suggested by the *Genesis trailer*. Instead of carefully nurturing and caring for the whole of creation, which was created in such beauty and goodness by God, the human race chose to destroy both the earth and themselves out of greed, anger and selfishness. The subsequent nuclear holocaust can be interpreted as a divine punishment for those crimes and transgressions against creation itself, whether the actual destruction was produced by God or by humankind or by a combination of the two. At least, God did not intervene and was right in doing so according to the theodicy of retribution.

The Irenaean forms of theodicy, including that of retribution, claim that the suffering caused by God is eventually for the betterment of humankind. The punishment brings new possibilities, new insights, new motivations, and creates – in short – a better human. The voice-over does not agree it seems. God did not so much punish humankind – through action or non-prevention – but He 'abandoned' his creation. Either God judged heaven and earth and then left the survivors to their own device or the lack of God's interference is equated to the abandonment itself.

Even more strongly, the voice-over identifies the reason for this punishment and the subsequent divine abandonment in human nature: like 'parasites'. This qualification denotes the moral stance of humankind that triggered the divine punishment, and the relationship between punisher and punished. Just as an exterminator ruthlessly destroys the nest of vermin without giving any further thought to the condition of the destroyed mice or flies, God did not keep walking with humankind a moment longer than the (near) extermination of humankind itself. The survivors in

the metro of Moscow feel punished, abandoned and degraded by God up to the point that it becomes impossible to believe in God's existence in the first place.

However, in the depths of this mixture of retribution and anti-theodicies, a new perspective emerges, just as it did in the case of *Wolfenstein* as described in the foregoing section of this chapter. Within the destruction and divine abandonment of the nuclear war, a hero emerges, who is both the game protagonist Artyom as well as the player himself. The voice-over describes this as follows: 'But there is still hope. We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands'.

In both cases (Blazkowicz and Artyom) the arrival of the idea of a messianic figure who brings new hope of salvation to the fallen and downtrodden, whether to the survivors of the Nazi regime or to the survivors of the metros, can be interpreted as extreme individualism or secularism. In the first case, the 'death of God' throws humanity back onto its own merits: without a divine being keeping morality secured and the universe in balance, man becomes his own judge, searching for a new purpose in a crude universe without aim or meaning of its own.

Artyom, and Blazkowicz too, are then the new gods of postmodernity, trying to fill the void left by God's death but only succeeding very modestly: Artyom saves the survivors of the Moscow metro, but only for the moment, and Blazkowicz's self-sacrifice only secures the freedom of a limited amount of people and only for a short amount of time. Any divine or transcendent 'moment' is lost to a purely human struggle for survival against all odds, fighting an uncaring universe and especially the worst that humanity has produced: its own pride.

From another perspective, as I have argued before, if one accepts the Christophoric quality of the game protagonist (as I have done), and subsequently that of the gamer, Artyom emerges as an intriguing embodiment of a specific kind of cruciform theodicy, just as in the case of Blazkowicz. Both games feature distinct elements from Christian tradition, contextualizing the protagonist in a field of tension in which their 'theodicial quality' can be distinguished. Artyom, and by extension the player, can embody God's presence in the game world, thus criticizing the idea of God's death and/or abandonment.

Artyom does not only present God in *Metro*'s world by forgiving his archenemy (see Chapter 4), but also in other, more trivial ways, traditionally associated with a religiously virtuous life: giving alms to beggars, playing music, listening to the sorrows of others, avoiding kills if possible, retrieving lost possessions, indicating the location of corpses to loved ones, and so forth. If these acts are undertaken, the game hands out 'morality points' to the player, eventually altering the ending of the game positively or negatively. The player is unaware of this mechanism: he or she does not know that his or her actions are being morally judged, neither which actions are and which are not, and he or she does not know

that the outcome of the game is influenced by this. (I return to this idea of 'morality' in Chapter 7.)

If one asks the game *Metro*, how one could defend the existence of God *vis-à-vis* the horrors of actual life after the nuclear holocaust, the game appears to answer negatively – the belief in the existence of God has become impossible. However, in a more indirect way the game positions the player as the incarnation of God, who tries to fight off evil while procuring the good and caring for those who are suffering.

d. Case 3: Shaw's theodicy

In the cases of Blazkowicz and Artyom, one could argue that the factual existence of God remains somewhat ambiguous: God could or could not be 'alive', but His experienced absence offers opportunities to the Christophoric hero to fill the divine void. Other games take a more radical stance in their handling of the theodicy problem: God is justified by his own non-existence, and this paradox does not leave any room for a Christophoric hero like Blazkowicz or Artyom. A good example of a game in which such a radical 'a-theodicy' can be found is *Assassin's Creed Rogue*. (As I have already mentioned this scene from the game at the beginning of the Introduction, I will only repeat this section here for the convenience of the reader.)

On November 1, 1755, a smart young captain with the name Shay Cormac enters the port of Lisbon. He has been sent to the Portuguese capital to retrieve an ancient artifact with mythical powers for whoever wields it. While he is walking through the city, we can hear the bells of the churches ringing to gather the faithful in celebration of the Feast of All Saints, as Shay himself acknowledges:

> Feast of All Saints, what a sight. And here I am looking for a relic from the time before Adam and Eve. Strange days indeed.

While the priest celebrates Holy Mass in Latin, Shay walks through the cathedral, undisturbed by the praying flock inside, or by the sound of angelic voices singing Gregorian chants. Through neck-breaking climbing and parkour, Shay manages to find a hidden entrance in the church leading to a cave below. Inside the cave a massive pyramid-shaped object is found, reachable over a small stone ledge. Floating above a stone pillar in front of the pyramid, a strange shape-shifting cube can be seen. 'The artifact', Shay whispers, just before taking it into his hands.

However, as soon as Shay has the artifact in his hands, it crumbles into dust and a massive earthquake is triggered, collapsing the cave, the church above it and the city around it. Shay has to run for his life, through the fires, rubble and chaos of the burning city, destroyed by the earthquake. Eventually, Shay manages to climb aboard his ship, which has managed to set sail before taking damage. A sailor picks him up, and staring over

the ruined city, he exclaims: 'How could God do this to them?' To which Shay replies, half ashamed, half angry: 'God had nothing to do with this'.

The preceding scene originates from the game *Assassin's Creed Rogue* (2014) and is ever so interesting for those who can see and understand the references given in this game. First of all, the mission is called 'Kyrie Eleison', a reference to the famous prayer of the same name in Roman Catholic liturgy, obligatory in every celebration of the Eucharist, even today. It is Greek, the language of the New Testament, and means 'Lord, have mercy'. The meaning of this prayer intertwines with the location and date of the scene. On November 1, 1755, Lisbon was struck by a massive earthquake, killing tens of thousands of people instantly and destroying more than half of the city's buildings including famous palaces, libraries and works of art (Paice 2008; Shrady 2014).

The discussion on the theodicy in our Western context has always been connected to this specific dramatic event in Portugal (Castelo 2012). Voltaire famously wrote his 'Poem on the Lisbon Disaster' to criticize Leibniz's idea of humankind living in the best of all possible worlds (*Essais de théodicée* from 1710). Later, Leibniz and his metaphysical optimism were ridiculed by Voltaire as 'Dr. Pangloss', the teacher of 'metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology' in his *Candide*. In the end, Leibniz's defense of God – that God created the best of all possible worlds – is a form of Irenaean theodicy, in which the evil existing in the world is framed as leading toward 'the good' or, in Leibniz's case, to the understanding of the concept of 'goodness' in the first place.

The interesting point of *Rogue* is the combination between the heavily religiously inspired scene – the mission name 'Kyrie Eleison', the famous date and location, the church bells, the Feast of All Saints, the sailor's cry 'How could God do this to them?' – and Shay's religiously ambiguous answer – 'God has nothing to do with this'. Without further knowledge of the *Assassin's Creed* lore, one could interpret Shay's words as a classical Augustinian defense of God: if it is evil, it has nothing to do with God but only with human acts. In this case, this interpretation could be very defendable, since it was indeed not God but Shay's actions that provoked the earthquake. So indeed, God had nothing to do with it.

But if we take into account the meta-narrative of the game series (Bosman 2018, 2016a, 2016b), Shay's expression – 'God had nothing to do with this' receives an entirely different meaning. In the world of *Assassin's Creed*, humankind is nothing more than the remnant of a genetically engineered slave race, developed and controlled by the super intelligent but now long gone and extinct Isu. When a cosmic disaster struck Earth, causing the death of almost all Isu, humankind survived, remembering their old lives in the form of legends and myths. The Isu left some very powerful artifacts, called 'Pieces' or 'Apples of Eden', a reference to the 'fruit' mentioned in Genesis 3, and which give their possessors almost unlimited power over mind and matter.

The *Assassin's Creed* series then reframes all of humankind's history as a battle between two groups over the possession of the Isu artifacts: the Assassins and the Templars, respectively based on the Shi'ite sect of the Nizari Isma'ilis and the Christian Knights Templar. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Joseph's capacity to interpret dreams, Moses' splitting of the Red Sea, David killing Goliath, Solomon's wisdom, the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, the Shroud of Turin, Jesus' miracles including his resurrection—the whole of human history is set in a completely different light. (I discuss the religion criticism of the series in Chapter 9.)

In *Assassin's Creed 3*, this is well illustrated. When Desmond Miles, a contemporary Assassin, complains to his father William about the illusiveness of the Isu, he refers to the biblical Nephilim.

Desmond: I'm tired of it. All the cryptic warnings. The threats. Just tell us what you want.

William: But they are. . . . We saw the Nephilim there. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them. Imagine trying to explain all of this to a two year old. To a grasshopper. When they said the will of the gods was unknowable, they meant it. Literally.

The *Nephilim* are mentioned in Genesis (6,1–5) and Numbers (13,31–33) and are said be of 'mixed blood', half divine, half human (Bosman et al. 2015). In *Assassin's Creed*, the Nephilim are used to describe the intellectual distance between the Isu and humankind as equal to that between a human and a grasshopper. In this universe, there is no room for gods, divine beings or any other transcendent reality. Even though the two main fractions, the Assassins and the Templars, are modeled after historical, very religious organizations, their respective philosophy is deistic at best but far more often secular and atheistic.

It is intriguing to observe that a game series featuring such a permanent atheistic world-setting is so interested in the question of the theodicy, and to such an extent that the developers devoted a whole mission to it, and quite explicitly so, as we saw earlier. This could be interpreted as a reductionistic 'move', fitting into the framework of the series, to reinterpret everything religious (especially Christian) as perfectly immanent and rationally explainable. When we think about evil in this world, the series seems to suggest, we should not try to blame or accuse a divine being for its cause, but we should realize that we have only ourselves to blame. If this kind of reasoning were to be extended a little further, then we could argue that this kind of 'a-theodicy' is actually an extreme form of Augustinian defense: the series justifies God by declaring Him non-existent.

e. Secular theodicy: *Si non deus, unde malum*?

Another interpretation is, however, also possible. Even if God is declared dead, the question of the existence of evil remains unresolved. It has been suggested that with the rise of our secular, atheist society, morality has lost its universal ground and source. The same is now debated concerning the notion of 'truth', as our era is provocatively identified as 'post-truth' (Ball 2017). As Dostoyevsky (1879–1880[2015]) already said, '[i]f God is dead, everything is permitted'. The necessity of religion as a ground for morality is still heavily debated (Lewy 2017), while the 'secular experiment' of the Western world is still in full swing and ignorant of its final outcome (Boutellier 2016).

The same 'problem' is also explicitly addressed by the *Assassin's Creed* series. The maxim of the Assassin Brotherhood, 'Nothing is true; everything is permitted', could be interpreted as highly cynical both in the field of ethics as in the field of epistemology. In *Assassin's Creed Revelations*, this potential, cynical interpretation is questioned by Sofia Sator, wife-to-be of the Italian Renaissance assassin Master Ezio Auditore. He explains to her:

> [The Assassin's Creed] would be [cynical] if it were doctrine. But it is merely an observation of the nature of reality. To say that nothing is true, is to realize that the foundations of society are fragile, and that we must be the shepherds of our own civilization. To say that everything is permitted, is to understand that we are the architects of our actions, and that we must live with their consequences, whether glorious or tragic.

At its core the Creed is not normative in nature but phenomenological. The world, according to the Assassins, is basically 'an illusion' or, rather, human knowledge of the world is illusory. This is illustrated by the metanarrative of the game series itself: only the Templars and the Assassins know the true origin of humankind and the true mechanisms that drive human development, and then only very partially. No Assassin or Templar has the grand overview of history and of the manipulations by the various possessors of the Pieces of Eden, with the possible exception of the player who has played all the installments of the game series.

The second part of the Creed is, therefore, not a license for libertine behavior. To say that nothing is true means that there is no ultimate knowledge by which we can direct our moral behavior. There is no supreme godhead which upholds the fabric of moral life. All moral responsibility lies with ourselves: we have to learn to live with the consequences of our decisions, our words and our deeds. There is no possibility of shrugging this responsibility off onto other people or onto a superhuman entity.

Still, if there is no God to judge us, or a divine being to function as the guarantee of our morality and knowledge, we are forced to look into our own mirror, where humankind is pondering over the question of the existence of evil. *Assassin's Creed* even intensifies our collective and individual liability to evil and suffering by including natural disasters, such as the Lisbon earthquake (usually categorized as a natural, not a moral evil). It was, as the player of the game knows, a human being who was responsible for the disaster.

This problem is what I would call the 'secular theodicy'. The original dilemma is *Si deus, unde malum?* If there is a God, why is there evil? However, after the dismissal of the divine realm, the question is different: *Si* non *deus, unde malum?* If there is *no* God, why is there evil? Since the only source of (moral) evil in this world *has* to be human in origin, it is therefore humankind who has to be defended against its own accusation. If indeed *homo homini lupus*, 'a man is a wolf to another man', then all the suffering caused by human cruelty and violence calls from the blood-spilled soil, asking, 'Why?' Here it is no longer God who is accused and has to be defended because of the existence of evil, but humankind itself, acting as judge, accuser, defender and accused at the same time. There is no external help, no emergency exit, no *deus ex machina*, since we have cut ourselves loose of that one last resort by declaring its owner non-existent.

While the radical atheistic narrative of the *Assassin's Creed* universe prevents its main protagonists, among whom Shay Cormac and Ezio Auditore, from becoming Christophoric figures in their own right, the extensive and more positive or, at least, more ambiguous, use of Christian images and notions in *Metro* and *Wolfenstein* make the framing of their protagonists Artyom and Blazkowicz as representations of the divine possible. This suggests that God's answer to the suffering of humankind, or more precisely, our human response to our experience of suffering in the face of an all-powerful God (i.e., the 'defense of God') is to be found in the Christophoric protagonists themselves who, in their deeds, embody God's presence in those who suffer from evil and in those who stand up against the causes and causers of human suffering.

It is very interesting to witness the continuous use of Christian material when dealing with the problem of evil, even in a Western context which is characterized by secularism, individualism and deinstitutionalism (see the Introduction). Even if the prime object of the theodicy, God himself, has disappeared as an entity whose existence is more or less automatically believed in by the vast majority of people, the 'defense mechanism' is still operational, but now directed to mankind itself, as I have already argued earlier.

This is precisely the context in which the Christophoric figures, as the embodiment of a cruciform theodicy, emerge. If God is not to blame for the evil and suffering in the world, but only moral beings are, then the

solution to the existence of evil is also anthropocentric (instead of theocentric). If God is to be found in the apparent atheistic worlds of *Metro* and *Wolfenstein*, it is in the form of the self-sacrificial heroes/players. If an answer to the existence of evil has to be given, it is then solely those who are humanoid, who hold in their hands their own final defense and that of humankind collectively.

The protagonist/player *chooses* to stand up against the suffering of the innocent, defending both the possibility of human goodness in the face of tremendous suffering, and the 'cloaked' presence of the accused and 'murdered' God of Nietzsche.

Primary bibliography

Assassin's Creed 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.

Assassin's Creed Revelations, 2011. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.

Assassin's Creed Rogue, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Sofia, Ubisoft.

Metro Last Light, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linus) 4A Games, Deep Silver.

Wolfenstein, 2009. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Raven Software, Activision.

Wolfenstein 3D, 1992. (PC) id Software, Apogee Software.

Wolfenstein. The New Order, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.

Wolfenstein. The Old Blood, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.

Wolfenstein 2. The New Colossus, 2017. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.

Secondary bibliography

[anonymous], 2014. Machinesgames talk Wolfenstein. *Shortlist*. Available from: www.shortlist.com/tech/gaming/machinegames-talk-wolfenstein [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Ball, J., 2017. *Post-truth. How bullshit conquered the world*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Benyamin, B., and Perez, Y., 2012. *Le code d'Esther*, Paris: First.

Birmingham, S., 1967. *'Our crowd'. The great Jewish families of New York*. New York: Harper and Row.

Boethius, 2007. *The consolation of philosophy*. Translated by W. Cooper. New York: Cosimo Classics.

Bonhoeffer, D., 1967. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. London: SCM Press.

Bosman, F., 2016a. The poor carpenter. Reinterpreting Christian mythology in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Gamenvironments* 4.

Bosman, F., 2016b. Nothing is true, everything is permitted. The portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 10.

Bosman, F., 2018. Requiescat in pace. Initiation and assassination rituals in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Religion* 9(5).

Bosman, F., and Mock, L., 2016. 'We do not pray, we invent'. Jews, Judaism and Jewish mysticism in the video game Wolfenstein. The new order. In: A. Houtman, T. Kadari, M. Poorthuis, and V. Tohar, eds., *Religious stories in transformation. Conflict, revision and reception*. Leiden: Brill.

Bosman, F., and Poorthuis, M., 2015. The children of Lilith. The place of man in the ontological and cosmological dualism of the Diablo, Darksiders and Devil May Cry Game Series. *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 7.

Boutellier, H., 2016. *Het seculiere experiment. Hoe we van God los gingen samenleven*. Amsterdam: Boom.

Braiterman, Z., 1998. *(God) after Auschwitz. Tradition and change in post-Holocaust Jewish thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Buber, M., 1957. *Eclipse of God. Studies in the relation between religion and philosophy*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Bytwerk, R., 2001. *Julius Streicher. Nazi editor of the notorious anti-semitic newspaper Der Stürmer*. New York: Cooper Square Press.

Castelo, D., 2012. *Theological theodicy*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Cullinane, J., 2009. Review: Wolfenstein. *Stuff*. Available from: www.stuff.co.nz/technology/games/2812534/Review-Wolfenstein [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Davis, S., 2001. *Encountering evil. Live options in Theodicy*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Dostoyevsky, F., 2015[1879–1880]. *The brothers Karamazov*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group.

Glatzer, N., 2002. *The dimensions of job. A study and selected readings*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Good, E., 1990. *In turns of the tempest. A reading of Job with a translation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Griffin, D., 2004. *God, power, and evil. A process theodicy*. London: Westminster John Knox Press.

Hayton, J., 2012. Digital Nazis. Genre, history and the displacement of evil in first-person shooters. In: D. Magilow, E. Bridges, and K. Vander Lugt, eds., *Nazisploitation! The Nazi image in low-brow cinema and culture*. London: Continuum.

Helmreich, W., 1982. *The things they say behind your back. Stereotypes and the myths behind them*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.

Hick, J., 1966. *Evil and the love of God*. London: Macmillan.

Hume, D., 2017[1779]. *Dialogue concerning natural religion*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Jenkins, E., 2012. *Free will in Augustine's evolving doctrines of grace and election*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.

Keller, T., 2013. *Walking with God through pain and suffering*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Kushner, H., 1981. *When bad things happen to good people*. New York: Avon Books.

Leibniz, G., 2009. *Theodicy. Essays on the goodness of God, the freedom of man, and the origin of evil*. Translated by E. Huggard. New York: Cosimo Classics.

Lewy, G., 2017. *If God is dead, everything is permitted?* London: Routledge.
Maybaum, I., 1965. *The face of God after Auschwitz*. Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep.
Miller, T., 2015. *Jews and anti-Judaism in Esther and the church*. Cambridge: James Clarke & co.
Moltmann, J., 2006. Crucified God. Yesterday and today. Translated by M. Kohl. In: M. Trelstad, ed., *Cross examinations. Reading on the meaning of the cross today*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
Neubauer, P., 2015. Wolfenstein. Ist B.J. Blazkowicz Jüdisch? *IGN*. Available from: https://de.ign.com/wolfenstein-the-new-order-ps4/88659/news/wolfenstein-ist-bj-blazkowicz-judisch [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Nietzsche, F., 2002[1882]. *The gay science. With a prelude in German rhymes and an appendix of songs*. Edited by B. Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nosson, M., 1986. Megillas Esther and the Nuremberg trail. *The Jewish Observer*. March 19: 46–57.
Paice, E., 2008. *Wrath of God. The Great Lisbon earthquake of 1755*. London: Quercus.
Pak, K., 2016. *Divine power and evil. A reply to process theodicy*. London: Routledge.
Posso, A., 2016. Internet usage and educational outcomes among 15-year old Australian students. *International Journal of Communication* 10.
Rubenstein, R., 1966. *After Auschwitz. Radical theology and contemporary Judaism*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
Schiff, E., 1982. *From stereotype to metaphor: The Jew in contemporary drama*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Scott, M., 2015. *Pathways in theodicy. An introduction to the problem of evil*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Shrady, N., 2014. *The last day. Wrath, ruin, and reason in the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755*. New York: Penguin Books.
Skolnik, F., ed., 2007. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Detroit: Thomson Gale.
Ullrich, V., 2008. *Der Kreisauer Kreis*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag.
van Wieringen, A., 1995. The reader in genesis 22:1–19. Textsyntax – textsemantics – textpragmatics. *Estudios Bíblicos* 53.
Voltaire, 1963. *Candide*. Translated by W.H. Barber. Great Neck, NY: Barrons Educational Series.
Westermann, C., 1981. *Genesis*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
Winterhager, W., 1998. *Der Kreisauer Kreis deutscher Widerstand gegen den Nationalsoziaslismus*. Trier: Saarbrücken.
Zuckerman, B., 2010. *Job the silent. A study in historical counterpoint*. New York: Oxford University Press.

7 The wicked problem of being alive
Ethics

In an alternative 1960, the airplane of a certain 'Jack' has crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. Being the only survivor, Jack swims to a nearby island, where he discovers a bathysphere that takes him to a city called 'Rapture', at the bottom of the ocean. The founder and ruler of Rapture, Andrew Ryan, a wealthy American businessman of Russian birth, built the city to materialize his utopia. In his own words,

> Rapture. A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well.

The combination of Ryan's exaggerated form of capitalism and extreme ethical egoism has delivered a city with minimal governmental rule, no social institutions and the unfettered trade of every imaginable object and service, including those heavily government-controlled in other civilized countries, like drugs, sex and weapons. Very quickly, Jack finds out that Ryan's utopia has rapidly developed into social chaos and anarchy, leading to a Hobbesian *Bellum omnium contra omnes* for survival, in general, and for the possession of a mental and physical abilities-enhancing power drug called 'Adam', in particular.

As Jack needs the drug for his own survival, he is confronted with genetically enhanced *Little Sisters*, young girls between five and ten years old, with adorable purple dresses and big round eyes. They have been genetically altered and mentally conditioned to reclaim the Adam from corpses around Rapture. Despite their age and fragile figures, they are very protective of their Adam and are aided by several *Big Daddys*, genetically enhanced human beings who have had their skin and organs grafted into an enormous diving suit. They count as the most powerful beings in all of Rapture.

After killing his first *Big Daddy*, Jack has to make up his mind how to treat the *Little Sister* in order to get her Adam for his own use. Two voices on the radio try to influence Jack to either 'harvest' or 'rescue' the

girl in question. Although Jack does not know, at least not this first time, what the consequences are of both options, the description suggests that the first option is not preferable from the perspective of the *Little Sister*. The first radio voice, identified as Atlas, tries to convince Jack to have no mercy, critically reacting to the attempts of a certain Dr. Tenenbaum to save the *Little Sister* from an attacking lunatic:

> Aye, that's a pretty sermon coming from the ghoul who cooked up them creatures in the first place. Took fine little girls and turned them into that, didn't you? Listen to me, boyo: you won't survive without the Adam those . . . things . . . are carrying. Are you prepared to trade your life, the lives of my wife and child for Tenenbaum's little Frankensteins?

Apparently, according to Altas, the dear doctor is responsible for the creation of the *Little Sisters* in the first place, which makes her attempt to save them understandable but not necessarily the better moral option. After Jack has spoken his warning, Tenenbaum herself throws Jack a device that he should be able to use 'another way' in regard to her creations:

> Here! There is another way . . . use this, free them from their torment! I will make it to be worth your while . . . somehow.

Now the player of *Bioshock* has to make up his or her mind to choose one of the two options available to its main protagonist and avatar Jack. The player has some vague clues regarding the context and origin of the *Little Sisters* and an even vaguer idea about the consequences of both options for Jack and the little girl. The gamer has no earlier experience, so he cannot rely on prior knowledge as to the outcome of either of the two options. Neither does the gamer know if this is the only encounter with a *Little Sister* or not and, if not, how many more he can expect. The gameplay slows down, while the game waits for the input of the gamer. A moral decision has to be made, based on little information, to say the least.

If Jack/the player chooses 'harvesting', the struggling child, shouting, 'No!' three times, is lifted up by Jack, who raises his other hand in an aggressive way. Then the screen turns vile green, and a screechy noise is heard. We see a big sea slug, the natural producer of Adam, bending and turning in Jack's hand. Afterward, no trace of the girl is to be found, but Jack is rewarded with 160 Adam-points, which the gamer can use to enhance his avatar. Atlas is complimenting Jack/the player for his ruthlessness:

> That should do the trick. You did the right thing. Just remember: that thing ain't people no more. And it is Dr. Tenenbaum we have to thank for that.

Tenenbaum, however, is not so pleased with Jack's decision:

> How can you do this thing? To a child. But there are other Little Ones in need of your help. Will you be as cruel to them?

If Jack/the player chooses to 'rescue' the *Little Sister*, she still struggles to get herself free, but Jack's free hand is seen stoking over her forehead, in an almost exorcism-like gesture. A bright white light prevents seeing what happens next, but after a second we see the little girl standing before Jack, apparently in more than perfect health. She waves at Jack while thanking him for her rescue, after which she runs away to find an air vent so small, only she can make use of it. The player is rewarded with only 80 Adam-points (instead of the 160 points received when harvesting). Tenenbaum is – understandably – very happy with this choice:

The path of the righteous is not always easy. The reward will become clear in time. Be patient.

Atlas is displeased:

> Tenenbaum is playing you for a sap. Those things may look like wee little girls. But looks don't make it so. You need all the Adam you can get to survive.

Jack/the player has to face the same choice more than twenty times during the course of *Bioshock*, so it is very easy to experiment with the outcome of the moral decision between harvesting and rescuing, but that does not make the choice any easier. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, the harvesting option appears to be the most preferable: it provides maximal benefit for the player, while the loss of the little girl is only a virtual one. However, from an ethical point of view, the choice is not so simple: Is it not morally more justified to save another being, even if it is only a virtual one and even if this means you have to sacrifice (some of) your advantage?

A small number of video games feature such moral choices within their gameplay. Sometimes the game communicates to the player that his actions will be morally judged; sometimes the system is invisible. Sometimes there is just one choice with two options; other times, multiple ethical conundrums are presented, all with multiple outcomes and consequences. Sometimes the consequences of an ethical choice are just cosmetic, but more often they have far-reaching consequences for the development of the game or for the (narrative) outcome of the game.

In all these instances, the games stimulate the gamer to pause his or her playing for a minute and to contemplate his own moral compass to find out which choices should be made and why. But again, not all games featuring a variation of ethical gameplay do so in the same way: games vary far and wide in the depth of the moral problems presented, both in terms of consequences or complexity.

a. The invisible judge. Morality systems

Some games offer moral problem-solving to their gamers as part of the whole game experience; this is called 'ethical gameplay'. It can be defined as 'the outcome of a game sequence in which players make definitive choices based on moral thinking, rather than on instrumental thinking. Ethical gameplay is, in other words, the outcome of moral play' (Sicart 2010).

Normally, a gamer is inclined to exhibit more ludological-strategical, rather than narratological-ethical behavior (Sicart 2013; Knoll 2014; Knoll 2018). This means that a gamer is usually primarily occupied with understanding the rules of the game to optimize his game progress and score. When confronted with moral puzzles, the normal fluidity of the gameplay is interrupted, forcing players to focus on the narrative delivered by the game. Instead of strategizing, he or she now has to reflect ethically.

To say it very simply, usually a gamer is busy shooting enemies while avoiding getting shot by them, without paying any attention to the morality of his or her actions. However, when a moral option is given, like the one in *Bioshock* described earlier, the usual shooting comes to a halt, and all the attention of the player focuses on the moral problem. Whereas the lives of all the others he has taken during the game are meaningless, the life of this particular one is above all else.

Many game scholars have criticized the use of ethical gameplay in video games, criticizing the moral dilemmas given to the player as lacking in ludological quality and narratological depth (Sicart 2013; Knoll 2014; Knoll 2018). Too often, moral problems that the game presents to the player can be solved easily once the ethical framework of the game is understood, or with the assistance of the visible moral feedback of the game, and/or simply by experimenting with the different outcomes by using (exploiting) the game's saving/loading system. Last but not least, moral choices often do not have many ludological and/or narratological repercussions on the rest of the game.

Ethical gameplay is usually 'scored' by means of a morality system. Famous examples are the *Infamous*, *Fable* and *Mass Effect* series, which keep track of the gamer's moral decisions. Generally speaking, video game morality systems can be defined as implicit or explicit digital systems within a particular game, which morally rate certain player actions and/or choices on the basis of a presupposed ethical framework. Stealing and killing innocent bystanders usually result in negative morality points, while rescuing hostages or killing bad guys deliver positive points.

The morality system can be either implicit or explicit. A system of the second category communicates very clearly with the player. In the first case, the player is unaware of the presence of the system in the game. The

player does not know that the game has a morality system and/or does not know the criteria used in the morality system. The player is unaware of the (subtle) changes in gameplay and/or narrative that are caused by his moral actions based on the way they are rated by the morality system because he lacks a means of comparison or because the changes occur only explicitly at the end of the game.

A video game morality system can also be explicit: this means that the player is aware of the presence of the system in a particular game. The player knows that the game has a morality system and knows the criteria it uses (or is able to find out through simple experimentation) because this is evident from feedback that the system gives, and because it visualizes the in-game moral judgment through some sort of 'morality chart'.

This morality chart rates the player's actions using a scale or a meter. In a scale model, the morality of the player's in-game choices is rated by the sum of all his or her ethically qualified choices in the game, placing the player's moral behavior on a scale ranging from good to evil (or neutral). In a meter model, the in-game actions of the player are rated by (at least) two different meters – usually 'good' and 'evil'- which keep track of all his or her ethically qualified choices in the game, allowing the player to be (more or less) good and evil at the same time.

While morality systems are relatively common in certain genres of video games, they have become the target of considerable criticism by gamers, critics and scholars alike (Birch 2014; Knoll 2014; Nguyen 2016; Rio 2014; Sicart 2013; Svelch 2010; Takacs 2013; Zagal 2009). This criticism includes the dismissal of the simplistic dualistic nature of the systems (as if a moral problem has only two possible solutions), the selective morality (killing a bad guy is considered 'good' but stealing from him as 'evil'), the inconsistency of the rule systems and the occurrence of the 'ludonarrative dissonance' (Hocking 2007). This 'dissonance' occurs when the gameplay demands one thing of a player (to kill as many enemies as possible), while the narrative of the game tries to let him or her reflect on the sanctity of human life.

The problems with many instances of ethical gameplay are, in my view, fourfold. In the first place, many games featuring ethical gameplay actually endorse ludological-strategical thinking far more than narratological-ethical behavior. Second, many ethical conundrums in games can be easily solved by using (exploiting) the save/load system (of course given the ability of manual saving/loading). The player simply saves the game right before making the choice, tries the first option to watch the results and reloads the old save to see what the second option is worth. Then he or she can easily decide what solution is the most desirable one. Of course, this tactic works only with explicit morality systems and only if the game refrains from incorporating the long-term consequences of the moral decision instead of only the very short-term ones.

Third, the availability, in most cases, of an 'ideal solution' to any given moral problem, which can be achieved by the player, hardly reflects the

moral ambiguity of everyday life. Many of our experienced moral problems occur exactly because a simple, one-dimensional solution is not at all available. Fourth, the presence of explicit moral feedback to the player influences the complexity of the moral decisions: if a player knows he or she is being judged, exactly when he is being judged and if the judgment is instantly delivered, manipulation of the system is made much easier.

b. Some problems are just so wicked

To contemplate some more on the idea of ethical gameplay and the moral reflections it offers players, I wish to introduce the concept of 'wicked problems'. The term originates from the field of social engineering and was coined by Rittel and Webber in 1973. It was broadened by Conklin in 2006 to be made applicable to other fields of science. Wicked problems are, very simply put, problems with no apparent ideal solution, no apparent strategy to find that solution and without the possibility to experiment with different outcomes. Conklin presents six characteristics with a more formal description:

1 The problem is not understood until after a solution has been formulated. The information needed to understand the problem depends on one's idea for solving it.
2 Wicked problems have no stopping rule. The problem-solver quits his or her job not because he or she knows he or she has done his or her job to full perfection but because of problem-external motivations; that is, he or she runs out of time, money or patience.
3 Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong. The quality of the outcome of the solution to a wicked problem cannot be determined unambiguously, because there are no established criteria for this. The outcome is 'good' or 'good enough' rather than 'right' or 'wrong'.
4 Every wicked problem is essentially novel and unique and cannot be reduced to a problem experienced or described before.
5 Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'. It is not possible to experiment because the consequences of one's choice cannot be reversed to try a different one.
6 Wicked problems have no given alternative solutions. There may be no solution at all, and/or there may be a solution that no one has ever thought of before.

Sicart (2013) applied the concept to games and ethical gameplay, formulating ten characteristics of the 'perfect' moral dilemma:

1 The player's knowledge of possible outcomes will be limited by ethical cognitive friction between the semiotic and the procedural domains. The player does not have perfect information about the potential outcome of a dilemma.

2 Ethical gameplay dilemmas have consequences that cannot be predicted by understanding only the procedural level of the game. Knowing how the system works should not be enough to make a decision because some aspects of the system that affect the outcome are unknown to the player.
3 The evaluation of the outcome by the game system will not be communicated to the player in quantized terms.
4 After players make a choice, they cannot reload to a state that is prior to that choice.
5 Every solution to an ethical gameplay dilemma locks players into a new state of the game. They are not able to return to prior states. All decisions matter.
6 Ethical gameplay dilemmas have some solutions that make the procedural and semantic level collide, suggesting non-optimal strategies that have emotional, cultural and contextual values.
7 Ethical gameplay dilemmas tend to be unique. A dilemma's structure should not be repeated through the game.
8 Ethical gameplay dilemmas reveal the moral nature of the semiotic and procedural domains of the game. Dilemmas represent the values that designers want to communicate with the game.
9 There is no correct solution to an ethical gameplay dilemma. Players have to evaluate the morality of their choices.
10 Players have no right to replay. Decisions made by players bind them to their chosen path, and the game, in the state determined by the choice taken, is playable only once.

Using Rittel and Webber's concept, and Sicart's adaption, I differentiate between four levels of ethical gameplay, each providing more challenge to the player (see Table 7.1).

The constitutive parts (criteria) of this differentiation are (Bosman 2017)

1 the extent to which the specific problem stimulates narratological – ethical gameplay instead of ludological-strategical,
2 the extent to which it is possible to solve the problem by exploiting the loading/saving mechanism of the game,
3 the presence of an 'ideal solution' and
4 the presence and nature of any feedback given to the player by the game.

The four levels of ethical gameplay are tame problems, semi-wicked problems, really wicked problems and super wicked problems, all increasingly challenging for the player to overcome.

Table 7.1 Overview of the different levels of 'wickedness' of moral problems presented to the gamer by the game, ranging from tame and semi to really and super wicked problems

	Tame	*Semi*	*Really*	*Super*
Stimulation of narratological-ethical (NE) or ludological-strategical behavior (LS)	LS	NE	NE	NE
Exploiting the load/save system	yes	yes	no	no
Availability of an ideal solution	yes	yes	yes	no
Presence of explicit feedback given to the player	yes	yes	no	irrelevant

c. Kill 'm, but don't steal from 'm (tame problems)

In the vast majority of cases of ethical gameplay, the nature of the moral problem is hardly difficult or 'wicked', but rather easy and 'tame'. In *Fallout 3*, for example, positive and negative morality points, called 'karma points', are distributed along a morality scale (indicating the amount of either 'good' or 'bad' karma) in combination with a leveling system. The player can be either 'good' or 'bad', leaving a small possibility to be exactly in the middle ('neutral'). While the current moral state of the player's character can be good or bad, it is always a result of good and evil actions combined into one statistic. The names of the levels range stereotypically from 'protector', 'ambassador of peace', 'last, best hope of humanity' to 'messiah' (for good karma); 'mercenary', 'pinnacle of survival', 'paradigm of humanity' to 'true mortal' (for neutral); and 'reaver', 'harbinger of war', 'scourge of humanity' to 'devil'.

Positive karma can be received by performing obviously morally justified deeds like donating money to a church, helping to repair a water-processing plant, giving water to beggars, rescuing wastelanders turned into slaves, making a truce between rival factions and killing very evil hostile non-playable characters. Negative karma is given for performing obviously morally unjustified deeds, like stealing (even from bad guys), hacking into computers, lockpicking, killing innocent bystanders, lying, siding with slavers and so forth. Even though not every mortal being will act according to these very simple ethical rules, the great majority of humanity acknowledges the moral decency of these guidelines.

Of course, in real life the morality of certain actions can be much more complicated. Stealing might be considered an overall unjustifiable deed but performed in desperation to feed one's own family, the moral judgment becomes less obvious very quickly. Whereas killing your enemies is considered widely as an emotionally understandable act, the moral and juridical justification is thought of in more ambiguous terms. Circumstances such as the existence of a working legal system, the brutality of

your enemies' actions against you, and other details will weigh in any moral decision concerning this topic. In the world of most video games with ethical gameplay, the moral world is much more black-and-white, with no room for gray shades.

Another example is the *Mass Effect* series. This series features fewer opportunities to influence one's 'karma' level than *Fallout 3* and features not a scale but, rather, a meter morality system. Any player can receive either paragon ('good') or renegade points ('evil') for solving moral dilemmas in a certain way. Yelling and shooting at friendly non-playable characters is generally considered a 'bad' choice while listening and helping them where you can rewards you with paragon points.

Since the two amounts, paragon and renegade, are not leveled out with one another, a character can be at the same time both good and bad in any given amount, leaving room for gray shades in the moral spectrum. It is a human experience that individual persons are usually neither totally good nor totally evil but an ever-changing mix of the two. However, that being said, also in *Mass Effect*, a certain moral dilemma can be solved either in a morally justified way or in a morally unjustified way, not half–half.

These 'tame' moral problems do not form any real ethical challenge for the player. That is, no narratological-ethical gameplay is stimulated. The player is aware that he or she is being judged by the game, and because of the explicitness of the morality system, the player at every time knows when he or she is being judged and how. Every moral problem has a very simple, dualistic structure, suggesting that an ethical ideal solution is possible. And having said all this, any player can very easily use the save/load system to experiment with the different outcomes of any given situation, choosing the one most fitting to his or her own chosen moral gameplay style (either as 'the good guy' or as 'the bad guy').

d. Minding the tree (semi-wicked)

Fortunately enough, there are games that offer better ethical gameplay than the tame ones just described. Some games or game fragments present moral dilemmas in such a way that the ludological-strategical behavior so inherent to the player is changed for a more narratological-ethical one, triggering moral reflection in the player. These semi-wicked problems can, however, be solved relatively easily by exploiting the game's saving/loading system. The player is able to empirically explore all the (unforeseen) consequences of all possible solutions within the game. This works especially well with explicit morality systems with short-term consequences. The moral problem is real on the level of the narrative but has no consequences on the ludological level.

A good example of this type of wicked problem is a specific mission in *Mass Effect*, called 'Wrex and the Genophage' (Bosman 2017). The *Mass Effect* trilogy is set in the near future (end of the 22nd century), when interstellar travel has been made possible through a network of mass relays. These relays were built by a now-extinct alien race known as the Protheans. With the help of Prothean technology discovered on Mars, humankind takes a decisive step into the galactic arena, where there are many sentinel and space traveling races. The Milky Way is governed by a conglomerate body known as the Citadel Council, which is dominated by the three most powerful races in our galaxy, the Asari, Salarians and Turians, later also joined by humanity.

In the *Mass Effect* universe, the Krogan race (battle-hardened lizards) has been infected by what is called the 'genophage', which makes all females infertile. The genophage was used by the Turians against the Krogans to stop their increasing thirst for domination, but it was developed by the Salarians. When Shepard (the player's avatar in the trilogy) lands on the planet Virmire, he can choose a Krogan by the name of Wrex as his teammate. Then Shepard, Wrex and the other teammate run into a Salarian squad, which has its own mission on Virmire. The player learns from the Salarians that they have come to stop Saren (a rogue Turian) rendering the genophage harmless. Saren wants to defuse the genophage threat in order to breed his private army of Krogan warriors. Wrex, understandably, is not amused to hear that the only cure for his race is about to be destroyed, and he turns for answers to Shepard, who wants to stop Saren from accomplishing his goals.

The discussion between Shepard and Wrex is extensive with multiple narrative trees and branches. Ultimately, it has two possible outcomes, to be decided on by the player. Either Shepard convinces Wrex to fight against Saren and, in doing so, very possibly destroying the remedy for curing Wrex's race, or Wrex is killed by Shepard or by another member of his team. Convincing Wrex can be done by gently persuading him or by crude intimidation. Intimidating or killing Wrex will result in renegade points ('evil'), while persuasion will deliver paragon points ('good'). If another teammate kills Wrex, the renegade/paragon points are given based on Shepard's reaction, anger or sadness, respectively.

The discussion and the decision made within it, appear to be a genuine ethical conflict. Shepard needs Wrex as a teammate, and he needs to stop Saren's attempts to use the genophage as a weapon. However, although Wrex's own desire to repopulate his species feels morally justified, the recent history of the Milky Way shows which horrors the Krogan race is capable of when unleashed. If examined a little bit closer, the dilemma is much more superficial than at first sight. It is very easy to discover all the possible outcomes of the discussion by using the in-game save/load system, including their attributed renegade and paragon points, and the one ideal solution of convincing Wrex to cooperate.

Another example of a semi-wicked moral problem is found in the *Fallout 3* quest 'Oasis'. (As I have already introduced the game in Chapter 4, I will only repeat this section here for the convenience of the reader.) *Fallout 3* takes places in the year 2277, when the majority of the North American continent has been destroyed because of a global nuclear war between the United States and China. Many inhabitants of the American continent died in nuclear blasts or in its violent aftermath. Some survived in semi-secret underground compounds, known as 'vaults', but the majority of the survivors and their offspring are fighting mutants, wildlife and each other for domination.

Born and raised in Vault 101, the game's protagonist (known in-game as The Lone Wanderer) is confronted with the disappearance-cum-escape of his or her father from the Vault in pursuit of an unknown scientific goal. Since his (or her, the gender is optional) mother died in childbirth, the Lone Wanderer also feels compelled to escape the Vault in search for his or her only known living relative. Outside, the Wanderer discovers the source of the continuous nuclear contamination of the Wastelands, harming all the flora and fauna depending on it, including humans.

On one of his/her travels through the Wasteland, the Lone Wanderer comes across a rather distant location on the map, known as the 'Oasis'. Cut off from the rest of postapocalyptic society, the few inhabitants of the Oasis have renounced all technology, although they use guns for the protection of their settlement, and they live off the bounty of the lavish trees that grow around the Oasis. The inhabitants call themselves 'Treeminders', and appear to be some sort of parody of modern-day eco-extremists. They are all named after a certain kind of tree – Tree Father Birch, Leaf Mother Laurel, Bloomseer Poplar, Branchtender Cypress and so forth – and some little branches appear to be sticking out of their body. They long for a spiritual bonding with nature, especially with the trees.

When entering the Oasis, the Lone Wanderer is greeted by Tree Father Birch, the spiritual leader of the Oasis. Birch brings the Wanderer to 'the Grove', where he meets Harold. Harold appears to be a talking tree with a distorted face halfway up the trunk and is worshiped by the Treeminders as a godhead: 'The One Who Grows, Gives, and Guides'. Harold was once a human being but evolved into his current form by being exposed to the Forced Evolutionary Virus, a major source of the mutations in the *Fallout* universe.

Harold suffers greatly, and because the Treeminders refuse to listen to his pleas and explanations, he asks the Wanderer to go into subterranean caves to destroy his human heart, which is still connected to his trunk-body and its countless roots. Without a human heart, Harold will die. Tree Father Birch and Leaf Mother Laurel also approach the Wanderer, each with a request of their own. Birch wants the Wanderer to apply a certain sap to Harold's heart to stop him from growing, a continued source of fear for Birch. Harold's growth could eventually extend beyond

the safe confines of the Oasis, putting the Treeminders and their ideological experiment at risk to influence and aggression from the outside world. Leaf Mother Laurel wants the Wanderer to apply liniment to Harold's heart, accelerating his growth substantially. In contrast to Birch, Laurel thinks that Harold's blessings should be given to the rest of the world as soon as possible so that the world can become as harmonious and peaceful as the Oasis itself.

There are four options to end this quest: siding with Harold and destroying him, siding with Birch and applying the sap to stop Harold's growth, siding with Laurel and applying the liniment accelerating Harold's growth and – not mentioned earlier – just burning the tree down to the ground. The last option is considered an 'evil' one by *Fallout 3*'s morality system, because of the cruelness of the deed itself and because Harold has specifically told the Wanderer of his fear of fire. The other three options are not considered either 'good' or 'evil' by the game, since it does not reward either good or bad karma points.

So, all things considered, the Oasis quest of *Fallout 3* is slightly more challenging than the 'Wrex' mission of *Mass Effect*. Both share the stimulation of narratological-ethical gameplay, and the possibility to (ab)use the save/load system of the games to experiment with all possible outcomes, but they differ slightly concerning the availability of an ideal solution and the presence, or rather activity, of the morality system.

In 'Wrex', one solution is clearly the most desirable one (morally), while in 'Oasis' three options are presented that at least do not reward the player with 'bad karma'. The interesting point in the 'Oasis' case, is that the game does not present one, but three possible 'good' outcomes, and even refuses to qualify them as such. Because of the moral ambiguity of the 'Oasis' quest, it appeals more to the ethical contemplation of the player, who has to find a solution to the Harold crisis without the (complete) help of a morality system.

The 'Oasis' quest is also more interesting content-wise. Whereas the 'Wrex' mission does not give the alternative options, like *not* fighting Saren, or even siding with Wrex to repopulate his race, *Fallout 3* gives three alternative solutions without morally discriminating between them. Whereas the situation with Wrex was ultimately aimed at saving him for the team, the ethical themes involved in Harold's case are many and diverse, like the sanctity and definition of human life, self-determination and euthanasia, isolationism *versus* proselytizing and so forth.

e. I chose Rapture (really wicked)

Real moral challenges can enter into the gameplay when the game refrains from presenting an attainable ideal solution, and/or when the exploitation of the save/load system is prevented by the use of an implicit morality system and/or the implementation of long-term consequences. The case of the *Little Sisters* from *Bioshock*, which I presented in the introduction

of this chapter, is such a 'really' wicked problem. Even more importantly, the ethical dilemmas are incorporated into the larger narratological context of the game itself.

Bioshock was written by its lead developer Kevin Levine as a virtual commentary on the philosophy of Ayn Rand (Bosman 2017, 2013). Rand, born as Alissa Rosenbaum in 1905 in St. Petersburg (Russia), migrated to America in 1926, fleeing the anti-Semitic pogroms and communist dictatorship (Heller 2009). In America, she developed a philosophical train of thought she named Objectivism, combining objective realism and epistemological rationalism with ethical egoism and political capitalism (Den Uyl et al. 1986).

Rand gained fame and momentum not through a traditional academic carrier, but through plays and novels she published, with great success one might add. With monumentally epic novels such as *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and *The Fountainhead* (1943) she influenced a whole generation of Republican politicians and hyper-capitalistic economists, among them former US presidents George Bush senior and junior, founders of the *Tea Party*, such as Ron Paul, and former chairman of the Federal Reserve of the United States, Alan Greenspan, who was one of Rand's most trusted protégés (Heller 2009:276).

The story of *Atlas Shrugged* revolves around a small group of super-entrepreneurs and captains of industry, who 'disappear' inexplicably from the face of the earth, leaving the American economy in disarray. In truth, the economist superheroes of Rand's fictional universe all flee to a hidden town in America's heartlands, called Galt's Gulch, named after the novel's protagonist. The prosperous little town and its most important citizen are the incarnations of Rand's view of society and of the ideal human. Egoism is heralded as the highest virtue, while all contact between humans is arranged through financial terms.

It is this fictional Galt's Gulch that Ken Levine used to realize Rapture, the underwater city of *Bioshock*. He told *The Guardian*, 'What I tried to do, having read Ayn Rand, was to create Galt's Gulch and stick real people in it' (Cowen 2011). While Jack is on his way to the bottom of the ocean in the bathysphere, Rapture's leader, Andrew Ryan, introduces the player to the kind of place he or she is heading to:

> I am Andrew Ryan, and I am here to ask you a question. Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? 'No', says the man in Washington, 'it belongs to the poor'. 'No', says the man in the Vatican, 'it belongs to God'. 'No', says the man in Moscow, 'it belongs to everyone'. I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose . . . Rapture. A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well.

Ryan summarizes the Randian society perfectly, and he is indeed the spitting image of Galt from *Atlas Shrugged*. The game *Bioshock* is permeated with references to the life and work of Rand. Andrew Ryan is an anagram of Ayn Rand, and both are Russian-born American emigres who grew increasingly weary of the 'communist' North American government. The name Atlas, the instructive voice on Jack's radio, is a reference to the same Randian novel. The character of Frank Fontaine, one of Rapture's greatest criminal masterminds and Ryan's archenemy, is a reference both to Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* and to her husband Frank O'Connor. Bridgette Tenenbaum, the creator of the *Little Sisters*, is a reference to Rand's birthname, Alissa Rosenbaum, and so forth.

When Jack enters Rapture, he does not find a super-sufficient, hyper-capitalistic utopia but an imploded society, where Thomas Hobbes's idea of *homo homini lupus* has become a sad reality. The underclass wages civil war against the upper class, with no governmental institutions to intervene or mediate, where guns and ammunition can be bought in every vending machine of the city and where Adam-addicted splicers are battling against the *Little Sisters* and their *Big Daddies*. Levine's criticism of Rand's ideas is clear: experiment failed, as in the game, as in real life. *Bioshock* can, therefore, be characterized as a philosophical commentary of the impossibility of hyper-capitalism and ideological egoism.

In *Bioshock*, the Randian philosophy, and especially Rand's virtuous egoism, is contrasted with Christian religion, especially its ideological altruism. Rand was a fervent opposer of any religious tradition and disqualified Christendom as 'the best *Kindergarten* of communism' (Rand 1997:80; Heller 2009:172). Although she admitted some admiration for Jesus of Nazareth as a kind of *Übermensch*, the 'drama of Christian mythology' was that he died not for his own sins, but for those of lesser men and women (Heller 2009:324).

When Jack enters Rapture, he quickly finds out that something is being smuggled into the city. The identity of the smugglers remains unclear for some time. The same applies to *what* is being smuggled. The accusation of smuggling is strange in a Randian society, since smuggling is only done to avoid taxes and/or to avoid the prohibition of selling and buying certain products (like weapons or drugs). But in Rapture, being a Randian society, there is no central government that collects taxes in the first place or that can impose a ban on the trade of certain products. What Jack does know is that the smugglers are ruthlessly hunted down and then executed by Ryan's thugs.

Eventually, Jack finds the Smugglers' Hideout just after it has been raided by Ryan's men. The scene is instantly identifiable as Christian-inspired. The player is confronted with a tortured and killed smuggler. He is suspended in the air, hanging at the end of a noose, his arms spread wide out, held by ropes. The body is hung at the end of a large staircase; the player has to ascend as if going up a small hill of sorts. Above his

head, the crime of the smuggler is written in his own blood: 'smuggler'. And under his feet an open suitcase reveals the content of the smugglers' ware: simple, brown books with a cross combined with the words 'Holy Bible' on them.

Again, the whole scene unmistakably references the crucifixion-scene of Jesus of Nazareth, killed for what he believed in, prepared to even give his life for his cause. Above his head, was written the reason for his execution: *INRI, Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'. Jesus is contrasted with the Randian superhuman. In *Atlas*, all the newcomers to Galt's Gulch have to take a rather egoistic oath:

> I swear by my life and my love for it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.

The core message of the Christian redemptive 'mythology' (as Rand called it) is exactly the opposite: Christians believe in 'a man' who sacrificed his life for the sake of others and who has encouraged his followers, the same Christian believers, to do likewise (Byrd 2015).

In other instances, Jack meets ranting splicers, mentally broken by a combination of torture, loneliness and their drug addiction. One of them sings in a half-moaning, half-hysterical tone the words of the famous Christian hymn 'Jesus Loves Me' by Anna B. Warner:

> Jesus loves me, this I know
> For the Bible tells me so
> Little ones to Him belong
> They are weak but He is strong

Other imprisoned smugglers and splicers cry to the heavens:

> I'm sorry, Father. . . [. . .] Father . . . Why have you forsaken me? [. . .] Je-sus! God! Somebody help!

However, there are more references to the Christian tradition. The name of the underwater city, *Rapture*, is a reference to the theological concept of the same name, especially popular in Evangelical and Pentecostal circles (Reiter 1996). And the names of the DNA-altering drug Adam and its 'fueling' essence Eve are both a reference to the biblical story of Genesis, including the suggestion of human *hubris* (LaCoque 2006).

The tension built into the game between Randian virtuous egoism and Christian ideological altruism is mirrored perfectly in the ethical gameplay concerning the *Little Sisters*. If the player thinks strictly ludological-strategically, essentially opting for a Randian ethical standpoint (heralding egoism), he or she will probably choose to harvest the *Little Sisters*, because of the double amount of Adam-points

then available to him. On the other hand, if the player opts for a more narratological-ethical way of thinking, adopting essentially a Christian-inspired altruistic ethos, he will probably rescue the *Little Sisters*, even if he is then penalizing himself in Adam-points.

Of course, for reasons of ludological balancing, the more experienced player will accept the loss in Adam-points, if rescuing will be accounted for positively elsewhere. And he would not be wrong. If Jack has rescued three *Sisters* in a row, he will find a pink teddy bear leaning against an Adam-vending machine holding three times sixty points, making up the difference. If this mechanism were not in place, choosing the 'rescue' option would mean that the player would choose to make the game a lot more difficult for him- or herself.

On the other hand, a new player of *Bioshock* would be in the dark about the consequences of rescuing and harvesting for at least until after the first two meetings with the *Sisters*. Although the balancing mechanism, described above, may be assumed, it is never made explicit, while the difference in points is immediately made visible. Tenenbaum and Atlas whisper their contrary advice into the player's ears, like the little angel and demon do in the old television cartoons. On the other hand, both voices pleading for either rescuing or harvesting have their own moral flaws. Tenenbaum's becomes apparent directly, because she is identified by Atlas as the creator of the *Sisters* in the first place. But later, also Atlas turns out to have a far darker personality than he is feigning.

The morality system of *Bioshock* is hidden, because it only becomes visible at the end of the game. If all the *Little Sisters* are rescued, Tenenbaum's voice-over tells the story of Jack rescuing the little girls from Rapture:

> They offered you the city, and you refused it. And what did you do instead? What I have come to expect of you. You saved them. You gave them the one thing that was stolen from them: a chance. A chance to learn. To find love. To live. And in the end, what was your reward? You never said, but I think I know. A family.

Images are shown of Jack bringing the exorcized *Little Sisters* to the surface, enabling them to live a normal life, including education, love and care. In the end, when Jack lies old and dying in a hospital bed, the hands of the *Little Sisters* are shown, holding his hand.

If even only one *Sister* has been harvested, another ending will occur. Again, Tenenbaum's voice-over tells the story beyond the ending of the game, but this time a much darker path is related:

> They offered you everything, yes. And in return you gave them what I have come to expect of you: brutality. You took what you wanted. All the Adam. All the power. And Rapture trembled. But in the end

> even Rapture was not enough for you. Your father was terrified the world would try to steal the secrets of his city. But not you. Now you have stolen the terrible secrets of the world.

The *Little Sisters*, now fully under the control of Jack, emerge from Rapture after an uncertain amount of time, hijacking the nuclear submarine that was trying to rescue them. Through this Jack is now portrayed as being in possession of the 'terrible secrets of the world', as a nuclear warhead is shown.

Bioshock is an apt example of a 'really wicked' problem in ethical gameplay. The player is encouraged to adopt a narratological-ethical gameplay. There is no possibility of misusing the save/load system of the game in this respect, although saving and loading are an integral part of the game itself. Because of the implicit nature of the morality system, and the extreme, long-term consequences of the player's moral actions (besides the short-term ones that can be experimented with) the ethical dilemma of choosing between better chances at the player's own survival *versus* the rescue of unknown entities without any tangible proof of future rewarding, is indeed satisfying, and stimulates the player to reflect on his own ethical choices and the ethical frameworks behind them.

f. When everything fails (super wicked)

All the moral dilemmas dealt with earlier in this chapter have one thing in common: the availability of an ideal solution to the given problem. The only exception to this rule is the 'Oasis' quest from *Fallout 3*, that refrains from morally judging the three given solutions: killing Harold, extending his growth, or stopping it. However, the short duration of this quest permits the player to experiment with all outcomes (save/load) and find the 'ideal solution' particular to his own interests, ethical considerations and preferences. But what if a video game would refrain from giving one or more ideal solutions? What if no ideal solution were available, and the player had to choose between equally evil options? This would lead to what I call 'super wicked problems', and I give two examples.

The first example is taken again from *Mass Effect*. In the mission 'Virmire', named after the planet the action takes place on, Shepard finds Saren's hideout (the rogue Turian). Shepard wants to destroy it by detonating a large nuclear device on the surface. During the events, a large squadron of Saren's soldiers appears, pinning down two of Shepard's teammates in different locations on the planet: Ashley Williams and Kaiden Alenko. Shepard/the player has a long history with both teammates and possibly (strong) emotional ties.

The mission only allows Shepard to save one of them, leaving the other to his or her death. The game will stall indefinitely until one of the two appropriate dialogue options is selected, making it impossible to change plans afterward. It does not matter how many times the player loads his previous save-file to experiment with the sequence of the mission or with the dialogue options: there is absolutely no possibility to save them both. The morality system of *Mass Effect* is silent, whatever option the player may choose. This is wickedness in its full ethical attire: knowing that there is no ideal solution and that the only choice to be made is one between two equally bad alternatives.

The other example of a super wicked problem in video games comes – again – from *Fallout 3*. In the 'Tenpenny Tower' quest, the Lone Wanderer has to decide the fate of the residents of a large residential tower with the same name. The Tower is a pre-war luxury hotel-turned-into-residence exclusively inhabited by white, wealthy and healthy people. When the Wanderer approaches the vicinity of the Tower that is surrounded by a guarded wall, he overhears the discussion between Roy Philips (standing outside) and Chief Gustavo (standing inside).

Roy is a ghoul, a mutated human being with horrific deformities and possible mental instability and a violent nature. Gustavo is the human chief of security, paid by the residents of Tenpenny to protect their property from people like Roy. The ghoul, on the other hand, demands entry for himself and his family into the tower, claiming he is as human as the 'smooth-skins' inside and that he is perfectly able to pay the rent as all the other tenants can. The residents of the tower, wavering somewhere between blatant racism and understandable fear, refuse to do any such thing.

Both Roy and Gustavo can be talked to, either in Warrington metro station or Tenpenny Tower. Both ask the Lone Wanderer to help them in their cause. Now, four possible courses of action become apparent. (1) The Wanderer can side with Gustavo, agreeing to help him find and kill Roy and his family, and return to the Tower to collect his reward (getting good karma from the morality system). The Wanderer can also side with Roy, in three different ways. (2) The Wanderer can open a secret passage in the basement of the Tower, allowing Roy's 'feral brethren' to enter the facility, killing all 'human' residents (bad karma). (3) It is also possible for the Wanderer to do the killing himself (bad karma). (4) The last option is the most difficult one: the Wanderer has to convince four Tenpenny tenants to willingly open the doors for the ghoul residents (good karma).

The morally problematic nature of the Tenpenny episode becomes very clear when we examine more closely the different conversations with Roy and his fellow ghouls and with Tenpenny tenants. Both sides in the standoff have some kind of moral justification on their side. The tenants, while

they are 'human supremacists', correctly fear that the ghouls are fully prepared to use violence to accomplish their goals. And the ghouls have every right to protest against the tenants' racist attitude. The player is forced to weigh the tenants' and ghouls' respective moral claims in order to come to a decision.

The fourth option seems to be the best in terms of morality. Both sides agree to be a little more tolerant towards one another, and both groups can be seen sharing the corridors of the Tower in a more or less respectful and peaceful way. However, if the player returns after a certain time (at least a couple of days in-game time), he finds the Tower occupied only by ghouls. Roy explains to the Wanderer that he and his fellow ghouls have murdered all the 'smooth-skins' after all, leaving the player behind with very mixed emotions. The morality system of the game amplifies this notion of moral ambiguity by giving the player good karma for resolving the situation peacefully, but neither good nor bad karma when the long-term consequences of his 'good' actions become clear.

The Tenpenny Tower quest appears to have an ideal solution, but in the end this is negated. While it is theoretically possible to use the save/load system to return to an earlier stage in the game, the average player, only visiting the Tower after a longer period, will not have the luxury of having made such an early game-save in the first place and, if he or she has, will not be very willing to give up all further progress made in the meantime. Besides this, in hindsight there is no solution agreeable to all parties in the long run. The morality system may suggest that options 1 and 4 are morally good and 2 and 3 morally bad, but the system refrains from giving a moral judgment when the player returns to the tower and finds half its inhabitants murdered by the other half.

Video games can stimulate the narratological-ethical style of gameplay but only under circumstances resembling real-life complexity; otherwise, the player will remain in his ludological-strategical playing style. When moral dilemmas are easily circumvented by saving/loading or when every moral step one takes is instantly and visibly morally judged, the moral problem loses its challenge. Only really (or super) wicked problems mirror the complexity of everyday moral life, where particular moral decisions can be made only once, based on very limited knowledge of the situation, without the luxury of experimenting with the actual outcomes and without a constant moral chaperone to keep one's feeble moral compass in check. The super wicked problems in video games remind the player of the hardest of all real-life ethical dilemmas, when all foreseeable outcomes have equally bad implications.

Video games can be seen as a sort of moral training ground, where the player can reflect on his or her moral choices and ponder over his or her own ethical framework within which his or her moral decisions are made. Why would you rescue the *Little Sisters*? Because it is good. And that is enough.

Primary bibliography

Bioshock, 2009. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, iOS) 2K Boston/2K Australia, 2K Games.
Fable, 2004. (PC, Xbox, Xbox 360, OSX) Big Blue Box Studios/Lionhead Studios, Microsoft Game Studios/Feral Interactive.
Fable 2, 2008. (Xbox 360) Lionhead Studios, Microsoft Game Studios.
Fable 3, 2010/2011. (PC, Xbox 360) Lionhead Studios, Microsoft Game Studios.
Fallout 3, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Infamous, 2009. (PlayStation 3) Sucker Punch Productions, Sony Computer Entertainment.
Infamous 2, 2011. (PlayStation 3) Sucker Punch Productions, Sony Computer Entertainment.
Infamous. Second Son, 2014. (PlayStation 4) Sucker Punch Productions, Sony Computer Entertainment.
Mass Effect, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts/Microsoft Game Studios.
Mass Effect 2, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts.
Mass Effect 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Bioware, Electronic Arts.
Metro Last Light, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linus) 4A Games, Deep Silver.

Secondary bibliography

Birch, A., 2014. The problem of morality in videogames. *Den of Geek*. Available from: www.denofgeek.com/games/29837/the-problem-of-morality-in-videogames [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Bosman, F., 2013. Christussen zijn geen Atlassen. In: P. van Geest, M. Poorthuis, T. Wagenaar, and A. Warringa, eds., *Vrienden met de Mammon. De levensbeschouwelijke dimensie in economie*. Almere: Parthenon.
Bosman, F., 2017a. Het dilemma van de kleine zusjes. Games als leraar van deugden. De casus van *Bioshock*. In: A. van Wieringen and B. Koet, eds., *Modellen van leraarschap. Van Jesaja tot Bioshock*. Almere: Parthenon.
Bosman, F., 2017b. There is no solution. Wicked problems in digital games. *Games and Culture*. Available from: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412017716603 [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Byrd, D., 2015. *A critique of Ayn Rand's philosophy of religion. The gospel according to John Galt*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
Conklin, J., 2006. *Dialogue mapping. Building shared understanding of wicked problems*. Chichester: Wiley.
Cowen, N., 2011. How Bioshock Infinite will be prescient. Interview with Ken Levine. *The Guardian*. Available from: www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/dec/01/bioshock-infinite-interview-ken-levine [Accessed 9 May 2018].
Den Uyl, D.J., and Rasmussen, D.B., eds., 1986. *The philosophical thought of Ayn Rand*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
Heller, A., 2009. *Ayn Rand and the world she made*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hocking, C., 2007. Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock. *Click Nothing*. Available from: http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Knoll, T., 2014. 'Are those the only two solutions?' Dealing with choice, agency and religion in digital games. *Online. Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet* 7.

Knoll, T., 2018. 'Instant karma'. Moral decision making systems in digital games. *Religion* 9(4).

LaCoque, A., 2006. *The trail of innocence. Adam, Eve, and the Yahwist*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Nguyen, R., 2016. Beyond the moral binary. Decision-making in video games. *With a Terrible Fate*. Available from: https://withaterriblefate.com/2016/04/25/beyond-the-moral-binary-decision-making-in-video-games/ [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Rand, A., 1943. *The fountainhead*. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill.

Rand, A., 1957. *Atlas shrugged*. New York: Random House.

Rand, A., 1997. *Journals of Ayn Rand*. Edited by D. Harriman. New York: Dutton.

Reiter, R., 1996. A history of the development of the rapture positions. In: G. Archer, ed., *Three views on the rapture. Pre-, mid- or post-tribulation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Rio, C., 2014. The morality system in games has outlived its usefulness. *The Escapist*. Available from: www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/features/11266-The-Morality-System-in-Games-Has-Outlived-Its-Usefulness [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Rittel, H., and Webber, M., 1973. Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences* 4.

Sicart, M., 2010. Wicked games. On the design of ethical gameplay. In: B. Christensen, ed., *Proceedings of the 1st DESIRE network conference on creativity and innovation in design*. Lancaster: Desire Network.

Sicart, M., 2013. Moral dilemmas in computer games. *Design Issues* 29.

Svelch, J., 2010. The good, the bad, and the player. The challenges to moral engagement. In: K. Schrier and D. Gibson, eds., *Ethics and game design. Teaching values through play*. New York: Information Science Reference.

Takacs, M., 2013. 5 Mistakes every videogame with a morality system makes. *Dorkly*. Available from: www.dorkly.com/post/56575/5-mistakes-every-videogame-with-a-morality-system-makes [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Zagal, J., 2009. Ethically notable videogames. Moral dilemmas and gameplay. *Paper presented at the international DIGRA conference*, London, UK. Available from: www.academia.edu/2809395/Ethically_notable_videogames_Moral_dilemmas_and_gameplay [Accessed 9 May 2018].

8 Game over
Thanatology

In games, players die. Or rather their avatars die. They die quite often, in some games more than others. In some games, death means starting all over again, in others that the player has to reload his or her last save-point to retry passing that particular jump or winning that particular fight. Usually, games do not bother at any length to explain *why* the player's avatar is capable of retrying that same jump or fighting for an unlimited amount of times, while at the same time the player has just witnessed the gruesome death of his avatar. Sometimes, games offer the player a better solution. Like in the case of the *Borderlands* series.

If the player's avatar dies in this game, it is instantaneously revived by the nearest *New-U Station* (NUS). The station clones the player's avatar in a matter of seconds based on the last saved DNA of the avatar. NUSs function ludologically as automatic saving-points for the player, but narratologically the game goes the extra mile by delivering a 'logical' explanation for the infinite lives the player's avatar possesses, mocking the player at the same time for his failure. After the cloning, a robotic voice from the NUS will remark sarcastically:

> Hyperion hopes your death was a learning experience, but wouldn't mind if you made the same mistake just a few more times just to be sure. Hyperion suggests that you do not think about the fact that this is only a digital reconstruction of your original body, which died the first time you respawned. Do NOT think about this! Thanks for using this Hyperion New-U station! Please die again!

The preceding quotation is a mixture of different quotes, and there are many more to find in the game. As said before, the *Borderlands* series is one example of games and series that actually try to construct a 'death narrative', the narratological embedding (or justification) of the ludological feedback mechanism that is commonly denoted as player's

death. Only a minority of games presents such a death narrative, but even within this small group of games multiple death solutions are contrived, and it is possible to construct a typology of them by systemizing their treatment of the concept of death – their thanatology – with regard to the player's avatar.

a. Dying is trying. Player's death

Ludologically speaking, the 'player's death' is nothing more than one of the most prominent and almost universally adopted feedback mechanisms of any particular game. The death of the player's avatar communicates to the player his or her (in)ability to achieve the positive goals that the game has set (Aarseth 1997). Most games refrain from penalizing the avatar's death by any means, but some games do 'punish' the gamer for his failure by removing experience points, gear or in-game money or by lowering the player's or avatar's level. Usually and ultimately, in-game 'death' is no more than a temporary setback, easily countered by the save and load system of the game. Intrinsically, death seems to have little or no meaning. 'In-game death is functional in games, rather than sublime', as Krzywinska (2015:34) has formulated; 'it is simply another feedback mechanism'.

Jesper Juul (1999:56) understands player's death as a device that stimulates the transition between *apora* and *epiphany* in the game, allowing him to progress further. *Apora* is a state in which the player is confronted with an in-game obstacle, be it a puzzle to solve, a physical object to overcome or an enemy to defeat. The player must overcome this obstacle by a combination and/or sequence of input actions (by keyboard, mouse, controller or touch screen), that is yet unknown to the player or that has physically not yet been mastered by the player.

If the player succeeds, finds the solution, overcomes the obstacle, or defeats the enemy, he enters the state of *epiphany*. Epiphany, according to Juul, is 'a sudden, often unexpected solution to the impasse of the event space'. Player's death, again, is then defined as the transition between 'no-solution-yet' and the solution itself.

One might argue that the framing of ludological failure within a game in terms of 'death' and 'dying' is a rather 'dark' design choice (Flynn-Jones 2015:50). Death is considered, especially in our secular age, as the definite end of a living being, from which no return can be expected and not containing the anticipation of an afterlife. The idea that dying could be some sort of 'learning process' would be considered ridiculous, since he who 'fails', can never learn anything ever again. Also, the idea of death as a 'punishment' for failure (death penalty for major crimes) is considered in most modern Western countries as barbaric. Again, this insight has considerable theological meaning, to which I will return later.

A word on terminology is appropriate here. I use the notions of *player's death* and *avatar's death* as synonyms, which they are strictly not. Player's death would indicate the real-life demise of the actual player, sitting lifelessly in front of his or her computer console, struck by an unknown physical entanglement between in-game and real-life events. The term *avatar's death* seems more appropriate, since it is the game's controllable character which perishes at the hands of the clumsy player. On the other hand, speaking of 'the death' of a fictional, digital 'entity' that happens to be the narratological bridge between the gamer and the game, seems somewhat overly dramatic. Pixels cannot die.

Nevertheless, the avatar is an 'affective conduit for the player' (Owen 2017:23) with which the player can interact with the digital environment of the game, and to which (or even to *whom*) the player can become emotionally attached up to the point of severe emotional identification. The player is both 'the initiator of the performance action [the played game] through an avatar and also the audience or critical witness to that action' (Owen 2017:2). The bond between the player who cries, 'I am dead!' and his avatar who drops into the pit because of an untimely jump initiated by the player is forged not on aesthetical identification but is based on control or, rather, the (temporarily) loss of control in the case of the avatar's death (McDonald 2013:116). Again, Flynn-Jones states,

> At the moment of avatar death, the game is temporary over and the player has control taken away from him/her while another screen loads, but the avatar respawns, play is restored, control returned (agency) to the payer, and the player has another turn (repetition) to beat the scenario that bested them previously (mastery).

I will treat the terms *player's death* and *avatar's death* as synonyms, because of the strong identification between gamer and avatar and because the first notion is more frequently used in the gamer community.

When examining the many examples of death narratives in video games, a number of recurrent traits and characteristics can be identified in regard to the way the developers narratologically handle player's death. I differentiate between three main types (see Table 8.1): (1) the avatar's death is real, but the player can continue with a clone/copy of the original avatar or with a revived/resurrected one; (2) the avatar's death is avoided, either by an external force or because of a simulation context; and (3) the game refrains from any narratological embedding. The third type is interesting, although lacking any narratological framework for the death of the avatar, because of the concept of 'permadeath', to which I will return in a short while.

Table 8.1 A typology of narratological embeddings of player's death in digital games

Type		*Description*	*Primary example(s)*
1		***Embedding: Actual death.***	
	A	The player's avatar is resurrected/ revived.	*Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*
	B	The player's avatar is replicated by cloning or copying.	*Borderlands* series, *Ghost 1.0*
	C	The player's avatar is replaced by an avatar from a parallel universe.	*Bioshock Infinite*, *Valley*
	D	The player's avatar is replaced by a new avatar.	*ZombiU, Agony, Battlefield 1*
2		***Embedding: Death avoided.***	
	A	The player's avatar is placed within a simulation context.	*Assassin's Creed* series, *The Talos Principle*
	B	The player's avatar is saved by an external force at the last moment.	*Prince of Persia, Bioshock Infinite*
3		***No explicit narratological embedding.***	
	A	The player's progress through the game is preserved for the next try.	*Tomb Raider* series
	B	The player's progress through the game is lost.	*The Binding of Isaac*

Source: Bosman (2018).

b. Do not panic, you'll be copied (actual death)

The subtypes of the 'actual death' category are arranged according to the strength of the continuity between the 'former' and the 'later' avatar. Continuity is strongest when the avatar is revived (type 1A), weaker in the case of copying, cloning or replacement from another dimension (types 1B and 1C), and weakest in the case of replacement with an altogether new avatar (type 1D).

1A: avatar is revived

In the first subtype (type 1A) of actual death narratives, the diseased avatar is revived/resurrected from death, effectively enabling the player to keep on playing with exactly the same avatar for the whole game. I provide two examples: *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*.

The first two *Bioshock* games feature such a death narrative. The games *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2* take place in an alternative reality, where super businessman Andrew Ryan has built an underworld city, Rapture, at the

bottom of the Atlantic Ocean (for more information about the game lore, see Chapter 7, section e). At regular intervals, the player's avatar, 'Jack', comes across contraptions known as 'Vita-Chambers' (*vita* is Latin for 'life'). They function as automatic save- and respawn-points in the game. If the player's avatar dies, it is revived in one of these chambers, retaining its former abilities and a considerable amount of health.

Narratologically, the Vita-Chambers function as resurrection machines. The chamber looks like a tubular case. The back, top and bottom are made of some sort of metal, while the front is made of some sort of glass. Inside, a green/blue light streams between two projectors on the ceiling and floor of the chamber, and between them green/blue light flashes are visible. The advertisement next to the chamber reads: 'Introducing the future of health and wellness. The Vita-Chamber. Restore vigor and spirit with the touch of a button'. The help caption of the chamber explains:

> If you are killed by the hostile denizens of Rapture, you will be revived live and whole at the last Vita-Chamber you passed. Some of your health will be restored, and you will always have at least a small amount of EVE. Vita-Chambers work automatically – there is no need to use or activate them.

In-game information tries to scientifically explain the possibility of a resurrection-chamber in Rapture, by formulating and combining some impressive terminology. The device is described as using a combination of 'plasmids' (DNA-altering substances), reconstructed within a quantum field entanglement. Although the use of the term *quantum entanglement* reminds one of subtype 1C – replacement by a parallel version of the avatar – the Vita-Chambers appear to indeed revive/restore/resurrect Jack after his death and not replace him with a clone, copy or another stand-in.

There is, however, also a possibility that the Vita-Chambers only *appear* to revive a subject, while effectively swapping the dead version of any person with a living version from another universe. This interpretation is backed up by the fact that in an in-game audio file by developer Dr. Suchong, he claims the chambers only work in the case of death by trauma, that is, a non-natural cause of death. If a person dies of old age or a slow terminal disease, the chamber cannot revive him or her. If the chamber were a true 'Lazarus machine', the cause of death would not matter.

In the context of a multiverse (as opposed to a universe), a person can only be swapped with his or her counterpart from another dimension if the two timelines differ enough from one another. In the case of acute trauma, the change that the two timelines differ is greater than in the case

of old age or a slow and terminal disease. Swapping two persons from two timelines who are both equally terminally ill would be a bad idea. I will return to the use of 'quantum physics' with regard to death narratives, when discussing subtype 1C.

1B: avatar is copied

The second subtype (type 1B) of actual death narratives comprises cloning or copying the player's avatar, enabling him or her to resume the game without narratological discontinuities or other disadvantages. I give three examples: the *Borderland* series (primary), and *Ghost 1.0*, and *Bioshock* (secondary).

In the *Borderlands* series, discussed briefly earlier, the player controls his or her avatar from a first-person perspective, killing an abundance of human and alien lifeforms on the distant planet of Pandora. The planet forms the décor in which an ongoing war takes place between High-Tec corporations, violent gangs and individual hunters in a lunatic race to find the mystical 'Vault', a secret location where the source of enormous power can be found. The game automatically saves the player's progress, when the avatar passes certain locations in the game, the already-mentioned NUSs. According to the *Borderlands*' lore, the NUS automatically copy the DNA and possessions of the 'vault hunter', the 'name' of the game's protagonist, and store it digitally.

If a player fails to comply with the necessary input sequence the game demands, his or her avatar dies. If the avatar's life meter drops to zero, the first-person perspective is switched for a third-person perspective, showing the avatar's back while he stumbles and falls onto one knee. On-screen the text 'Fight for your life!' is shown, together with a small explanation, 'Get a kill to revive'.

The player is enabled (in first-person perspective again) to kill any enemy before the time runs out in order to receive a 'second wind'. This can be quite tricky, since movement is severely hindered and no weapons can be changed. If successful, the avatar's life is fully recovered, ready for a second try. If the player is unsuccessful in his or her attempt to win the 'second wind', or if the appropriate 'I give up' key is held long enough, the perspective changes to third person again, showing the avatar from above, collapsing and falling onto his back, dropping his weapon. The camera zooms out, and the body of the fallen avatar disintegrates into a cloud of blue-and-white particles, scattered around.

Then, apparently from a first-person perspective, a blue-and-white tunnel is shown, through which windings the camera flows. After a couple of seconds, some blue-and-white particles are received by the antenna on top of the last NUS visited by the player. The particles are carried through the pole downward, ending in four small projectors, two at each side of the pole. The particles from the projector are

centered in front of the station, where the body of the avatar is reformed. The avatar is shaped from top to bottom, while a white-and-blue DNA helix gently revolves.

When the process is ready, the avatar's body is shown hovering some inches above the ground, his body leaning back. Life is restored to the body, which falls to the ground. All clothes, possessions and money are restored as they were the last time the station was visited. The perspective than returns to first person again, and the player is ready to have another go. The 'reconstruction' is not free of charge, since they are operated by Hyperion, one of the large corporations active on Pandora: an appropriate ratio of seven percent of the player's in-game money. In the presequel, the NUS are called 'Medvacs', and are operated by Hyperion's competitor Dahl.

If the player is down to seven dollars or less the fee is waived, whereupon the Station comments,

> We at Hyperion value your existence. Please accept this complimentary reconstruction. Take care of the New-U.

The whole concept of the NUSs is based on the mocking of the concept of in-game death and the player itself (Tremblay 2017). The game explains the whole process of the 'digital reconstruction of your original body' as 'digistruction' (a neologism). The storage of DNA is done in case of 'accidental death or dismemberment'. And the name of the stations, *New-U*, is a pun on the actual process itself: it replaces person A by person B, and they share (almost) all traits, characteristics, appearance and possessions. The avatar is not revived, rescued or resurrected but really dead. The new avatar is a new version of the old avatar, a digitally reconstructed clone. The game sarcastically sticks this insight into the player's face:

> Greetings, clone-of-the-recently deceased! Good luck in your future endeavors!

In *Borderlands 2* and *Pre-Sequel*, the station emits a random audio message when it is used. The majority of the quotes also mock the player. To give a few examples:

> Oh, hey, you're back.
> So, how was the dying?
> Awww, again?
> By using this New-U Station, you have forfeited your right to reproduce.
> Pandora needs you! Stop dying so much.

Some other quotes mock the (religious) idea of a transcendent afterlife:

> Do not worry about the afterlife, Hyperion customer! Hell is reserved exclusively for pedophiles.
>
> The Hyperion corporation wishes to clarify that the bright light you saw after death was our digistruct technology, and not a higher power. Not higher than Hyperion, anyway.
>
> Resurrection!

A slightly different example of the cloning/copying mechanism is found in *Ghost 1.0*. The developers have inserted an extra narratological layer into their indie game, which frames the death narrative quite nicely. *Ghost 1.0* takes places in the near future, where two socially backward cybercriminals want to hack into the mainframe of Nakamura Corporation, the world's largest producer of androids. The two criminals, who are of the most friendly kind, hire a mysterious figure known as Ghost to do the trick. Ghost remotely controls a gynoid body known as Chassis, through which she interacts with the world around her.

The narratological layer is thus twofold: the player controls Ghost, who controls Chassis, and by Chassis the player can interact with the game world. Occasionally, Chassis/Ghost/the player finds computer rooms which serve as save-points throughout the game. A digital copy of Chassis is stalled in the mainframe. When Chassis dies in-game, her body is 3D-printed in the nearest safe room (save-point), including all possessions and technology she had when she last visited the room.

The process of cloning/copying can take many forms: the first avatar can be cloned, be digitally reconstructed (*Borderlands*) or reprinted (*Ghost 1.0*) to produce a new, identical avatar. The practical result is the same: while the initial avatar is truly 'dead' (narratologically), the appearance, statistics and possessions of the second avatar are (almost) exactly the same (sometimes the game inflicts some small penalty like the loss of certain items or money). The identification between gamer and avatar is therefore virtually unbroken. The player is able to ignore the fact that he or she is not playing with the same avatar *per se* but with a clone or copy of the original one. The NUSs from the *Borderlands* series even mockingly remind the player of this unsettling insight:

> Hyperion suggests that you do not think about the fact that this is only a digital reconstruction of your original body, which died the first time you respawned.

Of course, this type of thinking creates serious and interesting psychological and theological problems surrounding the continuity of the 'essence' of the avatar (and by extension of that of the player controlling and identifying with it), but I will return to that question later.

1C: avatar is replaced through the existence of a multiverse

In the third subtype (type 1C) of actual death narratives, the dead avatar is replaced by its counterpart from another dimension within the multiverse, enabling the player to resume the game without narratological discontinuities or other disadvantages. The difference between types 1B and 1C is slim but is located in the difference between recreating the original by means of a perfect clone *within* the same reality, and replacing the original one by means of another version of the avatar from *outside* the original reality. Shortly, I give two examples: *Bioshock Infinite* (primary), and *Valley* (secondary).

This subtype of death narratives relies heavily on the (popular version of) the concept of 'multiversum'. The idea of the 'multiverse', also known as 'parallel universes', 'other universes' or 'alternative universes', is a scientific but heavily debated hypothesis on the existence of multiple universes, of which our universe is only one and in which physical constants may vary (Carr 2007). The notion of the multiverse has been used in numerous fields, like history, political science, social psychology, philosophy, mathematics, narrative theory and the arts, including video games (Front 2015).

Particularly the theoretical possibility of time travel within (a certain interpretation of) the concept of the multiverse has made this theory very popular in the modern cultural domain (Wittenberg 2016). To circumvent the 'grandfather paradox' – going back in time to kill one's grandfather, which would make the existence of the murderous grandchild impossible (Al-Khalili 2012) – time travel would have to be reinterpreted as shifting from one parallel universe to another.

In *Bioshock Infinite*, the player takes control of Booker DeWitt, a drunken and dysfunctional, former Pinkerton now private detective. In a retrofuturistic, steampunk version of our reality, more precisely 1912, DeWitt is ordered by two strange clients, Rosalind and Robert Lutece, to 'bring us the girl, and wipe away the debt'. Since DeWitt is suffering from some kind of amnesia, the player and DeWitt are equally in the dark about the context of this mission. DeWitt is transported, by rocket, to a floating city in the sky, Columbia, ruled by the self-appointed prophet Zachary Comstock. 'The girl', the Luteces want him to find, appears to be the eighteen-year-old daughter of Comstock, venerated by the Columbia population as 'the Lamb of Comstock'. (For more information on the religion criticism in the game, see Chapter 10.)

In Columbia, Booker DeWitt frequently dies because of faulty jumps or overpowering enemies. If DeWitt suffers a fatal blow (or if something else terrible happens to him), he collapses. The first-person perspective is maintained throughout the game, even if DeWitt dies (in contrast to *Borderlands*, where the perspective shifts). Sounds are muffled, and the

screen fades to black. Almost immediately, DeWitt/the player find themselves in a black, gray and white version of the detective's own office. The screen is opaque and unfocused, as if DeWitt is in a dream-like state. The player can read the inversed words on the door: 'Booker DeWitt, investigations into matters both public and private'. A brief ludological message appears on screen:

> When your life is saved, you will be partially healed, but so will your enemies. You will also lose some money. [button] open the door.

The player has no other option than to move toward the door and open it. At the other side of the door, the player finds himself in the vicinity of the location where a moment ago DeWitt was breathing his last breath. If the player turns DeWitt around – after passing through the door – no sign of either the door or the office is seen: it is as if both have disappeared into thin air. A clearly frightened DeWitt exclaims, 'What just happened?', while panicky music is heard for a few seconds.

The death narrative of *Bioshock Infinite* is based on the theory of multiverse. Even more: the whole complex narrative of the game works with multiple, parallel universes. Travel between the parallel dimensions is possible, by scientific or natural means, through so-called tears (Laas 2015). Multiple DeWitts from different timelines become entangled with one another (Bosman 2017), and in all these intertwined timelines, DeWitt's office plays a decisive role in the unfolding of the dramatic events.

In the office, detective DeWitt is visited the first time by the Lutece twins – who are actually two versions of the same individual from two different universes – to 'buy' DeWitt's (motherless) daughter so he is able to pay off his large gambling debts: 'bring us the girl and wipe away the debt'. The Luteces take DeWitt's daughter to another timeline in which DeWitt did not end up being a private detective but developed into the prophet Comstock, who is unable to produce offspring.

Moved by guilt and fear, the Lutece twins return a second time to DeWitt's office to take him to Comstock's reality so he can free his daughter from becoming a weapon of mass destruction in the hands of Comstock. DeWitt's daughter, called Anna or Elizabeth in either one or the other timeline, is naturally capable of creating tears between the parallel universes. Because of the interdimensional travel, DeWitt has lost almost all his memories, interpreting the Luteces' phrase 'bring us the girl and wipe away the debt' as meaning something completely different. Since the player does not know more than DeWitt, the player is also highly confused about the true nature of things until the very end of the game.

The theory of multiverse in *Bioshock Infinite* is backed up when DeWitt meets the twins on the outskirts of Columbia. Robert is wearing a billboard with a chalkboard on it. The board is divided into two columns: 'heads' and 'tails'. The 'heads' column has twelve stripes; the 'tails'

column has none. Rosalind is holding a tray with a coin on it. When Booker is provoked to flip the coin, he throws heads. This happens in *every* playthrough. While Rosalind draws another stripe on her brother's chalkboard, he says to her: 'I never find that as satisfying as I'd imagined', to which she replies: 'Chin up, there is always next time'. When the twins walk away, Booker (and the player) can see the back of the board. It has the same division between heads and tails as the front, but here the score is 110 for 'heads', and none for 'tails'.

This little scene indicates that the current DeWitt represents the 123rd (at least) attempt by the Luteces to free Elizabeth with the help of her father from their original universe. It fits the death narrative of the game: every time the player fails to play the game at a sufficiently reasonable level, DeWitt dies, only to be replaced by another version of himself from another timeline. The current avatar dies but is swapped instantly for another identical one, sharing almost all (temporary loss of) knowledge, possessions and qualities with the initial one, except the experience of dying. That explains the surprised expression of DeWitt when he leaves the dream-like office to find himself in the midst of (for this version) unknown action.

A variation of this kind of death narrative – the avatar is replaced by a version from another reality – is found in the game *Valley*. The game take place in the present-day United States, in a place resembling the Rocky Mountains. The player controls a nameless male or female avatar, whose nature hiking trip turns bad after having trashed his or her canoe. In a hidden valley, the player finds remnants of an American military expedition going back to the Second World War. In-game information reveals that all were looking to harvest the incredible power of the 'seed of life', but none of them was successful.

Very soon, the player also finds the L.E.A.F. suit, an acronym for Leap Effortlessly through Air Functionality, which enables the player to run faster and leap higher. More important, the suit enables the player to extract life energy from (larger) animals and trees or to restore it to them, effectively killing and reviving them. Using the mechanics of this technology, the player can keep his or her avatar's life in good shape. Everything, however, comes at a cost.

If the player's avatar dies, usually by miscalculating a jump or by coming into contact with a large body of water, the screen turns black. A pictogram of a branch with several leaves is shown, and two leaves fall off, symbolizing the decrease of life energy in the ecosystem of the valley itself. A white, black and blue whirl of colors appears, and then the gamer is back again, at a moment a few seconds before the last fatality. The leaves can be restored by resuscitating the animal and vegetable life of the valley. If not done properly before the avatar dies again, the player is forced to begin at the beginning of the particular level he has reached in the game.

The game frames this death narrative as follows:

> The L.E.A.F. suit's Quantum Death functionality allows the user to return to life after dying. [. . .] But life must be traded for life. The more you die, the more the valley will die around you until it is fully deadened. Without enough life in the valley, you cannot be revived.

This explanation indicates that the avatar's death was an actual one, while the notion 'Quantum Death functionality' suggests that another version of the avatar is brought in from a parallel universe. The energy needed for this swift transition from one to the other timeline is harvested by the natural collective energy of the valley itself. *Valley* and *Bioshock Infinite* share this common trait: the avatar is swapped by its counterpart from another dimension.

1D: avatar is replaced by a stand-in

In the fourth subtype (type 1D) of actual death narratives, the dead avatar is, again, replaced but now not by a copy, clone or another dimensional counterpart but by another avatar without any personal continuity provided, except via the player controlling them both.

The game *ZombiU* is the perfect example of this type of death narrative. The game is a zombie-apocalyptic survival game, set in an alternative London in 2012, and is based on the visions of the historical English mathematician and Hermetic philosopher John Dee (1527–1608), who is said to have had great influence on both Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth I (Clulee 1988; Harkness 2006). After the zombie outbreak, the player's (first) avatar – a stereotypical survivor – is contacted by a mysterious 'prepper' by radio, who orders the player/player's avatars around for the rest of the game.

The game is played from a first-person perspective. The player's avatar will die frequently, by environmental hazards or zombie infection. Infection occurs if a zombie bites the avatar or if the avatar comes into contact with saliva or vomit. The first-person perspective is then swapped for a third-person one, indicating a breach in the player's control of the avatar (like in the *Borderlands* series), showing the avatar 'die'. The player is then given control over yet another randomly generated survivor, sleeping in the prepper's safehouse. The player's first job is to hunt down his former avatar and kill it (if zombified) and to retake all possessions lost when losing control.

The terms *death* and *dying* are, however, somewhat problematic here because in the case of infection the avatar does not actually die but is forced to live on as an infected entity, robbed of any self-consciousness. One could argue that the process of zombification 'de-humanizes' the avatar in question, mentally destroying him beyond any chance of restoration. Like Father Grigori does in *Half-Life 2*, the only 'decent thing' to do is put them out of their misery.

A very dramatic example is found in *Battlefield 1*. During its openings scene, the player is given control of different members of the Harlem Hellfighters (the historical 369th US Infantry Regiment) in their defense against a German offensive, during the last year of the Great War. When the player's avatar dies, the player is shown the name of the deceased and the year of his birth and death (the last one always being 1918). Subsequently, the player hovers over the enormous battlefield until he 'enters' another soldier. And then, the process is repeated as long as necessary for the player to reach the end goal of the level.

Another example of this type of death narrative is found in the game *Agony*. When the player is killed by one of the many flesh-eating demons from the underworld, the player is given a short time to find another living being to possess its soul.

The different death narratives of the first subtype have in common that the avatar actually 'dies', that is, leaves this plane of existence to never be seen again. The possible exception to this rule is *ZombiU*, as I have explained above. Still, conceptually speaking, in all four subtypes the avatar's demise is serious and definite, but the continuation of gameplay is guaranteed by either providing a clone/copy of the avatar, providing the same avatar from another dimension, swapping it for another interchangeable avatar or reviving the avatar after his death.

The most important difference between the four subtypes is the amount of continuity they provide between the different avatars. In the case of resurrection (1A), the 'trans-death' continuity is maximized, since the player actually plays with one and the same avatar, ludologically and narratologically. In the case of cloning/coping (1B) and quantum replacement (1C), the continuity is problematized: on one hand, the 'new' avatar shares all possible characteristics with the 'old' one, but on the other hand, it is still a copy; that is, it is not the original. Finally, in the case of outright replacement by another, different avatar (1D), the continuity is narratologically broken while remaining ludologically intact.

c. Do not panic, you're safe (avoid death)

The second type of death narrative occurs when the death of the player's avatar is avoided, either because of a simulation context (type 2A) or because death is prevented at the last possible moment by an external force (type 2B).

2A: Avoidance by simulation

The first subtype (type 2A) of death-avoiding narratives is when the avatar is located in a simulation context of his own, adding an extra narratological layer to the game. The player controls avatar 1 in real-life by means of his computer (console), while avatar 1 controls avatar 2 by

means of an in-game (computer) device: a simulation *within* a simulation. A player's death does not mean the actual death of the player but, rather, of his avatar, so – in this type of game – the second avatar's death does not mean the actual death of the first avatar. Death is avoided. I give two examples: the *Assassin's Creed* series (primary) and *The Talos Principle* (secondary).

The *Assassin's Creed* universe consists of a complete reframing of humankind's entire world history. (I have already described the lore in Chapter 6, but for the convenience of the reader, I repeat this section forthwith.) In the world of *Assassin's Creed*, humankind is nothing more than the remnants of a genetically engineered slave race, developed and controlled by the super intelligent but now long extinct Isu. When a cosmic disaster struck Earth, causing the death of almost all Isu, humankind survived, remembering their former lives in the form of legends and myths. The Isu left behind some very powerful artifacts, called 'Pieces' or 'Apples of Eden', a reference to the fruit in Genesis 3, which give their possessors almost unlimited power over mind and matter (Bosman 2018, 2016a, 2016b).

The *Assassin's Creed* series then reframes all of humankind's history as a battle between two groups over the possession of the Isu artifacts: the Assassins and the Templars, respectively based on the Shi'ite sect of the Nizari Isma'ilis and the Christian Knights Templar. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Joseph's capacity to interpret dreams, Moses's splitting of the Red Sea, David killing Goliath, Solomon's wisdom, the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, the Shroud of Turin, Jesus's miracles, including this resurrection—the whole of salvation history is set in a completely different light.

In the in-game present, the Templar Order seems to be winning the great battle against their eternal rivals through, among other things, a great financial and technological advantage. The Templar's aboveground cover, Abstergo Industries, has developed a device, called 'the Animus' (Latin for 'life' or 'spirit'), with which it is possible to relive the life of historical figures. Originally, the user of the Animus and the historical figure whose life is to be relived had to have a genetic connection. In other words: you could only relive the life of your genetic ancestors. Very soon after, Abstergo developed a new version of the Arenimus, the Helix, for which the requirement of genetic similarity was removed. The Templars, and somewhat later the Assassin Brotherhood too, use the Animus/Helix to go back in time to discover the location of several lost Isu artifacts.

The narratological structure of the *Assassin's Creed* series is equally complex, but very illustrative for the simulation kind of death-avoiding narratives (see Table 8.2). In *Assassin's Creed*, *Assassin's Creed 2*, *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, and *Assassin's Creed 3*, the player controls Desmond Miles, a modern-day Assassin. Desmond, in his turn, is placed in the Animus by the Brotherhood, thus virtually controlling his ancestors,

Table 8.2 Overview of the different narratological layers in the primary games of the *Assassin's Creed* series

	Actual situation		**In-game situation**				
	Actual player	*Actual device*	*Contemporary assassin*	*Primary in-game device*	*Primary historical assassin*	*Secondary in-game device*	*Secondary historical assassin*
A. Triple layered (PC, Animus, Masyaf Keys)							
ACRe	Player	(PC)	Desmond	(Animus)	Ezio	(Masyaf Keys)	Altaïr
B. Double layered (PC, Animus)							
AC1	Player	(PC)	Desmond	(Animus)	Altaïr		
AC2	Player	(PC)	Desmond	(Animus)	Ezio		
ACB	Player	(PC)	Desmond	(Animus)	Ezio		
AC3	Player	(PC)	Desmond	(Animus)	Connor/Haytham		
AC4	Player	(PC)	Employee 1	(Animus Omega)	Edward		
ACRo	Player	(PC)	Employee 2	(Animus Omega)	Shay		
ACO	Player	(PC)	Layla	(Animus HR-8)	Bayek/Aya		
C. Merged layers (PC = Helix/Animus)							
ACU	Player	(PC)	=	(Helix/Animus)	Arno		
ACS	Player	(PC)	=	(Helix/Animus)	Evie/Jacob/Lydia		

Note: They are first listed in the order of narratological complexity and, second, in order of their game-internal time frame (Bosman, 2018). AC1 = *Assassin's Creed*; AC2 = *Assassin's Creed 2*; ACB = *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*; ACRe = *Assassin's Creed Revelations*; AC3 = *Assassin's Creed 3*; AC4 = *Assassin's Creed 4. Black Flag*; ACRo = *Assassin's Creed Rogue*; ACU = *Assassin's Creed Unity*; ACS = *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*; and ACO = *Assassin's Creed Origins*.

the historical Assassin Altaïr ibn Al-Ahad and Ezio Auditore. As soon as Desmond is placed in the machine, the player's control is shifted from Desmond to either Altaïr or Ezio. The games maintain the double narrative layer by regularly returning from Altaïr or Ezio to Desmond.

The Animus is a vertical virtual reality machine. The subject has to lie down on a type of bench, while he is brought into a sort of state in which he is able to control the virtual body of his ancestor as if he is controlling his own, without moving his actual body in the Animus.

In other games of the series, the same double-layered structure is maintained, although without Desmond as the modern-day Assassin. Desmond is replaced by a nameless Abstergo employee (*Assassin's Creed 4* and *Assassin's Creed Rogue*) or by Layla Hassan, a rogue Abstergo scientist working on a portable version of the Animus (*Assassin's Creed Origin*). In one instance, the double-layered structure is increased with a third layer, complicating matters even more. In *Assassin's Creed Revelations*, the player controls Desmond (through the gaming console), who controls Ezio (through the Animus), who relives fragments of the life of their common ancestor, Altaïr (through objects called 'Masyaf Keys').

In *Assassin's Creed Unity* and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* the original two narratological levels (that of the modern-day Assassin and that of the historical Assassin) are merged into one. The games suggest that Abstergo has produced a consumer version of the Animus, the Helix, with which everyone can access the memories of any historical person whose DNA is analyzed and digitally stored on their servers. By several, and clever, means, the two games suggest a merger between the actual gamer console and the in-game Helix console. The player is now directly controlling the historical Assassins Arno Dorian (*Unity*) and the twins Evie and Jacob Frye (*Syndicate*).

Within the Animus simulation, the series suggests, the player/modern-day Assassin has to relive the actions of his ancestor within certain strict boundaries. If the player's/modern-day Assassin's actions differ too much from those performed by the historical figure, the simulation becomes unstable: the screen fizzles and is prone to interference as if the Animus is on the verge of losing its 'signal'. If taken too far – for example by missing critical mission directives or by simply dying – the camera immediately zooms out, while the screen turns vaguely red. A message appears: 'You are desynchronized'. The player is shown the standard loading screen of the game. The Assassin the player is currently working with is shown in the 'memory corridor', while the player is waiting for the game to restart, some instance before the last failure. In short, the avatar of the *Assassin's Creed* series does not actually die because of his in-game simulated status.

Another example of the simulation death narrative is found in *The Talos Principle*. (As I have discussed the narrative of *The Talos Principle* in Chapter 5, but for the convenience of the reader, I provide a short summary.) *The Talos Principle* takes place in the future, when humanity

has been eradicated by a killer virus coming from the melted permafrost. All knowledge of humankind is stored in a database, waiting for future use by the successor of humanity. This successor is, however, still in the process of being created when the events of the game takes place.

Humanity tried to develop the perfect artificial intelligence to take over humanity's place on earth. In a section of the fictional Institute for Applied Noematics (IAN), called the 'Extended Lifespan' (EL), the scientists ran tests in virtual environments. If a version of the artificial life (AI) failed one or more tests, the successful parameters were stored and the ones remaining were randomly adjusted for another go. The project was dubbed 'the Talos Principle'. The virtual simulation was run on drive 0 of this project, overseen by another AI called the Holistic Integration Manager, or HIM. And so, the acronym EL0HIM was constructed: the self-identification of the virtual manager (HIM), running on drive 0, managing the experiments of the Extended Lifespan (EL) section of the IAN.

Since time unknown, long after the extinction of humankind, the HIM kept the simulation going, resulting not only in continuously improved versions of the tested AI (the game protagonist and player's avatar) but also in the, probably unintended, development of self-consciousness in the HIM himself. If the player/avatar disobeys EL0HIM, the player/avatar is considered to have passed the 'child independence check'. The virtual avatar that succeeds in doing this is then downloaded in a physical version of its former virtual body and is given the collective knowledge of humankind.

As soon as a fatal mistake is made by the player, the screen freezes and time is rewound. The player sees his actions reversing very rapidly until the beginning of the level is reached. Then, control over the avatar is returned to the player. The framework is perfectly logical within the game narrative, but given the fact that the player is only aware of the true nature of things at the very end of the game, the whole re-winding can be quite surprising. In *The Talos Principle*, the player's avatar does not actually die: the simulation run on drive 0 of the Extended Lifespan project is simply ended, and reset to a prior state to give the artificial intelligence in question (the player's avatar) another go.

2B: Avoidance through intervention by an external force

The second subtype (type 2B) of death-avoiding narratives is found when the avatar's death is prevented at the last possible moment by an external force. I present multiple examples of this type: *Prince of Persia* (primary) and *Bioshock Infinite* and the *Far Cry* series (secondary).

The 2008 installment of the *Prince of Persia* series stands rather apart from all the other ones. The game's narrative leans heavily on the religion and spirituality of Zoroastrianism (or Mazdaism), a historical religion from the Middle East (Skjaervo 2011; Rose 2011). The background

story of *Prince of Persia* is a retelling of the cosmic origin story of Zoroastrianism: the cosmic and eternal struggle between the twins Ahura Mazda (or Ormazd), the principle of good and order, and Angra Mainyu (or Ahriman), the principle of evil and chaos. Eons ago, Ormazd imprisoned his evil twin brother Ahriman in the Tree of Life. Ormazd's chosen people, the Ahura, are left in charge of guarding the Tree and its prisoner.

In the temporal present of the game, the King of the Ahura, struck by grief for the loss of his beloved wife, is lured over to the dark side by Ahriman. He is in the process of cutting down the Tree of Life, thus freeing Ahriman, in the hope the evil twin will bring his wife back to him. The other Ahura have become weary of their everlasting life, and choose to obey their king. One Ahura, however, refuses: Elika, the daughter of the corrupted king himself. In the beginning of the game, she is hunted by her father's warriors, only to be rescued by a nameless 'Prince', the game's protagonist and the player's avatar.

Elika and the Prince form an inseparable couple for almost the whole of the rest of the game. She provides him with detailed information about the environment she is very acquainted with and takes care of the revitalization of the lands corrupted by Ahriman, while the Prince's job is primarily fighting and climbing. When fighting, Elika provides additional help (producing 'combos', specific combinations of key inputs stringed together to execute heavier attacks), and while climbing, Elika sits on the Prince's back.

There is another very important aspect of the bonding between the Prince and Elika, besides the blossoming romance. If the player fails to time his jump or fails to slay an enemy, Elika intervenes on behalf of the Prince. If in a fight, she will magically drive the enemy back a couple of meters giving the Prince a new chance of success. If falling to his doom, Elika magically grabs the Prince's hand in the midst of the fall, pulling him back to safe ground so he can try again. Elika is the Prince's 'external force', preventing his death at the last possible moment.

This special interaction is reflected on, when the two have to defeat one of Ahriman's four lieutenants, once good and decent people but now under the corrupting spell of Ahriman. This specific lieutenant is called 'The Concubine', once a beautiful and powerful woman at the Ahuras' court, but after eventually having been outsmarted by a female rival, she joined ranks with Ahriman, who gave her the power of illusions in return for eternal servitude to him.

The Concubine, true to her former position of court intrigant, tries to drive a wedge between the Prince and Elika, who obviously, but very reluctantly, seem to have fallen in love with one another. When the Concubine utterly fails to win the Prince's heart, she projects seven copies of Elika, next to the real one. She challenges the Prince to 'choose her'. The only way to do so is a rather radical one. The player has to let the Prince

jump from the tower into the depths without knowing if Elika is in any shape to rescue him. But when the Prince does jump, she saves him like always, and thus, he knows who the real Elika is.

The second example of death-avoidance through intervention by an external force is taken from *Bioshock Infinite*, a game we discussed earlier under subtype 1C (the avatar is replaced by a counterpart from another dimension). As soon as Booker DeWitt succeeds in finding his daughter Elizabeth (a fact he is still oblivious about), she will take on the role that Elika has in *Prince of Persia*. If the player fails to perform a jump or is defeated by an enemy, DeWitt falls to his knees, his body bending backwards.

DeWitt's eyes blink as he tries to fight of his imminent death. Since the player is looking through the blinking eyes of DeWitt, slipping in and out of consciousness, only fragments of what is happening are seen. What the player can see, is Elizabeth bending over DeWitt's body, screaming 'Booker, don't die on me!', or similar phrases. In the second instance Elizabeth can be seen ticking against a syringe with green substance in it, as if she is about to inject the fluid into Booker's bloodstream; and in the third instance, Elizabeth helps Booker to stand up again, fully recovered from his injuries.

A last example is in the later installments of the *Far Cry* series, numbers 2, 3, 4 and 5, which offer the possibility of 'hired help': mercenaries, soldiers, farmers, bandits and adventurers can be recruited to aid the games' protagonist in his battle against the hordes on islands, in mountains, jungles, savannas and the American wilderness. The two characters are complementary. If the health of the player's avatar runs too low, he collapses to the ground, lying on his back, struggling to survive the lethal wounds. At that point his buddy runs to the player, and if he reaches him before he too is killed, he will grab his hand and lift him up from the ground. Magically, all wounds are healed, and health is fully restored.

The opposite can happen too: if the buddy falls to the ground, struggling to survive, the player has a certain amount of time to reach him and revive him as well. Interestingly enough, this mechanism makes it relatively easy to survive, since both characters can heal each other for an unlimited amount of time, but at the same time forces both the player's avatar and the computer-controlled companion to risk their own lives in an attempt to save the other. If the player does not succeed in reviving his avatar's companion quickly enough, it will then die, negating the chance of its reviving the player's avatar if necessary.

In all cases, the death of the avatar is prevented by either an external force (Elika from *Prince of Persia*, Elizabeth from *Bioshock Infinite*, the protagonist of the *Far Cry* games) or is exposed as harmless because of a simulation context (in the cases of the *Assassin's Creed* series and *The Talos Principle*).

d. Do panic, you're actually dead (permadeath)

A third type of death narrative is somewhat paradoxical in nature. In this type of game, the death of the avatar is either very insignificant, both narratologically and ludologically, or so utterly important that no second attempt is allowed. In the first case, there is no death narrative to explain why a player can continue to use his avatar postmortem: he just can. In the second case, there is no death narrative, because the player is forced to start all over again in the event that his or her avatar dies (type 3A). The common ground between these two very distinct types of game is the absence of a death narrative or a very minimalistic version: 'You are dead. The end' (type 3B).

3A: No death narrative

The first subtype of games without a narratological embedding of the player's death is very abundantly present in modern-day games and gaming. It is the industry's standard policy to give the player the possibility to save and load his or her game. Sometimes games are automatically saved by the game itself, sometimes by time-interval, sometimes at certain points in the game (called save-points), and sometimes by a combination of the two. Other games, usually somewhat older ones, offer the possibility of saving and loading the game at any given time by hitting the hot key, effectively making a snapshot of the game as it is at that moment in time.

For example, in the reboot series of *Tomb Raider*, no death narrative is present. Lara Croft, the game's protagonist and player's avatar, can fall to her death, be impaled, drowned, burned, crashed, shot and so on. When she dies, the player can hear her scream or shout, while the camera zooms out and the screen turns to gray shades. Then, the game will automatically show the standard loading screen. After some seconds – depending on the speed of the computer or console – the last automatic save will be loaded, bringing the player back some instants before the last fatal situation, enabling him to try one more time not to get killed. Again, there is no explanation why Lara is gifted with unlimited lives or why she appears fresh and shining, while some seconds previously her head was shot off or her body was torn to pieces.

Interestingly enough, the theme of the second installment of the reboot series, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, is immortality. In this game, Lara Croft is searching for an artifact, known as the 'Divine Power', effectually functioning as a source of eternal life. Lara wants the artifact because she hopes she can bring back her father from the grave. The Divine Source seems to be in the possession of a 'deathless prophet', whose tomb in Syria appears to be empty. The trail leads to the hidden city of Kitezh, but Lara is followed by an ancient and secret organization known as 'Trinity', which is both interested in harvesting the power of the Divine Source for themselves and in hunting down any remnants of the 'heresy', of which the Prophet is the eternal living spiritual leader.

Besides the obvious play on the Templar Knights and their supposedly ancient powers, the whole narrative is based on the historical legend of the lost city of Kitezh, a Russian city, the inhabitants of which were saved by divine intervention from the attacking Mongol hordes, sometime early in the 13th century. The city was swallowed by the waves, like a Russian Atlantis. The legend of Kitezh is connected to a group of historical Russian Orthodox faithful, who are known as 'Old Believers' or 'Old Ritualists'. The group was dubbed heretical by mainstream Eastern Orthodoxy at a Synod in 1666/1667, because of their different interpretation of the inner structure of the Holy Trinity (Prokofieff 2016:68–85; Woodson 2014). As we have seen, the name of the organization against which Lara is fighting in *Rise*, is called: Trinity.

3B: permadeath

The second subtype featuring (hardly) any death narrative (type 3B) can be found in games containing what is called 'permadeath': 'the permanent loss of a player's character in a video game' (Mazzei et al. 2014). Superficially, this resembles the old notion of the slot machines in the arcade era when technology was not able to save the player's progress, but at a deeper level it is a response by game developers to demands, especially from hard-core players who want a challenging game environment in which every decision counts (Griffin 2014). While games as *Spelunky* (2008) and *The Binding of Isaac* (2011) feature permadeath prominently, other games, especially in the role-playing genre, like *Diablo 2, Diablo 3* and the previously discussed *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*, offer 'an optional, extra-difficult mode' (Frome 2016) featuring permadeath. In the case of the *Bioshock* games, the Vita Chambers are simply de-activated.

For example, in the game *The Binding of Isaac* 'dead' means 'dead' and not 'try again'. That is, when the avatar dies, the player is forced to start the entire game over again, independent of his progress through the game. *The Binding* draws narratologically speaking heavily on the Biblical story of the same name, from Genesis 20. In this Genesis story, God appears to ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, to prove to God that Abraham loves him above all else. The developer of *The Binding* addresses this theme very critically (Bosman et al. 2018).

When the avatar Isaac dies in *The Binding of Isaac*, the player is confronted with an image, supposedly of Isaac, describing his own death (which, in itself, is rather paradoxical and humorous).

> Dear diary, today I died. I was killed by this thing [a drawing of the enemy that killed Isaac] in some [the name of the level]. I leave all that I own to my cat Guppy [a drawing of the head of a stuffed toy animal with its eyes sewn closed]. Goodbye, cruel world. XOXO [emoticons for 'kiss' and 'hug' twice] Isaac.

Ludologically, it features permadeath, but narratologically it mocks the concept of the avatar's death by suggesting that a deceased in-game character could write a log about this occurrence. *The Binding* suggests that only the player is able to produce a written record of the avatar's death, since he or she knows the game can be restarted again and again for another try, and, narratologically speaking, to fill in yet another page of 'his' or 'her' diary.

e. To die of a sin. Theological reflections

In Christian tradition, the notion of 'death' is primarily associated with the concept of 'sin' and secondarily with the process of the transition of a human from his or her earthly to his or her heavenly existence. Death is discussed in three contexts: (1) Death as the result of Adam's original sin. (2) Death as the result of individual sins. (3) Death as defeated by Christ on the cross. All three contexts have their parallels within video games, especially when focusing on player's death and the identification between the player's avatar and the player himself. Of course, 'death' in the Christian tradition can also indicate theological discussions on what happens after we die: judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory, and so forth. Although video games do feature such themes and locations, I discard those in this section.

(1) Death, as said before, is frequently discussed within Christian theology with regard to the biblical figures of Adam and Eve, who transgressed against God's commandment, thus 'creating' death as a result and as punishment. Unfortunately for the rest of humankind, classic theology teaches that the sins of Adam and Eve were passed on to their offspring, a concept known as 'original sin' (Toews 2013). Every man and woman is born sinful, because of Adam and Eve. Traditionally, Romans 5,12 is quoted as a scriptural basis for the concept of original sin:

> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

Intriguingly, the preceding quoted text is a good translation of the Greek original: death spread to all man, because everyone sinned. Adam was just the first one to sin, and therefore to die, but every man and woman also individually sinned, and therefore died. The Latin Vulgate, the dominant Bible version for more than a millennium of Western Church history translates the verse from Romans differently: . . . *in quo omnes peccaverunt*, 'in whom [Adam] all have sinned' (Fitzmyer 1993:402–420).

The idea that the original sin of Adam and Eve are somehow transmitted to every next generation, as an inevitable verdict of imminent death, was defended by many theologians of the first millennium but

most influentially by Augustine of Hippo. In his *Answer to the Pelagians* (transl. 1998), he writes:

> For either Paul meant that all sinned in that man, because, when he sinned, all were in him, or that all sinned in that sin, because it became universally the sin of all, which all would contract by being born.

Original sin is passed on ('contracted') through procreation and birth. Many interpreters of Augustine see a clear connection between sexual desire and human procreation, on one hand, and the transmission of original sin, on the other (Toews 2013:82). This connection between sex and sin is one of the most demonstrable *loci* of Christian 'sexual pessimism' (Hebeis 2012; Deschner 2012; Ranke-Heinemann 1995).

Since the turn of the 19th century, and especially after the Second Vatican Council (1960–1965), theologians have suggested new ways of interpreting the classic notion of original sin. Piet Schoonenberg (1965:186–187) and others explored the Johannine idea of the 'sins of the world' (John 1,29): 'a formula to sum up the social nature or, or solidarity in, the sin of all humanity' (Richardson 1995:285). Humans are affected by numerous 'sins' that precede their own individual existence or their own individual responsibility: peer-group pressure, pollution, global warming, violent conflicts, the atom bomb, unfair distribution of wealth, sexism, racism, xenophobia and so forth.

These sinful 'socio-politico-economic structures' (Richardson 1995:285), as a modern interpretation of the idea of original sin, can be traced in several of the games I have discussed in this chapter and in this volume. To stay with the examples in this chapter, in *The Talos Principle*, the unnamed artificial intelligence (the avatar) *and* EL0HIM are both the result of collective human errors in the past. Humans produced pollution, by which the earth warmed up, causing the permafrost to melt. The melted permafrost released a deadly virus, resulting in the total extermination of humankind in a matter of years. Neither the android nor EL0HIM is responsible for their current predicament and neither for their 'conflict', since both artificial intelligences, at least as an early version, were programmed by humans.

In *Bioshock*, the population of Rapture is only partially responsible for the implosion of their utopia and its disarray. Of course, their greed, addiction and egoism made them enemies of one another, but no one would be there if it were not for Andrew Ryan, who brought them in by means of, in hindsight, false promises. Jack, the player's avatar, is eventually revealed to be Ryan's son, produced as a safeguard against Rapture's failure. Both Jack and the player are manipulated by Atlas, Ryan's main competitor, to wear each other down.

In *Valley*, the nameless avatar is confronted with the sinful heritage of armies and scientists, who tried to harvest the power of the valley for their own unholy purposes. In *ZombiU*, the player's interchangeable avatar is threatened by a zombie outbreak for which the individual survivors have no responsibility whatsoever. In the *Assassin's Creed* series, the modern-day *and* historical Assassins *and* Templars are implicitly framed into the larger, ancient and complex rivalry between the two factions. The majority of the people are unaware of this battle, and even the members of both secret organizations seldom have the full picture.

The death of the avatar in these video games is the result of individual failure on the side of the protagonist (narratologically) and/or the player (ludologically) – as I argue later in this chapter – but is also made possible by the greater sinful and preceding structures presented to the avatar/player: pollution, war, egoism, and so forth. If Andrew Ryan had not have tried to found a Randian society, Jack's troublesome existence would not have been necessary, and all the splicers Jack is killing in Rapture, would have been civil people living their civil, mediocre lives. If the Isu had not have produced and enslaved humankind to work as laborers and war machines, the strife between Assassins and Brotherhood would never have occurred, sparing potentially thousands of innocent lives. Death as a consequence of original sin is very much present in video games and their death narratives but only in a modern interpretation of the old theological notion.

(2) Death and sinning are intertwined in the Christian tradition. By sinning against God's commandment, Adam and Eve were condemned to live a mortal life eventually, and inevitably, ending in death. To Adam God said (Genesis 3,19): 'By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground. Because from it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return'. The connection is taken up by Paul, for example, in his Letter to the Romans (6,23): 'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'.; and one chapter earlier (5,14): '[D]eath reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come'. Although, as we have seen, the death of every individual human is frequently connected to the one fault of Adam and Eve, modern interpretations argue that death is upon us all because of our individual *behavior* and not because of our Adamic *nature* (Harwood 2011:59). Every individual dies, not because of Adam's sin but because every human being sins individually.

When applied to the field of games and death narratives, the idea that death is connected to sin or failure can also easily be identified. The death of the avatar is produced by the player who fails to comply with the system's demand for a specific sequence of input. If Lara Croft, Jack or Booker DeWitt 'dies', it is because the player leaps into a ravine, is killed by an auto-turret or is smashed to pieces by Comstock's men. In-game

dying is a consequence of individual failure on the part of the gamer, because of his 'sinfulness'.

Of course, there is a problem applying 'sinfulness' to the failing actions of the player right away. In-game dying is primarily a feedback mechanism to tell the player he is failing to produce the right input. The death of the avatar is foremost a ludological category, to be embedded into the larger narratological framework of the game. The category of 'sin' is a religious-ethical one, indicating that an individual has transgressed certain well-established moral boundaries within the real world, like killing your neighbor or stealing money from your co-workers.

On the contrary, 'not-failing' in-game usually means the destruction of objects, the defeat of enemies, and/or the taking of objects not necessarily yours in the first place, all actions with questionable moral caliber. Paradoxically, in-game failing usually means not sinning, while not failing (succeeding) in-game is usually obtained by doing 'sinful' things.

There is one game, a very small and insignificant one, that seems to understand this tension: *Run, Jesus run!* – aka 'the ten second Gospel'. This flash game from 2010, challenges the player to successfully 'redeem humanity' in ten or fewer seconds. The player can use two keys to run right or left, and one action key to 'do Jesus things'. The game starts with baby Jesus crawling from his crib in Bethlehem, then jumping a ledge in front of the devil (Luke 4,1–13), followed by the feeding of the five thousand (John 6,1–14), walking over water (Mark 6,45–52), the Sermon on the Mount (jumping gives you a heart, as if in *Super Mario Bros.*), the resurrection of Lazarus (11,1–44) and the counting of the Apostles at the Last Supper (if you're quick enough you'll get twelve).

If successful, Jesus ends up on the cross, dying between the two others. If unsuccessful during the playthrough, the player is confronted with an empty cross, and the words 'game over'. The developer found a very intriguing interpretation for Jesus' words: 'For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it' (Luke 9,24). In this very rare case, the game is won by dying and lost by living.

This perspective on death narratives in video games kindles the fire for a full-fledged discussion on the (supposedly) violent nature of many video games in the first place, and the friction between this violent nature and the (supposedly) pacifistic nature of the Christian message in the second place. I will return to this pressing issue in Chapter 10. For now, it is sufficient to point out the numerous occasions, primarily in the Hebrew Bible but also in the New Testament book of Revelations, in which all kinds of violent behavior is shown, unreprimanded by God, and in more than one occasion instigated by God himself.

(3) In Pauline theology, followed by many theologians, including the aforementioned Augustine, sin and death have entered the world through

one man, Adam, but are conquered by another man, Jesus Christ. Paul, again in his Letter to the Romans (5,18–19), says,

> So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

Christian tradition, in the broadest sense of the phrase, is based upon the idea that through Christ's voluntary death on the cross and his resurrection, humankind is freed from the power of evil, of sins, and ultimately of death. Even though people still die after Christ, either by natural causes or by the hands of other people, their spirit is thought to be immortal, transcending to God's heavenly reign (McGrath 1986). The debate on the exact interpretation of this doctrine of justification is still going on, and this is neither the place nor the time to venture any deeper into this theological conundrum.

Behind the mist of theological discourses and debates, one thing seems to be unattested in Christian theology: that the death of Jesus Christ meant the end of the reign of evil, sin and death. When applied to the death narratives discussed in this chapter, the connection seems absent. The death of the avatar is nowhere directly beneficial for any larger group of people. As for being indirectly so, one could argue that *because* Jack or DeWitt overcome death so they can succeed in their final goals, they can achieve things beneficial for larger groups. In the case of *Bioshock*, Jack can save the *Little Sisters*, while in *Bioshock Infinite* DeWitt can prevent his alter ego Comstock from using their daughter Elizabeth to conquer the known world. However, the avatar's death is never directly connected to salvation for the many, let alone universally beneficial.

When looking further than just the death narratives, the death of the avatar can, however, be beneficial for a larger group of people, and not only indirectly, but also directly. In Chapter 4, I addressed the notion of the 'Christophoric gamer', a gamer whose in-game behavior represents God Himself within the game world. In the game *Child of Light*, the player has to sacrifice his or her own life, that is, of the player's avatar Aurora (symbolizing life). The sacrificial death of Aurora is directly linked to the defeat of the Queen of Darkness (symbolizing death) and to the salvation of the people of Carniola, who are brought to an underworld, now safe to live in peace and harmony forever. In *Fallout 3*, the player can sacrifice the life of the Lone Wanderer to activate Project Purity to cleanse the world, toxic from the sins of the living and their ancestors, and to bring a new and better life to all the inhabitants of the Wastelands. But again, these sacrificial deaths of the Christophoric gamers are unique and purely narratological in nature, while the player's death and its possible narratological embedding are not.

A very important question regarding death, as well as in games as in Christian theology, is the matter of continuity. We have seen that two types of death-avoiding narratives deliver 100 percent continuity, since the player is able to control the same avatar for the whole game. In narratives featuring a real death of some sort, the continuity becomes problematic. When the avatar is revived or resurrected, the continuity is maximized, while in the case of copying or cloning or replacement from another dimension, the continuity between the former and the later avatar is broken, even in the case of an extreme well-crafted copy. Replacement with another avatar, of course, is the climax of discontinuity.

The same problem has been faced by Christian theologians from the beginning of the Church. In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 15), the Apostle writes about the resurrection of the faithful, following that of Christ himself. There appear to be a lot of questions in the local Christian community concerning the details of this 'resurrection'. Paul quotes one of these (15,35): '[S]omeone will say: "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" ' Paul scorns the questioner (15,36): 'You fool!' Apparently, Paul is not waiting for too many critical questions: he is on fire proclaiming the resurrection, when stating (15,42–44),

> So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

The dualism between body and soul and between natural and spiritual is interesting in itself (Tappenden 2016:3–6), and I want to focus on the term *spiritual body* (Greek: *soma pneumatikon*). The translation of the notion is notoriously difficult to translate (Tappenden 2016:115). The matter Paul is very acutely aware of is the necessity of continuation and continuity between our life on earth and that with God. Even though some critics want to accuse Paul of anachronistic Cartesian dualism, Paul seems to understand the necessity of the bodily component of the resurrected body in order to secure this continuity. Humans do not 'own' or 'house' a body but *are* their bodies just as much (Pfeifer et al. 2007). The only possibility for humans to understand the world and to make contact with one another is through our corporeal senses, all intrinsically connected to our body and its biological functions.

The continuity between the successive avatars is an important asset of the narratological embeddings of the games' death narratives. The identification between player and avatar, as already explained at the beginning of this chapter, is based on control, and can be very strong, even up to the point that the player exclaims 'I am dead', when his avatar plunges to its death. This identification is not a matter of owning or inhabiting; the player does

not put the avatar on like a glove or a pair of spectacles. This identification is a matter of *being*: the fusion of the virtual and the real.

The occurrence of the different death narratives signifies the importance of the identification between player and avatar and the continuity between the different iterations of the avatar.

Primary bibliography

Agony, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) Madmind Studios: PlayWay.
Assassin's Creed, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 2, 2009. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 30, Xbox One, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 4. Black Flag, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, WiiU) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Brotherhood, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Origins, 2017. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Revelations, 2011. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Rogue, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Sofia, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Syndicate, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Quebec, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Unity, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Battlefield 1, 2016. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) EA DICE, Electronic Arts.
The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, WiiU, New Nintendo 3DS, OSX, iOS) Nicalis, Nicalis.
Bioshock, 2009. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, iOS) 2K Boston/2K Australia, 2K Games.
Bioshock 2, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX) 2K Marin, 2K Games.
Bioshock Infinite, 2013. (PC, PlayStation, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux) Irrational Games, 2K Games.
Borderlands, 2009/2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Borderlands 2, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Nvidia Shield, Linux) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Borderlands. The Pre-sequel, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Nvidia Shield, Linux) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Child of Light, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii U) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Diablo 2, 2000. (PC, OSX) Blizzard North, Blizzard Entertainment.
Diablo 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX) Blizzard Entertainment: Blizzard Entertainment.

Fallout 3, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Far Cry 2, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Far Cry 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Far Cry 4, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Far Cry 5, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Ghost 1.0, 2016. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, WiiU) unepic_fran, unepic_fran.
Half-Life 2, 2004. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux, Android) Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation.
Prince of Persia, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Run, Jesus run!, 2010. (PC, OSX, Online) Molleindustria, Molleindustria.
Spelunky, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Chrome OS) Mossmouth LCC, Mossmouth LCC.
The Talos Principle, 2014/2015/2017. (PC, Android, PlayStation 4, iOS) Croteam, Devolver Digital.
Tomb Raider, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linus, Shield TV) Crystal Dynamics, Square Enix.
[Tomb Raider 2] *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2015/2016/2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) Crystal Dynamics, Square Enix/Microsoft Studios.
[Tomb Raider 3] *The Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One). Eidos Montréal, Square Enix.
Valley, 2016. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) Blue Isle Studios, Blue Isle Studios.
ZombiU, 2012/2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, WiiU) Ubisoft Montpellier, Ubisoft.

Secondary bibliography

Aarseth, E., 1997. *Cybertext. Perspectives on ergodic literature*. London: J. Hopkins.
Al-Khalili, J., 2012. *Paradox. The nine greatest enigmas in physics*. London: Bantam.
Augustine, 1998. *Answer to the Pelagians, part 2*. Introduced and translated by R. Teske. New York: New City Press.
Bosman, F., 2016a. The poor carpenter. Reinterpreting Christian mythology in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Gamenvironments* 4.
Bosman, F., 2016b. Nothing is true, everything is permitted. The portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 10.
Bosman, F., 2017. 'Accept your baptism and die!' Redemption, death and baptism in Bioshock Infinite. *Gamenvironments* 6.
Bosman, F., 2018. 'Requiescat in pace'. Initiation and assassination rituals in the Assassin's creed game series. *Religions* 9(5).

Bosman, F., 2018. Death narratives. A typology of narratological embeddings of player's death in digital games. *Gamenvironments*.

Bosman, F., and van Wieringen, A., 2018. 'I have faith in Thee, Lord'. Criticism of religion and child abuse in the video game the binding of Isaac. *Religions* 9(4).

Carr, B., 2007. Introduction and overview. In: B. Carr, ed., *Universe or multiverse?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clulee, N., 1988. *John Dee's natural philosophy. Between science and religion*. London: Routledge.

Deschner, K.-H., 2012. *Das Kreuz mit der Kirche. Ein Sexualgeschichte des Christentums*. Koblenz: Enfer.

Fitzmyer, J., 1993. *Romans, the Anchor Bible. A new translation with introduction and commentary*. New York: Doubleday.

Flynn-Jones, E., 2015. Don't forget to die: A software update is available for the death drive. In: T. Mortensen, J. Linderoth, and A. Brown, eds., *The dark side of game play. Controversial issues in playful environments*. London: Routledge.

Frome, J., 2016. Video game sadness from Planetfall to Passage. In: B. Perron and F. Schröter, eds., *Video games and the mind. Essays on cognition, affect and emotion*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.

Front, S., 2015. *Shapes of time in British twenty-first century quantum fiction*. S.l.: Cambridge Scholars.

Griffin, B., 2014. Why permadeath is alive and well in video games. *Gamesradar*. Available from: www.gamesradar.com/why-permadeath-just-wont-die-video-games/ [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Harkness, D., 2006. *John Dee's conversations with angels*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harwood, A., 2011. *The spiritual condition of infants. A Biblical-historical survey and systematic proposal*. Foreword by P. Patterson. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.

Hebeis, M., 2012. *Schwarzbuch Kirche. Und führe uns nicht in Versuchung*. Cologne: Batei Lübbe Taschenbuch.

Juul, J., 1999. *A clash between game and narrative*. Master's thesis. University of Copenhagen.

Krzywinska, T., 2015. Gamification of Gothic. In: M. Fuchs, ed., *Diversity of play*. Lüneburg: Hybrid Publishing Lab.

Laas, O., 2015. Would you kindly bring us the girl and wipe away the debt. Free will and moral responsibility in Bioshock Infinite. In: L. Cuddy, ed., *Bioshock and philosophy. Irrational game, ration book*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Mazzei, S., and Schall, D., 2014. Infinite gestation. Death and progress in video games. In: C. Moreman and A. Lewis, eds., *Digital death. Mortality and beyond in the online age*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.

McDonald, P., 2013. On couches and controllers. Identification in video game apparatus. In: M. Wysocki, ed., *Ctrl-Alt-Play. Essays on control in video gaming*. Jefferson: McFarland.

McGrath, A., 1986. *Iustitia Dei. A history of the Christian doctrine of justification*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Owen, D., 2017. *Player and avatar. The affective potential of videogames*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Pfeifer, R., and Bongard, J., 2007. *How the body shapes the way we think. A new view of intelligence*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Prokofieff, S., 2016. *The spiritual origins of Eastern Europe and the future mysteries of the Holy Grail*. Great Barrington: East Sussex Temple Lodge Press.

Ranke-Heinemann, U., 1995. *Eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Women, sexuality and the Catholic Church*. New York: Penguin.
Richardson, W., 1995. Heidegger's fall. In: B. Babich, ed., *From phenomenology to thought, errancy, and desire. Essays in honor of William J. Richardson, S.J.* London: Springer.
Rose, J., 2011. *Zoroastrianism. An introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris.
Schoonenberg, P., 1965. *Man and sin. A theological view*. Translated by J. Scullion. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Skjaervo, P., 2011. *The spirit of Zoroastrianism*. London: Yale University Press.
Tappenden, F., 2016. *Resurrection in Paul. Cognition, metaphor, and transformation*. Atlanta: SBL Press.
Toews, J., 2013. *The story of original sin*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.
Tremblay, K., 2017. *Ain't no place for a hero. Borderlands*. S.l.: readyhowyouwant.com.
Wittenberg, D., 2016. *Time travel. The popular philosophy of narrative*. New York: Fordham University Press.
Woodson, L., 2014. *The legend of Kitezh in Russian literature*. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin.

9 God's delusion

Religion critique in video games

In *Far Cry 4*, the player controls Ajay Ghale, who returns to his homeland Kyrat after a very long time to scatter the ashes of his mother Ishwari over her homeland. Ajay finds himself in the middle of a long civil war between the dictator Pagan Min and the rebels of the *Golden Path*, the same conflict that drove Ishwari and her infant to seek refuge in the United States. To complicate matters even more, Mohan Ghale, Ajay's father, was the leader of the rebellion, but the son refuses to take his father's place. However, because of his urge to realize his mother's dying wish, Ajay returns to the fictional mountain state of Kyrat to find himself in the midst of mayhem.

Very soon after the beginning of the game, Ajay joins the *Golden Path* rebellion, more on practical than ideological grounds, however. Ploughing through the soldiers and mercenaries of Pagan Min while slitting their throats, Ajay meets the arms dealer of the rebellion, a strange man called Longinus. If Ajay agrees to help Longinus, the player will unlock various types of high-end weaponry. The arms dealer lives in a ridiculously small shed somewhere in Kyrat. When Ajay opens Longinus's door for the first time, he is greeted by the arms dealer with a loaded gun, swinging in front of his nose, and an open Bible from which Longinus quotes verse after verse:

Longinus: Welcome. I am Longinus and you . . . you are Ajay! Welcome to my church away from church.

Ajay: That sells guns?

Longinus: Of course! For the meek shall inherit the Earth, my friend. [Mt. 5,5] All they need are some good guns. Revelation 5,5. It is the most . . . invigorating read. 'And one of the elders sayeth unto me, weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David hath prevailed to open the book, and loose the seven seals thereof!' [. . .] It is our Savior! It is our Savior returned to us as a lion, a warrior! So, I started thinking to myself. When the Son of God is reborn, what gun would he use? Deuteronomy 32,47? 'For there are no empty words for you, but your very life. . . ' Or maybe! Revelations 19,11. 'The discretion of a man deferreth his anger'.

And so it goes on verse after verse, conversation after conversation, mission after mission. Longinus keeps on linking all possible Biblical quotations to guns and violence, stretching the interpretation of the quotes to the limit. In the preceding dialogue, Longinus quotes Matthew 5,5 and Revelations 5,5. He interprets the 'lion' from the Apocalypse as referring to Jesus, as has been done almost unanimously in Christian tradition (Stefanov 2009), but adding the – not-so-Christian – question about the nature of the weapons the Glorified Christ will use at his Second Coming.

Now, Longinus has a very interesting background story. When the player has progressed a sufficient way through the mission he has given Ajay, Longinus tells about his 'conversion':

> Business, Ajay . . . terrible business. I was saved by a bullet . . . to the head. It killed the old me, the terrible me, one you would have called a warlord. But that bullet, it made a hole in my skull that allowed the light of God to slip in and I was baptized by the waters of Goka Falls.

Longinus seems to be referring to the events of *Far Cry 2*, in which Longinus was involved in the trade of blood diamonds. In *Far Cry*, the player has to kill, in the course of a specific mission, one of two warlords, Prosper Kouassi or Leon Gakumba, at the Goka Waterfalls. Based on Longinus's words and the physical similarity between Prosper from installment 2, and Longinus from installment 4, it is very likely that we are looking at one and the same individual. Prosper was mortally injured but saved by the Roman Catholic priest Maliya, also a character from *Far Cry 2*. After Prosper was baptized by Maliya in the waters of the Goka, he was forced to leave the country, ending up, years later, as the Bible-quoting arms dealer Longinus. It is unclear if Longinus has had any formal training in theology, or if his biblical knowledge is primarily based on self-education. Neither is it clear whether Longinus has received some sort of official ordination or if he is a self-ordained minister.

The choice of Longinus may be explained as being Prosper's baptismal name or as a new name adopted by Prosper after his flight to Kyrat. However, I would opt for a more interesting analysis. Longinus is the traditional name given by Christian folklore to the unnamed soldier who lanced Jesus in his side with a spear, just after his death on the cross (John 19,34). The piercing soldier is combined with the figure of the unnamed Roman centurion under the cross who expressed his faith in Jesus' divine Sonship, also just after Jesus's death (Matthew 27,54 and Mark 15,39). Already in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* (4th century, also known as the *Acta Pilati*), the name and identification are present (Barber 2004:188).

The figure of Longinus is firmly tied to his iconic attribute: the spear with which he pierced Jesus's side. The object, commonly known as the 'Holy Lance' or the 'Spear of destiny' is found in popular fiction and

pseudo-scholarly literature, and is thought to have been in the hands of many powerful and often-ruthless rulers and dictators throughout history, like Charlemagne, Napoleon Bonaparte and even Adolf Hitler (Schrier et al. 2009). The most famous of these claims was held by the anthroposophical author Trevor Ravenscroft (1921–1989). In his book *The spear of destiny* (1972), Ravenscroft claimed to have received secret information about the history and power of the lance from another anthroposophical writer, the German Jew Walter Stein (1891–1957). The entire claim was a fraud (Goodrick-Clarke 2002:118–121). Nevertheless, the idea that Hitler owed his swift rise to power to the possession of an occult object, especially the Lance, can be found in many novels, films and video games, for example, *Wolfenstein. Spear of Destiny* (1992).

Back to the Longinus in *Far Cry 4*, the combination between biblical texts and the selling of (heavy) weaponry is somewhat disturbing, since the traditional peaceful (sometimes even pacifistic) interpretation of especially the Gospels seems to contrast with the violence associated with guns and pistols, while at the same time Christian history is certainly not without its examples of violence executed in the name of God and excused by masses of Bible quotations, not unlike Longinus:

> A soldier knows. A soldier always knows. For we have seen the Rapture and survived it. You need guns to do righteous work, Ajay . . . for every gun is a Bible, for every bullet . . . a sermon. [. . .] And he said to them 'Go forth into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole of creation'.

Longinus quotes the Gospel of Mark (16,15) in the last sentence; the rest is the product of his own imagination. But the accusation is loud and clear: 'for every gun is a Bible, for every bullet a sermon'. Together with the quotation from Mark in which Jesus sends his disciples to convert the people of the word according to the Gospel, Longinus's statement reminds us of the multiple instances the Christian churches, aligned with secular powers and rulers, has forcefully pressed 'the Good News' on individuals, groups, tribes and nations alike—an unsettling remark.

a. Religion as a problem to be solved

Richard Dawkins, the godfather of battle-ready New Atheism, ends the preface of his famous *The God Delusion* (2006:5) as follows:

> If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. What presumptuous optimism! Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination using methods that took centuries to mature (whether by evolution or design).

Dawkins assumes provocatively that religious people will be able to withstand his perfectly logical atheism because of the brainwashing received during their upbringing and education. The truth is, however, that religious people are not *per se* convinced Dawkins's reasoning is beyond any doubt and are so without becoming intellectual nitwits (McGrath 2005; McGrath et al. 2007) *and* that religious people certainly feel appalled by Dawkins's accusations with regard to the numerous faults, errors, miscalculations, crimes and monstrosities committed by religious individuals and organizations, usually in the name of God (Schwartz 1997). And while Dawkins received quite some criticism also from other atheist thinkers like Michael Ruse (2009), who claimed that *The God Delusion* would 'fail any introductory philosophy of religion course', the basic position, held by prominent atheist thinkers like Hitchens (2007), Dennet (2006), Harris (2004), and Stenger (2008, 2009), that religion and violence have not been historical arch-enemies, still stands.

In this final chapter of this volume, it is explicitly not my purpose to confront the New Atheism on the level of their proposed philosophical presuppositions, methodology or logic, because I believe that taking their criticism seriously is much more preferable and fruitful to both religion and society. However, not only philosophers like Dawkins have criticized religion and its (supposed) evil traits; video games have also done the same. In the rest of this volume, the majority of examples given shed a positive light on religion in video games, where inspiration from religious traditions, especially Christianity is used to create believable words and to inspire game narratives. However, games also shed a much darker light on organized and institutionalized religions. In some games, the criticism is a little 'cheap', in the sense of uninspired, stereotypical negative imagery, like the cults in *Borderlands* and *Fallout 3* and *4*. In other games, the criticism is harsh but not unfair or even shamefully accurate.

After analyzing the criticisms on religion provided by the New Atheists, I would categorize them as follows:

1 Religion is fraud, an illusion believed by the uneducated masses, and conjured up by the powerful few for their own purposes. Religion is, implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or unintentionally, trickery, superstition, and magical hocus-pocus used to scare and manipulate the people.

2 Religion is blind obedience: religious people are trained by their religious tradition, texts, upbringing and education to blindly believe what their God or his servants ask him or her to believe or to do without asking any (critical) questions and without critical self-conscious contemplation.

3 Religion is violence: religion *always* results in differentiating between the own group and the 'other' or 'non-believers', who are deemed outsiders, enemies, heretics and schismatics, who are to be forced to return to the truth or be killed.

4 Religion is madness: religion exists as a surrogate for reason and logic, adhered to by frightened, simple people who cannot bear to confront the notion that the universe is void of any purpose or goal, divine in origin or not.

5 Religion is suppression: religion functions usually, if not exclusively, as an instrument used by the powerful few to subdue the powerless many, fusing secular and religious power into one totalitarian system.

In the rest of this chapter, I survey multiple examples of games expressing one or more of these traits of religious criticism. We are not dealing with 'ideal types', as we will see that multiple critiques are intertwined in the various examples that follow. Afterward, I try to argue what religion, especially Christianity, has to gain by internalizing this criticism into its own theological (iconoclastic) tradition.

b. 'A kingdom on a cloud'. Religion as fraud/illusion

For the first category of religion criticism, religion as based on fraud, I present two examples, both of which I have described earlier in this volume: *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (primary example) and the *Assassin's Creed* series (secondary example).

Jacob, the 'Deathless Prophet'

In the second installment of the *Tomb Raider* reboot, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, the game's protagonist and player's avatar Lara Croft embarks on a self-chosen mission to find a powerful and mysterious artifact known as the 'Divine Source'. The keeper of the artifact is believed to be immortal and in the possession of several supernatural abilities. Lara's search for this immortality device is inspired by her urge to come to terms with the untimely death of her father, with whom she felt a very strong bond. Lara's father, Richard Croft, was already searching for the key to immortality because of the death of his beloved wife, Amelia, who died in a plane crash when Lara was still very young. When Lara was older, Richard was murdered by a secret organization known as Trinity, but his death was staged as a suicide. 'I am the only one left who knows he [Richard] was right', Lara says to herself at a campsite.

In *Rise*, Lara's travels take her to the Syrian desert and the Siberian winter. Lara is following the trail of the 'deathless prophet of Constantinople', who was supposedly buried in Syria after persecution by the Roman Catholic Church around 1000 AD. Once inside the burial chamber, Lara discovers that the tomb of the prophet is empty. At the site she is confronted with Konstantin, a Trinity field commander who is convinced that he is acting at God's will. Lara escapes the Trinity soldiers and follows the trail of the Prophet to Siberia. Here she discovers a hidden

valley, called Kitezh, were the immortal Prophet and his people are still hiding from Trinity. This 'Jacob' helps Lara to fight off Trinity, ultimately destroying the artifact and leaving Jacob to age very quickly and die on the spot.

Through the course of *Rise*, Lara slowly unravels the origin of the Deathless Prophet's story. The Prophet was born sometime before 970 AD, somewhere in the Byzantine Empire. At an unknown time in his life, he found, probably coincidentally, the Divine Source, a crystal of uncertain origin. The crystal gave Jacob the ability to heal from even mortal injuries and prolonged his life indefinitely. Jacob began preaching a further unknown 'gospel' (the word is mine), the persuasiveness of which was massively enhanced by Jacob's power to heal the sick and the wounded. Some of his followers even considered him to be a kind of 'messiah'.

His rising popularity brings Jacob into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, who sends the Order of Trinity to eradicate the sect for heresy and blasphemy. Jacob leads his people from Constantinople into the Syrian desert to escape, but the Trinity knights find and kill them almost entirely, including Jacob, who is impaled on a spear. The remnant of Jacob's people takes his body to an oasis near Aleppo in order to erect a burial tomb for him. But during the construction, Jacob returns from the dead, earning him the name 'the Deathless Prophet'.

Jacob's miracle draws even more people to his sect, something eventually noticed by Trinity. Under the commandment of the same soldier who impaled Jacob earlier, a regiment of Trinity soldiers sets out to the oasis, believing the 'Deathless Prophet' was not Jacob but an imposter. The leader of the second expedition writes to his master:

> My Lord, what you say is impossible. I myself drove a spear into the Prophet's heart. I saw him die. Doubtless his people have propped another man up in the slain Prophet's robe to continue his lies. They are broken, discredited, and exiled. We will head south and put the rest of his people to the sword, but the Prophet is dead. This, I swear.

Jacob's people were disseminated by Trinity but barricaded themselves inside the tomb. In a surprise attack, Jacob and his people managed to kill all the Trinity soldiers. Seeking a new and hidden refuge, Jacob leads his people, again, through the desert, now for modern-day Siberia, where they find a hidden valley kept warm by geothermal activity. There a city is constructed, Kitezh, a name, the origins of which is not made explicit in the game (see below).

In the 13th century, the city is attacked during the (historical) invasion of Siberia by the Mongol army. The Mongol siege could only be ended by Jacob using the Divine Source to create monstrous warriors, that triggered an avalanche. The disaster killed the Mongol Khan, and destroyed almost the entire Mongol army, but left the surviving members

of Jacob's people to a new life in the wilderness. The city was sealed off and the Remnant, as they called themselves now, led a much humbler life by fishing, hunting and farming. After that, the Remnant could remain living peacefully under the guidance of their immortal Prophet until the Soviet incursion of the 1960s. Eventually, Jacob's people managed to cut off the Russian supply route and killed them all. It was only recently, that Trinity, still operating, rediscovered the valley while in search for the Divine Source.

The whole game narrative is based on Jacob, his Divine Source, and Trinity troops who try to find the object for their own goals. It is, however, not very hard to identify the numerous parallels between the Jacob narrative and Christian history, especially between the Deathless Prophet and Jesus of Nazareth.

When Lara visits the Syrian tomb of the Deathless Prophet, she is intrigued by the numerous frescos (on walls) and mosaics (on floors) depicting different stages of Jacob's life before the flight to the desert. We see him curing crippled, sick and wounded people. We see Jacob leading his people into the desert. We see Jacob peacefully holding off the Trinity soldiers from doing any harm. The style of the frescos and mosaics is Byzantine and reminds the gamer instantly of similar images of Jesus as we find them in churches and cathedrals constructed throughout Western history. Clothing, gestures, compositions, the appearance of sheep, city walls, shepherd's staves and especially the crossed halo behind Jacob's head—they are all an almost-explicit reference to traditional Christian art depicting Jesus.

The story of the Trinity soldier killing Jacob by driving his spear through his body is a reference to the figure of Longinus and his famous 'Spear of Destiny' as described earlier.

In *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, a Longinus-like figure is said to have pierced Jacob's body, without being able to put a definite end to the life of the prophet. Again Jacob and Jesus are equated, since both were regarded as messianic prophets who defeated death by returning to life. This identification is strengthened by the fact that the tomb of the Deathless Prophet in Syria appears to be empty, just like Jesus's grave after his resurrection, as reported by all four evangelists (Matthew 28,6; Mark 16,6; Luke 24,3; John 20,2).

In *Rise*, Jacob is said to have been married to a woman, who died long ago. Together they had a daughter, named Sofia, who is still at her father's side. In historical Constantinople, the city in which Jacob's in-game sect began, Roman Emperor Justinian I rebuilt an older church into the now world-renowned *Hagia Sophia*, meaning 'holy wisdom' in Greek. In Christian tradition, especially in the theologies of the church fathers, Jesus was identified with God's wisdom (Scott 1992). As Paul writes, 'Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God' (1 Corinthians 1,30). Again, *Rise* offers a parallel between Jacob and Jesus.

The name of Jacob's people, after the Mongol invasion, is 'the Remnant'. The remnant is a Biblical term used throughout the Hebrew Bible, especially in Micah, Jeremiah and Zephaniah but most of all in Isaiah (Umoren 2006). The remnant denotes a small group of (Jewish) faithful who survive a large disaster, like exile or military defeat. The faith and perseverance of the remnant are praised in contrast with that of the majority who has lost faith and hope.

On the floor of the Syrian tomb, Lara comes across 'the sign of the Remnant, as the game puts it. The identification of the sign is, again, not very difficult: it is a Christian cross, in Byzantine style, carved into a rock. It reminds Lara of a picture she once saw in one of her late father's 'Russian' books. The 'Russian book' is probably a reference to the 18th-century *Kitezh Chronicle*. According to this historical document, the lost city of Kitezh was swallowed up by the waves of a nearby lake, by divine intervention, to guard the city and its pious (Christian) inhabitants against the advancing (Muslim) Mongols.

The legend of Kitezh is connected to a group of historical Russian Orthodox faithful, who are known as 'Old Believers' or 'Old Ritualists'. The group was dubbed heretical by mainstream Eastern Orthodoxy at a Synod in 1666/1667, because of their different interpretation of the inner structure of the Holy Trinity (Prokofieff 2016:68–85; Woodson 2014). As we have seen, the name of the organization against which Lara is fighting in *Rise*, is called Trinity.

Trinity, in its turn, is very loosely based upon Roman Catholic orders of warrior monks like the Templar Knights or, rather, on a modern popular version of those knights. The sudden and spectacular end of the influential Templar Order in 1307 has kindled several enduring conspiracy theories and inspired many novels and films, among which the pseudo-scientific *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent et al. 1982) and the fictional *The Da Vinci Code* (and its film adaption) are the most well known (Brown 2003).

Konstantin, the Trinity field operator of the Kitezh mission, is portrayed as a religious zealot, convinced that he is on a mission from God to save the world of its sins, by any means necessary. His religious devotion to the Trinity cause is strengthened considerably by the appearance of bloody wounds on the palms of his hands. Konstantin identifies them as 'stigmata', the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ, said to appear on the body of certain saints and mystics (like Francis of Assisi). The name Konstantin is, again, a reference to the Roman Emperor Constantine, who was responsible for the institution of Christianity as the official state religion.

As I have shown, the background story of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* relies heavily on references to the Christian tradition, especially the Byzantine Empire and Russian Orthodoxy. Although one could argue that *Rise* does not focus on theological or political discussions, it is not difficult to

interpret the narrative as a religion-critical one. If we 'read' the game as a commentary on Christian faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the resurrected Son of God, then *Rise* tells the gamer that this faith is misplaced and based on fraud and that Christian institutions are essentially built on that same fraud.

The New Testament depicts Jesus (among other classifications and identifications) as a miracle worker, especially as a miracle healer (Twelftree 1999). *Rise*'s Jacob also performs (healing) miracles, earning him the title of 'messiah', the same term used by the New Testament writers to identify Jesus as the 'anointed' of God (Chester 2007). However, Jacob is nothing like a godhead; he is just a mortal man who coincidentally stumbles on a powerful object that provides him with superhuman powers up to the point where his followers start to call him the Messiah.

In the murals and mosaics in the Syrian tomb, Jacob is depicted just as Jesus is in Christian art, including Christian symbols like lambs, a staff, and a cross-shaped halo. Just like the New Testament describes the empty tomb of Jesus after his crucifixion, so Lara also finds out that Jacob's tomb is empty, suggesting he too has risen from the dead. Again, we know that Jacob 'cheated death' with the help of the Divine Source, which is not a symbolic name for God's redemptive power but is a very physical and immanent object.

This idea is known as the 'swoon hypothesis': the notion that Jesus never really died on the cross. He simply swooned or fainted. The Roman soldiers, incorrectly assuming he was already dead, then released the body for burial. Jesus was subsequently placed in a tomb, perhaps in a comatose state, where he was revived by the cold air and/or with the help of his friends, who are not uncommonly identified as Essenes (Strauss 1840 and Habermas 1996).

A considerable number of books has been published on the basis of the swoon hypothesis, sometimes truly scholarly works, but mostly works of the popular pseudoscientific genre: from Karl Bahrdt's *Ausführung Des Plans Und Zwecks Jesu* (1784) and Heinrich Paulus' *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Kommentar über das neue Testament* (1802) to Hugh Schonfield's *The Passover Plot* (1965), Barbara Thiering's *Jesus the Man* (1992) and Michael Baigent's *The Jesus Papers* (2006). The swoon hypothesis has been disproved time and time again as historically highly unlikely by scholars as far back as David Friedrich Strauss (1840) and Albert Schweitzer (1906), but it seems never to have lost its appeal for the larger public.

The context of the Byzantine Empire, the city of Constantinople from which Jacob's first 'exodus' starts, and the name of the Trinity lieutenant Konstantin are all references to Emperor Constantine the Great, who was responsible for the establishment of Christendom as the official state religion. While this imperial decision is usually thought to have been a good

thing for the Christian faith, others – believers and non-believers alike – criticize this move as a disastrous intertwining of worldly and spiritual power, ultimately enabling historical religiously inspired atrocities like forced conversion, the Crusades, pogroms, witch hunts, and so forth.

The antagonists of *Rise*, the soldiers of Trinity, are precisely the result of such a combination of religious zeal and worldly power resulting in violence. It is true that Konstantin truly believes in his divine election to free the world from corruption and sins (to which the world is indeed very prone, as we all know), but eventually Lara discovers that his religious visions and stigmata are fabricated by his sister, Ana, not coincidentally the second wife of Lara's father Richard, who was killed by Trinity operatives. Ana wants to use Konstantin's religious zeal to secure the Divine Source for herself, since she suffers from an incurable form of cancer.

Ultimately, religion is portrayed in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* as the product of fraud and superstition, conjured up by one or few to manipulate the masses. Just like Jacob was not a god, not a messiah and not a miracle worker but just an accidental mortal capable of tricking people into believing and worshiping him, resulting in their own demise and suffering, so was Jesus also just a mere mortal making use of the superstition of his uneducated followers to pursue his own personal goals. Just as Trinity is a religiously inspired organization, focused on the sins, heresy and blasphemy of the world but blind to its own religious oppression and violence, so is institutionalized religion, especially the Roman Catholic Church, prone to self-preservation at any cost, and blind to the religious fraud it is based on.

The Apples of Eden

The *Assassin's Creed* series makes almost the same point as *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, although in a much more elaborate way, thanks to its atheist meta-narrative which comprises ten installments (and at least one more game will follow in the near future). I have already summarized this meta-narrative in the sixth chapter of this volume, but for convenience's sake I give a quick wrap-up.

In the world of *Assassin's Creed*, humankind is nothing more than the remnant of a genetically engineered slave race, developed and controlled by the super intelligent but now long extinct Isu (Bosman 2018, 2016a, 2016b). When a cosmic disaster struck Earth, causing the death of almost all Isu, humankind survived, remembering its former life in the form of legends and myths. The Isu left behind some very powerful artifacts, called 'Pieces' or 'Apples of Eden', a reference to the famous fruit in Genesis 3, which give their possessors almost unlimited power over mind and matter.

The *Assassin's Creed* series then reframes all of humankind's history as a battle between two groups over the possession of the Isu artifacts: the Assassins and the Templars, respectively, based on the Shi'ite sect of the Nizari Isma'ilis and the Christian Knights Templar (Bosman 2018). Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Joseph's capacity to interpret dreams, Moses's splitting of the Red Sea, David killing Goliath, Solomon's wisdom, the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, the Shroud of Turin, Jesus's miracles including his resurrection, the whole of human history, especially the Christian salvation history, is all framed in a completely different light. All religion is depicted as based on fraud and/or ignorance about the true nature of our universe. Only the top Assassins and Templars are aware of this, usually keeping the rest of humankind (and their organizations) captured in ignorance, because of its presumed incapability to understand or because of its potential for manipulation.

The resentment against religion as praxis and as a concept can be found in multiple installments. I list some interesting and illustrating examples. The various assassins with whom the player interacts with the game world have a tendency to casually disqualify religion personally. In *Assassin's Creed Revelations*, the modern-day assassin Desmond Miles is confronted with a computerized version of his former colleague Clay Kaczmarek, who watches over Desmond. Desmond replies: 'Like a guardian angel?' To which Clay remarks: 'There is no such a thing'.

In *Assassin's Creed Origins*, which takes place in ancient Egypt, historical assassin Bayek confronts the priest Hetepi, a member of the Order of the Ancient, a predecessor of the Templar Order. The priest loathes Bayek's attempts to free the people of their belief in the gods: 'The masses are the cattle of the gods, driven by the herdsman's whip'. And later in the same game, Bayek's wife Aya, concludes, 'The gods are dead'. And in *Assassin's Creed Unity*, set in Paris during the French Revolution, the historical assassin Arno tells himself: 'No supreme being watches to punish us for our sins'.

If we focus our attention on the figure of Jesus Christ within the *Assassin's Creed* universe (since this game series is only discussed here as a secondary example of religion as fraud), we see some interesting similarities with the earlier framework of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. In the first installment, the assassin Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad is sent by his leader Al Mualim ('the mentor') on different missions in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade. Templars and Assassins want to get their hands on one of the Pieces of Eden. When asked, Al Mualim explains the power of the artifact by means of several references to the Old and New Testament:

> This . . . piece of silver cast out Adam and Eve. It turned staves into snakes, parted and closed the Red Sea. Ares used it to start the Trojan War, and with it, a poor carpenter turned water into wine.

Al Mualim identifies this specific Piece of Eden as the 'fruit' from Eden, the plucking of which God forbade Adam and Eve. While Genesis speaks of 'fruit', in Christian tradition this fruit is identified as an apple, probably because the Latin word for *evil* and *apple* are both *malum* (Kissling 2004:193). In the *Assassin's Creed* universe, the 'fall' of Adam and Eve is considered positively, because it heralded the first uprising of humankind against their Isu creators. This positive interpretation has several Gnostic predecessors, like the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (Alexander 1992): the Fall of Adam and Eve was actually an awaking of human knowledge and the beginning of human independence from the evil Demiurge, who was credited with the creation of the 'foul matter' (Broek 2006).

Furthermore, Al Mualim also connects a Piece of Eden to the staves used by Moses and Aaron to impress upon Pharaoh to release the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Moses and Aaron were able to turn their staves into living snakes, but instead of attributing this to divine intervention by God, the miracle is linked to the Isu artifact (Exodus 7,10). It is the same staff of Moses mentioned in connection with several of the plagues (Exodus 7,14–12,30), with the parting and closing of the Red Sea (Exodus 13,17–14,29), with the finding of a spring of water in rocky terrain (Numbers 20,2–13), and with the securing of a decisive victory over the Amalekites (Exodus 17,8–15): all because of Moses's possession of the artifact, not because of his belief in God.

After the inclusion of a non-Christian reference (to the Trojan War described by Homer), Al Mualim implicitly mentions one of Jesus's many miracles, in this case, the water miracle from John 2,1–12. So, according to the Mentor, not only was Moses using the Apple of Eden to perform pseudo-miracles instead of real ones; Jesus did so too. The identification of 'a poor carpenter' is strongly linked to Jesus's (religious) biography. Both Mark (6,3) and Matthew (13,55) identify Jesus as the 'carpenter's son'.

After Altaïr discovers that Al Mualim wants the Apple for his own purposes, he nuances his earlier words concerning the exact nature of the Isu artifact's power and, in doing so, the nature of the biblical miracles.

Al Mulaim: The Red Sea was never parted, water never turned to wine. It was not the machinations of Ares that spawned the Trojan War, but this! Illusions! All of them!

Altaïr: What you plan is no less an illusion – to force men to follow you against their will!

Al Mualim: Is it any less real than the phantoms the Saracens and Crusaders follow now? Those . . . craven gods who retreat from this world that men might slaughter one another in their names? They live amongst an illusion already. I'm simply giving them another, one that demands less blood.

Al Mualim suggests that the power of the artifact is that it is capable of producing illusions in the mind of the people instead of altering physical reality itself. The adventures of Paris triggering the Trojan War, the parting of the Red Sea by Moses and the water miracle of Jesus, all caused by a mind-controlling device. And when Altaïr confronts his (former) mentor, Al Mualim argues that 'the phantoms' of Islam and Christianity, that is, of religion in general, are also the products of illusion, demanding blood and violence.

But what about Jesus's resurrection, the 'miracle to end all miracles' one could say? As we have seen in the case of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, the empty-tomb narrative from the Gospels has given rise to several reductionist interpretations as to the actual reason for the missing body. There are two hidden hints at Jesus's death on the cross: one in *Assassin's Creed 2* and one in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. In the last one, set in Victorian London, the assassin Evie Frye makes inquiries about the nature of a certain 'shroud', apparently located in a secret location in the city. Mr. Green, Evie's companion, explains:

> The Shroud of Eden is supposed to heal even the gravest injury. [. . .] How much do you know about the Shroud of Eden? Green: It is said to heal the sick. Popular myth is that it brings people back from the dead, but the Assassin records say that is not true.

In *Syndicate*, the Shroud is sought by a high-level Templar called Lucy Thorne. Her in-game biography provides the following description:

> [Lucy Thorne] branched out into the study of obscure religious knowledge, into magic and occult philosophy. [. . .] In her spare time, she grew more and more taken with occult philosophy and supposedly magical objects, such as the Shroud of Turin.

The shroud Evie and Green are talking about, the shroud the Templars want for its supposed capacity to heal wounds and raise the dead, is identified as the actual Shroud of Turin (Bosman 2016a). The Shroud of Turin is a rectangular piece of woven cloth, approximately 4.4 meters by 1.1 meters. Its most distinctive characteristic is the faint brownish image of a front and a back view of a naked man with his hands folded across his groin. While radiocarbon dating seems to have shown that the shroud material dates to between 1260 and 1309 and not to the beginning of the common era (Damon et al. 1989), many Christians continue to believe that this cloth is the actual shroud in which Jesus was buried after his crucifixion (Matthew 27:59; Mark 15:46, Luke 25:53; John 19:40).

The shroud also appears in *Assassin's Creed 2*, in an in-game puzzle known as 'Glyph #7'. As a part of this particular puzzle, the gamer has to identify five out of ten historical paintings based on their hidden common

denominator: all paintings show a robe: a ceiling painting of Saint Joseph of Egypt (St. Martin's church, Zillis, Switzerland), De Ferrari's *Joseph's Coat Brought to Jacob* (ca. 1640), Reni's *David Decapitates Goliath* (1606/1607), De Juanes's *The Last Supper* (ca. 1562) and El Greco's *The Disrobing of Christ* (1577/1579). When selected correctly, a new historical painting appears: *Christ Crucified* by Diego Velázquez (1632). When the player scans Jesus's left hip, he can finally find the element that all the images of the glyph have in common: a Piece of Eden. It is no longer a traditional cloak but a square golden cloth, covered by Isu patterns. The glyph identifies this cloth as 'ID: Piece of Eden 66 – Shroud'.

The *Assassin's Creed* series classifies the resurrection of Jesus as stated in the Christian tradition, as a fake one. Jesus did not die on the cross or, at least, that is what he was trying to prevent by means of the artifact. Whether Jesus succeeded (as was clearly the intention) or whether he died anyway (as Green seems to suggest) is not clear. But for all intents and purposes, Jesus's resurrection was not the result of divine intervention but of illusion, conjured up by a lonely individual, like Jacob from *Rise*, to impress the masses.

The most cynical statement on religion is also found in *Assassin's Creed 2*, when the Italian Assassin Ezio Auditore confronts the Templar's Grand Master Rodrigo Borgia (1431–1503), after his historic election as Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503). While the Borgia popes are counted among the worst popes in Roman Catholic history (Hollingsworth 2014), the *Assassin's Creed* series succeeds in finding an even deeper level of immorality for Rodrigo: all his crimes, all his manipulations, his whole ecclesiastical carrier were focused on getting access to an Isu vault under the Vatican. When Ezio demands an explanation, he replies:

Ezio: What do you even want with the vault, Rodrigo? [. . .]
Rodrigo: God! It's God that dwells within.
Ezio: You expect me to believe that God lives beneath *il Vaticano*?
Rodrigo: A more logical location than a kingdom on a cloud, don't you think? Surrounded by singing angels and cherubim. [. . .] Whatever lies beyond that wall won't be able to resist the staff and apple. They were MADE for felling Gods.
Ezio: God is meant to be all knowing. All powerful. You think a couple of ancient relics can harm him.
Rodrigo: You know nothing, boy. You take your image of the creators from an ancient book, a book, mind you, written by MEN.
Ezio: You are the pope. And yet you dismiss the central text of your Faith?
Rodrigo: Are you so naive? [. . .] Do you think I believe a single god-damned word of that ridiculous book? It's all lies and superstition. Just like every other religious tract written over the past ten thousand years.

Gods are exclusively the products of human imagination, and holy scriptures are purely a human endeavor. Sacred texts, as *Assassin's Creed 3* tells us, are nothing more than the distorted memory of what a wise man once said. As Desmond Miles, a contemporary Assassin and one of the three player's protagonists, is given the opportunity to save the world from a pending catastrophe, the long-gone Isu explain what will happen afterward: Desmond's words will be the core of a new religion formed after his demise, evolving in institutions based on illusion, just as the great religions of our time did before:

> And as the world heals, so too will humanity. But you are just a man. Frail and mortal. You pass from the world, leaving behind only a memory, a legacy. You will be remembered first as a hero. Later as a legend. And in time as a god. It is the cruelest fate. To have written words that meant well, and see them made wicked and unwise. What was meant to encourage life, used instead to justify taking it. And so now you see. That what was, shall be again.

Assassin's Creed's universe is essentially an atheist one, in which religion is always illusive, based on lies, manipulated for personal gain, with a tendency toward oppression and violence. As Arno Dorian, the Paris assassin, concludes after the French Revolution killed thousands of its own children,

> [i]deals too easily give way to dogma. Dogma becomes fanaticism. No higher power sits in judgment of us. No supreme being watches to punish us for our sins. In the end, only we ourselves can guard against our obsessions. Only we can decide whether the road we walk carries too high a toll.

Both *Rise of the Tomb Raider* and the *Assassin's Creed* series deliver bold criticism(s) on (institutionalized) religion, in general, and on the Christian tradition, in particular. Religion, according to these two games, is *always* the result of fraud and based on illusions of a transcendent reality.

c. 'I love you above all else'. Religion as blind obedience

The second kind of religion criticism found in video games equals religion with blind obedience. In his *The God delusion*, Dawkins (2006:265 and 242) criticizes this religious trait with a reference to the biblical story of Abraham (nearly) sacrificing his son Isaac (Genesis 22,1–19):

> Any modern legal system would have prosecuted Abraham for child abuse. And if he had actually carried through his plan to sacrifice Isaac, we would have convicted him of first-degree murder. [. . .] By the standards of modern morality, this disgraceful story is an

> example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defence: 'I was only obeying orders'. Yet the legend is one of the great foundational myths of all three monotheistic religions.

A game apparently taking this criticism – religion means blind obedience of a Nazi type – very seriously: *The Binding of Isaac*. The game's narrative directly taps into the Genesis narrative with which it shares its name. The Bible story is famous and difficult to interpret (Lenzen 2003; van Wieringen 1995; Westermann 1981) but focuses one way or the other on God's commandment to Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. The whole offering appears to be some sort of 'test' (Genesis 22,1), passed gloriously by Abraham, who is halted by God at the very last moment, saying, 'Don't do anything to him, because I've just demonstrated that you fear God' (Genesis 22,12b).

The game *The Binding* delivers to its players a multilevel narrative, in which each layer nuances the interpretation of the larger story (Bosman and van Wieringen 2018). At the first level, the prologue and the epilogue of the game tell a disturbing story about a mother and her son living 'in a house on a hill' (a reference to the unnamed mountain in Genesis 22,2). The complete intro and outro of the game are drawn by pencil on sheets of paper, resembling the style of a child's drawing in primary school. The voice-over narrates:

> Isaac and his mother lived alone in a small house on a hill. Isaac kept to himself, drawing pictures and playing with his toys as his mom watched Christian broadcasts on the television. Life was simple, and they were both happy. That was, until the day Isaac's mom heard a voice from above.

The voice appears to be coming from above, but it seems that only Isaac's mother is capable of understanding it, suggesting that she is 'hearing voices':

> "Your son has become corrupted by sin! He needs to be saved!" – "I will do my best to save him, my Lord," Isaac's mother replied rushing into Isaac's room removing all that was evil from his life.

Isaac's mother rushes to the job, taking everything away from Isaac, including his clothes. The narrator continues:

> Again, the voice called to her: "Isaac's soul is still corrupt! He needs to be cut off from all that is evil in this world and confess his sins." – "I will follow your instructions, Lord. I have faith in thee," Isaac's mother replied as she locked Isaac away in his room, away from the evils of the world.

Isaac's mother isolates Isaac in his room, where he is kept under lock and key. Then, a third time the voice from above speaks to the mother:

> One last time, Isaac's mom heard the voice of God calling to her: "You have done as I asked, but I still question your devotion to me. To prove your faith, I will ask one more thing of you." – "Yes, Lord. Anything," Isaac's mother begged. "To prove your love and devotion, I require a sacrifice. Your son Isaac will be this sacrifice. Go into his room and end his life as an offering to me, to prove that you love me above all else!" – "Yes, Lord," she replied grabbing a butcher's knife from the kitchen.

Isaac's mother grabs a knife and storms into Isaac's room to end his life. Isaac, in his turn, tries to find a way out until he discovers a previously undetected trap door under the rug in his room. And 'without hesitation, he flung open the hatch just as his mother burst through his door and threw himself down into the unknown depths below'.

The 'unknown depths below' is a reference to the second narratological level in the game, that of the actual gameplay itself. The player controls Isaac, whose primary task is to navigate through randomly generated dungeons while keeping all kinds of monsters at bay by shooting tears at them. The game is a dungeon crawler and is presented top-down, enabling Isaac to go in four different directions.

The game is flooded with references to Christian tradition, in general, and to Roman Catholicism, in particular. Monsters, items, attributes and unlockable characters are all reminiscent of Christianity: the Bible, the book of Revelations, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, cat-o'-nine tails, a halo, a rosary, holy water, Longinus's spear (again!), the Holy Grail, the 'Duke of Flies' (Beelzebub) and so on and so forth. Furthermore, the player can unlock other playable characters, like Cain, Eve, Judas, Mary Magdalene, Samson and Lilith: all biblical characters from the Old and New Testament who are considered evil or problematic figures within Christian tradition.

After Isaac has defeated the final boss, the Mother Monster, the epilogue starts where the prologue ended. However, not entirely: the epilogue disregards Isaac's escape through the trap door and pretends he is still facing his knife-wielding mother. The narrator explains:

> Isaac was cornered. His mother, fueled with the desire to serve her god, was bearing down on Isaac. "I will do as I'm told, my Lord. I love you above all else", Isaac's mother repeated to herself. This was the end of the line for Isaac, his mother was far too strong for him. But just as he accepted his fate, God intervened, sending an angel down from above to stop his mother's hand. And just like that, it was over.

Just as in the Bible, 'God intervened' by 'sending an angel'. In Genesis, the angel lacks all description and is only given a voice. In *The Binding*, the angel is given the form of a physical Bible that is taken from its shelf by an invisible hand, to be smashed on the mother's head, ending her life and Isaac's horror. At the last instance, Isaac is shown standing victoriously smiling on top of his mother's dead body.

While there are differences between the two stories of Genesis 22 and *The Binding* (regarding time and place, the gender switch, the speaking angel versus an acting one, the identification of Isaac as a 'sinner' and others), the intertextual relationship between the two is apparent and can be classified as a destructive one (Allen 2000): the game addresses its source text very critically. *The Binding* seems to suggest that, like the mother in the game, the father of the biblical narrative has to be considered as a pathological religious fanatic. Just like Dawkins, *The Binding* criticizes religion, in this case in its Christian form, as demanding and producing blind obedience of and in its adherents, who have to de-activate all logic, critical thinking and moral independence in favor of an all-consuming religious fervor urging them to cross all boundaries of 'civilized behaviour'.

Interestingly enough, this is, however, not the end of *The Binding*'s narrative: the game is much more cleverly designed to be reduced to mere religious criticism. Let us first turn to McMillen, the designer of *The Binding of Isaac*. Where designers usually refrain from interpreting their own game out of commercial considerations, McMillen has spoken multiple times on his inspirations when developing *The Binding* (Holmes 2011; Jagielski 2011; Smith 2011; McMillen 2012). McMillen describes his religious upbringing as a hybrid between Roman Catholicism and born-again Christianity, both sides contributing to the creation of *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen 2012):

> I grew up in a religious family. My mom's side is Catholic, and my dad's side is born-again Christians. The Catholic side had this very ritualistic belief system: My grandma could essentially cast spells of safe passage if we went on trips, for example, and we would light candles and pray for loved ones to find their way out of purgatory, and drink and eat the body and blood of our saviour to be abolished of mortal sin. As a child growing up with this, I honestly thought it was very neat, very creative and inspiring. It's not hard to look at my work and see that most of the themes of violence actually come from my Catholic upbringing, and in a lot of ways I loved that aspect of our religion. Sadly, the other side of my family was a bit more harsh in their views on the Bible; I was many times told I was going to hell for playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering* (in fact, they took my MtG cards away from me), and generally condemned me for my sins.

McMillen's evaluation of his religious upbringing is mixed but certainly not entirely negative: the stringent Protestantism of his father and the more lenient Roman Catholicism of his mother and grandmother, both inspired McMillen to include dark and adult content that most other game developers would rather avoid or neglect (McMillen 2012):

> A lot of the content in Isaac is extremely dark and adult. It touches on aspects of child abuse, gender identity, infanticide, neglect, suicide, abortion, and how religion might negatively affect a child, which are topics most games would avoid.

The developer encourages his player audience to make up its own mind concerning the interpretation of his game (McMillen 2012):

> The Bible is a very good, creatively written book, and one of my favourite aspects of it is how so many people can find different meanings in one passage. I wanted Isaac to have this in its story as well, which is why the game's final ending(s) have many possible interpretations.

The appeal for multiple interpretations is strongly embedded in the game, nuancing its initial harsh religion criticism. The story of the prologue and epilogue, discussed earlier, are drawn on drawing paper, as I already mentioned. During the narration, an Isaac-like shadow can be seen over the paper, while a small pink thumb holds down the paper on the lower left. This indicates that the prologue/epilogue is a creative invention of Isaac, not necessarily a depiction of the reality outside that. At both endings of prologue and epilogue, we see, for a short moment, a happy Isaac (now in full color) looking at the drawing he just created and thus the story it represents. But while at the prologue's end, Isaac smiles happily into the camera, at the epilogue's end, Isaac looks shocked, as the silhouette of his mother appears in the door flung open, holding a large knife in her hands.

This second narratological layer indicates, as far as I can deduce, that Isaac is indeed under attack by his mother or, at least, he is convinced he is. To cope with the experience of an abusive mother, the child Isaac constructs a framework in which he is mentally able to 'understand' the reasonability behind his mother's madness and in which he is able to escape his seemingly inevitable fate. Isaac, probably being raised a Christian, took a familiar biblical narrative that he could easily adapt to his own situation, tweaking its details to fit his personal situation even better. Now the focus of the narrative has been shifted from religiously inspired blind obedience and the consequential violence it accompanies to child abuse in a much broader sense in which the religious layer has become more incidental.

There is, however, a third narratological layer to complicate matters even more. After the first time the player defeats the game, he is shown the epilogue, discussed earlier. After a second-to-twentieth victory, the player is given nineteen different endings, unlocking new avatars to play with, not only unlocking permanent abilities or upgrades but also painting, again, a different story about what truly happened to Isaac and his knife-wielding mother (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Overview of the different endings of *The Binding of Isaac*, *Rebirth* edition

Endings	*Name*	*Description*
Epilogue	Epilogue	Isaac's mother is struck down by a Bible.
1	Eden	Isaac is swallowed by the chest, emerges as Eden.
2	Glue	Isaac finds rubber cement in the chest, uses it.
3	Noose	Isaac finds a noose in the chest, hangs himself.
4	Hanger	Isaac finds a wire coat hanger, jams it into his own head.
5	Mother	Mother's arm reaches from inside the chest, grabs Isaac.
6	Vomit	Isaac opens the chest, vomits into the chest, causing explosions.
7	Syringe	Isaac finds a syringe in the chest, (apparently uses drugs).
8	Quarter	Isaac finds a quarter (coin) in the chest.
9	Fetus	Isaac finds Dr. Fetus in the chest, wearing top hat and monocle.
10	???	Isaac finds ??? <an unlockable character> lying in the chest, who sits up and smiles.
11	Heart	Isaac finds 'It Lives' in the chest, growling and smiling.
12	Light	A bright light shines on Isaac from the chest, switches to different characters, Isaac steps into the chest.
13	Bible	Isaac reads the Bible, looks into a mirror, which shows Isaac with red eyes and black skin.
14	Pictures	Various pictures of Isaac's life are shown, 'the end'.
15	Poster	A missing persons poster is shown on a pole, Isaac's mother can be seen in the background.
16	Crying	Isaac lies crying inside the chest, assumes demon form.
17	Skeleton	Ending #15, mother opens chest, flies and spiders, ghastly landscape, Isaac pops out of red chest, large shadow bends over him.
18	Cave 1	Isaac is shown in a small cave, the entrance collapses, rotting shopkeeper who looks suddenly into the camera.
19	Cave 2	As #18, but the shopkeeper's head falls off, spewing a geyser of spiders.
20	Final	A combination of multiple endings and unique material.

Source: Bosman and Wieringen (2018).

The endings 12, 13 and 16 suggest that Isaac is accusing himself of some unknown crime or mishap. He reads through a book, very probably the Bible from which he got the whole Isaac-survives-story, and looks sadly at himself in the mirror seeing a devilish version of himself. Isaac is feeling guilty about something, but we don't know what yet. Endings 15 and 17 show 'wanted' posters of Isaac stuck to a pole, with the silhouette of his mother standing in the background next to the house.

In ending 14, a number of Polaroid pictures are shown from an increasing distance, so actually seeing what they depict is somewhat difficult: (a) mother, Isaac (fully dressed) and a male figure, probably Isaac's father, who is not seen or heard anywhere else in the game; (b) Isaac's mother with an unknown female child, who is not seen or heard anywhere else in the game either; (c) a naked Isaac in his room with a devilish, dark figure in the corner in the back, who resembles Isaac's silhouette with the hanger through his head (Ending 4); (d) Isaac's mother and father smiling at each other as they hold hands; (e) Isaac (dressed) outside, alone; (f) A naked Isaac crying, sitting beside a closed chest; (g) Isaac's mother holding a knife in her hand as she did in the prologue, epilogue and post-epilogue. But we cannot see whom she is threatening with the knife: Isaac, Isaac's father/her husband or someone else? (h) Isaac and his mother look through a window at an unidentified person outside, perhaps his father; (i) the text 'the end' appears.

Together with ending 20, essentially a mash-up of earlier endings, but with some distinct additions, we can make a final educated guess. Isaac is seen happily drawing behind his desk. We hear noises from another room, very possibly two persons having a terrible row. Isaac's look darkens. Another addition is Isaac's mother shown weeping in front of a turned-off television. Isaac is watching her unseen. The grand picture that can be drawn from all these endings together with the prologue and epilogue is that once, Isaac lived happily with both of his parents and his sister. Then the sister disappears, probably because of illness or accident.

The psychological tension in the family rips Isaac's parents from one another: they fight bitterly, with Isaac as an unseen witness. As is not uncommon for young children with fighting parents, Isaac 'concludes' that he is the cause of his parents' problems, and he increasingly identifies himself with the devil. Eventually, the fighting between Isaac's mother and father reaches boiling point, and Isaac's mother forces her husband out of their house, threatening him with a knife. Isaac, again, is a silent witness. Isaac, blaming himself for his parents' problems, locks/hides himself in the chest in his room, suffocating himself. Isaac's mother, desperately trying to find her lost son, eventually discovers his body in the chest.

Now we finally understand the reason behind the alternations of the Genesis story by Isaac-the-drawer, and again the interpretation of the game shifts: from a criticism of religious obedience to a charge against child abuse in a much broader sense to – finally – a heartbreaking story

about a young child undeservingly feeling guilty about the divorce of his parents. McMillen criticizes (violent) divorce as a form of child abuse, equal to that of other forms like psychological and/or physical harassment. The religion criticism still stands – religious people tend to blindly follow orders given to them by a higher power, or so they think – but the criticism is embedded in a much larger reflection on the emotional well-being of young children.

d. 'There will be a reckoning'. Religion as violence

Another criticism institutionalized religion is prone to is that of violence. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, *Far Cry 4* addresses the problem of religious figures of power, using scripture to justify any and all means of violence in pursuing personal goals in the name of a divine entity. The self-ordained priest Longinus sells weapons to the rebels of the *Golden Path*, pacifying his conscience by randomly quoting all possible biblical verses in which violence is condoned or even asked for by God. This alone demonstrates the vulnerability of biblical texts, read outside of a historical context and without the framework of an interpretative tradition that is constantly corrected by academic exegesis.

Far Cry 5 takes this kind of criticism – religion as inherently violent – to the next level with the introduction of Project at Eden's Gate (PEG), a violent Christian doomsday sect, located in Hope County, Montana (USA). At the head of the organization stands Joseph Seed aka 'The Father'. Together with his brothers John and Jacob, and their adopted sister Faith, Joseph tyrannizes the valley, killing all who dare to resist and mind-controlling all those who are too afraid to resist. Local law enforcers eventually take interest in the sect when a former cultist disappears without a trace.

In the beginning of the game, the player takes the role of a sheriff's junior deputy, who is sent into Joseph's compound. Joseph's church is located at the center of the compound, heavily guarded by 'peggies' (as the locals call the cultists), who are very reluctant to let the law enforcers inside. However, the team makes it inside the compound and into the church, a simple wooden structure covered in biblical quotes about violence and the end of times. Joseph lets himself be arrested by the player's avatar and is led to a nearby helicopter. The vehicle is overrun by peggies, and crashes, leaving the team in imprisonment and triggering Joseph to proclaim that 'the first seal has been broken', a reference to the Book of Revelations (6,1–2).

The junior deputy succeeds in escaping. The rest of the game is dedicated to unifying the resistance in the valley, freeing the marshal, sheriff and deputy who were taken prisoner in the compound and confronting Joseph and his three siblings John, Jacob and Faith. John Seed is the

'confessor' of the cult: he initiates new arrivals into the cult's doctrine using pseudo-evangelical lingo like 'the Power of YES!' and makes sure that those who sin against Joseph's rule are 'purified' by confessing their sins. The confessional process is somewhat different from the standard Roman Catholic approach. The penitent is tortured to confess his sin (otherwise, it would be a 'real confession'). 'We must wash away our past. We must expose our sins. We must atone' is John's credo. Then the name of the sin – 'sloth', 'hate', 'wrath' – is carved into the penitent's body, after which the tainted piece of skin is skinned off. As a member of PEG summarizes,

> confession without pain isn't confession. You'll scream out your sins, then you'll wear it on your flesh before John peels it off of you. It's a beautiful thing.

Jacob Seed, the 'protector', is in charge of the defense forces of the cult, which are paramilitary in quantity and quality. Jacob's methods to improve the mental and physical resilience of his recruits are somewhat creative: with the help of classical brainwashing and conditioning, Jacob sets his recruits against one another or against wild animals to 'cull the herd'. 'The weak have their purpose. You'll understand that soon enough', he ironically tells the player. Faith is not a biological sister of the three Seeds but is regarded as one of them. She is in charge of the production and distribution of 'bliss', a powerful drug capable of converting new recruits and pacifying those in need of comfort or tranquility. 'The collapse is upon us', she tells the player, 'and the reaping has begun. . . . But there is nothing to fear'.

So far, so good. The *Project at Eden's Gate* appears to check all the boxes for your classic religio-fanatic Doomsday's cult (Snow 2003): a charismatic but crazy leader demanding absolute obedience of all his followers; divine visions proclaiming the arrival of the Apocalypse that will destroy sinful humankind but promising redemption to the elect few; geographical isolation; members are cut off from all of their family and former friends; the reframing of traditional religious language like *redemption*, *bliss*, *confession*, *sin*, *reckoning* and *baptism* into a new and often violent context; and so forth. The peggies have it all. And like Longinus from *Far Cry 4*, the PEG has no problem with the cherry-picking of biblical quotes and interpreting them as violently as possible.

Game critics did comment on the one-dimensional portrayal of Christian fundamentalism in *Far Cry 5*, mentioning the absence of God's or Christ's name, the lack of biblical quotes in Joseph's speeches and sermons and the fact that the obvious references to 'the Beast', '666', devil or Satan are left aside. Green (2018), for example, states,

> Far Cry 5, meanwhile, for purportedly being about a fundamentalist Christian sect, is about the least Christian thing I've ever seen. And I mean that not in actions of the cultists per se, but rather the ideology. It's completely missing. The name of God is rarely invoked, scripture is almost never quoted, neither Hell nor Satan are used as a threat. One of the only visible markers of their faith – the "seven deadly sins" – are neither Biblical nor particularly popular within Christian circles.

And Roberts (2018) thought the game fell short of depicting a believable Christian sect:

> But from the outset, the ideology behind Eden's Gate doesn't feel rooted in any tradition beyond vague notions of sin and survivalism. Joseph Seed is clearly based on the traveling-pastor trope, and his not-so-subtly-named brother John the Baptist takes his cues from sloganeering mega-church pastors. John's catchphrase – "Power of Yes!" – rings with the same hollow spirituality of a typical self-helpy sermon series from whoever this year's celebrity hype priest may be. Neither them, nor any other *Far Cry 5* antagonist, seems quite able to articulate an agenda, or even a motivation.

For now we can summarize that the connection *Far Cry 5* makes between Christianity and violence is historically not without rhyme or reason but otherwise fails to demonstrate the deeper sociological or theological undercurrents of such a type of religious fundamentalism. But again, there is more than meets the eye.

Before the game was officially released in 2018, gamers could pre-order their copy of the game on the site of developer Ubisoft. For the first 2000 pre-orders of the 'Mondo Collector's edition' of the game (a special edition of the game including a lot of merchandise) only, Ubisoft (2018) included a physical copy of *The Book of Joseph*, a fictional autobiography of Joseph Seed. The book exists in-game but can only be seen (and not read) at the end of the 'False Prophet' quest. The in-game version of the book has a white cover with a golden frame and in the middle a double golden cross, the symbol of PEG. After the burning of the book, the voice of Faith can be heard in the deputy's ears, saying, 'What have you done? His words. Don't you understand. What He'll do to me?' suggesting she has to pay for the book burning.

As said, the in-game book cannot be read, but the physical book included in the Mondo edition of the game can. Since it is so extremely rare (only two thousand copies are known to be in existence), obtaining a physical copy is rather difficult. However, a Tumblr user with the name 'octo-chan' has posted screenshots of all pages of the book on his

dedicated *Far Cry 5* site, called 'House of the Seedlings'. The content of the book (Seed 2017) is highly instructive on the game lore and history of the Seed family, reframing their later religious insanity as well as their tendency to physical and mental violence.

The Book of Joseph visually resembles a standard Bible: black leather with the title in golden letters on the cover. No publisher, date or place of publishing, ISBN or colophon is found, except a copyright warrant on the last page by Ubisoft claiming it as their intellectual property. Each chapter, twelve in total, begins with a quote from one of Joseph's sermons. The text is alternated with pencil drawings, not unlike those used in evangelical literature to illustrate either the Bible or depict the decadence of modern society versus the purity of the new faith.

In the book, the origin story of the Seed brothers is found: from their birth until the foundation of their 'church'. The three Seed brothers were born and raised in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Rome, Georgia (probably a reference to the city of Rome in Italy, the heart of Roman Catholicism). Their mother was 'absent', while their unemployed, alcoholic father was keen to discipline his offspring with a combination of his leather belt and a copy of the Bible.

The first chapter is written (almost) entirely in the third person, in contrast with the rest of the book that is written in the first person. Joseph recounts the first time 'the Voice' spoke to him: after twenty-five lashes of his father's belt as punishment for reading a *Spiderman* comic.

> The father thrashed his arms furiously while the boy, young Joseph Seed, stood with his head bowed, contrite and seemingly fixated on the floorboards. If he had looked up, he would have seen the kaleidoscopic colours of an old Spiderman flashing by, alternating with the smooth black leather of his father's Bible and the ruddy face of the father himself. [. . .] The cause of the parental fury was simple: comics were forbidden in the home – comics and books, records, magazines, radio, and television. Only the Bible was allowed. [. . .] I am Joseph Seed. And if you want to know why I remember that scorching day in June so clearly, it's because that was the first day the Voice spoke to me.
>
> (Seed 2017:9–12)

An intriguing detail is that not only does Joseph speak about himself in the third person, but that he also refers to his father as 'the Father', without a proper name. This is more, I reckon, than just refraining from calling your parents with their given names, as is custom in most parts of the world, including the United States, or just a literary technique. Joseph is distancing himself psychologically and emotionally from both

his abusive father and from his young defenseless self. Like the nameless 'Isaac's mother' in *The Binding of Isaac*, the nameless 'the Father' from *The Book of Joseph* is a sign of some kind of 'coping mechanism' functioning within the two small children for dealing with their complex and ambiguous relationship with their parents.

When teachers at John's primary school discovered the marks of repeated lashing, child protection removed the three sons from their parents' home. They left, never to see their parents again. Eventually separated, John was adopted by the Duncan family, who were not only 'very rich' but also 'religious zealots of the worst sort' (Seed 2017:73):

> To them, a child's silence could mean only that he was thinking impure thoughts, every absence meant mischief, every movement meant temptation. They were convinced that John's soul was tainted and that it must be cleansed, purified by any means necessary. John's childhood and teen years were no more than one long, elaborate exorcism. The Evil within him had to be exterminated. John was urged to confess his sins at all hours of the day and night. [. . .] He ratcheted up the shows of penitence, whipped himself, force himself to kneel in the tiny, austere chapel the Duncan's had built and pray for entire days at a time. He became the joy of his foster parents, a saint in their eyes.

Again, the similarity with the story of *The Binding* is striking. Again, the child is thought to be evil and in desperate need of purification. 'The Voice' would speak one more time to Joseph, but its message remains utterly vague and unclear. When Joseph is attacked by three thugs, he is enraptured by a vision:

> [T]he Voice answered me. The Voice broke its silence and showed me. And I saw. [. . .] The end of the world, complete collapse, call it what you will. Everything you know will soon be gone. Humanity has been condemned. It is inevitable, imminent, and terrible. The Voice did not show me exactly how it all would end. [. . . The] Voice also told me that humanity would not disappear entirely. Billions of people would die, yes. But some would be saved. [. . .] The beating I had received from those three thugs – who would soon be nothing more than dust – was my coronation, my anointment. The Father was revealed. Those who want to live must follow the voice of the Father, the voice of Joseph See. My voice.
>
> (Seed 2017:63–67)

The Bible is mentioned several times in *The Book*, but it is never quoted literally. The Voice is heard twice but without any of its content described

except that the second time it seems to hint at Doomsday. Other religious notions are used: coronation, anointment, voice, father. No mentioning of God, Jesus, a Christian Church, sacraments and religious celebrations or rituals, either at home or in communion. Eventually, Joseph's religious zeal is infused with conspiracy theories:

> We live apart from the outside world. We live together, far away from the vile, rotten society that nearly devoured us all at one time or another. We live away from its lies, its false idols, its obscene music, and its overwhelming desire for material wealth. We keep as far as possible from the toxic fumes of airplanes, hidden messages in advertisements, the hypnosis of television and the internet, and the lies taught in schools. We are hidden from the government that monitors our every move. We have rejected the poison they put in our food, that they inject us with – all those chemicals, and the physical and mental manipulations whose purpose was to enslave us and distance us from original virtue.
>
> (Seed 2017:115–116)

As I suggested earlier, the focus point of *Far Cry 5*'s story is not so much religiously inspired violence, though the criticism is tangible, but about child abuse, not *per se* religiously inspired, and the role of religion as a coping mechanism to survive. When the junior deputy is taken prisoner by the Seeds, something that happens a lot during the game, Joseph tells him a little story about the time his own daughter was born. Indeed, The Father once was *a* father. This story is *not* included in *The Book of Joseph*, probably because even The Father understands the moral ambiguity of his actions. The story is rather long but too fascinating to abbreviate, although its content is highly disturbing:

> I know you are in pain. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh, hm? But you're not the only one to be tested. Did you know I had a wife? So beautiful, isn't she? We were pregnant with our first child. And we were just babies ourselves really. And I was terrified. Becoming a father. Mostly about money. She wasn't worried. She had faith that things were going to work out. She always had faith.
>
> And then one day, she was going to visit a friend. There was an accident . . . and the Lord taketh. And they rushed me to a hospital and put me in a room with this little pink bundle stuffed with tubes and they said I had to be strong because my little girl was going to live. God was looking out for our daughter. And they left me in a room alone with her. I just stared at my daughter. So helpless. So innocent. And all she had in the world was me. A nobody, from nowhere, with nothing.

> And in that moment I knew that God was testing me. He was laying out a path before me and all I had to do was choose. So I put my hand on my little girl's head and I leaned in and I could smell. And we prayed together. Prayed for wisdom. Prayed for strength. Then I knew. I heard God's plan for me. And I took my fingers and I put them on that little plastic tube that was taped to her angelic face and I pinched it shut. Mmmm. And after a little while, her legs began to kick and kick. And then nothing. Stillness. Release. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh. Pain. Sacrifice. These are all part of his test. Only have to prove that we can serve God, no matter what He asks.

A story about cold-blooded infanticide, performed by a widowed father on his newborn child. Maybe Joseph panicked at the idea of caring for her alone. Maybe Joseph remembered his own 'motherless' upbringing and the terror of his own father. Maybe Joseph was too afraid that history would repeat itself. And again, religion is used as a coping mechanism: God saved his daughter in the first place to enable Joseph to make a conscious decision. And in his twisted mind, Joseph is certain this is what God wants from him: the offering of his only child, a 'sacrifice', again, much like the story of *The Binding*.

Another religious motive is also mentioned in this twisted story: a test of faith. The theme of the theodicy is brought up (see also Chapter 6 of this volume). Job 1,21 is quoted twice: 'The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh', a classical text in the theological debate on the reasons of the existence of evil in this world. Pain and sacrifice, according to Joseph, are all part of a God-given test to proof we 'love God above all else', to quote *The Binding*. But just as in that game, religion in *Far Cry 5* is not the cause of the violence, in general, or the infanticide, in particular, but an additional narrative, a psychological construct to understand reality in such a way that it begins to start to make some sense. In this case, the death of Joseph's wife and the murder of his child are all part of a divine test, which Joseph 'passed'.

e. 'You must die and become gods'. Religion as madness

Another kind of religion criticism is that of madness. We have already witnessed quite some examples of religion-infused madness in passing: the stigmatic Konstantin, the power-hungry Rodrigo Borgia, Isaac's homicidal mother, and the Seed brothers. But a prime example of this kind of religion criticism is found in *Nier: Automata*, and is connected to the figure of the robot Pascal. (Even though I have already introduced the game in Chapter 5, I repeat that section here for the convenience of the reader.)

In the year 11,945, Earth is the decor for a proxy war between machinemen, created by unknown alien invaders, and androids, made by humankind. The initial invasion has driven humankind to the Moon, leaving its

creations to fight in its place. The identity of the alien race is shrouded in mystery. From its Moon base, humanity eventually sends down its elite combat androids, known as YoRHa. The androids are made in the spitting image of their creators but were denied human emotions and proper names. The machine-men are esthetically and technically inferior to the androids, appearing to have originated from a child's imagination: walking cylinders on tiny feet with tube-like arms and claws. While the androids are capable of complicated conversations in perfectly understandable English, the machine-men seem incapable of any form of communication perceivable for humans.

Main protagonists of *Nier Automata* are two of these androids, dubbed 2B (a battle droid) and 9S (a scanner droid). Both androids are very clearly gendered and even sexualized: 2B is the female android, while 9S is clearly a male robot. 2B and 9S are both sent to Earth by YoRHa command for reconnaissance purposes. During their adventures in the ruins of human civilization, the androids slowly develop a clear form of self-awareness and strong emotional feelings for one another. However, the same development manifests itself in the machine-men, although in a much more primitive way.

Eventually, 2B and 9S find out that both groups of creators have long since died: both the remnants of humankind on the Moon and the alien invaders and constructors of the machine men are extinct, leaving their creations to fight each other pointlessly until the end of times. This existential inanity is forcing both robot races to find new ways of finding a purpose in their mechanical lives.

One small group of machine men have gathered in 'Pascal's village', a group of treehouses on a rather remote part of the map. (The androids seem to care much less about their collective and induvial purpose, even though they are much more evolved.) The robots in the village have adopted a strict pacifism after growing tired of the endless fighting and the absence of any new orders from their creators. Head of the village is the female-voiced, softhearted philosopher robot Pascal. Pascal likes to read and discuss modern philosophy with 2B and tries to educate his fellow machine-men to find a new purpose for themselves. He is especially attentive to the little machine-men, dubbed 'children' by Pascal, trying to bring a new generation to knowledge and self-consciousness.

The robot is probably named after the philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). In this context it is not without reason to mention one of Pascal's most notable thought-constructs, known as the 'Pascal Wager' (Jordan 2006:7–36). In number 233 of his *Pensées* (1670 [2011]), Pascal formulates an argument in favor of the existence of God or, rather, an argument in favor of believing in God. If God exists and is believed in, the believer will have infinite gains (heaven); if God does not exist, the believer will have limited loss (some earthly pleasures). If God exists and is not believed in, the believer will suffer infinite loss (hell); if God does not exist, the unbeliever will have finite gain (again, earthly pleasures).

So, in the end, Pascal observes, the changes of a good outcome are higher if one believes in God, even if God does not exist in the first place.

Later in the game, the robot Pascal asks 2B to accompany him to a neighboring group of peaceful machine-men to form some sort of alliance between them and Pascal's village. The other group is located in the abandoned factory. When Pascal and 2B enter the facility, they are greeted by an oddly dressed machine-man: 'You enter the domain of God. Down this corridor if you would'. The machine man is identified by the game as 'priest'. The 'priest' is dressed in a garment not unlike a Roman Catholic priest or Protestant minister: a purple cloak with a white-and-purple embroidered collar.

When Pascal and 2B have been led to an elevator, they enter a long corridor lit by the torches of two rows of machine priests, all identically dressed. They speak religious utterances like the following:

> That door leads to the sanctum of His Grace.
> How I yearn for his Grace to light the path forward for all.
> May hardship and conflict be ever banished from this world.
> Once I accepted God into my heart, I was filled with serenity.

At the end of the corridor, Pascal and 2B enter a circular room. In the middle of the room, positioned on a platform, 'His Grace' appears to be sitting on his throne made of scrap metal, surrounded by torch-carrying machine priests. He wears the same cloak and collar, but on his perfectly round ball-shaped head (a characteristic of almost all machine-men) is a head, also in purple and white, with the same geometrical patterns. Qua-shaped, the head holds the middle between a papal tiara and a carnivalesque fool's cap.

When approached, His Grace tumbles over, his head rolling over the floor. From that moment on, things descend into chaos very rapidly. One of the machine priests exclaims, 'His wondrous Grace has become a god!' Then, the robot priests begin to dance synchronically. One priest acts as precentor, while the others collectively answer, in the manner of a Christian antiphon. They chant: 'His Grace is a god! His wondrous Grace has become a god! We as well shall become as gods! All of you shall become as gods'.

Two robot priests close the door Pascal and 2B have entered through, effectually locking them inside. The priests begin to dance around the two in a double circle, holding their lit torches high up in the air: 'We'll all die together and become as gods!' When the priests become too intrusive towards Pascal and 2B, the android attacks. Pascal refrains from joining in the fight but observes, 'I've never seen machines with such . . . unique perspectives. I wonder if there's a way to collect some samples and. . . '

Then, he is interrupted by 2B, who has managed to find a way to unlock the door for an escape into the outside world. During the escape, the

two are confronted with more machine-men and priests, shouting similar religious phrases as before:

> You also must die and become gods!
> The afterlife is wonderful. Death brings final tranquility.
> Die and become gods!
> Let us die and become gods together!
> We shall become gods. We shall.
> Machine! People! Androids! Every one of them, a god!

Later, Pascal and 2B are confronted with machine-men carrying explosives in the manner of suicide bombers. In the next room, some machine-men appear to be fighting among themselves. Apparently, some robots are killing others for the same reason they want to kill Pascal and 2B: so they can become gods, just as His Grace did. The fanatic priests shout, 'Rejoice! You have all been chosen' and 'With your death, you will become gods'. Other machine-men sound frightened and not so sure that a mutual suicide pact is very preferable in the first place: 'No! Please, don't kill me' and 'Somebody help us'.

In another corridor, the two find multiple machine men lifeless on the floor, silent witnesses of an earlier successful mutual annihilation. And in again another room, a large industrial one, Pascal and 2B are helpless as they witness multiple machine-men jumping from ledges into pits of molten iron. They keep on uttering among themselves:

> It feels good. It feels so good. God. God. God. God.
> Why did this happen?
> The only option left is to die.
> I'm scared. I am so scared.
> We must die and become gods.
> Yes, let us die now.
> Farewell. Farewell. The moment we've planned for is here. Let us all go together.
> We will become gods and be freed from our torment.

When Pascal and 2B leave the abandoned factory, all cultists are dead, either by suicide or murdered by their fellow devotees. The collective religious madness of the cultists – the mission is called 'twisted religion' for a reason – reminds us of real-life mass suicides like those of Jim Jones and his more than nine hundred followers in Jonestown, Guyana (1978), the 74 deaths of the Order of the Solar Temple (1994–1997), the thirty-nine followers of Heaven's Gate (1997) and the nine members of Adam's House (2007). In all these cases, religious motives were involved in kindling the mass hysteria.

Unfortunately for poor Pascal, his ordeal is far from over. After his adventurous escape from the abandoned factory, he returns to his peaceful village, only to find the 'adult' machine-men fighting with one another, and even 'cannibalizing' each other, for no apparent reason whatsoever. Pascal collects the 'children' of the town and flees with them to the now-really abandoned factory (how machine-men could be classified as either 'adult' or 'child' is not explained by the game). A2, yet another member of YoHRa, and the protagonist of the third run-through of the game, is called to the factory by Pascal to defend the frightened children against a new wave of violent machine-men.

After A2 and Pascal defeat the waves of opponents in front of the factory, they return inside, only to find that the machine children have collectively committed suicide by destroying their data cores. Pascal is out of his mind from grief and self-accusation:

Pascal: No. How can this . . .
A2: Their own cores. They killed themselves. [. . .] Why would they do such a thing?
Pascal: I taught them everything. All my thoughts and emotions. I thought it would serve them well in the future. But instead . . .
A2: How would teaching them lead to something like this?
Pascal: Fear. [. . .] I taught the children what fear is. I felt they had to know so they wouldn't rush heedlessly into danger. But instead . . .
A2: Fear destroyed them. It caused them to take their own lives.

Fear is not always a good motivation for staying out of trouble: the machine children were so terrified of the idea of being destroyed by their violent fellow robots, they 'chose' to end their own mechanical lives prematurely. Pascal cannot live with the guilt and asks A2 to either destroy him or to wipe his memory.

Religion can harness enormous amounts of psychological powers, especially when not kept in balance by other more rational strains of thought. *Nier Automata* shows, as we all know, the great and mortal danger for every devotee when reason and faith are no longer balanced. As Pope John Paul II observed in his *Fides et Ratio* (1998, para. 48),

> [d]eprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so runs the risk of no longer being a universal proposition. It is an illusion to think that faith, tied to weak reasoning, might be more penetrating; on the contrary, faith then runs the grave risk of withering into myth or superstition. By the same token, reason which is unrelated to an adult faith is not prompted to turn its gaze to the newness and radicality of being.

According to John Paul, faith without reason leads to 'superstition', while reason without faith leads to nihilism and relativism. While popes like John Paul II and Benedict XVI (Jankunas 2011) have written and spoken extensively on the 'dangers' of Western cultural relativism and religious pluralism, that is, reason without faith, the other extreme seems to be less prominent on the theological radar of ecclesiastic leaders. But without reason, 'there can be no religion', as the Presbyterian theologian Archibald Alexander (1772–1851) argues. 'For in every step we take, in examining the evidences of revelation, in interpreting its meaning, or in assenting to its doctrines, the exercise of this faculty is indispensable' (1832:5).

In *Nier: Automata*, the old machine-men, robbed of any form of communication from their creators, eventually began to question the validity of the old orders. But without new orders or directives, the machines were forced to discover their own *raison d'être*. While the majority of machine men simply stick to the 'old ways', small groups begin to experiment with a new purpose for and meaning to their mechanical lives. In doing so, the androids and machine-men of the *Nier Automata* universe try to imitate their creators, and those of their opponents, without any other source of knowledge than their own existence and that of their enemies (see Chapter 5).

One combination of imitation and creativity led to the foundation of the religion of His Grace in the abandoned factory. And as is the case in the whole game, the artificial behavior tells us more about humans than about robots. The machine men of the factory have found a way to reinvent purpose in their lives: to become gods. The only way they know how to do so is committing suicide, probably a reference to their creators, both human and alien, being extinct. To become gods means to become like their creators: dead.

Religion can be a coping mechanism in times of grief, pain, suffering and insecurity (as we have seen in the earlier examples). However, the cure can be worse than the illness. In the case of the Seed family, the religious cure produced a violent doomsday cult, while the teleological void of the machine men is filled with death-embracing madness. Blind faith, *Nier: Automata* warns us, can destroy itself, together with its adherents.

f. 'The Sodom below'. Religion as intolerance/suppression

Yet another criticism concerning (institutionalized) religion, especially in its monotheistic form, is its supposed intolerance. If there is only one God, there is only one Truth. And all who refuse to embrace that one truth are victimized, cast out, persecuted or even killed. Religion, in this way of reasoning, is always attached to worldly powers and figures who seek to use religious notions to differentiate between 'us' and 'them'. A striking example of such a religion criticism is found in *Bioshock Infinite*.

In *Bioshock Infinite*, the player takes control of Booker DeWitt, a drunken and dysfunctional former Pinkerton now private detective. In a retrofuturistic, steampunk version of our reality, more precisely 1912, DeWitt is ordered by two strange clients, Rosalind and Robert Lutece, to 'bring us the girl, and wipe away the debt'. Since DeWitt is suffering from some kind of amnesia, the player and DeWitt are equally in the dark about the context of the mission. DeWitt is transported, by rocket, to a floating city in the sky, Columbia, ruled by the self-appointed prophet Zachary Comstock. 'The girl', the Luteces want him to find, appears to be the eighteen-year-old daughter of Comstock, venerated by the Columbia population as 'the Lamb of Comstock'.

The game lore of *Infinite* is heavily based on the idea of American exceptionalism and its overt religious dimensions (Kain 2013; Mullaney 2013; Jackson 2014; Bosman 2017; Wysocki 2018). 'American exceptionalism' is the idea that the United States holds a special position among the nations and peoples of the world by divine instigation (Madsen 1998; Zimmer 2013). As Liberman (2012) explains, the exceptionalists believe the United States to be different because it was the first 'new' (truly democratic nation in the world), indicted by God to remake the world in its own image, elevating the United States above the other nations of the world.

This idea of exceptionalism has strong religious roots: the United States is frequently presented as a 'shining city upon a hill' or 'the new Eden'. The first phrase stems from the biblical Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus instructs his followers: 'You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden' (Matthew 5,14). The phrase entered American politics in 1630, when the famous Puritan leader John Winthrop gave a sermon ('A Model of Christian Charity') aboard the ship *Arbella* (Rosano 2003). Winthrop told the soon-to-be Massachusetts Bay colonists that their new community would be 'as a city upon a hill', to be seen by the whole world as an example of a new and truly Christian civilization. Many American politicians have used the phrase since, including John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Mitt Romney and (then senator) Barack Obama.

Infinite mixes religion and American exceptionalism into a highly critical version of the American Civil Religion (Bellah 1967): demonstrative of how American history and the American state may be interpreted in religious terms. When the player descends in an elevator to the entrance of the church, golden phrases with white nimbi are shown, resembling captions in traditional Jesus films. The phrases form a short theological introduction to Columbia's religion, referencing Christian notions as 'salvation', 'redemption' and 'Eden':

> Why would he send his savior unto us. If we will not raise a finger for own salvation? And though we deserved not his mercy, he has led us to this new Eden. A last chance for redemption.

During the whole scene, the hymn 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken?' is heard: a popular Christian hymn written in 1907 (also known as 'Can the Circle Be Unbroken?'). The last two sentences of the chorus are appropriate for Columbia, being a floating 'Eden' in the sky: 'Is a better home awaiting, in the sky, in the sky?' As soon as the player enters Columbia, he finds himself in a church, slightly flooded, filled with traditional Christian symbols like stained glass, saintly pictures, inspirational quotes, burning candles, praying devotees, a baptism ceremony and stone statues.

While the *form* of the religious paraphernalia is utterly Christian in origin, the *content* of the religious objects is certainly not traditional. There are three stained glass windows positioned in the fashion of Roman Catholic 'side altars'. The first depicts Zachary 'Father' Comstock, self-proclaimed prophet and founder of Columbia, preaching to his followers while pointing to a literal city floating in the sky: Columbia. Above it is written in pseudo-biblical language: 'And the prophet shall lead the people to the New Eden'.

The second stained glass window depicts Annabelle 'Lady' Comstock, wife of Zachary. She is surrounded by red roses, traditionally in Roman Catholic tradition associated with the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. The writing confirms the identification: 'And in my womb shall grow the seed of the prophet'. Confessional papers are laid before the portrait. The last window depicts a variation on the well-known picture of the 'Holy Family', but instead of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we see Annabelle and Zachary Comstock holding their infant daughter Elizabeth. (Actually, it is not their child, but the narrative of *Infinite* is too complex to explain here. For more information, see Bosman 2017.)

When the player enters the actual church, we see (and hear) preacher Witting, dressed in a black robe, surrounded by devotees clad in white robes. Above him is written 'The path of forgiveness is the only way to the city'. While the player nears the preacher, he starts to give a rather odd sermon:

> And every year on this day of days, we recommit ourselves to our city, to our Prophet, Father Comstock. We recommit through sacrifice, and the giving of thanks, and by submerging ourselves in the sweet water of baptism.
> And lo, if the Prophet had struck down our enemies at Wounded Knee, and not railed against the Sodom beneath us, it would have been enough.
> If the Prophet had just railed against the Sodom beneath us, but not accepted the three golden gifts of the Founders, it would have been enough.
> If the Prophet had just accepted the three golden gifts of the Founders, and not prayed for our deliverance, it would have been enough.
> If the Prophet had only prayed for our deliverance, and not led us to this New Eden, it would have been enough.

> If the Prophet had just led us to this New Eden, and not purged the vipers of the Orient, it would have been enough.
> If the Prophet had just purged the vipers of the Orient, but not suffered the sacrifice of his beloved, it would have been enough.
> If the Prophet had just suffered the sacrifice of his beloved, but not expelled the Vox Populi, it would have been enough!

To explain the exact content of the sermon would take too much time and space. It is enough to pinpoint the overt religious language used in the sermon, connecting the biography of the prophet Comstock to the foundation of Columbia. The structure of Witting's prayer strongly resembles that of the Jewish *Dayenu* prayer, said by pious Jews during Pesach (Gonen 2005), to praise the deeds of God freeing the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery and leading them to the Promised Land. Ken Levine, the developer of *Infinite* was raised in the Jewish faith in New York (Mello-Klein 2018), and *Infinite* was released on March 25, 2013, the first day of the Jewish Passover that same year.

In the church, in three stained glass windows, and later outside the church, in three larger-than-life statues, the three Founding Fathers of the United States – Fathers George Washington (1732–1799), Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) and Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) – are depicted and worshiped as the 'Three Saintly Founders'. They can be recognized by their attributes, in the manner of Roman Catholic saints: a sword, a key and a scroll, respectively. Abraham Lincoln (1861–1865) is, on the contrary, considered to be a devilish figure. Two times he is visually contrasted with George Washington, leading the Unionist and the Confederation armies, respectively. Washington is depicted as wearing a white robe and a golden halo around his head as tokens of his sainthood, while Lincoln is drawn with devilish horns, red eyes and a tail.

The reason Lincoln is called 'the Great Apostate' is because of his abolishment of slavery in the United States. Here, *Infinite*'s religion criticism gets into second gear. First, it criticizes the exalted position Americans are so fond of believing they hold and the uneasy alliance between Christian faith and (a certain interpretation of) America's history. Now, *Infinite* shifts to the issue of, again religiously inspired, slavery and xenophobia. Comstock's church of Columbia is namely incredibly racist.

When the player has finally entered Columbia, one of the first things he is asked to do is partake in a public raffle, as a part of a fancy fair. The bowl containing all the numbers is brought on stage by a beautiful young lady, introduced by the announcer as 'the prettiest young *white* girl in all of Columbia'. Booker DeWitt wins with lucky number 77 and is presented with his 'prize'.: he is allowed to throw the first baseball at a young interracial couple, tied together on stage, surrounded with carbon-carved monkeys. The crowd sings – fairly out of tune – the traditional *Wedding March*. The announcer provokes DeWitt to throw the 'first stone', saying, 'Are you gonna throw or are you taking your coffee black these days?'

Whatever the player decides to do – throw at the couple, throw at the announcer or do nothing – the crowd turns hostile toward DeWitt.

The economy of Columbia is based on racial politics: the majority of hard labor is done by peoples of color, including Africans, Asians and Irish men and women. These laborers are tolerated but must preferably not be seen or heard: they are located in the lower depths of the city, like a giant model of the location of the different social classes in the television series *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971–1975). Through political propaganda found around Columbia it becomes perfectly clear that this kind of semi-slavery is inspired by traditional American politics combined with religious notions.

One giant mural in Columbia depicts George Washington, holding the Liberty Bell from Philadelphia and the two stones with the Ten Commandments in his hands, thus combining political and religious authority. Different slogans can be seen: 'For God and country', 'For Faith', 'For Purity' and 'It is our holy duty to guard against the foreign hordes'. What is meant by the 'foreign hordes' is made perfectly clear: we see caricatural, stereotypical depictions of native Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, Jews, Indians and Irish.

The combination between Christianity and slavery, invoked by *Infinite*, is a very uncomfortable one. Far too long, Christian theologians and ministers used Bible and Tradition to sanction the existence of slavery as 'God's will', usually referring to 'the Curse of Ham' from Genesis 9,20–27. In this chapter, Ham, one of Noah's three sons, is cursed by his father or, rather, Ham's son, Canaan, is cursed by his grandfather. The transgression seems to be that Ham is the only son who saw Noah's drunken nakedness. The curse involves Canaan being the slave of his two uncles, Shem and Japheth:

> When Noah sobered up and learned what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Canaan is cursed! He will be the lowest of slaves to his relatives." He also said, "Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave. May God make room for Japheth; may God live in Shem's tents, and may Canaan serve him".

While probably the curse of Canaan was primarily a literary device to prelude and sanction the later domination of the Israelites over the Canaanites, in Christian tradition, the 'curse of Ham' has been interpreted as a theological justification of discrimination against black (and other colored) people (Goldenberg 2004). During and before the American Civil War, both defenders and opponents of slavery quoted scripture to one another to prove that their own stance was backed up by divine commandment (Snay 1997; Ericson 2001).

The bigotry, xenophobia and racism of Columbia's ruling class produce – how could it be otherwise – an uprising. Led by Daisy Fitzroy, the *Vox Populi* (Latin for 'the voice of the people') try to take over Columbia

by any means necessary, violence not excluded. When DeWitt has secured a zeppelin, he is overtaken by the *Vox* and beaten unconscious. When he awakes, he looks out of the zeppelin. Under him he sees black slaves, dressed up as inmates, carving stones (not unlike prisoners in the old cowboy movies). They sing in the typical manner of the slaves of the plantations while being monitored by machine-human hybrids. Then, Daisy addresses DeWitt, who insists he is 'not looking for a fight':

> There's already a fight, DeWitt. Only question is, whose side are you on? Comstock is the god of the white man, the rich man, the pitiless man. But if you believe in common folk, then join the Vox. If you believe in the righteous folk, then join the Vox.

The religion criticism of *Infinite* – that religion in general, but specifically American Civil religion is used to promote and procure intolerance – has been criticized in its own turn (Pérez-Latorre et al. 2017; Wysocki 2018). The portrayal of evangelical Christendom is deemed biased and incomplete: the Bible, the cross and Jesus, just to name a few central Christian notions, are not in the game. People were offended by the supposedly anti-Christian message of *Infinite*. An anonymous designer and member of Ken Levine's team wanted to quit his job working on *Bioshock Infinite*, because, in Levine's own words, it 'offended him so much' (Petite 2013a). The designer was offended specifically by the religious identity of Comstock, triggering Levine into altering the characteristics of his prime antagonist significantly (Petite 2013b).

The figure of Zachary Comstock, by the way, is probably based on the historical Anthony Comstock (1844–1915) a US Postal Inspector and politician dedicated to eradicating everything 'immoral' from society, especially obscene images and language and birth control information. His methods were grim and drove several of his victims to suicide, a cause for pride for Anthony (Beisel 1998).

Another famous example is the 'Malmberg case'. In 2013, a Christian video game player by the name of Breen Malmberg asked and (allegedly) received a refund from game platform Valve for his copy of the game *Bioshock Infinite*. Malmberg's letter to Valve is quoted on *Kotaku* (Hernandez 2013):

> I wish to return/exchange this game [Bioshock Infinite] for steam credit or refund on the grounds that I cannot play it. [. . .] At the very beginning of the game there is a section of the game that is so offensive to my religious beliefs that I cannot proceed with it any further. [. . .] The player is forced to make a choice which amounts to extreme blasphemy in my religion (Christianity) in order to proceed any further – and am therefore forced (in good conscience) to quit playing and not able to experience approx. 99% of the content in the game.

Malmberg allegedly got his refund. Nevertheless, in spite of its apparent flaws, *Infinite* rightly points out the risk of religion turning into an instrument of oppression, excluding those who are not 'pure' or 'holy' enough to participate fully in church and society and delivering various powerful but ultimately corrupt and sanctified justifications for this exclusion.

g. Digital iconoclasm. Internalizing the religion critique

The first instinct of a gaming theologian, Christian gamer or scholar of religion in general, could very well be a defensive one or, at least, a sharply nuanced one. The religion criticisms in the *Assassin's Creed* series, *The Rise of the Tomb Raider*, *The Binding of Isaac*, *Nier: Automata* and *Bioshock Infinite* could easily be disqualified as one-dimensional, stereotypical depictions of lived religion, delivered from an outsider's perspective. One could even argue that the core of Christianity is distorted by these games and replaced by corruption, intolerance, madness and blind obedience.

One step further, one could argue that the game developers have culturally appropriated Christian tradition. However, identifying Christendom as a 'cultural minority group' would mirror a blatant underestimation of the actual cultural impact of Christianity, as I have argued in the introduction to this volume. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Christian faithful, who actively participate in Christian communal life, attend services regularly and so forth, the critical reinterpretation of 'their' Christian heritage by the game developers could spark some justified anger: this is ours, not yours, to take.

At the same time, 'religion' has to take the criticism seriously or, rather, the adherents of the different institutionalized religions should. As the Indian philosopher and politician Sarveplalli Radhakrishnan (1993:40) argued,

> [t]he intolerance of narrow monotheism is written in letters of blood across the history of man from the time when first the tribes of Israel burst into the land of Canaan. The worshippers of the one jealous God are egged on to aggressive wars against people of alien [beliefs and cultures]. They invoke divine sanction for the cruelties inflicted on the conquered. The spirit of old Israel is inherited by Christianity and Islam, and it might not be unreasonable to suggest that it would have been better for Western civilization if Greece had moulded it on this question rather than Palestine.

It would be easy to dismiss Radhakrishan's criticism by pointing out the fact that also Hinduism, although a polytheistic religion, like that of ancient Greece, is prone to religious and ethnic violence (Wilkinson 2004; Brass 2003). Rather, the Indian philosopher points rightly to the

numerous times monotheistic religion, in general, and Christianity, in particular, has been unfaithful to its own religious core: forced conversions, pogroms, hate against homosexuals, justification of slavery and torture, support for imperialistic expeditions, discrimination of females, fraud, sexual abuse—the list is endless. Church officials have manipulated the faith of the masses for their own good and goals. Christians have been encouraged to push aside their own conscience in favor of blind obedience to 'God's will'. Christians have fought wars against one another, not infrequently also because of dogmatic disputes between the groups.

When confronted with this amount of criticism, however one-dimensional but still justified, theologians and the faithful are likely to use some coping mechanisms, that may be practical but do not intellectually withstand further criticism. The first strategy to counter the accusation of the connection between religion and violence, is that the faithful can just ignore the problem in the first place: this kind of believer is not prepared to discuss the problematic features of his or her own religious tradition. However, within an intellectual and public discussion of religion, society and violence, such a strategy alienates the faithful and theologians from the same society they wish to interact with.

The second strategy is to exclude the religious and violent individual. When confronted with violence within one's own religious community, the perpetrator is verbally stripped of his religious identity, through which the deeds of the excluded no longer entail responsibility for his 'former' religious group. The disadvantage of such a strategy is dual: it robs the perpetrator of his self-declared religious identity, and – even more important – it suggests that 'the evil' has been eradicated. All the same, the religiously inspired perpetrator may have been excluded from the religious community, but the inspiration for the violence still exists somewhere in the community.

There is, in my opinion, a third strategy that is theologically much more fruitful: the incorporation of the (atheist) religion criticisms. I try to demonstrate this by applying the term *digital iconoclasm* to the religion criticisms in video games. Technically, iconoclasm is 'the destruction of and/or suspicion against physical representations of the divine, the sacred, the transcendent' (Asselt et al. 2007). Historically, the term is strongly linked to either the Byzantine Iconoclasms, from 726 to 787 and from 814 to 842 (Brubaker 2012) or the *Beeldenstorm* (statue storm) from the early Protestant Reformation between 1522 and 1566 (Freedberg 1988).

However, in the context of this chapter, I want to look at iconoclasm as a broader tendency in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and hence within the Christian tradition in the West, starting with the 'source' of almost all the theological controversy surrounding the depiction of the divine in Judaism and Christianity, Exodus 20,3–5:

> You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. . .

The use of such images is strictly forbidden within biblical law. Deuteronomy 4,15–19; 5,6–10; Exodus 20,23; Leviticus 19,4; 26,1; and Joshua 24,18–23 all echo this divine commandment (Curtis 2008). In the Hebrew Bible, multiple verses can be found in which the destruction of such images is promised or commanded by God (Ezekiel 6,6; 1 Kings 15,12; 2 Kings 18,4; Daniel 11,8; Hosea 9,6; Micha 1,7; Nahum 1,14; 2 Samuel 5,21; Isaiah 2,20; and Zechariah 13,2). Jeremiah 5,47 states,

> Therefore behold, days are coming / When I will punish the idols of Babylon; / And her whole land will be put to shame / And all her slain will fall in her midst.

The interpretation of this prohibition is, however, not clear. Are all images of creatures forbidden, with no exceptions? While different iconoclastic groups throughout Christian history have claimed so, the Hebrew Bible does not condemn artistic expression. Moses made a bronze image of a snake (Numbers 21,9). Images of Cherubim (Exodus 26,1; 31,1; 1 Kings 6,23–28; 2 Chronicles 3,7) and other pieces of representational art (1 Kings 7,25.29.36; Jeremiah 52,20) were used around the tabernacle and in the temple, seemingly without any theological problems (Curtis 2008).

Another interpretation of the Exodus prohibition is that no images of creatures shall be constructed *to worship*, leaving all other forms of representational art allowed. As the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East were used to worshiping their gods in the form of images and statues of humans and animals, the prohibition of Exodus would mean a sharp contrast between Israel's religion and that of its neighbors, but it does not mean the abolishment of images altogether (Dohmen 2004:106–113).

Now, to return to my proposal on 'digital iconoclasm', I would suggest that the worshiping of 'graven images', which Exodus 20 forbids, is not reserved for physical objects only. Mental images of God are just as problematic. Over two millennia, the Christian tradition has collected very many intertwined theological concepts, philosophical theories, biblical interpretations, rules and regulations about God, the world and our place in it. Just as the Israelites, impatient for Moses's return, fashioned the golden calf to worship, it is certainly not without possibility that within this two-thousand-year tradition, Christians have started to worship their ideas and concepts of God instead of God himself. By worshiping our theological and religious concepts, we have begun to worship

ourselves instead of God. The idols that have to be smashed are not in the outside physical world but within ourselves. That is why so many theologians, including Augustine, Barth (Mahlmann 2010) and Küng (1992), have called for an ever-developing, ever-reforming church, *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*. Time and time again, theologians, ministers and the faithful are called on to destroy their conceptual graven images of God to make room for spiritual renewal.

In ideal circumstances, this conceptual iconoclasm stems from the religious community itself, but more than once the impulse for reformation has come from outside the community. And when iconoclastic criticism comes from outside, the Church's reaction is not always one of thanksgiving. As the International Theological Commission in 2011 summarizes,

> [o]ne might think, for instance, of the discovery of historicity, and of movements such as the Enlightenment and the French revolution (with its ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity), movements for emancipation and for the promotion of women's rights, movements for peace and justice, liberation and democratisation, and the ecological movement. The ambivalence of human history has led the Church at times in the past to be overly cautious about such movements, to see only the threats they may contain to Christian doctrine and faith, and to neglect their significance.

The religion criticism of video games can be interpreted as a new form of iconoclasm, an opportunity for reformation of and within the Christian churches. The games I have used in this chapter urge Christians to look inward, renew their faith and get rid of their idols, either in psychical or mental form. *Assassin's Creed* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* urge the faithful to be very attentive to situations in which faith turns into uncritical acceptance of what religious authorities claim to be the truth. *The binding of Isaac* warns the faithful that for too long, and still today, Christians have closed their eyes to all kinds of abusive situations, inside and outside the church, neglecting to intervene on all kinds of different grounds. *Nier Automata* lets believers understand that faith not only is a powerful vehicle to search for life and goodness but can also be harnessed to induce blindness and madness. *Bioshock Infinite* and *Far Cry 5* show the Christian world how faith can deteriorate into a system of oppression and discrimination, instead of being a universal message of freedom and salvation.

Religion criticism in video games can have great theological value if the faithful let themselves be inspired to critically examine their own collective and individual behavior and history. The smashing of the religious idols in video games may not be a bad thing after all.

Primary bibliography

Assassin's Creed, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 2, 2009. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 30, Xbox One, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 4. Black Flag, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, WiiU) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Brotherhood, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Origins, 2017. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Revelations, 2011. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Rogue, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Sofia, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Syndicate, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Quebec, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Unity, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, WiiU, New Nintendo 3DS, OSX, iOS) Nicalis, Nicalis.
Bioshock Infinite, 2013. (PC, PlayStation, Xbox 360, OSX, Linux) Irrational Games, 2K Games.
Borderlands, 2009/2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Borderlands 2, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Nvidia Shield, Linux) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Borderlands. The Pre-sequel, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Nvidia Shield, Linux) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Fallout 3, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Fallout 4, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Far Cry 2, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Far Cry 4, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Far Cry 5, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Nier: Automata, 2017/2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) PlatinumGames, Square Enix.
Rise of the Tomb Raider, 2015/2016/2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linux) Crystal Dynamics, Square Enix/Microsoft Studios.
Wolfenstein. Spear of Destiny, 1992. (PC) id Software, FormGen.

Secondary bibliography

Alexander, A., 1832. *The evidences of the Christian religion*. Sixth enlarged edition. New York: Jonathan Leavitt.

Alexander, P., 1992. The fall into knowledge. The garden of Eden/paradise in Gnostic literature. In: P. Morris and D. Sawyer, eds., *A walk in the garden. Biblical, iconographical and literary images of Eden*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Allen, G., 2000. *Intertextuality*. London: Routledge.

Asselt, W. van, Geest, P. van, Müller, D., and Salemink, T., 2007. Introduction. In: idem, eds., *Iconoclasm and iconoclash. Struggle for religious identity*. Leiden: Brill.

Bahrdt, K., 1784. *Ausführung des Plans Und Zwecks Jesu*. Berlin: August Mylius.

Baigent, M., 2006. *The Jesus Papers. Exposing the greatest cover-up in history*. San Francisco: Harper.

Baigent, M., Leigh, R., and Lincoln, H., 1982. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Barber, R., 2004. *The holy grail. Imagination and belief*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bellah, R., 1967. Civil religion in America. *Daedalus Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96.

Biesel, N., 1998. *Imperiled innocents. Anthony Comstock and family reproduction in Victorian America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bosman, F., 2014. 'The Lamb of Comstock'. Dystopia and Religion in Video Games. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5.

Bosman, F., 2016a. The poor carpenter. Reinterpretating Christian mythology in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Gamenvironments* 4.

Bosman, F., 2016b. Nothing is true, everything is permitted. The portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's creed game series. *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 10.

Bosman, F., 2017. Accept your baptism, and die! Redemption, death and baptism in Bioshock Infinite. *Gamenvironments* 6.

Bosman, F., 2018. Requiescat in Pace. Initiation and assassination rituals in the Assassin's Creed game series. *Religion* 9(5).

Bosman, F., and van Wieringen, A., 2018. 'I have faith in Thee, Lord'. Criticism of religion and child abuse in the video game the binding of Isaac. *Religions* 9(4).

Brass, P., 2003. *The production of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Broek, R., van den, 2006. Gnosticism I: Gnostic religion. In: W. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western esotericism*. Leiden: Brill.

Brown, D., 2003. *The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Doubleday.

Brubaker, L., 2012. *Inventing Byzantine iconoclasm*. London: Bristol Classical Press.

Chester, A., 2007. *Messiah and exaltation. Jewish messianic and visionary traditions and New Testament Christology*. Tübbingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Curtis, E., 2008. Graven images. In: D. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Yale Bible dictionary*. London: Yale University Press.

Damon, P. et al., 1989. Radiocarbon dating of the Shroud of Turin. *Nature* 337.

Dawkins, R., 2006. *The God delusion*. London: Black Swan.

Dennett, D., 2006. *Breaking the spell. Religion as a natural phenomenon*. New York: Viking.

Dohmen, C., 2004. *Exodus 19–40*. Freiburg: Herder.

Ericson, D., 2001. *The debate over slavery. Antislavery and proslavery liberalism in antebellum America*. New York: New York University Press.
Freedberg, D., 1988. *Iconoclasm and painting in the revolt of the Netherlands. 1566–1609*. New York: Garland.
Goldenberg, D., 2004. *The curse of Ham. Race and slavery in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Gonen, J., 2005. *Yahweh versus Yahweh. The enigma of Jewish history*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
Goodrick-Clarke, N., 2002. *Black sun. Aryan cults, esoteric Nazism and the politics of identity*. New York: New York University Press.
Green, H., 2018. Far Cry 5 offers no insight into Christian fundamentalism. *Paste*. Available from: www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2018/04/far-cry-5-offers-no-insight-into-christian-fundame.html [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Habermas, G., 1996. *The Historical Jesus. Ancient evidence for the Life of Christ*. Joplin: College Press Publishers.
Harris, S., 2004. *The end of faith. Religion, terror, and the future of reason*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
Hernandez, P., 2013. Some don't like Bioshock's forced baptism. Enough to ask for a refund. *Kotaku*. Available from: http://kotaku.com/some-dont-like-bioshocks-forced-baptism-enough-to-as-473178476 [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Hitchens, C., 2007. *God is not great. How religion poisons everything*. New York: Twelve.
Hollingsworth, M., 2014. *The Borgias. History's most notorious dynasty*. London: Quercus.
Holmes, J., 2011. How a killer Christian shmup roguelike came to steam. *Destructoid*. Available from: www.destructoid.com/how-a-killer-christian-shmup-roguelike-came-to-steam-206601.phtml [Accessed 13 February 2018].
International Theological Commission, 2011. *Theology today. Perspectives, principles and criteria*. Available from: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Jackson, R., 2014. *Bioshock. Decision, forced choice and propaganda*. Lanham: John Hunt Publishing.
Jagielski, R., 2011. The Binding of Isaac. Interview with Team Meat's Edmund McMillen. *Venturebeat*. Available from: https://venturebeat.com/community/2011/09/02/interview-with-teammeats-edmund-mcmillen.
Jankunas, G., 2011. *The dictatorship of relativism. Pope Benedict XVI's response*. New York: St Pauls/Alba House.
John Paul II, 1998. *Fides et Ratio*. Available from: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Jordan, J., 2006. *Pascal's Wager. Pragmatic arguments and belief in God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kain, E., 2013. 'Bioshock Infinite' refunded on religious grounds. *Forbes*. Available from: www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2013/04/17/bioshockinfinite-refunded-on-religious-grounds [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Kissling, P., 2004. *Genesis: Volume 1*, Joplin: College Press.
Küng, H., 1992. *The Church*. Translated by R. Ockenden and R. Ockenden. London: Burns & Oats. 130.

Lenzen, V., 2003. Das Opfer von Abraham, Isaak und Sara. Genesis 22 im rabbinischen Judentum. *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 30.

Liberman, M., 2012. The third life of American exceptionalism. *LanguageLog*. Available from: http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3798 [Accessed 13 February 2018].

Madsen, D., 1998. *American exceptionalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Mahlmann, T., 2010. 'Ecclesia semper reformanda'. Eine historische Aufarbeitung. Neue Bearbeitung. In: T. Johansson, R. Kolb, and J. Steiger, eds., *Hermeneutica Sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

McGrath, 2005. *Dawkins' God. Genes, memes, and the meaning of life*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

McGrath, A., and McGrath, J., 2007. *The Dawkins delusion? Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine*. Downers Grove: IVP Books.

McMillen, E., 2012. Postmortem: McMillen and Himsl's The Binding of Isaac. *Gamasutra*. Available from: www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/182380/postmortem_mcmillen_and_himsls_. php [Accessed 13 February 2018].

Mello-Klein, C., 2018. Bioshock's Jewish roots run deep. *Kotaku*. Available from: https://kotaku.com/bioshocks-jewish-roots-run-deep-1827482206 [Accessed 13 February 2018].

Mullaney, B., 2013. *The greatest art form. Video games and the evolution of artistic expression*. Cork: Bookbaby.

Pascal, B., 2011[1670]. *Pensées*. Introduced and translated by A. Krailsheimer. London: Folio Society.

Paulus, H., 1802. *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament*. Bonn: Lübeck.

Pérez-Latorre, Ó., and Oliva, M., 2017. Video Games, Dystopia, and Neoliberalism. The Case of BioShock Infinite. *Games and Culture*.

Petite, O., 2013a. BioShock Infinite artist almost resigned over game's depiction of religion. *PCGamer*. Available from: www.pcgamer.com/bioshock-infinite-artist-almost-resigned-over-antagonists-religious-views/ [Accessed 13 February 2018].

Petite, O., 2013b. BioShock Infinite character 'highly altered' after talks with religious irrational members. *PCGamer*. Available from: www.pcgamer.com/bioshock-infinite-character-changed-religion/ [Accessed 13 February 2018].

Prokofieff, S., 2016. *The spiritual origins of Eastern Europe and the future mysteries of the Holy Grail*. Great Barrington: East Sussex Temple Lodge Press.

Radhakrishnan, S., 1993. *The Hindu view of life*. New Delhi: Indus.

Ravenscroft, T., 1972. *The spear of destiny. The occult power behind the spear which pierced the side of Christ*. London: Neville Spearman.

Roberts, T., 2018. Examining Far Cry 5's cult of Christian caricatures. *Relevant Magazine*. Available from: https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/videogames/examining-far-cry-5s-cult-christian-caricatures/ [Accessed 13 February 2018].

Rosano, M., 2003. John Winthrop, John Cotton, and Nathaniel Niles. The basic principles of Puritan political thought. In: B.-P. Forst and J. Sikkenga, eds., *History of American political thought*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Ruse, M., 2009. Why I think the New Atheists are a bloody disaster. *Beliefnet*. Available from: www.beliefnet.com/columnists/scienceandthesacred/2009/08/why-i-think-the-new-atheists-are-a-bloody-disaster.html [Accessed 9 May 2018].

Schonfield, H., 1965. *The passover plot. New light on the history of Jesus*. B. Geis Associates: New York.
Schrier, V., and Schleif, C., 2009. The holy lance as late twentieth century subcultural icon. In: K. Tomaselli and D. Scott, eds., *Cultural icons*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
Schwartz, R., 1997. *The curse of Cain. The violent legacy of monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Schweitzer, A., 1906. *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*. Tübingen: Mohr.
Scott, M., 1992. *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
Seed, J., 2017. *The book of Joseph*. Montreal: Ubisoft. Available from: https://octochan.tumblr.com/tagged/The-Book-Of-Joseph [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Smith, E., 2011. New details on TeamMeat designer's new game. *IGN*. Available from: www.ign.com/articles/2011/07/12/new-details-on-team-meat-designers-new-game [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Snay, M., 1997. *Gospel of disunion. Religion and separatism in the Antebellum South*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
Snow, R., 2003. *Deadly cults. The crimes of true believers*. Westport: Praeger.
Stefanov, P., 2009. The lion and the leopard in the Bible. *Journal of iconographic studies* 2.
Stenger, V., 2008. *God. The failed hypothesis. How science shows that God does not exist*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
Stenger, V., 2014. *The new atheism. Taking a stand for science and reason*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
Strauss, D., 1840. *Das Leben Jesu*. Tübingen: C.F. Osiander.
Thiering, B., 1992. *Jesus the Man*. London: Doubleday.
Twelftree, G., 1999. *Jesus the miracle worker. A historical & theological study*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
Ubisoft, 2018. *Far Cry 5 x Mondo Collector's Edition*. Available from: https://far-cry.ubisoft.com/game/en-gb/news/detail.aspx?c=tcm:154-318602-16&ct=tcm:154-76770-32 [Accessed 13 February 2018].
Umoren, G., 2006. *The salvation of the remnant in Isaiah 11:11–12. An exegesis of a prophecy of hope and its relevance today*. Dissertation, Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas.
van Wieringen, A., 1995. The Reader in Genesis 22:1–19. Textsyntax – Textsemantics – Textpragmatics. *Estudios Bíblicos* 53.
Westermann, C., 1981. *Genesis*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
Wilkinson, S., 2004. *Votes and violence. Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Woodson, L., 2014. *The legend of Kitezh in Russian literature*. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin.
Wysocki, J., 2018. Critique with limits. The construction of American religion in Bioshock Infinite. *Religions* 9(5).
Zimmer, B., 2013. Did Stalin really coin 'American Exceptionalism'? *Slate*. Available from: www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2013/09/27/american_exceptionalism_neither_joseph_stalin_nor_alexis_de_tocqueville.html [Accessed 13 February 2018].

Conclusion

A systematic theology of video games

In the last two hundred or so pages, I have tried to demonstrate that religion has its rightful place within the modern-day video game medium, especially Christianity within the Western video games. Religion can be found in five different shapes (material, referential, reflexive, ritual and meta), both positively as favorably reflecting on Christian traditions and negatively as delivering some one-dimensional but nevertheless well-deserved criticism on religion, especially in its institutionalized form.

We have seen a complete reimagining of the Christian tradition in the *Assassin's Creed* series, as well as discussions on the existence of evil *vis-à-vis* an almighty and benevolent God in *Wolfenstein. New Order/Old Blood*, *Metro Last Light* and *Assassin's Creed Rogue*. We have witnessed thought-provoking reflections on the human condition in *The Turing Test*, *The Talos Principle* and *Nier: Automata*, in which disobedience emerged as a surprising new virtue, contrasted with the traditional explanation of the story of the Fall of Man in Christian tradition.

We have discussed the religion criticism of *The Binding of Isaac*, problematizing the supposed connection between (institutionalized) religion and (child) abuse but slowly changing its color into a far more interesting discussion on the psychological consequences for children of their parents' divorce. We have seen super wicked moral problems in the *Mass Effect* series and *Fallout 3*, followed the death narratives of *ZombiU* and the *Borderlands* series, the theomorphic gamer of *Godus*, and the Christophoric player of *Child of Light*.

Now it is time to return to my two initial hypotheses concerning the theological status of games as *loci theologici*, and my rather provocative suggestion that games could be interpreted as religious acts in their own right.

a. Video games as *loci theologici*

The first hypothesis made at the beginning of this volume was about video games being genuine *loci theologici*. As explained in detail (first in the Introduction, but more thoroughly in Chapter 1), a *locus theologicus*,

in my view at least, involves a cultural object – like for example a song, film or dance performance – in which God reveals Himself to us as Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker and in which this divine revelational act is reflected on in one way or another.

In this volume, we have seen multiple examples of this. In 'god games' like *Godus* or *Black & White 2*, the player is encouraged to 'act out' his creational mission to be a creator like the Creator himself (Chapter 3). This 'theomorphic quality' of every human being can be seen in all creative endeavors of the individual and the human collective, but in video gaming the notion of *created co-creator* is found in a new, profound way. Because of the necessary interactive nature of the medium itself, the player quite literally mirrors the work of his creator. The god gamer, as *imago Dei*, is an explicit theomorphic entity, not only living up to his or her initial call to be a created co-creator but also doing so in a most explanatory way, by virtually becoming who he or she essentially is.

In extension, the same applies to the developer of the god games: by creating the game they do not only answer to their own creational calling of creating-like-the-Creator, but they enable others, the players, to do the same. The developer is imitating, mimicking and merging this own creative work with that of God, that is, the creation of hidden potentials and possibilities to be used by those who have the creativity to utilize them. Of course, game developers and gamers do not create *ex nihilo* but from the undiscovered potentials hidden within the fabric of creation itself. Like God, the god-gamer builds his or her own Secondary World, a reflection of the first one, as an actualization of human potential *par excellence*.

In other cases, the player adopts a more Christophoric role, a role mirroring Christ himself (Chapter 4). In games like *Singularity*, *Fallout 3*, *Metro Last Light* and, especially, *Child of Light*, the game not only narratologically follows the lines of the self-sacrificial hero or 'messiah' as laid out in our collective memory but also enables the player to reenact, and thus actualize, the Son's salvational acts, whenever they are life-offering, enemy-forgiving or dying, descending and resurrecting.

In other instances, we have seen games presenting and reflecting on other great theological themes. The question of the human condition, for example, where games like *The Talos Principle* and *The Turing Test* reflect on the key characteristics that make us human: creativity, morality, freedom and disobedience (Chapter 5). Using material from Christian tradition, those games not only suggest – quite provocatively – that disobedience (against programming or divine rule) could be the one point identifying something as truly human but also shed new light upon the relationship between humans and artificial intelligences as between creator and created, mirroring our relationship with the divine Creator.

Other games explicitly discuss the difficulty of believing in an almighty and benevolent God when we are confronted with many pains, horrors

and suffering in the world, far away and closer to home (Chapter 6). Games like *Wolfenstein New Order*, *Assassin's Creed Rogue* and *Metro Last Light* dismiss the traditional Augustinian or Irenaean theodicies (that try to excuse God or evil, respectively) in favor of a more, though highly implicit, process or cruciform one, focusing on nearness and compassion.

Also, those games ask intriguing questions about answering the *unde malum* question, even when God is taken out of the equation as is done in our postmodern times. The death of God and the destruction of every and all transcendent realities do not mean that evil is eradicated from our life or that we have found a rationale for its existence. The Christophoric gamer, embodying the nearness and compassion of Christ, is the postmodern in-game answer to this theodicy.

Again, other games reflect on morality (Chapter 7) or the death of the player's avatar (Chapter 8), while not directly so closely linked to creation or salvation, still contribute some very intriguing insights concerning theological questions. The impossibility of solving some wicked moral issues in a satisfactory way stimulates the player to reflect upon the moral grounds of his own existence. And the combination between the ludological concept of 'player's death' and the narratological embedding, invoke new reflections on the concepts of sin and redemption.

Therefore, I find it reasonable to confirm the quality of video games as *loci theologici*, as 'finding places' of faith and theology, of reflection and criticism, about the hidden God of our Western world.

b. Video gaming as a religious act

The second hypothesis of this volume concerns the identification of the act of playing video games as a religious one, comparable with more established, traditional ones like praying, contemplating or going on a pilgrimage. We have encountered gaming as a religious act in multiple ways in this volume:

First, we have gaming as a religious act in the sense of **acting religiously** in games, either provoked by the developers, like in the case of the forced baptism in *Bioshock Infinite* (Chapter 4), or spontaneously as in the unofficial ceasefire in *Fortnite*, when players decided to hold a 'sacred truce' enabling them to watch a onetime in-game event (Chapter 2). This kind of 'religious gaming' coincides with the fourth shape of religion in video games, as I have defined in Chapter 2, the 'ritual shape' of religion in games, in which the players act in a way traditionally associated with the religious domain.

Second, gaming as a religious act can also mean gaming as a **religious ritual** in itself. This coincides partly with the fourth and the fifth shape of religion in games, the ritual and the meta shape. This form of religious gaming is when the player experiences his or her playing acts as imbued with ritual characteristics: the player separates a certain amount of time

from that for all other activities; he or she experiences the gaming as something pleasant and fulfilling; there is a special place in the house is reserved for playing; special equipment is required, as is a certain mindset; the act of gaming is repeated frequently; and so forth. However, this is not what I have intended to argue.

Third, and this is what I am aiming for in this volume, video gaming can be regarded as a **religious act** in itself. This form coincides with the fifth shape of religion in games, which occurs when the experience of gaming itself is identified as religious, by developers, gamers and/or scholars. In the introduction of this volume I use two definitions of a 'religious act', one by Taliaferro (2010), indicating that such an act is the 'repeatable symbolic action involving God', and one by Scheler (1954), who argues that such an act transcends the world, brings an experience of fulfillment, and is connected to a divine entity 'bending down' to the individual who is acting.

In the case of video games, I wish to argue that a selection of video games can be interpreted as a religious act in the sense of Taliaferro and Scheler, although using different phrasing. I discuss four arguments. Two are centered on the game, the other two on the gamer: (a) the necessary interactive nature of the medium itself, (b) the played games bear witness to God's self-revelation, (c) the players represent God in the game-world and (d) the players merge their own acts into the divine economy of salvation.

Gaming can be conceived and interpreted as a religious act because a video game requires the involvement of the player at a qualitatively higher level than do films or novels of their respective viewers and readers. In a sense, films and novels can exist without the adherence or even existence of the viewer and the reader, while games cannot function at all without the active involvement (input) of the player, who has to combine both his or her cognitive and physical facilities to interact with the world the game provides.

The philosophical consequence of the insight of the necessity of the player's active involvement in the act of playing is that the 'unfolding' of the game, both from ludological and narratological perspectives is the sole responsibility of the actual player, of course, within the confines or parameters built into the game by the developers. The player activates the game's potentials within the game by his or her input, decides the exact sequence of events, makes moral choices and chooses his or her path to walk through the game.

In theological terms, this player agency also means that the religious content of the game, in whatever shape it is delivered, is also actively connected to the player. As we saw in *Bioshock Infinite*, *The Talos Principle*, *Metro Last Light* or *Fallout 3*, it is not only in the game-world that the religious elements can be identified but also, and primarily, in the actions of the player him- or herself. The player *creates* the game by playing it,

as a co-creator together with the game's developers, being both actor and spectator at the same time. The same applies to the theological potentials of a given game: they are only actualized in and by the player's actions and decisions. This is what I have argued, in slightly different phrasing, in Chapters 3 and 4 on theomorphism and Christophorism.

If the theological potentials are necessarily realized in the actions of the game player, it is the player who bears witness to God's self-revelation in video games. He or she bears witness at two different levels. First, he bears witness to the material, referential, reflexive and (partly) ritual shapes of the complex of all religious references in any given game, created by the game's developers. Second, the player bears witness to God's self-revelation in his or her own in-game actions, as is the fifth shape of religion in games I have dubbed 'meta'. In the realization of his theomorphic and Christophoric quality, the player can understand his or her own part in the game's unfolding as being a 'proof' of that divine revelation.

This leads to the insight that the player is not only a witness to God's self-revelation but also an actualization of this revelation, that is, the presentation of God in the game-world. In the realization of his theomorphic and Christophoric qualities, the gamer postulates God Himself. When the player forgives his or her enemies (*Metro Last Light*), descends into the underworld (*Child of Light*) or sacrifices his own life for the benefit of humankind (*Fallout 3*, the *Mass Effect* series), the gamer is not only remembering God's redemptive actions within the economy of salvation, nor is it a mere reenactment of those actions as they have been interpreted within the history of Christianity, although remembrance and reenactment are certainly not absent.

The necessary active role of the gamer within the game together with his theomorphic and Christophoric quality, 'merges' the player's own in-game actions within the divine economy of salvation, contributing to God's self-revelation. He 'brings forth' God in his in-game actions in a human–divine cooperation. The gamer, in a sense, *becomes* God (apotheosis), not because the player *creates* God, or because the player is merely *mimicking* God's self-revelation, but because the player is actualizing his *imago Dei*. As Christ is the face of God for all humankind, so the gamer – in his or her theomorphic Christophoric capacity – is the face of God in the world of the game.

So, I wish to argue that the act of playing video games (not all, but many) can be interpreted as religious act. In this way, gaming becomes a repeatable symbolic action involving God, as Taliaferro describes, transcending the world of the game itself, presenting God-as-revelation, who is 'bending down', as Scheller argues, to the gamer himself. In this sense, this particular kind of gaming is not qualitatively different from other, 'established' religious acts such as praying, meditating, chanting or pilgrimaging.

c. The conscious player: sacramental play?

One important issue has to be dealt with before concluding this volume on video games as *loci theologici* and as religious acts: the issue of the conscious player, coinciding with Scheller's last characteristic of religious acts, that is, the experience of fulfillment in the one conducting the specific act itself. To summarize, does the player necessarily have to be aware of the theological significance of his or her gameplay and of his or her own theomorphic or Christophoric quality to 'make' the game a *locus theologicus* or – and even more pressing – the playing of the game a religious act? What if the player is absolutely unaware of everything I have mentioned in my monography until this point?

Of course, a quick answer could be that the experience of the game player is part of the player-centered approach in video games research (Chapter 2), and therefore beyond the scope of this volume. But this would be too quick an answer, an insult to the interested reader of this volume. Therefore, I want to argue in favor of the experience of fulfillment from a theological point of view, which will act as the *finale* to this monography and as a possible draft for future theological research into video games.

I argue that the player's 'religious consciousness' concerning the theological quality of his game playing is a preferable condition but not an exclusive one. The theological awareness of the player is an enrichment of the player's act of playing and a stimulus for existential reflection but not a necessity for the player to bear witness to God's self-revelation, his or her presenting of God in the game world, and/or his or her merging of his or her own gaming acts into the divine economy of salvation.

To argue this theologically, I turn to the realm of sacramental theology, and especially to what is known in Christian tradition as the Donatist controversy. Followers of the North African bishop Donatus Magus (+355), the 'Donatists' have a rigorous image within the Christian tradition. Confronted with numerous 'traitors', Christian ministers and faithful denouncing their faith under the Diocletian Persecutions (303–313), the Donatists insisted that the spiritual dignity, theological value and dogmatic validity of the Christina sacraments were closely knit/linked to the moral quality of the individual minister (Tilley 1997).

Within the history of Christian dogmatics, this discussion about the morality of the minister as a *conditione sine qua non* (or not) for the validity of a sacrament is known as the Donatist controversy. The two opposing sides of the conflict are frequently abbreviated as *ex opera operantis*, 'working from out of the worker', versus *ex opera operato*, 'working from out of the work' (McGrath 2011:406). The first position, the Donatist position, links minister and sacrament together in such a way that only the holiness of the minister can realize the sacrament's grace. The second position, that of orthodoxy since Augustine of Hippo, holds

that the sacrament is effective, apart from the spiritual state of the minister. The first position makes it impossible for a sinner, heretic or fraud to minister sacraments, while the second opposition allows for this.

If we use the Donatist controversy for our discussion on video games, we can establish the following. If the act of video gaming involves God and His self-revelation, as I have argued earlier, is the actualization of the involvement tied to the act of gaming itself or to the awareness of the gamer? I would argue that, while the second is preferable, the first is also true. Sacraments convey grace, strengthen faith, enhance unity (of the faithful community) and reassure us of God's promises towards us, as McGrath (2011:406–408) informs us.

At least three of those four functions of sacraments are to be found in video games, as I have argued. The playing of certain games conveys grace in the sense that they mediate the self-revelation of God. Those games, in a particular interpretation, enhance faith in the sense that they offer information about and stimulate reflection on the Christian tradition and faith. Especially the messianic hero and the matching (self-)identification of the gamer as Christophoric reminds the theological gamer of the promise of God never to abandon us to our fate. The function of strengthening the unity of the faithful is more problematic in the genre of single player games (as is focused on in this volume) but may have significance in the case of multiplayers. Here, a new field of inquiry is opened.

The fulfillment, as Scheler described in his definition of religious acts, is – therefore – possibly to be found in the realm of video games. The fulfillment is namely independent of the explicit consciousness of the player concerning the religious dimension of his or her playing acts. The games 'work', so to say, *ex opera operato*. Even if a player is totally unaware of the religious content of the game and of the theological scope of his or her playing itself, the merging of the gameplay and/in the divine economy of salvation will still happen. The game is still a *locus theologicus*, even if an actual player does not realize it being so. And the game is still a religious act, even if the player does not identify his or her playing as such.

Does this mean that I am suggesting that video games are – in fact – sacraments? Yes, and no. No, video games are not sacraments in the sense of the seven (or two) in the Roman Catholic (or Protestant) tradition(s): these are 'charged' with two thousand years of theological thought and liturgical practices that elevate them above all other religious acts and rituals, including video gaming. But, at the same time, maybe it can be argued that video games are semi-sacramental, or *sacramentalia* ('sacramentals' in English), as Augustine would call it (Chupungco 2000). As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) of the Second Vatican Council defines (#61),

> [t]hus, for well-disposed members of the faithful, the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals sanctifies almost every event in their lives; they are given access to the stream of divine grace which flows

> from the paschal mystery of the passion, death, the resurrection of Christ, the font from which all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power. There is hardly any proper use of material things which cannot thus be directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God.

Video games, especially in my interpretation, can very well fit into this category: they give access to grace since they transfer God's self-revelation; they are often inspired by the 'paschal mysteries' of Jesus's death and resurrection (like for example in *Child of Light*); they can be interpreted as sanctifying people (their players), and to be praising God.

Video games are sacramental to say the least, and operate with or without the player's awareness. They are new vehicles of God's self-revelation and grace, new and surprising ways to witness the hidden God of our postmodern world. God did not die; He has been hiding himself, waiting to be found by the gamer.

Happy gaming :-)

Primary bibliography

Assassin's Creed, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 2, 2009. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 30, Xbox One, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed 4. Black Flag, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, WiiU) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Brotherhood, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Origins, 2017. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Revelations, 2011. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Rogue, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Ubisoft Sofia, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Syndicate, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Quebec, Ubisoft.
Assassin's Creed Unity, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, WiiU, New Nintendo 3DS, OSX, iOS) Nicalis, Nicalis.
Black & White 2, 2005. (PC, OSX) Lionhead Studios, Electronic Arts/Feral Interactive.
Borderlands, 2009/2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, OSX) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Borderlands 2, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Nvidia Shield, Linux) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.

Borderlands. The Pre-sequel, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Nvidia Shield, Linux) Gearbox Software, 2K Games.
Child of Light, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii U) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.
Fallout 3, 2008. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks.
Fortnite, 2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, OSX) People can fly, Epic games.
Godus, 2014. (PC, OSX, iOS, Android, Fire OS) 22Cans, 22Cans.
Mass Effect, 2007. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts/ Microsoft Game Studios.
Mass Effect 2, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts.
Mass Effect 3, 2012. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU) Bioware, Electronic Arts.
Metro Last Light, 2013. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, OSX, Linus) 4A Games, Deep Silver.
Nier: Automata, 2017/2018. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) PlatinumGames, Square Enix.
Singularity, 2010. (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Raven Software, Activision.
The Talos Principle, 2014/2015/2017. (PC, Android, PlayStation 4, iOS) Croteam, Devolver Digital.
The Turing Test, 2016/2017. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) Bulkhead Interactive, Square Enix.
Wolfenstein. The New Order, 2014. (PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.
Wolfenstein. The Old Blood, 2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) MachineGames, Bethesda Softworks.
ZombiU, 2012/2015. (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, WiiU) Ubisoft Montpellier, Ubisoft.

Secondary bibliography

Chupungco, A., 2000. *Sacraments and sacramentals*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
McGrath, A., 2011. *Christian theology. An introduction*. Fifth edition. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
Scheler, M., 1954. *Vom Ewigen im Mensen. Gesammelte Werken*. Volume 5. Bern: Francke Verlag.
Taliaferro, C., 2010. Religious rites. In: C. Taliaferro and C. Meister, eds., *The Cambridge companion to Christian philosophical theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tilley, M., 1997. *The Bible in Christian North Africa. The Donatist world*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Index

This index includes the names of referenced authors, and video game titles, alongside some major theological themes discussed in the volume. Individual video games are grouped together under the name of their series, if applicable.