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Playing God: An Analysis of Video Game Religion

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Claremont McKenna College

Playing God: An Analysis of Video Game Religion

submitted to
Professor Gaston Espinosa

by
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To my friends, who held me accountable for all of my actions throughout my college experience; to my professors that put up with me in class; to my football coaches that kept my head on straight and pushed me to be the best I could on and off the field; to my advisor, thesis reader, long-time professor, and friend Gaston Espinosa, thank you for helping me make it through college; and to my family, who gave their unwavering support through the good times and the bad... here's to you.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction & Overview

Religion is associated with positive and negative stigmas. It can be used to build hope, serve as a means for teaching and instilling morals, forge communities around similar ideals, and provide answers to many of life's unanswered questions. On the other hand, it can contribute to backwards thinking, invoke fanaticism, and persecute those who have different ideas about God and social values. Despite its pitfalls, religion seems to have had a net positive gain on society. Why, then, are Americans shying away from organized religion in the 21st century?¹

Video games, on the other hand, are rapidly growing in popularity. But, video games have a negative stigma surrounding them, being seen as a leisure activity at best and an addiction at worst. This thesis examines the effect that religion has on video games, and how video games are a conduit for and similar to religion. It draws from both personal experience and academic study. Simply stated, I argue that video games provide many of the same experiences as religion. Digital games create a pseudo-religious community around a virtual world packed full of real religious symbols. This relationship

¹ See articles from the sites listed below for arguments pertaining to the decline of religion.

- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/12/christianity-faces-sharp-decline-as-americans-are-becoming-even-less-affiliated-with-religion/>
- <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>
- <http://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/christianity/another-study-confirms-christianity-is-fading-in-america>
- <http://www.rawstory.com/2015/05/teens-are-fleeing-religion-like-never-before-massive-new-study-exposes-religions-decline/>

may help to explain why some people in America (especially young adult white men) might be shying away from organized religion. It may also help to explain why recent national surveys indicate that, while a growing number of Americans are shying away from organized religion, the actual percentage of Americans that report being atheist (3.1 percent) still remains quite small.² Video games offer a liberating, virtual-community building and meaning-making out-of-body experience for those that whole-heartedly engage in them. The lore and backstory of some of the most popular games (*League of Legends*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *World of Warcraft*) are heavily influenced by all types of religion. In addition, and contrary to popular perception, a growing number of video games offer a global medium for instilling positive morals in society. As a result, video games become a religious placeholder or pseudo-religion for many of the most devoted gamers.

The Introduction begins by debunking the negative video game stigmas, then defining the term religion, including examples for non-religious entities that have religious qualities to them, and finally by arguing that some video games have a religious dimension to them and function like a religious placeholder system for many gamers. I will then reflect on both the larger and practical implications of this study and their findings. Chapter two provides a brief history of video games, and defines the various terminology and general ideas of what constitutes a game. Chapter three examines the religious dimension of gaming through various religious dialogue, lore and backstory, and symbology in three of the most popular games on the market: *League of Legends*

² Gregory Smith, et al. *America's Changing Religious Landscape*. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>.

(Riot Games, 2009), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), and the *Kingdom Hearts* series (Square Enix, 2002). Chapter four then lays out the similarities between religious and gaming systems and argues for the latter serving as a religious placeholder for the most devoted gamers. Chapter five addresses foreseeable critiques to my theory.

Debunking the Negative Video Game Stigma

For years, video games have been scrutinized by scholarly research, overprotective parents³, the National Rifle Association⁴, various media outlets, and a plethora of other social and political institutions.⁵ These people believe that video games have adverse effects on those who engage in them. Games have been berated as highly addictive, tying negative behavior in the fantasy world to risk taking behavior in the real world. Such behaviors include but are not limited to: substance abuse, reckless driving, gambling, risky sexual behavior⁶, and violence.⁷ According to some, gaming contributes to one or more of these negative behaviors.

If the aforementioned statements are true—that they directly or indirectly foster undesirable behavior, then video games should be considered harmful for society. Yet, many of the claims have been disproven. For example, the link between violent behavior and video games has been one of the longest lasting, and most fervent media arguments.

³ Christopher John Ferguson. "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: A Meta-analytic Review of Positive and Negative Effects of Violent Video Games." *Psychiatric Quarterly* 78, no. 4. 2007: 309-16. Doi: 10.1007/s11126-007-9056-9.

⁴ Ben Hallman. "NRA Blames 'Corrupt' Video Game Industry for Gun Violence." The Huffington Post. December 21, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/21/nra-video-games-gun-violence_n_2348219.html.

⁵ Ferguson. 309-16.

⁶ "Taking Risks in Video Games Tied with Real-Life Risks." Video Gaming Addiction: When Video Games Become More than Just Games. <http://www.video-game-addiction.org/video-game-addiction-articles/taking-risks-in-video-games-tied-with-real-life-risks-04380.htm>.

⁷ Hallman, "NRA Blames 'Corrupt' Video Game Industry for Gun Violence."

At best, scholars have only been able to link *aggressive* behavior to the playing of violent video games. There is insufficient evidence to prove whether playing video games leads to criminal activity or delinquency.⁸ In addition, many of these studies fail to examine the effects of playing video games on the development of the individual over a significant course of time, and need to be adjusted for publication bias. An overwhelming number of people play video games with numbers estimated as high as 98% during adolescence.⁹ A 2008 Pew Research study found that “97% of teens aged 12-17 play computer, web, portable, or console games.”¹⁰ The study also found that “game playing is also social, with most teens playing games with others at least some of the time and can incorporate many aspects of civic and political life.”¹¹ Therefore, it is difficult to tie broad-scale behavior of playing video games with direct criminal activity.

Games are being used practically to promote important health messages. For example, a player may encounter a poster while they are running through a building for an anti-smoking or anti-DUI campaign. Developers are intentionally including important moral and health messages, because of the widespread popularity of the games, and how they can positively affect society.¹² Deeming video games solely as adverse for society is *judging a book by its cover*. Video games offer a world of fantasy, where the player is

⁸ Mark Appelbaum. "Technical Report on the Review of the Violent Video Game Literature." *APA Review*, 2015. <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2015/08/technical-violent-games.pdf>.

⁹ Ferguson, 2.

¹⁰ Amanda Lenhart, et al. *Teens, Video Games, and Civics*. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008. http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2008/PIP_Teens_Games_and_Civics_Report_FINAL.pdf.pdf. i.

¹¹ Lenhart, et al. *Teens, Video Games, and Civics* Report Summary. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2008/09/16/teens-video-games-and-civics>.

¹² Heesun Wee. "The Messages Scientists Are Embedding in Video Games." *CNBC*. April 07, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/07/scientists-are-creating-video-games-with-health-psas.html>.

only limited by his or her imagination. Games like *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997) allow the player to run freely throughout the virtual town choosing to help people or wreak havoc amongst its citizens. Digital games examine political, social and religious issues in depth. Popular games like *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007)—the word creed clearly denoting a religious connotation—let the player go on an adventure through life in different eras, providing stylized experiences that resemble the lives of people during that time. In short, they expose students to not only historical facts about the past, but also the role that religion played in these past societies. In a way that one could never do in public society today, gamers (many of whom are not regularly attending religious services) are asked to suit up and join a religious or quasi-religious order or society to fight for good against evil. With the rapid growth of gaming in contemporary society, one can argue that video games are now a religious placeholder system and medium through which to explore religious symbols, messages, ancient texts and deities, and secret societies that they might not ever normally encounter in our (reportedly) increasingly secular society.

The newest and fastest growing “godly medium”¹³ in the world is video games. According to Video Game Scholar Liel Leibovitz, “the human construct with which video games have most in common isn’t television or literature or warfare but religion... It is a practice in rituals, ethics, moralities, and metaphysics.”¹⁴ He claims further that religion is like a video game:

As it sets out to order the world, religion must first face a host of questions pertaining to the relations between the world’s creator or creators and the creation, us meek mortals. Religion must explain just what that said creator demands, and decide whether it believes we have the right to refuse. And religion

¹³ Liel Leibovitz. *God in the Machine: Video Games as Spiritual Pursuit*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013. Kindle. Location 37.

¹⁴ Ibid.

does so, generally, by presenting us with a foundational story and a set of fundamental rules. The story explains the origins of the universe to us, its believers, and then dictates a list of expected behaviors: Don't eat pork. Take Communion. Pray five times a day. Hurt no living creature. Recite these texts each day, each week, each year. As further motivation, religion offers a set of rewards for compliance, as well as various punishments for different magnitudes of transgression. And religion is sufficiently layered so as to welcome into its fold a host of believers, each willing to accept some but rarely all of its strictures. Religion then, is exacting but modular, rule-based but tolerant of deviation, moved by metaphysical yearnings but governed by intricate, earthly designs. Religion is a game.¹⁵

And for many gamers, gaming is a religion. Video games occupy significant amounts of time for people, with that number ever-increasing as graphics get better, technology advances, stories and mythologies grow richer and more detailed, and imaginations grow wilder. In one moment, you could be soaring through the skies of a fantasy world on the back of a dragon with spiritual powers, and in the next you could be fighting the Dark Lord (i.e., Satan) for the fate of the world. They open up the realm of possibility, give spiritual fulfillment and explore the all-important question of: *what if?*

Religion Defined

Another important aspect of society that examines the “*what if*” question is religion. Because an organization can reap the benefits of being considered a religion (i.e. tax benefits), it is paramount for the US Government that religion be properly defined. However, it is difficult to create a universal definition for religion, because of how different one may be from another. Unlike the word “apple” or “table,” which have definitive characteristics, the idea of religion is more fluid around the world. Catherine L. Albanese outlines the four main components of a religion in her book *America Religions*

¹⁵ Ibid.

and Religion. In it, she says that religions provide the four Cs: creed, code, cultus, and community. Creeds are the “explanations about the meaning of human life”¹⁶, codes are the “rules that govern everyday behavior,”¹⁷ cultuses are the “rituals to act out the insights and understandings that are expressed in creeds and codes,”¹⁸ and communities are “groups of people either formally or informally bound together by the creed, code, and cultuses they share.”¹⁹ As I hope to show in this thesis, many of the most popular virtual worlds created through games around the world today provide all four of these dimensions, in various levels and to varying degrees.

A careful examination of the common Western Religious tradition, Christianity, will show that Albanese’s definition of religion is sound. Christianity believes in an afterlife of heaven and hell, follows the teachings in the Bible, which outline both rules for living one’s life, and rituals for prayer and social behavior. Finally, Christians are bound formally through their respective Churches, and informally through the commonalities they share with other Christians through their beliefs. Albanese’s theory is valid with respect to Christianity. If you were to apply her rules to other organized religions, you would find that it adequately A) defines that which you are defining as a religion, and B) explains the basic components of that which you are examining. Albanese’s theory is intentionally left broad to include non-traditional religious traditions.

¹⁶ Catherine L. Albanese. *America, Religions and Religion*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub., 1999. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Another important scholar of religion is Emile Durkheim. With respect to the topic and thesis that gaming functions as implicit religion, sociologists of religion like Durkheim are helpful because they argue that “religious phenomena emerge in any society when a separation is made between the sphere of the profane—the realm of everyday utilitarian activities—and the sphere of the sacred—the area that pertains to the numinous, the transcendental, the extraordinary.”²⁰ The separation of the sacred and the profane are what grant objects the sacred tag—without the distinguishing of the two, one could argue that anything holds intrinsic sacred value. Durkheim argued that objects are neither intrinsically sacred nor profane, and those statuses are given to them by the society around them.²¹ Video games can become sacred in their own right by intentionally incorporating religious symbols, traditions, beliefs, and social views, but have yet to become so because of the preconceived notion that video games are profane objects and gaming a profane practice. In reality, and this will become clearer in later chapters of this paper, for at least some of the most devoted gamers, video games hold sacred meaning within contemporary society.

Some might take issue with my thesis and claim that all of the religious paraphernalia creates nothing more than an authentic fake religion, something noted by scholars like David Chidester. He argues that an authentic fake is something not associated with a traditionally religious group or belief that nevertheless provides the

²⁰ Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, 2nd Ed., Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977: 136-139, Found in: "Emile Durkheim. *The Sociology of Religion*. Emile Durkheim - The Sociology of Religion. <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/undergraduate/introsoc/durkheim6.html>.

²¹ Ibid.

things religious groups and beliefs provide.²² It can contribute to the creation of religious placeholder systems that despite their similarities with religion are not really religious.

Religious Placeholders

While some theologians and religious studies experts may not consider a non-religious entity like Communism a religion, one could argue that they sometimes share many of the core components noted by Albanese that make up a religion, in part making them religious placeholders. There may be instances where communists have pictures of the leader of their respective country hanging in their house, or giant iconographic statues of the leader in public spaces (i.e., Stalin's Russia), much the same as a Christian family may have a picture of Jesus on the wall or a giant cross in a public space. They may follow a particular book like Mao's Red Book, as Muslims follow the Quran. They form communities in the same way that religions do, around similar ideas. Finally, there are required laws and rituals that people may have to engage with daily when under communist rule, that are functionally similar to religious rituals or laws. Despite the best effort of communist leaders to weed out religion, they ultimately failed; instead, Communism took the place of religion, as an anti-religious, religious placeholder. A religious placeholder is something typically thought of as a non-religious entity that takes the place of a religion, and may or may not become religious in and of itself. People follow Communism out of fear or loyalty to the state, and that non-willing aspect may take away from its overall "religiousness."

²² David Chidester. *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005. Vii.

Applying Albanese's definition of religion to Communism would make someone believe that Communism is a religion, because, as mentioned previously, it shares the same components with many religions. Why is it not a religion then? Like Communism and video games, religious placeholders fall short of being labelled religions. The obvious reason is a lack of widespread acceptance. It is as Durkheim believes: objects are granted sacred status when society accepts something as sacred. Ultimately, Western Religious Traditions like Judaism or Christianity have been around for significantly longer time than video games. As this thesis seeks to prove, video games contain all of the necessary prerequisites and components to become a religion; however, society does not recognize video games as religious as of yet.

Video Game Religion

Jason Anthony, a video game designer, "describes three particular kinds of religious games: (1) catechistic games that point toward the sacred or are situated in a sacred context but are not themselves sacred; (2) poimenic games in which the divine manifests itself through the game; and (3) praxic games where playing the game is itself a sacred activity."²³

The first point that I will make is that video games, like Communism, act as a religious placeholder system. They share many of the main components with religion as outlined by Albanese and kindly noted by Anthony. This point will be discussed further

²³ James Anthony, "God and Avatar," plenary lecture given at the Digital Religions conference at the University of Colorado, Boulder, January 14, 2012. Found in: Robert M Geraci. *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. Kindle. Location 115.

in the paper, but at a basic level, video games offer both in-game belief systems (that are sometimes adhered to by people in the real world), and create their own belief system surrounding the game. The belief systems in games, is sometimes less focused on, but there are definite parallels between the religions in the fantasy world and those in the real world. For example, in some games, the player's character is adorned with crosses or other notable religious symbols (i.e., the Buddhist Dharma Wheel, Sigil of Baphomet from Satanism, and Yin and Yang Taijitu) there is often a church or holy ground aspect, there exists a notion of good vs. evil, the player's character follows the mythic hero's journey archetype noted by Joseph Campbell, which is present in ancient Greek literature and religion, and the game often provides social, political, and religious commentary. There are video games that specifically push religious messages, (i.e., *Bible Adventures*, Wisdom Tree 1991) and there are ones with much more subtle meanings (*Halo Series*, Bungie 2001).

The games themselves create massive followings, and people come together in online sacred spaces. In the digital age, even traditional churches or synagogues have online services, or skype sessions for prayer. I know that in the Jewish Temple I attend, it streams the Friday night Shabbat services every week, and there are many other organized religions that are following the same trend in using online technology as a vehicle and conduit for religion. Thus, it is not uncommon for people to consider an online space as a sacred space, despite it being in a virtual environment.

Unlike Communism, however, video games offer a spiritual outlet for people who engage with them. Despite the claims of "seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century -- Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx,

and Sigmund Freud [who] all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society,”²⁴ this has not come to pass. The religious dimension of gaming may provide one clue as to why it hasn’t for the least religious segment of the U.S. population—young white males 18 – 31 years of age. A recent (2015) Pew Research Study of more than 35,000 U.S. adults found that “the percentages who say they believe in God, pray daily and regularly go to church or other religious services all have declined modestly in recent years.”²⁵ However, are they really becoming less religious? This thesis seeks to convince the reader that video games offer a spiritual outlet for those that engage with them and may help explain that while despite the alleged religious decline, the number of Americans reporting to be atheist and as having no religion or spirituality whatsoever still remains very modest – about 3.1 percent. People are not becoming less religious, rather, they are finding both entertainment and spiritual fulfillment in an everyday activity in video games and not through conventional institutions. Thus while commitment to institutional religious traditions has declined, not all who have chosen to opt out have opted out of religion and spirituality altogether, but rather found other non-conventional ways and means to meet their spiritual needs and Albanese’s four religious components.

According to the previously noted claims, the Secularization Theory, which states that as society progresses, religion will gradually begin to fade out, may be holding true for America. A Pew Research Study found that the number of atheists in America has

²⁴ Pippa Norris, and Ronald Inglehart. “The Secularization Debate” in *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/Sacred_and_Secular/Chapter_1.pdf.

²⁵ Smith, et al. *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious* Report Summary. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

doubled from 2007 to 2014 and that the average age of an atheist in America is 34 years old, and is usually an educated white male. The actual raw percentage, however, is still remarkably small (3.1%) given 100 years of rapid technological advancements in American society.²⁶ Coincidentally, the average age of a video gamer is 35 years old, and is usually a male that has been playing games for about 13 years.²⁷ This relationship may not be a coincidence. It may be that atheists, who claim to not believe in god or subscribe to an organized religion, are not necessarily non-spiritual, and find their spiritual fulfillment elsewhere. However, this claim is nearly impossible to defend, as a large scale study of atheist gamers would need to take place, and hasn't yet. However, the number of religiously affiliated "nones," those believing in some form of religion but not necessarily an organized one, is on the rise. According to my thesis, people do not need to engage in organized religion to fulfill their spiritual need; they obtain their spiritual requirement through engaging in video games packed full of spirituality. While organized religion may be on the downturn in America, religiosity and spirituality are still as fervent as ever; people obtain their spiritual needs through different mediums than those in the past.

Video games fashion online sacred-space communities for its followers based on a set of shared system of beliefs and rituals in the same way that a religion does; video games provide people a subconscious spiritual outlet. The reason that there is a decline in the number of people who subscribe to organized religion, especially in America may be because people fulfill their spiritual desires through religious placeholders in the form of

²⁶ Michael Lipka. "7 Facts about Atheists." Pew Research Center RSS. November 05, 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/05/7-facts-about-atheists/>.

²⁷ ESA. "The Entertainment Software Association." The Entertainment Software Association. <http://www.theesa.com/>.

video games. “Digital games are not a superficial phenomenon peculiar to an uncharacteristic cultural activity. Rather, digital games are an important site into the exploration of the intersection of religion and contemporary culture that help us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society.”²⁸

Why?

Finally, why is all of this important? There are several reasons for exploring this topic and linking video games to religions. First, video games are one of the largest and most global markets today. In 2014, the video game market was worth 15.1 billion U.S. dollars and is expected to reach 19.6 billion by 2019.²⁹ In comparison, the film industry in the United States, one of the largest and oldest entertainment markets, brought in 29.2 billion U.S. dollars in 2015.³⁰ Authoritarian Societies, such as China, even allow video games for its citizens. At any point in the day, someone from the United States can log on to a game, and start a dialogue via the in-game chat function with someone in France; the global possibilities are endless. As such, the lessons that the games teach, and the morals that they instill have a global impact. Video game companies are then responsible for teaching proper morals to the youths of the world, because no other aspect of society is as widespread as video games.

Video games have become one of the newest technological babysitters for the most recent generation of children. These children will not gain the same interpersonal

²⁸ Heidi A Campbell, and Gregory P. Grieve. *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*. Digital Games Studies. Indiana University Press, 2014. Kindle. Location 71.

²⁹ Statista: The Statistics Portal. "Value of the Video Game Market in the U.S. 2015 | Statistic." Statista. June 2015. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/246892/value-of-the-video-game-market-in-the-us/>.

³⁰ Statista: The Statistics Portal. "Filmed Entertainment Revenue in the U.S. 2016 | Statistic." Statista. June 2015. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/259984/filmed-entertainment-revenue-in-the-us/>.

experiences that previous generations have. Children used to play in the front yard, be allowed to roam the neighborhood, etc.; there was not much of a worry that anything would happen to them. Now, the fear-mongering that mass media instills into the society has created a sheltered generation of children, that are not allowed to play freely outside; put simply, there is a movement from the front to the back yard. Combine this with the advancements in technology (i.e. television, video games, computers, etc.) and there is no reason for kids to play outside. As such, future generations of children will miss out on the essential skills of problem solving in a group setting, creating rules and guidelines as a team, treating others fairly, etc. It then falls on these technological babysitters to instill these important teachings and morals, since the children are not getting them in full elsewhere.³¹

³¹ Lenore Skenazy. *Free-range Kids: Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had without Going Nuts with Worry*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Chapter 2:

What are Video Games?

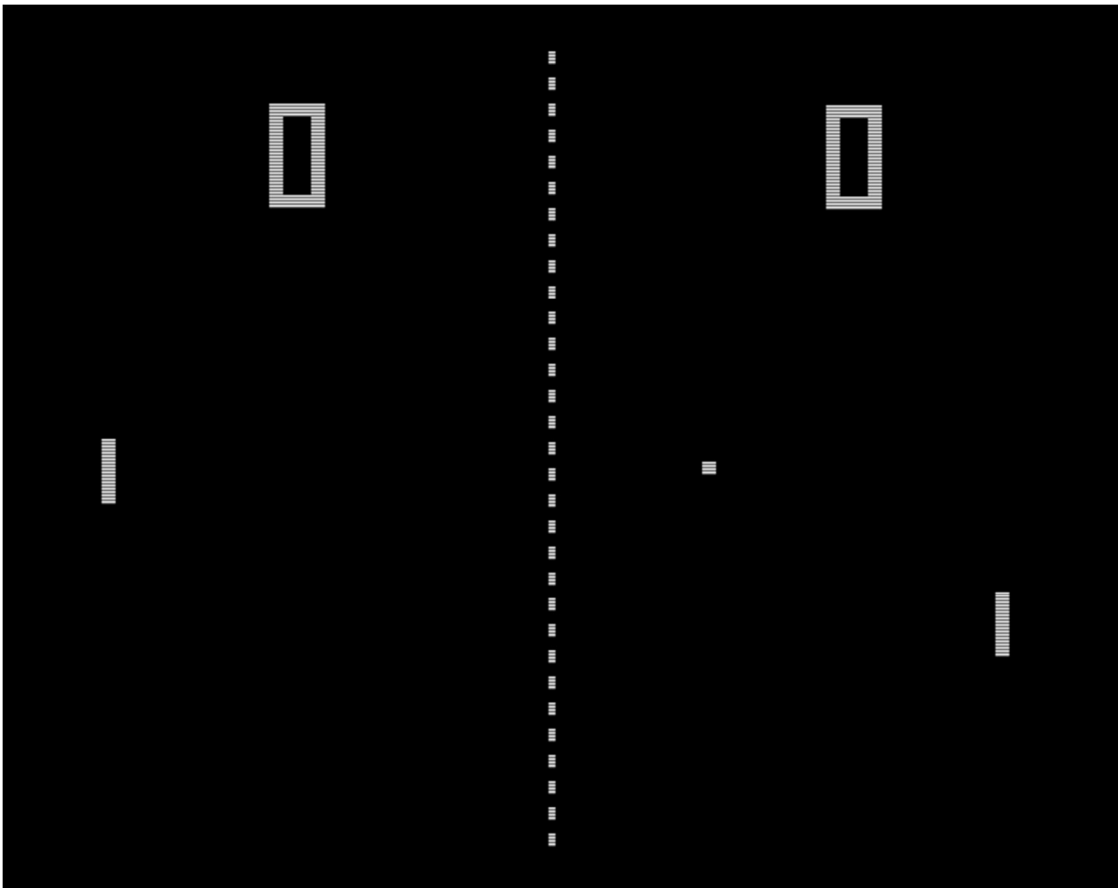
There are several different types of video games on the market today, including but not limited to: MOBAS (multiplayer online battle arenas), RPGS (role playing games), MMORPGS (massively multiplayer online role playing games), FPS (first person shooters), etc. But first and foremost, what are video games? A simple Google search brings up the definition: “a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a television screen or other display screen.”³²

Popular website, Wikipedia, describes video games as “an electronic game that involves human interaction with a user interface to generate visual feedback on a video device such as a TV screen or computer monitor.”³³

These definitions define video games in a physical sense. A set of stimulating images that are manipulated by the user via some form of computer program. Usually, there is a goal to be achieved by the image manipulation, and it revolves around a story. That is a very basic definition of video games. While this thesis seeks to argue that there is much more to video games than mere image manipulation, this chapter aims to provide insight into the history of video games, what are some of the different types of games, and explain important terminology to the reader that will be important in later arguments.

³² Google: “what are video games”

³³ "Video Games." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game.



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The above picture is a screenshot from the game Pong. Although not the original video game, Pong is likely the most famous of older games. It models tennis or ping-pong, featuring two paddles and a ball. Players earn points when your opponent misses the ball. The goal is to defeat your opponent by scoring ten points first. The game can be played with two human players, or one player against a computer controlled paddle. It was originally developed by Allan Alcorn and released in 1972 by Atari Corporations. Soon, Pong became a huge success, and became the first commercially successful game. In 1975, Atari released a home edition of Pong (the first version was played on Arcade

³⁴ "Pong: The Original Source of Video Game Bigotry - SuperNerdLand." SuperNerdLand. June 13, 2015. <https://supernerderland.com/pong-the-original-source-of-video-game-bigotry/>.

machines) which sold 150,000 units. Today, Pong is considered to be the game which started the video games industry, as it proved that the video gaming market can produce significant revenue.³⁵ Many of the early video games, like Pong, were devoid of religion. In fact, many of the games lacked detailed narratives and complex actions. The earliest of games were found in the arcade, and were extremely limited by the technology of the time, and presupposition that video games were a secular, leisure activity for children. When the market opened up for computer and more *complicated* console games, the narratives and actions of the characters became more complex, as the designers were not as limited by the technology.

Games became increasingly more detailed, moving from two to three dimensional. The stories became deeper and longer in duration, with morals and lessons to be learned from completing the game. Games eventually branched off from the single story path into games involving choices, which would influence how your character developed. In short, they became more human.

Now, the video game market is dominated by a few subcategories of games. For the sake of this paper, the important terminology for video games are as follows. The first game that will be examined is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, also known as action real-time strategy games. Unlike traditional real time strategy (RTS) games, MOBAs don't include unit construction and you only control a single character. They typically contain two separate teams of equal numbers of players fighting to destroy prebuilt structures that appear in the same spot each time you start a new game. Individual games last anywhere from 20 minutes to over an hour. The goal is to destroy

³⁵ "Pong Game." Pong Game. <http://www.ponggame.org/>.

the other team's structures and ultimately the opposing team's base. This is done by killing the opposing minions (computer controlled characters that are smaller and significantly weaker than the players), and opposing members of the other team. Destroying structures, killing minions and killing other players grant your character money, gold, or other types of in-game currency in order to buy items from your base. Items grant your character stats that make him or her better for fighting the enemy team, healing your team, or destroying enemy structures. Characters in these games usually have four pre-set skills or abilities that deal damage to the opposing team, heal team members, or grant additional stats to yourself or team members. The items, while not shown on your character, make their skills stronger, and the player is limited to a certain number of items (usually 6). After a game is completed, all progress from that game is wiped out, and if you choose to start a new game, you begin from the very beginning, like the previous one. The game is typically recorded in your match history. You can choose from a variety of playable characters, sometimes referred to as champions, all with unique skill sets. The amount of customization in MOBAs is rather limited, since all of the characters that you can play are premade.

This category of games is home to the most popular game in the world, *League of Legends*. League, or LOL as it is sometimes abbreviated, is owned by Riot Games. It has platforms available for players to engage in around the world. These Servers, as they are called, offer realms for players from their respective geographic area to engage in. For example, people who live in North America will play on the North American server, China has its own server, as does Korea, Oceania, etc. League is currently the most widely played game in the world, as seen in its large number of followers that actively

watch live streams of casual players, entertainers, and professional eSports athletes playing the game on sites like Twitch or Azubu. Professional *League of Legends* players exist all around the world. They form teams sponsored by large organizations like Coke, Intel and Nissan. They are granted professional sports visas by governments when visiting other nations to compete in tournaments. LOL is beginning to be recognized on famous sports television channels like ESPN. The annual world championship for *League of Legends*, which showcases the best talent from regions all around the world, is watched by millions of viewers from all over. The victors bring in cash prizes of hundreds of thousands of dollars. League is truly a global game that appeals to anyone from the casual gamer to the hardcore professional.

Another important category of games is the role playing game (RPG). This category of games controlled the market for a long stretch prior to the introduction and growth of online play. Still popular, RPGs are meant to be played by a single player and follow the story line of a character throughout the plot of the game. The story arch for these games are fairly similar and predictable: ordinary character becomes extraordinary, faces conflict, rises above conflict, and emerges victorious. These types of games will have more social or political commentary, or be more religiously driven than a MOBA. The focus of an RPG is the story, whereas MOBA is in the gameplay. Oftentimes, there is a system to level up your character, whereupon you unlock better items and/or skills upon achieving certain levels. Experience, which is used to level up, is gained from killing enemies or completing quests. These games typically offer hours of content, but may not have as much replay value as a MOBA—because of the strategy aspect that MOBAs offer, the player has a different experience every time he or she plays a new

game, whereas RPGs offer no new content when played through again. Players may or may not be given much customizability over their character; in the case of *Kingdom Hearts*, the RPG that will be examined in the following chapter, the user is not given the option of customizing the protagonist, Sora.

The *Kingdom Hearts* series, created by Square Enix in cooperation with Disney, incorporates characters from the Disney realm with characters from Square Enix games like Final Fantasy. While the gameplay is simple, sometimes being dubbed negatively as a “press X to win” type game³⁶, it incorporates magic and other stylized elements, that along with a cast of memorable characters, has created a series that lasted over a decade with the next installment of the series set to drop at the end of 2016. *Kingdom Hearts* takes place in Disney Worlds, where the player is in control of the protagonist, Sora, on his search for his friends in the ultimate fight between light and dark. Sora, embodying the ultimate light, wields the key blade, a sword-like weapon that is shaped like a giant key, and fights off the darkness in the form of Nobodies and Heartless. The lore of the game is extremely confusing; in the words of Ashley Reed, assistant editor at popular gaming article and magazine website GamesRadar, “this series is difficult to keep track of. With seven major releases on a variety of consoles, *Kingdom Hearts'* storyline has become so convoluted that even loyal fans have given up trying to make sense of it. You'd need an extensive series of graphs, diagrams, and red string to explain it all

³⁶ “Press X to win” games are berated for having simple gameplay, requiring minimal work to complete—the player needs only to press the X button to progress easily through the game. This is in comparison to a MOBA whereupon the player must decide when to use skills, where they should position their character and what items they should build, among other things.

properly.”³⁷ The important aspects of the story will be detailed further in the following chapter’s case study of *Kingdom Hearts*.

The final category of video game that will be examined is the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG). This is by far the most extensive game, taking the longest to develop, and requires regular maintenance of servers and gameplay updates. Unlike standalone RPG games, the MMORPG takes place in an online environment. The actions of players affect the actions of others. While there is some guidance as to what the player should be doing in the game, you are free to explore the world, fight monsters, go on quests, follow the main story line, fight other players, ride animals (known as mounts), farm, mine, and so much more at your own leisure. The MMORPG offers a level up system, in a similar way to RPGs. Experience is gained from killing monsters or performing various other tasks (i.e., mining and farming). The MMORPG typically offers a storyline for the player to follow that, like RPGs, provides commentary about social, political, and religious issues. It also explores the notion of good vs evil, but will blend the notion in ways that may challenge assumptions of the player.

Arguably, the most famous game that belongs to this field is the ever-popular, *World of Warcraft*. Created in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment, WOW, as it is sometimes abbreviated, was a continuation and fourth installment of the *Warcraft* series created by Blizzard in 1994. From there, WOW became a standalone game, where the player was given more choice in their actions, and the world grew ever-more expansive. Since its

³⁷ Ashley Reed. "Kingdom Hearts History - One of Gaming's Most Complicated Stories Explained." Gamesradar. December 3, 2014. <http://www.gamesradar.com/kingdom-hearts-explained/>.

original release in 2004, *World of Warcraft* has gone through five different expansion packs, with the sixth set to drop on August 30, 2016. Each expansion offered more content and religious and mythological lore, expanded the world, brought about new characters for the player to play, and much more. Upon logging onto WOW for the first time, a player will be prompted to create a character. This game offers various customizable features to your character: you may play as the Horde or the Alliance, which are the two groups of player bases that are pitted against one another, but sometimes work together to conquer a greater evil and NPCs (non-player character). After deciding which side you wish to be on, you are prompted to choose the race of your character. The Horde offers: Orcs, Taurens (Minotaur), Undead (less bloodthirsty, stylized zombie-skeletons), Blood Elves (lighter skinned, pointy eared, magical humans with glowing eyes), Trolls, and Goblins. The Alliance offers: Human, Dwarf, Gnome, Worgen (Werewolves), Night Elf (blue skinned rather than light skinned like Blood Elves), and the Draenei, which are nearly impossible to explain, but look like aliens with tentacle beards and horse legs (which are surprisingly the race most adherent to faith in the game). The final race in the game is Pandaren, and may be played on either the Alliance or Horde side.



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After choosing a race and that particular character's physical features, the player is prompted to choose a class. There are currently eleven playable classes, with one more set to be introduced in the next game expansion. A brief description of each is as follows: the warrior is a typical physical damage dealer or damage absorber wielding some combination of swords and/or shields. The paladin is similar to a warrior, except it wields the power of the light. It is played with either a sword and shield or a two handed weapon. It can absorb damage for your team, deal massive damage with both the sword and light power, or can focus on healing its teammates with light power. The hunter is a ranged damage dealer wielding a bow or gun. The Rogue is an assassin wielding daggers and using the element of surprise. The priest uses faith based magic, or Holy Power, to

³⁸ Character images courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment. Pictures found on: <http://www.gamerevolution.com/news/upcoming-world-of-warcraft-patch-will-make-all-races-free-14663> and <http://warcraftlooks.blogspot.com/2012/02/case-for-plump-pandaren-females.html>
 Races from left to right. First Row: Tauren (Male, Female), Orc (M, F), Troll (M, F), Undead (F, M), Blood Elf (F, M), and Goblin (M, F). Second Row: Draenei (M, F), Dwarf (M, F), Night Elf (M, F), Human (M, F), Gnome (M, F), and Worgen (F, M). Third Row: Pandaren (M, F).

heal or deal damage. The Death Knight is a sword wielding class that harnesses dark magic to deal or absorb massive damage. Mages and warlocks are ranged magic damage dealers that differ in their uses of magic: mages deal in fire, ice or arcane, while warlocks channel demonic energy. Shamans are the spiritual leaders of their tribes, and can heal, deal ranged magic or melee magic and physical damage. Monks are physical melee range damage dealers, damage absorbers or healers. The final current playable class, Druids, are nature loving shapeshifters. They can do anything that the aforementioned classes can (heal, take and deal mixed damage) via their shapeshifting abilities.

There is a massive amount of detail put into just the customization of the character in the game. Upon entering the game, the player is placed into the respective village of his/her race (male and female playable races), and follows the main story path, which acts as a tutorial of sorts for the player. After completing many of the basic beginner missions, a travesty strikes (that differs by race and village), and the player must leave home to go out and become a hero and save the world... or farm for herbs, whatever he/she wants to do. Many of these story lines follow Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey story arc and weave religious symbols, themes, archetypes and teachings throughout their stories and often by mixing multiple religious traditions or mythological strands.

Chapter 3:

The Religion in Video Games

Introduction

Religion exists inside games. The plots of games are fueled by religious stories, offering the player good moral decision making via positive reinforcement of in-game benefits for your character (i.e. gaining an ally by helping them rather than ignoring them) and a good overall message, creating a more immersive experience for the user. They explore the notion of good vs. evil and work towards bettering the digital character and inadvertently, the human player. Digital games offer out of body experiences, whereupon the player will not realize that he or she spent 7 hours in a world of fantasy. Players become their character through various means such as cosplay (literally embodying their characters by wearing what they wear and acting how they act), fan-fiction writing, or drawing their characters. There exists numerous religious symbols, both apparent, in the form of churches and holy grounds or crosses, and hidden in the form of discrete messages and commentary about current events, direct parallels between religious icons and video game characters, and so much more. Important to note before embarking on the following case studies is the assumption that religious experiences are more meaningful than nonreligious ones, because of the grander scale that it falls on. It is thus, more meaningful and more desirable to have an experience similar to a religious one within video games. The following Case Studies are for the three major video games,

League of Legends, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *World of Warcraft*. Throughout the studies, you will find various parallels between the games and religion.

Case Study: *League of Legends*

Recently, a picture surfaced on the internet from the security camera footage of an internet café in an unknown Chinese city. The picture seems to show an elderly woman making an offering to a large, life-like statue of a character, Garen, in the popular video game, *League of Legends*. Garen may be based off “of traditional portrayals of the Chinese deity Guan Yu (known also as Guandi or Lord Guan), a deified hero from the Three Kingdoms period.” While Garen may not resemble Guan Yu in the traditional sense of red face and long flowing beard, historical figures are often depicted in different ways. For example, Jesus is most often shown with a white face and long black hair, but in other depictions, he has dark skin, short hair or other non-traditional features. Regardless, the woman was no doubt making an offering to the statue. While it isn’t unnatural to pray to ancient figures like Guan Yu in China, it may seem odd to most who know that the statue is actually Garen from *League of Legends*.



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The picture brings to light many questions, but most importantly, did the woman in the picture know that she was making an offering to a video game character, or did she simply mistake the statue for an ancient Chinese deity? Either way, the fact that something of this nature occurred says a lot about religion and video games: video games are either inspired by religion and religious figures, or they create real world religion that people actually adhere to.

The link between the historical depictions of Guan Yu and the playstyle of the character Garen are undeniable. As seen in *League of Legends* for Garen, and as told in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* for Guan Yu, both Garen and Guan Yu seem to

³⁹ Natasha L Mikles. "Why Are Chinese Grandmothers Giving Offerings to Video Game Characters? And Why Does the Internet Think It's Funny?" Bulletin for the Study of Religion. April 11, 2016. <http://bulletin.equinoxpub.com/2016/04/why-are-chinese-grandmothers-giving-offerings-to-video-game-characters-and-why-does-the-internet-think-its-funny/>.

share many common characteristics. They both embody a large leader, carrying a massive weapon and charge headstrong into battle. Garen's playstyle matches the description of Guan Yu on the battle field. Garen charges into the enemy team at high speed and hits them with his sword before swinging it around in circles to deal damage. He also has the ability to take a lot of damage before being critically injured.⁴⁰ Guan Yu would charge into the enemy lines and take the life of the enemy general or other important enemy commanders while emerging seemingly unscathed. Guan Yu is described as having rugged features, in the same way that Garen has. Guan Yu is typically depicted as having a large beard and red face, while Garen lacks those features.⁴¹

First, let's assume that the lady in question was unaware that the statue to which she was presenting offerings was of a video game character; that she mistakenly believed the statue to be Guan Yu. There is then a clear religiously driven character design in creating Garen. It is hardly a coincidence that Garen and Guan Yu share such similar characteristics; the character model had to be based on the depiction of the Chinese religious icon. This proves the point that character design, and on a broader scale, game design, is deeply embedded in religion. On the other hand, assuming that the lady was consciously praying to a video game character provides implications for what will be further flushed out in the following chapter. Essentially, this character has spiritual value for her, and the game an online sacred space, which also becomes a real life sacred space when statues are erected of the characters in games. Thus, the video game has a mythical,

⁴⁰ Riot Games. "Garen." *League of Legends*. <http://gameinfo.na.leagueoflegends.com/en/game-info/champions/garen/>.

⁴¹ "Romance of the Three Kingdoms." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_of_the_Three_Kingdoms.

religious value to the woman in the form of an implicit religion or religious placeholder. Either way, for some gamers there is a clear religious connection between the religion and the video game.

There are a myriad of other playable characters in *League of Legends* that either directly or indirectly personify religious or mythological creatures from modern and ancient religions. A few of the more obvious characters include Kayle and Morgana, Cassiopeia, Renekton and Nasus, Malzahar, Ahri, Thresh and Zilean.

Kayle is the embodiment of the archangel Michael and the fallen angel Morgana is Lucifer. Kayle's lore can be found on the *League of Legends* homepage. While it is more detailed, the important aspect that links her to Michael are seen in the first part of her backstory:

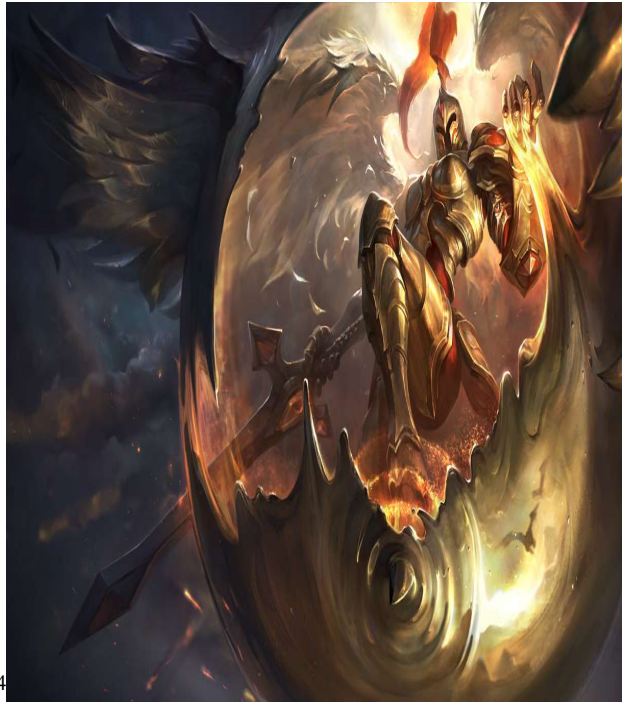
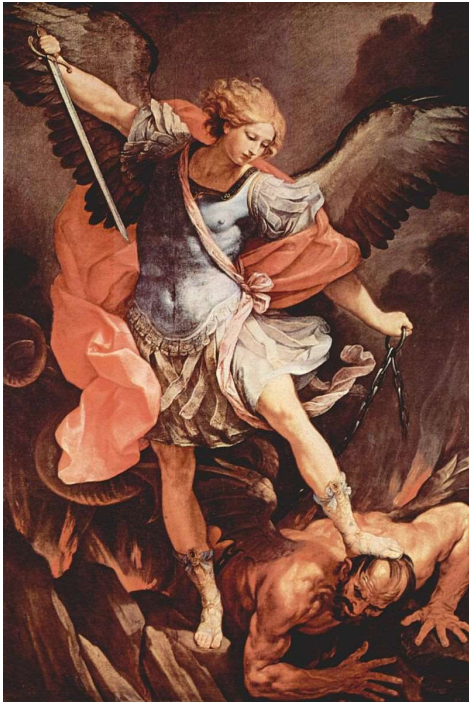
In a world far away where an ancient war still rages, Kayle was a great hero - the strongest of an immortal race committed to destroying evil wherever it could be found. For ten thousand years, Kayle fought tirelessly for her people, wielding her flaming sword forged before time itself. She shielded her delicate features beneath her enchanted armor, the sole remaining masterpiece of an extinct race of craftsmen. Though a beautiful, striking creature, Kayle, now as then, avoids showing her face; war has taken a terrible toll upon her spirit. In her quest for victory, she sometimes would try to lift the wicked up from their morass of evil, but more than often she instead purged those she herself deemed beyond redemption. To Kayle, justice can so often be an ugly thing.⁴²

In comparison, Michael is characterized as "God's top angel, leading all of the angels in heaven. Michael's main characteristics are exceptional strength and courage. Michael fights for good to prevail over evil and empowers believers to set their faith in God on fire with passion. He protects and defends people who love God."⁴³ In addition,

⁴² Riot Games. "Kayle." *League of Legends*. <http://gameinfo.na.leagueoflegends.com/en/game-info/champions/kayle/>.

⁴³ Whitney Hopler. "Meet Archangel Michael, Leader of All Angels." About.com Religion & Spirituality. December 6, 2015. <http://angels.about.com/od/SearchAngelsMiracles/p/Meet-Archangel-Michael.htm>.

careful examination of Kayle's art reveals her physical resemblance to the archangel Michael.



The above image on the left is Reni Guido's *The Archangel Michael Defeating Satan*. On the right is Kayle's splash art from Riot Games' character page. Both Kayle and Michael share similar angelic characteristics. First, both Kayle and Michael wield swords; Michael's sword is sometimes depicted as being on fire, and one of Kayle's abilities in game ignites her sword to deal extra damage to enemies. They both possess wings that grant them flight (although flight is not worth much gameplay wise in League). While Michael is a male and Kayle is a female, Michael is often depicted, as seen above, with a soft, feminine face. Kayle also has a skin, a different purchasable

⁴⁴ Guido Reni. *The Archangel Michael Defeating Satan*. 1635. Private Collection.
<http://www.wikiart.org/en/guido-reni/the-archangel-michael-defeating-satan-1635>.

⁴⁵ Riot Games. "Kayle."

appearance for the character, which shows her with her helmet off. Her hair and face in the “Unmasked Kayle” skin⁴⁶ appear similar to Michael’s in Guido’s painting.

Both Kayle and Michael are members of immortal races, Michael being one of God’s angels, and Kayle being of an unknown race that appears very angelic in nature, as evidenced by the aforementioned physical similarities between the two. Like Michael, Kayle engages in the tireless battle of good vs. evil. Her rival, Morgana, is loosely related to Lucifer. Like Lucifer, Morgana was branded a fallen member of her ancient tribe and fights tirelessly against Kayle with her dark magic. The connection between Christianity and League is apparent in the connection between Lucifer and Michael, and Kayle and Morgana.

League of Legends takes from other religions and mythologies. From a physical standpoint, many characters embody ancient mythological creatures or beings from Greek, Egyptian, Oriental, and Asian mythologies, religions and legends and lore. Some quick observations include: the character Cassiopeia has a strong connection to Medusa in Greek mythology; both are human and snake featured with the ability to turn enemies into stone when looked at. Alistar clearly resembles a Minotaur from Greek mythology. Nasus embodies Anubis and Renekton is Sobek in ancient Egyptian mythology. Malzahar appears to be based off a Djinn from oriental lore. And Ahri is based off the Korean legend of the Kumiho, a nine-tailed fox that has the ability to transform into a beautiful woman that seduces people. Ahri has nine-tails and also is a beautiful character in game

⁴⁶ Riot Games. "Kayle."

and has an ability that literally seduces people into walking towards her whereby they are unable to perform other actions for a short amount of time.⁴⁷

There is clear religious inspiration for the game *League of Legends*. Not only is character lore immersed in traditional religions, as in the example of Kayle, but there are a wide variety of inspirations for different characters, from distinct locations and time periods. League has grown to be so inspirational, that people may actually pray to the characters in the game, as seen in the picture at the beginning of the study.⁴⁸

Case Study: *Kingdom Hearts*

For over a decade, millions of fans have been captivated by the mythology and lore behind the *Kingdom Hearts* series. This magical universe is filled with nostalgic recollections of classic Square Enix (Final Fantasy series) and Disney characters, forming new stories and adventures. The series echoes general themes of light and dark, good and evil, and religious themes of the trinity, and the heart and soul. *Kingdom Hearts*, while sometimes creating confusion for the player, has created a large and loyal fan base eager to engage in the next installment in the series; players are desperate for the next game to come out so that they may understand the events of each game and reveal the story behind each character. The series invests a lot into its story, weaving a confusing and

⁴⁷ Observations were made in an online forum on the *League of Legends* website by a person under the in-game name *Draqson*. All information can be found here:

<http://forums.euw.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=587822>

⁴⁸ Mikles. "Why Are Chinese Grandmothers Giving Offerings to Video Game Characters? And Why Does the Internet Think It's Funny?"

continuous narrative thread over seven installments, with the next one (*Kingdom Hearts 3*) set to drop in December of 2016.⁴⁹

The first important aspect of *Kingdom Hearts* is the notion of the heart. Hearts in the games are not the physical organ that exists in the body, but rather the embodiment of people's souls. Hearts contain light and darkness, in a yin and yang relationship; light and dark are not meant to necessarily embody good and evil, respectively. Rather, the characters within the series that fight for light are represented as good, while those that fight on the side of darkness are considered evil. The games make use of beings that represent the darkness, known as Heartless and Nobodies. Heartless are primal beings that either act in random acts of violence, or obey the orders of someone who controls the darkness; they are created when someone's soul is overrun by darkness. People who have a particularly strong will that are turned into a Heartless will leave their body behind; this empty shell creates a being known as a Nobody. Nobodies are incapable of feeling emotion, since they are an empty vessel lacking a soul, but they do preserve the memories from their previous life. Unlike the Heartless, Nobodies are intelligent and sometimes even retain their human appearance. Nobodies are drawn to beings that have hearts, for they wish to once again have one of their own. A particularly strong and smart group of Nobodies banded together to form Organization 13. Their goal is to gather hearts in order to make Kingdom Hearts full again; they hope that it will give them their hearts and original forms back so that they may become human again. However, they go

⁴⁹ *Timeline: Kingdom Hearts*. Produced by Michael Damiani. By Michael Damiani and Marco Rosado. Narrated By: Brandon Jones. YouTube. September 30, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xm-NoyqzGkY>. Kingdom Hearts series produced by Square Enix.

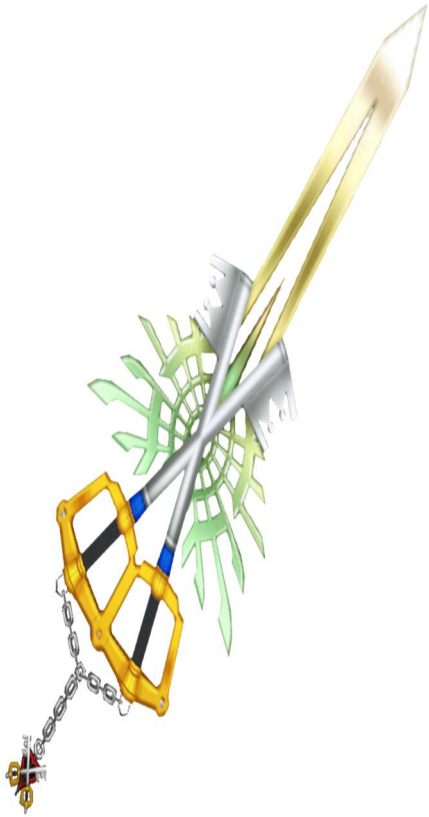
about doing so in an expedited and rather evil way: putting worlds into danger by introducing Heartless to wreak havoc, knowing that Sora and other keyblade wielders will slay the Heartless. When a keyblade wielder kills a Heartless, that heart is returned to Kingdom Hearts. Additionally, the members of Organization 13 wear black cloaks, for which the game reveals protect them from the darkness, insinuating that the members of the order are not necessarily evil or dark themselves, despite their actions.⁵⁰

These few points offer plenty of religious commentary. First, *Kingdom Hearts* addresses the notion of life, death, the soul, and what happens when you die. In the games, the heart passes on from the body and joins Kingdom Hearts, which is the “metaphysical galactic repository for all hearts that have passed on, both from people and worlds.”⁵¹ Clearly a tie to Christianity, the heart in KH is what Christians view as the soul, and the metaphysical galactic repository, Kingdom Hearts, is heaven. Keyblade warriors, like the player’s character Sora, are pseudo-grim reapers. Rather than being seen as harbingers of death, they instead fight to vanquish the powers of darkness and return wayward hearts/souls to Kingdom Hearts. Since an infinite amount of knowledge is stored inside of Kingdom Hearts, people began looking for ways to access it. This seeking of infinite knowledge led to the Keyblade War, an apocalyptic war fought by keyblade wielders over the *X-Blade* (chi-blade, pronounced key-blade), the key to opening and accessing Kingdom Hearts. The Keyblade War took place prior to any across the seven playable games and left the universe, which was originally only one

⁵⁰ As explained in a YouTube video *The Entire Story of Kingdom Hearts in Under 20 Minutes* by a person under the YouTube name “Frustrated Jacob.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99hSFcl5LK4> Square Enix. *Kingdom Hearts* Series.

⁵¹ Ibid.

world, fragmented and engulfed in darkness. The war and resulting aftermath resemble the apocalypse and end-times as explained in the book of Revelation in the Bible, whereupon the earth will be destroyed and taken over by demons from hell. According to the games, it was the light that remained in children throughout the universe that brought the worlds out of the darkness. The world was split into several worlds, each inhabited by Disney characters from different movies. The *X-Blade* is forged when equal and opposite forces of light and darkness collide. It is similar in both appearance and characteristics to the Keys of Heaven, which represent papal authority and the ability to access Heaven.



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⁵² Square Enix. "X-Blade." Found in Kingdom Hearts Wiki. [http://www.khwiki.com/File:X-blade_\(Complete\)_KHBBS.png](http://www.khwiki.com/File:X-blade_(Complete)_KHBBS.png).

⁵³ *Coat of Arms of the Holy See*. Found in "Keys of Heaven." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keys_of_Heaven.

The physical similarities between the *X-Blade* in KH, and the Keys to Heaven in Christianity can be seen in the above pictures. The picture on the left of the *X-Blade* is clearly comprised of two keys forged together, with a gold ending coming from the top. On the right is the *Coat of Arms of the Holy See*, which is comprised also of two keys: one silver and the other gold. Both follow the same gold and silver color scheme. The ends of each key on the *X-Blade* have unique heads that appear as though they would fit over the top of a crown. The crown is also apparent in the Coat of Arms on the right. The *X-Blade*, if flipped with its blade facing down, resembles a cross in its structure: the green webbed design running perpendicular to the rest of the weapon seem similar the structure of Christian Crosses, which are very common in the Coat of Arms on the right. The *X-Blade* resembles the swords that the crusaders used in the Holy Wars, (again, taking the form of a cross via the hilt and blade).

The *X* plays an even more important role throughout the series. When Nobodies join Organization 13, they are given anagrams of their original form's name, with an *X* added. For example, during the original *Kingdom Hearts* game, Sora is turned into a Heartless, when he has to sacrifice himself to save his friends. Both a Heartless and a Nobody of Sora are formed during this process; this Nobody is given a human form and is named Roxas by joining Organization 13. Roxas contains the letters of Sora's name with an additional *X*. The number 13 is important in both Christianity and *Kingdom Hearts*. 13 is the number of members of darkness it will take to revive the ultimate antagonist, Xehanort, in *Kingdom Hearts*. In Christianity, 13 is considered unlucky because there were 13 members sitting at the Last Supper before Jesus' death. In addition, in Revelations chapter 13, the beast is revealed to be the number 666, often

associated with the anti-Christ or the devil.⁵⁴ The sacrifice of 13 Nobodies to bring back Xehanort is equated to summoning the devil because of its connection to Christian scripture. Additionally, Sora is brought back to life by the power of the light (similar to the belief in Christ).

Themes of trinities are apparent throughout the various *Kingdom Hearts* games. The first set of trinities involves the one true Kingdom Hearts, which contains the hearts of all men and all worlds, and the Kingdom Hearts containing the hearts of all worlds and the Kingdom Hearts containing the hearts of all men. This resembles the Trinity in Christianity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. While it is confusing to understand the different versions of Kingdom Hearts, it is important to note the relationship that they have to the Christian Trinity. One possible reason (based purely off speculation) for the confusion may be that the developers wanted to push Christian themes and/or messages without seeming like they were doing so. Many of the *Kingdom Hearts* games were released several years ago: the first game was released in 2002, and the most recent relating to the series was released in 2012. The games were developed in a time when video games were not seen as religious entities, rather as leisure activities or secular activities. Perhaps the newest edition to the series, set to be released at the end of this year, will be chalked full of religious themes and messages, now that the study of games and the idea of religion in games is appropriate.

Further, the trilogy notion is pushed in the idea of the heartless, the nobodies and the keyblade, which is seen in Namine's drawings in game. The Heartless seek to destroy the wielders of the keyblades, as they are the only weapons that can truly vanquish them.

⁵⁴ Revelations 13. New International Version.

The Nobodies seek to kill Heartless in hopes to gain a heart for themselves. And the key blade is capable of purging both forms of darkness from the world. There exist several other trinities in the game: the protagonist is almost always accompanied by two other characters, the antagonists in the series, a trilogy of villains, are all related because one is the Heartless, one is the Nobody, and the final is the actual person prior to him splitting into a Nobody and a Heartless. The worlds that the player visits are clunked into groups of three. In one installment of the series, *Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep*, the keyblade master, Eraqus, had three apprentices, once again reinforcing the notion of the trilogy. Most of the game has to do with trinities and groupings of three.

The final aspect of *Kingdom Hearts* that we will examine is the inner and the outer struggle. This is most apparent in Sora's best friend, Riku. The player is constantly chasing after or trying to find Riku. For various reasons, Riku is separated from Sora throughout the series. Riku is fighting the darkness in his own heart, and against the exterior darkness in the form of Nobodies and Heartless. In the first game, entitled *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Enix, 2002), Riku made the ultimate sacrifice of giving up his life to seal off the door to Kingdom Hearts, just as a multitude of heartless were about to burst through the gate. The scene is reminiscent of the gates of hell being unleashed as demons are about to take over earth. Riku's Christ-like sacrifice saves the universe; however, he pays the price. His heart is taken over by darkness; he fights the struggle to beat the darkness in his heart, reminiscent of a Christian fighting the devil's temptation and stepping into the light of Christ. Riku is also an example of the inner and outer jihad, one of the few non-Christian messages in *Kingdom Hearts*. The inner struggle against his darkness is the inner struggle for Muslims to be better Muslims, and the outer struggle

against the infidels is Riku's struggle against the embodied darkness of Heartless and Nobodies.

Kingdom Hearts has touched many fans around the world, offering a subtle Christian message about goodness besting evil, and providing many associations with religion. KH furthers the ability for video games to provide a subconscious spiritual auxiliary to fans, whether or not they understand the deeper meaning behind the games.

Case Study: *World of Warcraft*

Religion surrounds the *World of Warcraft* universe: it possess many standalone religions inside the game that were created with the universe and are observed by the different races within; contains religious symbols within that parallel real-world religions; and finally, has been effected by religion outside the game. The first aspect of this case study will examine a few of the in game religions, most notably The Holy Light.

While there are a myriad number of in-game religions, the two most apparent ones are The Holy Light belonging to members of the Alliance, and Shamanism whose adherents are members of the Horde. The Holy Light is predominantly pervaded by humans, draenei, night elves and dwarves, and relates to Christianity or Catholicism. Based out of Stormwind City in the land of Azeroth, the Cathedral of Light is reminiscent of the Vatican. Church leaders from around the world (of Warcraft) gather in the Cathedral of Light and send missionaries out to spread the message of the Holy Light. At its core, the Holy Light is about "making the world a better place and making oneself

better by helping other people.”⁵⁵ While undeniable similarities exist between The Holy Light and Christianity (i.e., missionary work and helping others), Blizzard probably distinguished The Holy Light from Christianity so as to avoid a lawsuit. The main difference is that the Holy Light doesn’t involve reverence for a single being. While the Light may be seen as a being or deity, and is sometimes worshipped and prayed to as one, it can be understood as more of a pervading force that guides all of its members to do good works.

Followers of the Holy Light adhere to the three main teachings, or virtues, of respect, tenacity and compassion. Respect is paramount in understanding the relationship between the self and others. They strive to better the universe and bring happiness to others; thus, they must respect the world in which they live in. The second virtue is tenacity. True adherence to, and mastery of, the Light takes years to master; members must understand that it takes a lifetime of subjugation to properly serve the Light. The goal of members of the Light is to positively impact the universe, and only through a lifetime of servitude can members hope to achieve that goal. Servants of the Light must have the tenacity to hold their faith true for a lifetime. The final virtue is compassion. The Holy Light holds that people must help others to strengthen their bonds with the universe and those around them. In such a way, he or she is able to positively affect the universe. However, compassion can be dangerous: by giving help where it is not needed or wanted, a follower of Light can inhibit people’s ability to grow, by completing difficult tasks for those whom they are trying to help. In reality, these tasks are set out for people to help

⁵⁵ Blizzard Entertainment. "Church of the Holy Light." Found in: WoWWiki. http://wowwiki.wikia.com/wiki/Church_of_the_Holy_Light.

them grow, not for stronger people to complete for them. Thus, only the wisest members of the way of Light are taught compassion. They are able to properly discern who is actually in need of help, and who can grow on their own.⁵⁶

The Horde, on the other hand, do not have a religion like The Holy Light. In fact, the Horde are loosely held together by a strong War Chief, rather than by a set of beliefs. Those that are religious or spiritual adhere to a more primal religion, known as Shamanism and/or Nature Worship, and are often led spiritually by their village elders or leaders. They honor the spirits of their own ancestors and the elemental forces through ceremonial totems. "Shamanism is based on the premise that the visible world is pervaded by the invisible force of spirits that affect the living in a very strong and meaningful way. Shamanism can therefore be seen as the practical application of the concepts of animism through specialized knowledge and abilities. Shamanism is not, however, organized into full-time rituals or spiritual association as priests [of The Holy Light] are."⁵⁷ When compared to real world religious traditions, Shamanism and Nature Worship are seen as less of a mainstream religious tradition, and directly relate to the religious practices of Shamanism and Nature Worship in the real world.

Because of the Alliance and The Holy Light's connection to mainstream Western Religious traditions and the Horde and Nature Worship's relation to nonwestern religious traditions, there may be a correlation between player choice in choosing whether to join the Horde or the Alliance, based on the player's religious affiliation outside of the game. Research done on this topic, however, is highly unregulated, unorganized, and lacks

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Blizzard Entertainment. "Shamanism & Nature Worship." Found in WoW Wiki. http://wowwiki.wikia.com/wiki/Shamanism_and_nature_worship

professionalism. There exist research papers wherein the authors examined people on their server and attempt to relate small-scale religious behavior to large scale trends within the game. One such paper, *Religion and World of Warcraft*, was written and submitted by previous University of Denver Students Greg Brunk, Kevin Chaves, and Parker Wiseman for a class specifically taught on *World of Warcraft*, by Richard Colby. The paper assumes that players that are followers of Western Religious traditions in real life are more likely to choose Alliance characters, whereas atheists and followers of non-Western Religious Traditions were more likely to choose Horde characters.⁵⁸

While I cannot knock these former students for their efforts, their method was rather underwhelming. Their sample size of 42 players is too small to be accurately representative of the population, and lacked the professional presentation of a proper research paper. To truly relate something of that nature, a large sample size, spanning numerous nations and servers with vast and random sampling would need to occur. Yet, the small findings that the Denver students found is not without its merit; they managed to prove, on however small a scale, that religion effects character choice in the game. The sample size (21 Horde and 21 Alliance) seems consistent enough to show that players that adhere to Western Religious traditions choose to be an Alliance character more so than Horde, and vice versa for nonreligious players as Horde characters. There are many factors that contribute to a player's choice in the game: groups of friends in real life tend to play the same faction together, which faction has the *cooler*-looking characters, which faction is better for end-game content (player vs. player, pvp, battles, or player vs.

⁵⁸ Greg Brunk, Kevin Chaves, and Parker Wiseman. "Religion and *World of Warcraft*." World Rhetoric: Lit 1133. 2008. <http://files.richardcolby.net/Religion.pdf>.

environment, pve, content), and much more. Holding these other factors constant, you find a small relation of religious Alliance to nonreligious and/or non-Western Religious Tradition Horde players.

World of Warcraft is packed with a plethora of religious symbols from religions outside of the game. The most apparent is the notion of the churches, which house the in-game Alliance religion of The Holy Light. These churches are symbolic and represent the churches found in various Christian faiths. A subgroup of NPCs in the game, known as The Ardent Crusades, has the Cross as their group's symbol. There exist several other allusions in the game. However, Blizzard Entertainment, the group that created *World of Warcraft*, also created another game, *Diablo III*, and they forcefully and intentionally removed all religious symbols from within the game after it was released prior to 2014.⁵⁹ It stands to reason that Blizzard does not support official symbology and relations to real-world religions. That doesn't mean that there isn't any, they just aren't officially recognized.

Conclusion of Case Studies

Evidence from the three globally recognized, successful games, *League of Legends*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *World of Warcraft* all support the claims that there exists religion within video games, and that the narrative of games is often fueled by religion, offering a more immersive experience. Characters are created based on religious figures, and are sometimes worshipped outside of the game (the intentionality of which is not yet understood). Religion provides meaningful commentary about life and creates engaging

⁵⁹ *Diablo III* Official Online Forum Discussion. <http://us.battle.net/d3/en/forum/topic/10311351037>

story lines that the player becomes a part of. The next chapter will explain how video games create out of body experiences, wherein the games are played religiously and become implicit religions.

Chapter 4:

Video Game Religion

Undeniably, video games, like *League of Legends*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *World of Warcraft* contain religion. That religion may be presented through subtle means, as in the different notions of the trinity in *Kingdom Hearts*, or more explicit, like the churches in *World of Warcraft*. Moreover, games may be considered a religion and gaming a religious experience. Video games, are the next stepping stone for religion. As Walter Ong argues “different media may make different religiosities possible. Ong suggests that religion began in an era of orality, was transmitted into visual form through manuscript writing as well as print, and has now entered the world in a new way via electronic media.”⁶⁰ This idea paves the way for video games to become a religious medium; games may be the next evolution of religion. Video games offer meaning making experiences. “They provide places for playing out our religious thoughts and simultaneously are inscriptions of them. *World of Warcraft* [is an] active constituent of modern religious life, and [it] helps shape, authorize, and rewrite our religious practices.”⁶¹ Gaming is a religious experience, and should be treated as such.

Video games have taken on the physical functions that religion has. William Sims Bainbridge argues that “MMORPGS like *World of Warcraft* have taken on sociological functions previously served by religion. Games—with their systematized cosmologies,

⁶⁰ Walter Ong. *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1967. Found in: Heidi A. Campbell, and Gregory P. Grieve. *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*.

⁶¹ Geraci. Kindle Location 262.

ritualized behaviors, and rules both spoken and unspoken—can function as implicit religions by creating specific worlds for players to inhabit populated with model heroes, mythic histories, and ultimate concerns, such as saving the world or defeating the opposing horde.”⁶² On the other hand, Chidester might argue that games are authentic fakes: while they contain all of the physical aspects of religion, they ultimately fall short of being a real religion like Christianity. Yet, the experiences of the players, both inside and outside of the games, are very real. The virtual spaces that players engage in are created by humans. This has a positive and negative effect for the overall argument surrounding video game religion: something created by man does not hold intrinsic sacred value (in comparison to the Quran in Islam). But, its innate creation by man, like a skyscraper or a computer, is what makes virtual reality real, not fake. Therefore, players are engaging in real activities with real consequences.

The actions of the players have consequences in both the fantasy and real world. For example, gamers that play for too long may develop carpal tunnel syndrome, a common wrist injury amongst avid gamers. This could be countered by the argument that someone who skates may fall and break their leg: a real action having a real consequence. Does that then make skating a sacred activity? Not necessarily, but this relation provided a means for showing a real-life consequence of gaming. In-game choices may influence the choices that players make outside of the game. In *World of Warcraft*, eating food offers your character bonus stats. The food may have a variety of interesting names, but if

⁶² William Sims Bainbridge. *EGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Found in: Natasha L Mikles. "Why Are Chinese Grandmothers Giving Offerings to Video Game Characters? And Why Does the Internet Think It's Funny?"

developers make the names of in-game food similar to healthy foods in real life, players, especially the younger ones who have wild imaginations, may tend to eat healthier in real-life. They may feel it will make them stronger in real-life, like it does in game. The actions and choices of players have real consequences for their characters in game as well. Since we have established that virtual spaces are real spaces, because they are made by man and able to be manipulated, used, or inhabited, the choices of players within the game are real. Going rogue, or killing an ally, will have negative consequences for the player, putting his character in trouble. While previously being dubbed secular and profane activities, video games provide many of the subconscious spiritual experiences that religions provide. The games become religious placeholders due to the sacred symbols that are inside and the immersive religious experiences that they give their players. But can they be considered more, perhaps a new religious movement or standalone religion?

It is easily argued that video games, like *League of Legends*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *World of Warcraft* fit Albanese's theory about religion. They build communities around meaning-making activities in online sacred spaces, follow rituals such as completing daily activities in game that in turn reward the player. They are subject to the rules and laws that govern the game. And, the games offer explanations for life after death (if one so chooses to believe in the experiences of the video game), as well as provides both real life and fantasy world meaning-making from their actions. Another author, Robert Geraci, argues that games like *World of Warcraft* have many religious consequences. He states:

The allure of the *World of Warcraft* mythos means the game competes against traditional stories and religions... *World of Warcraft* gives its players very appealing commodities—communities, opportunities for reflection, a sense of personal meaning, even transcendent experiences. In an age where thin wafers of bread do not always seem to carry a divine personality and where the historical authenticity of almost every religious text has been called into question, the communities and experiences enabled by virtual worlds offer something completely novel to the spiritual marketplace.⁶³

Geraci sheds light on interesting points regarding contemporary religion and spirituality. The following argument is not meant to be malicious in any way towards any type of religion: why is value placed on eating a cracker and drinking wine, but not in actions that occur in video games (i.e., saving the world from the demonic, helping other players with quests, or gathering followers and creating guilds in game that include like-minded players with similar ideals)? Additionally, why is there value placed on Kosher dietary laws, but not on the morality taught from conquering evil in games? Struggling with these questions about where and why value is placed only brings about further questions: Can video games like *World of Warcraft* be a religion? Is it a new religious movement and standalone religion, or a religious placeholder/implicit religion? Geraci coins a term that he feels describes video games: virtually sacred. There are a few other aspects that need to be addressed prior to deciding on the status of video game religion.

Other important factors to discuss are the experiences of the players within the game. The notion that video games are nonreligious entities is so engrained into the societal norms, that if one were to go out and ask random video game players if they believe their game is religious, or even has religious meaning, they would most likely be given a hard time.⁶⁴ The heteronormative assumptions of video games must be broken

⁶³ Geraci. Kindle Location 227.

⁶⁴ For more, see any online forum about games and religion.

before religion can, as scholars have put it, continue to evolve. Video games are destined to be the new religious medium because of games' innate ability for the player to interact with it. With the implementation of virtual reality gaming on the rise, online sacred spaces will become even more immersive. No longer will the physical experience of gaming be contained to a keyboard and mouse or console controller. Currently, the only meaningful physical experience that gamers get is the movement of a mouse or game stick and the pushing of a keyboard or controller buttons. Despite its small physical impact, video games have already created immersive virtual reality worlds chalked full of religion that allow members to explore worlds and realities not possible in real life. They enlighten their player base to not only historical facts about the past, but also the role that religion played in these past societies. Oftentimes, gamers are asked fight alongside a religious or quasi-religious order or society to fight for good against evil (whether they are conscious of the religiosity of the order or not). Video games are now a religious placeholder system and medium through which to explore religious symbols, messages, ancient texts and deities, and secret societies that they might not ever normally encounter in our (reportedly) increasingly secular society.

Gamers will often engage in Cosplay or Roleplay, contribute to online forums outside of the game, and create fan art of their character. These actions are more than homage-paying activities; they allow the players to completely immerse themselves in the worlds of the games.



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As you can see by the above picture, people spend a lot of time, effort, and money, to bring to life their favorite video game characters, constructing elaborate costumes and going through painstaking detail.

Sometimes unbeknownst to the player, gamers have out of body experiences that allow them to live out their wildest dreams in the game. Players will often lose track of time while playing a game, as if the focus of their mind, body and soul were a part of the game; it's as if they existed in the game rather than in the real world. I can attest to this personally: many times have I awoke from a state where I felt as though I was the avatar that I was controlling. I was so glued to the game that only the sound of my door opening or the voice of my mom yelling at me to get off the game would pull me from my trance. The spiritual allure of the game is what makes people like me spend so much time on them. It was only after becoming a Religious Studies major in college and being educated

⁶⁵ "Jayce" by Jasper Sardonicus. Photo Credits to XenPhotos. Photo found on: <http://www.dorkly.com/post/73444/the-most-insane-league-of-legends-cosplays-weve-ever-seen>

on the religiousness that pervades existence that I came to consciously realize the religion inside of the games that I had been playing my whole life.

The most recent addition to the gaming world is live streaming and videos. Live streaming is exactly what it sounds like: people record themselves playing games and stream the actions of their character along with their real life actions to a streaming website, the most popular of which is Twitch. While some may view the popular streamers as mere entertainers, it is undeniable that they have amassed a large followership that watches them religiously. Some watch for educational reasons, some for entertainment; most important is the fact that people now spend time watching people play games rather than playing the games themselves. This relationship is like a church! The religious head leads the service, and the congregation follows along. The Twitch streamer, much like the religious head, engages with and leads his or her congregation of followers through the religiously inspired games. His or her viewers follow along and engage the streamer through the Twitch chat function. Live streaming has literally become a religious service for video games. At the very least, this relationship is equivalent to the televangelists, preachers that broadcast their services over live television.

Ultimately, however, I am not willing to argue that video games are a standalone religion like Christianity. Despite fitting the physical characteristics set forth by Albanese, and providing meaning-making, teaching morals and fulfilling the spiritual requirements in a similar fashion to Western Religious Traditions, games are simply not widely accepted enough to be considered religion. There is no doubt that games are spiritual, and gaming is a spiritual process; as such, video games are an implicit religion.

They are not authentic fakes because the experiences and consequences of actions inside the game are real. Video games will ultimately become the next medium for religion, in time. Because of the national movements to suppress hate speech today, the idea of video game religion has the opportunity to sneak through the cracks and onto the scene.

Because “declaring one thing as religion and another as superstition, myth, or occultism is a power play; the terms establish a value system that valorizes one set of practices or beliefs over another. In the present age, we still privilege beliefs in gods and afterlives and attendance in places that espouse such beliefs as religion over and against other practices of meaning-making.”⁶⁶ Through widespread acceptability, and the continued incorporation of religious experiences through gaming, video games could be the next evolution of organized religion, whereupon people will take place in organized religion through their online avatar.

⁶⁶ Geraci. Kindle Location 355.

Chapter 5:

Critiques

The issues addressed in this paper are sometimes not received kindly by society. Visiting any online forum whereupon someone asks questions about religion and that particular game will be met by dissent by at least one responder. People still hold preconceived notions that religion is a negative entity. In reality, religion is neither negative nor positive, but can be used negatively or positively. Additionally, people seem to make speculations about religious relations with no real response from the game creators. Without some type of intent, the religious ideas will sometimes float around but become nothing more than mere speculations. It would, however, be dangerous for a content creator to come forward and say that the game is religious and/or trying to push a religious message. Because a lot of gamers still belong to religious organizations, they may become offended at the idea that a video game is trying to take the place of an organized religion. Thus, virtual religion is sometimes left to be organized by random players within the game. Even when religious gaming organizations are founded (gamers banding together to form a guild around religious ideas), they seem to hold less merit because the creation wasn't from someone of significant stature, like a game developer, or disingenuous people try make the religion seem illegitimate.

Another core issue that critics of this theory may have is that religion cannot exist in the digital world. A digital world is not real, and religion cannot exist there; there is no physical location where the religion exists. However, "Virtual worlds are the objects that 'objectify' our stories and our interpersonal relations. We can build and shape them with

our motives in mind so that they lean on residents, encouraging certain thoughts or behaviors. We can use or modify them likewise. Thus, we can use virtual worlds to hold together communities of people and relationships between people and ideas.”⁶⁷ The virtual world is very much a real entity. A critic may counter with the idea that technology, and in turn these religious worlds belong to the profane, whereas religion is sacred; these two simply cannot intersect. Religion has made use of the internet since the late ‘90s. Religious services are streamed over the web for people to watch from their homes, there are online chat rooms where you can ask questions to priests or rabbis, all of which make use of technology and the online sacred space. A reality or space is what you make of it—thus, if you believe it to be a sacred space, then it becomes one.

The black sheep with online games include the lack of genuine players, and the “trolls.” Trolls are people “who sows discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people, by posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community (such as a newsgroup, forum, chat room, or blog) with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion, often for their own amusement.”⁶⁸ These players enjoy terrorizing members of the online community for their own enjoyment. They are difficult to track and quantify, as the chat logs in games are usually only scanned for intense cases of racism or homophobia, and it would be inaccurate to ask them to self-identify themselves as trolls. People like this will skew data by providing disingenuous answers. Some people presume that trolls constitute a large portion of online gamers, but there is no fair way of

⁶⁷ Geraci. Kindle Location 259.

⁶⁸ “Trolls” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_troll

quantifying them. Trolls take away from the immersive experience and religiosity of games, by engaging other players in acts of profane slander.

Along the disingenuous line is the concern that people are not truly themselves in an online space. Since the other users online have no real way of tracking other players down and verifying whether what they present is true, people will sometimes present different variations of themselves in the online space. Some present their best self, while others, their worst. Can an experience be religious if the members are disingenuous? The answer is yes. People who have sinned go to church and engage in organized religious practice all the time. Liars exist in the world around us. Chances are that you, the reader, have lied in an organized religious sacred space before. Therefore, it is not an issue that the digital avatar does not accurately represent the player.

Video games are seen as a religious experience, but not a New Religious Movement; along with the lack of societal acceptance, games are deficient in supernatural aspects. When the player turns off the game, they are no longer engaging with it—though some of the more avid players might continue in their minds. Comparatively, just because someone is not in church doesn't mean their religion doesn't follow them wherever they go. A Christian may wear a cross around his or her neck, and ask for guidance from Christ throughout the day. Additionally, Christians are taught that God is always with you. Do video games provide that same experience? Somewhat, but it is not necessary to relate completely to an organized religion, since the argument is that digital games are a religious placeholder system or implicit religion. People can wear articles of clothing that represent their game, or even have a necklace representing some aspect of their game in the way that a Christian does. However, when the user turns off the game, the experience

also turns off. The in-game character is not with you (although some fanatics may disagree, contending their characters are with them in spirit as well) like God is for Christians.

The final argument is more psychological than religiously fueled. Critics may write off games as escapist or addiction oriented. First, let's address the issue of addiction. "While most people associate addiction with substances, such as drugs or alcohol, doctors recognize addictive behaviors as well. In a WebMD feature on the definition of addiction, psychiatrist Michael Brody, MD, set forth the following criteria: (1) the person needs more and more of a substance or behavior to keep him going and (2) If the person does not get more of the substance or behavior, he becomes irritable and miserable."⁶⁹ People can become addicted to anything. The stigmas surrounding addiction are slowly beginning to fade, and people are realizing that addiction is and can be more than drugs or alcohol. I am by no means arguing that video games cannot be an addiction; like drugs or alcohol, playing too much video games is detrimental for one's health. That being said, the allure of games is not from the flashing lights and vibrant color schemes. People are drawn to the game because of the subconscious religious undertones and spiritual fulfillment they receive when playing the game wholeheartedly. Digital games, like many other aspects of life, should be used in moderation.

The escapist properties of games are relevant to the allure of religion and the fantasy world. Players will sometimes turn to games to escape the hardships of their life, or to fulfill some innate desire that they cannot perform in real life. Television and media

⁶⁹ Sherry Rauh. WebMD. "Video Game Addiction." WebMD. <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/addiction/features/video-game-addiction-no-fun>.

have branded the gamer as the ‘nerd,’ that gets picked on in school and goes home to his or her game to escape from the bullying. Other ways games have been branded as escapist are the lonely, unmarried man (or woman), that has no real social life, and a boring job. They find solace in finishing work and being able to play their games. While these stereotypes may or may not be true, it is certain that gamers stem from all different backgrounds and cultures. The gaming community is diverse, and features players of all shapes, sizes, socio-economic classes, or social standings. Games may be used to escape the harshness of reality, just as one may find solace in reading a good book, or playing with miniature figurines. These are likely only a few of the criticisms that people may have about this thesis.

Chapter 6:

Conclusion

This thesis hopes to have challenged some of the assumptions about video games. They have a positive impact on society because of how global they are and their ability to spread positive, moral, and/or health messages to massive amounts of people. As of yet, there is insufficient data to prove that video games have adverse effects on society, and have unfortunately been used as scapegoats for explaining negative behavior in the past (people that perform massive shootings were apparently trained by playing video games).

Despite the supposed decline in religion in America, religion is just as fervent as ever. The category of “nones” is rising, while people are shying away from organized religion. This shift away from organized religion may be explained by the fact that people are finding spiritual fulfillment in video games.

Video games use religion to fuel their narrative, add depth and mystery to their mythology and characters, and implement various religious symbols to add realness aspects. As such, and because video games fit the description of religion by Albanese, video games are an implicit religion, or a religious placeholder system. They provide a spiritual outlet for people to enjoy, allowing gamers to really engage their religion. Video games are the next stepping stone for modern religion. What is holding video games back from being a standalone religion is the societal norms surrounding video games: secular, leisure activities, and are only really played by children or teenagers. This thesis hopes to have disproven these heteronormative assumptions and furthered the field of game studies by offering a religious studies perspective.

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