

Presented to:
2012 Conference on Digital Religion
Center for Religion, Media and Culture, University of Colorado-Boulder.

Holy Sins: Depictions of Violent Religion in Contemporary Console Games

Greg Perreault
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Missouri

179 Gannett Hall
Missouri School of Journalism
Columbia, MO 65211
gppfm5@mail.missouri.edu

Abstract

No genre of gaming more exemplifies the ability create deep narratives than the role-playing game, or “RPG” genre which is heavily narrative and often relies on an in-depth back story and deep world history. This paper includes a narrative analysis study that will focus on religious depictions in key video games of the past three years, including *Mass Effect 2*, *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow*, *Assassin’s Creed*, *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, and *Final Fantasy XIII*. In addition, a visual analysis was conducted on key scenes where religion is depicted. While all of these games depicted religion differently, the key theme that drew them together was the idea of religion as a motivator for violence.

Introduction

Imagine there was a game where you play as Noah. The way you get animals onto the Ark is to raise them over your heads a la *Super Mario Bros. 2* to throw them in. But wait, there’s more. Imagine you can play as Miriam and in order to beat levels, you have to escape Egyptian guards with baby Moses, who you can throw like a football. But wait, there’s still more. You can also play as David and in order to work up to fighting Goliath, you need to collect a ton of sheep. To top it all off, this 8-bit game for the Nintendo Entertainment System, *Bible Adventures*, was produced without the proper licensing—the evangelical Christian company that made the game reverse engineered the Nintendo cartridge so they didn’t have to pass Nintendo’s licensing process.

Needless to say, there is a lengthy history involved in the depictions of religion in console games—one that includes Link from Nintendo’s *Legend of Zelda* using a shield

with a giant cross, Cecil from Super Nintendo's *Final Fantasy IV* (II in America) undergoing what could be described as a sort of conversion experience, and more subtle images, such as characters from *Breath of Fire* and *Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* praying to statues in order to "Save Your Game."

The images from *Bible Adventures* present an interesting piece of data for those interested in depictions of religion in digital media forms. Of course it raises many of the questions inherent in any study of religion.ⁱ And it also raises the questions inherent in the process of depiction as well. Media forms are methods of communication, which are flawed in that they can never truly represent the reality of that which is being represented. It's hard to represent all the nuances, trends and traditions inherent in 2000 years of Christianity in video game. Games, like all signs, go through an encoding/decoding process. The history, culture and context that informs the creation of a game can all be encoded. And all those things come into play in how a depiction is decoded (Hall, 1973). Can something as complex and nuanced as religion be depicted in a way meaningful enough that it can still be considered religion?

Literature Review

With the acknowledgement that there are many different opinions and approaches to the questions posed above, this paper will use the term "religion" as encompassing a range of both unorganized and organized spiritual behaviors, individuals and rituals. This paper will also admit that while the process of depiction is imperfect, there's a reason why there are blogs dedicated to coverage of religion in the press,ⁱⁱ there are books

dedicated to images of religion in television,ⁱⁱⁱ and online message boards about images of religion in video games.^{iv}

This paper will examine depictions of religion in contemporary console video games. This study will focus particularly on the differing depictions of organized religion as opposed to unorganized religion in *Final Fantasy XIII*, *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow*, *Mass Effect 2*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. In what ways does religion appear in contemporary console games? What common religious themes arise?

It's worth asking why such depictions are of value. There was a time when video games were derided as child's play, destructive to the brain and the stuff of computer geeks (Gee, 2003). If it was the case once, it is no longer. Video games make more money than Hollywood annually (Gee, 2003). And while movie theaters continue to churn out reruns and sequels to sequels to sequels, the video game industry is telling some of the most innovative storytelling available. The video game is not solely a medium for wasting idle time (Bogost 2007). In James Paul Gee's (2003), "What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy," he noted the numerous places in which learning principles are well served by the medium of the video game.

One learning principle Gee (2003) noted is the ability of the player to have an "embodied experience" in which meanings are discovered throughout the game in the encountering of different signs—words, actions, objects, etc. (Gee, 2003). This embodied experience is similar to that had when a person interacts with a book or movie, but story narrative works differently in the course of a video game.

He notes that the story line of a video game is made up of four things: game designer choices, the way the player causes those choices to play out as result of the order

he/she finds things, the actions the player's avatar carries out and the player's "imaginative projection about the characters, plot and world of the story" (Gee, 2003, p. 82). He continues:

There are all sorts of reasons why stories in video games cannot (yet?) be, in a sense, as deep or rich as stories in good books and movies. For example, a video game must work out different futures based on choices different players have made and different things they have done earlier in the game. This creates a computational problem that books and movies do not face, since in a book or movie the designer always knows what choices have been made earlier (Gee, 2003, p. 82-83).

Gee's comment here is dated and doesn't take into account the way choices affect the outcomes in games such as *Heavy Rain* and the *Mass Effect* series. Learning challenges, reinforces and/or hones cultural models. A good book or good speech can bring about those responses, Gee said, and there is no reason to doubt a video game cannot. Gee made note of the two sides of the theoretical arc that run through video game studies: how players affect their avatar and how avatars affect the player. Rehak defined avatars as the "figures that appear on screen in place of, indeed as direct *extensions* of, the spectator: sites of continuous identification... The video game avatar, presented as a human player's double, merges spectatorship and participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities" (Rehak, 2003, p. 103).

In other words, the player not only participates in the game through the avatar but is a spectator of the game as well. The player experiences the avatar's world, and watches it as a sort of interactive movie. Rehak said the player simultaneously wants to experience the game but see himself doing it at once. However, he said that being a spectator is different if the player is actively involved in the actions being done and being a participant is different if the player can watch himself doing it. Both actions are changed. The first game with an avatar as *Spacewar!*, the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology's video gaming experiment from 1962. In his history, Rehak categorically left out games without definitive avatars, like *Pong*, since those games do not fit the above model. The avatar of *Spacewar!* was a white rocket ship the player piloted through the obstacles of the game. The form of this game is very similar to early games in that the player is given a "God's-eye perspective" on the scene (Rehak, 2003). In this perspective, the player is able to see all the obstacles on screen and all the places their avatar can go.

This operation leads to the repetitive nature of the medium that is so much a part of the video gaming experience. For example, the player reaches the "Game Over" screen in a game, followed by a "restart?" request that allows them to reincarnate their avatar from the beginning of the level/ last saved location/ beginning of the game, etc. The "God's-eye perspective" dominated early gaming but recent games have limited visibility. There has been a transition recently to more explorer-friendly surroundings. Recent games also feature avatars that are more easily maneuverable from a technological standpoint so the player feels like they are exploring the same territory the avatar is exploring.

Rehak would say that technology has increasingly made it possible for player-avatar relations to be more prevalent and closer. But he would also say it is a relationship that will always feel incomplete: partially as a result of the power the player has over the avatar. The player can kill his avatar at will and he can reincarnate the avatar as well. Rehak's comments here raise another interesting question: to what extent is playing of a game a religious experience? The idea of the God's-eye perspective provides us a view into the life of the avatar, a view humans can only pray for—a way to see all the

obstacles ahead. In a sense, the avatar's experience of a religious ritual is the player's experience of a religious ritual.

What can be said to be religion? Religion is a social experience (Durkheim, 1938). Religion is phenomenological (Eliade, 1957). It's the experience of the sacred. It's ritual practice. It's the meaning making that occurs within a community gathered in a thin-place. It's the meaning making that an individual takes upon himself/herself in order to create a world that has equilibrium with their experience (Berger, 1990). That said, the experience of the religious in the physical world is necessarily different than the experience of the religious through a mediated form.

Depiction implies a process of communication in which an entity is transmitted in another form. This communication need not include the word signifying the entity, or for that matter be a realistic pictorial representation. A depiction captures the essence of the entity in terms of the practices, norms, typified behaviors and perceived stereotypes. If one is to understand the video game medium as being one with the power to depict, then it's important that the definition of depiction is inclusive of text—text plays an important role in the narrative experience of most role-playing games. For the purposes of this paper, depictions are images in both symbolic and non-symbolic form which are able to represent entities, people, institutions and ideas in both verbal and visual ways by the perceptual power granted by the depiction's consumers; that are constructions which have grown out of culture, history, worldview (Abell and Bantinaki, 2010; Gombrich, 1961; Goodman, 1976; Lopes, 1996; Peacocke, 1987).

A depiction is the text on a page. It's the image that text creates in the mind of the reader and it's that which is implied by the text. A depiction is a picture—it's a lamb on

the grass. But through the symbolic power granted by the audience and the context in which the depiction is presented, it can also be Christ. A painting of a cross is a depiction of two pieces of wood nailed together. It is also a heinous symbol of hatred and man's inhumanity to man.

What are Role-Playing Games?

In the digital medium, a role-playing game usually involves the use of one or more playable avatars that travel through a highly developed fictional world. In terms of narrative genre, a majority of role-playing games are of the fantasy and science fiction genres. Storylines are typically linear, meaning the narrative will inevitably go in specific directions, leading to a specific ending. There are often bonuses for characters who make ethical decisions in the narrative and consequences for those that do not. The avatar's effectiveness in doing certain actions is often based on statistics accessible through some sort of status screen and influenced by finding certain items, achieving certain goals, or gaining battle experience in the game. The stories usually involve a group of characters on a quest and, along the way, they must face a great number of enemies and obstacles (RPG Fan, 1998). Role-playing games rely heavily on narrative and thus lend themselves toward immersive play by nature.

Role-playing games arose out of the board games in which players each act out a role; the most famous of these being *Dungeons & Dragons*. The digital take has little in common with its analog predecessor, but for two key characteristics. Role-playing games tend to rely heavily on (1) fantasy or science-fiction worlds and (2) statistics that play an important role on a character's abilities (Rilstone, 1994; Babovic, 2000).

Once role-playing games transferred to a digital medium, they split in two directions: computer-based role playing games which were favored in North America, and console-based role playing games which were favored in Japan (Barton, 2006). Those two worlds have since meshed. What started in 1982 with *Dragonstomper* for the Atari 2600 gaming console now includes hundreds of titles (Fielder, 2002; Vestal, 2007). Role-playing games tend to be more popular in Japan – the soundtracks for these games are even played on the radio overseas – but after Squaresoft’s heavily marketed release of *Final Fantasy VII*, the genre became mainstream in America (Vestal, 2007).

However, as games have evolved in both technology and narrative ability, the number of games that can be considered “role-playing” under the definition laid out above has skyrocketed. There is currently much debate about what constitutes a role-playing games since so many games could now be said to reside in this genre.^v This study will use the term role-playing game broadly to include the sort of vast narrative games noted above.

Methodology

Of the role-playing genre, five recent games were selected by the author based on the popularity of the game, the popularity of the series to which they belong and the quality of the religious depictions presented. In addition, the author tried to select games that were reflective of the genre as a whole.^{vi} So *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* provides hack-and-slash gameplay with dark gothic overtones. *Final Fantasy XIII* is a more futuristic, science-fiction story done in the traditional turn-based gameplay of the Japanese role-playing games that built the genre in its infancy. *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*

and *Mass Effect 2* represent the growing trend of Western role-playing games, which are heavily affected by player choice, non-linear and play similarly to first-person shooters. *Assassin's Creed* is a game that can be seen as skating a thin line between an "action" game and a "role-playing game." It was deemed appropriate for inclusion because of the heavy narrative elements that have traditionally defined the genre. Each of these games is part of a series of games. In video games, series tend to be popular and they also tend to have the vast narratives that would include topics of religion.

This analysis seeks to answer the following questions: in what ways is religion depicted in contemporary console role-playing games? What is indicated historically and culturally by these depictions?

For each game, a combination of visual analysis and narrative analysis will be employed to specific scenes from each of the games. The scenes were chosen because of the either subtle or overt religious content presented. The visual analysis will draw light to what imagery is presented in the clothing, lighting and setting of the scene. The narrative analysis will indicate what the text spoken (and often presented on screen) brings to light in the story and what the story brings to light on the text. In a sense, this part of the analysis will provide the context of the scene in the larger game narrative.

Castlevania: Lords of Shadow (2010)

The Castlevania series has had a long-standing history in the video game world, with the original debuting in Japan in 1986. In the history of the series, the game's antagonist has almost always been Dracula and the protagonist of the series has almost always been a vampire-hunter from the Belmont family. The series started out as a

strictly action game that later on began to involve gaining levels, more narrative structure and earning experience for abilities, etc. It is at the culmination of this trend that *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* was released, as a reboot of the franchise (Yin-Poole, 2009). And since the story is rooted in the vampire tradition, there are already religious elements involved in the story. In the original novel *Dracula*, the vampirism was a result of demon possession. The only ways to fight the demon were through the use of Christian symbols—holy water, the reading of Biblical texts, the crucifix, and even the use of the wooden stake can be seen as having overtones of the crucifixion.^{vii}

The protagonist of *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* is Gabriel Belmont, a member of the brotherhood of light who has been sent to the Lake of Oblivion where he has been told he could receive a message from his deceased wife that could save the world. Gabriel progresses through the game hoping to find a way to bring his wife back to life. He discovers that three great demons, called the Lords of Shadow, hold pieces of the God Mask—which he thinks may bring his wife back to life. Through the course of the game, we learn that the original founders of the Brotherhood of Light long ago fought Satan's spawns. In the process of the fight, they created the God mask and used this power to transform into powerful spirits. But in turning into these spirits, they left behind pieces of God mask to their dark sides—the Lords of Shadow. These Lords of Shadow are threatening earth's connection to heaven. So by killing the Lords of Shadow, Gabriel also kills the founders of his order to the ultimate end of keeping earth's connection to heaven and regaining control of the God Mask.

During the game, Gabriel meets a fellow member of the Brotherhood of Light, Zobek. In the cutscene examined here, Gabriel finds Zobek kneeling in a churchyard

surrounded by dead soldiers. His sword is planted in front of him. His head is bowed respectfully for the dead and he appears to be praying. When Gabriel approaches, he rises and the dialogue below follows:

Zobek: “Thank God you are still among the living my friend.”

Gabriel: “The Lycan Lord has been defeated. I have his power. What happened here?”

Zobek: “I congratulate you on your victory, but these fellows were not so fortunate. Word has spread of our quest. The Vampire clan has slaughtered this entire village. And now...they are expecting us.”

[Zobek looks up at the Abbey]

“That Abbey...I am told the abbot possesses an ancient relic that harnesses the power of the sun. It is said to be capable of burning Vampires and reducing them to ashes. That relic protects the abbey and all who take refuge there, but the abbot has barricaded himself inside and filled the building with deadly traps to deter visitors. After years of isolation, some say he has been driven quite mad...He resides there, in the tallest of the towers. If we could persuade him to give the relic to us, it would give us a tremendous advantage over the Vampires but it won't be easy...”

Gabriel: “Mad or not...damn him for not protecting his people.”

Throughout the scene, Zobek and then Gabriel are seen in the foreground. The perspective of the camera is looking up at the figures. They appear prominently and powerfully in turn. During Zobek's prayer, he appears respectful. In short, Zobek and Gabriel are presented as the tale's heroes—this is reinforced later when the player uses the two characters to fight off demons. Zobek and Gabriel are both well lit. In contrast, the abbey is distant, decrepit and menacing. In the dialogue text, the abbot is presented as a coward who is at least partly responsible for the slaughter of the local villagers and soldiers.

It's an interesting scenario because the abbot is clearly a figure of organized religion—in this case either Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. Based on the location of the story, it's likely he would have been Eastern Orthodox although the abbot is not called a hegumen, which seems to indicate he was Roman Catholic. One could see this depiction as having a negative tone toward organized religion, but both Zobek and

Gabriel are members of the Brotherhood of Light, an organization that by all indications is at least Christian and perhaps likened to the Knights Templar. The year in which this story is said to take place, 1047 A.D., seems to indicate Zobek and Gabriel could be having their adventure in the years leading up to the Crusades. So both parties represent organized religion. The abbot is a coward who has put his countrymen at risk of brutal death while Gabriel and Zobek are presented as morally ambiguous members of a religious order. Gabriel and Zobek are, after all, killing these Lords of Shadow and thus the founders of their order as well. So the picture of organized religion here is fairly dark, which is indicative of the gothic genre from which it originates.

Final Fantasy XIII

Final Fantasy XIII is the most recent of the Final Fantasy series, which was for years considered the gold standard for role-playing video games. Few of the games have been sequels—instead all of the games have taken place in different worlds with different characters, often only connected by occasional easter eggs. But since the early days of the franchise, Final Fantasy games have tended to involve a mixture of science fiction and sword-and-sorcery fantasy elements. The story revolves around a set of characters who are branded as l'Cie—people who can use magic and are hated because of the role of l'Cie in the “War of Transgression” 500 years prior to the game’s story. L'Cie are created by fal'Cie—god-like creatures. Many of these creatures want to enslave humanity or destroy it. The main setting of the story, Cocoon, is ruled by a figure named Galenth Dysley who rules as the Primarch, a word that literally means “Great Pope” (Primarch). The Primarch is said to be the sole person who can communicate with Cocoon’s fal'Cie

Eden, who offers advice and guidance but restrains from direct influence. The main party, led by a former Cocoon soldier named Lightning, eventually determines that the Primarch may be colluding with fal'Cie to bring about an apocalypse. In the meantime, the party has come in contact with a fal'Cie and is being hunted as l'Cie. In the scene selected, Lightning and the party confront Dysley. His servant offers to fight them off while Dysley escapes. To the surprise of the player, and the characters in the narrative, Dysley casts a spell that kills the servant and then reveals himself to be a fal'Cie himself—masquerading as a human in order to bring about the eventual destruction of humanity.

In this case, the religious depiction is in the appearance and personhood of Dysley. Dysley in a number of ways can be seen as a depiction of a Pope in the Roman Catholic Christian tradition. Dysley's appearance bears a remarkable resemblance in that he wears headwear, robes and carries a rod that resembles a crosier. The clothing bears the sacred appearance that would be seen as similar to the dress of an archbishop or Pope. Beyond that, the position he holds is similar—personifying a thin place between the divine and the temporal.

Yet Dysley reveals himself to be a fal'Cie named Barthandelus and someone plotting to destroy humanity. The visuality of the scene often puts Dysley off in the distance, his face in a menacing grimace. His movements are sudden and jarring. Obviously, this can be seen as a negative depiction of organized religion if one is to cede what is practiced in Cocoon as an organized religion. The question then is: this an organized religion? It appears to be. There are strict rules which can exclude one from the community—the most obvious of which being making contact with a non-Cocoon fal'Cie

as the party did. In the beginning of the game, Cocoon characters are seen wearing the robes not unlike that of monastic monks. There is an elaborate mythology behind the tradition and rituals associated with it. So what is negatively depicted here is organized religion, the key element being the Primarch/Pope's role as a purveyor of destruction.

Mass Effect 2

The *Mass Effect* games surround the character of Jack Shepherd, a human starship commander in a science fiction environment. The world is exceptionally multi-racial, with humans making up a weak minority role in the intergalactic community. The intergalactic community has democratic representation in the Citadel and they are militarily supported by an elite group of soldiers known as Spectres. In the original game, Shepherd becomes the first human Spectre. He is ordered to hunt down another Spectre accused of working with an ancient robotic race called the Reapers. The Reapers are said to wipe out civilization every few thousand years. In the first game, Shepherd gains information that indicates that the Reapers are returning, but by and large, the intergalactic community doesn't believe him.

At the beginning of *Mass Effect 2*, an unknown ship appears in Shepherd's sector. The ship fires on them and Shepherd's ship goes down. Shepherd manages to save his team, but he perishes in the process. A human splinter group revives Shepherd and says that a race called the Collectors have been kidnapping humans—and that they suspect the Reapers are behind it. They provide Shepherd whatever resources he needs to take down the Collectors and root out the Reaper involvement.

Much of the early *Mass Effect 2* experience revolves around Shepherd building his team. The scene examined here takes place in the midst of Shepherd's team building. Shepherd has been informed that Thane is an assassin of the highest skill and their job is to recruit him. Shepherd's team shoots their way up a business building, eventually finding themselves in the crooked senior executive's well-fortified office. In the scene, Shepherd meets the executive and he admits that he's not here to kill her, but rather to find the assassin sent to kill her. In the midst of the conversation, Thane drops out of the ceiling, shoots the executive's guards and then hugs the executive close as he shoots her. she gasps her last breath, Thane crosses her arms over her chest and begins to pray. The dialog is interesting, and it differs depending on what a player chooses to say and who is on Shepherd's team during the scene. This set of dialog will largely represent choices that lean toward the game's "Paragon" options and involved Shepherd bringing Grunt and Jack on the mission.

[The senior executive, Nassana, sees Shepherd and his team entering her office]

Nassana: "Wait. Before you kill me, just tell me who hired you."

Shepherd: (Alt. Option: "*You Tell Me.*") "*Nobody:* I'm not an assassin, Nassana. But I am looking for one."

Nassana: "You break in here and decimate my security just to find the person who's here to kill me? What are you playing at Shepherd? [Sounds heard elsewhere] What?"

Asari Commando (one of her guards): "I heard something."

Nassana: "Damn it. Check the other entrances! [Pointing at Shepherd] You...stay put. [Thane drops down from the ceiling behind her guards] When I'm finished dealing with nuisance, you and I are going to...[Thane kills the two guards] Who...?"

[Thane lays her down, arms crossed. He begins to pray.]

Jack: "Nice entrance."

Shepherd: (Alt Options: Hello?/ You ignoring me?) "Can we talk?: I came a long way to talk to you."

Thane: "One moment. Prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken."

Shepherd: (Alt Options: I see./ Don't bother.) "Why?: Do you really think she deserves it?"

Thane: "Not for her. For me. The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you for instance. All this destruction...chaos. I was curious to see how far you'd go to find me. Well...here I am."^{viii}

This depiction comes back to the question of what qualifies as religion. In the context of the narrative, it's clear that what Thane's practicing is the religion of his people—distinct from the more popular organized religion of the asari or the hanar. It's personal, polytheistic and spiritual with no hierarchy. The imagery of the scene plays on the contrast between light and dark, sunlight and shadow. The setting is in an office building with broad open windows. Outside the sun is setting. When Thane kills the guards and Nassana, he is masked in shadow. Throughout the rest of the scene, Thane is partially lit—the very visual image of a yin and yang.

Thane's religion draws a distinction between the body and soul. Later in the game, he notes that he bears no guilt for the murders he's committed—because his body was merely acting as a tool of those who hired him. But his photographic memory doesn't allow him to forget any of his jobs. Thus Thane is hounded by regret and prays regarding his own wickedness—wickedness that his religious tradition wouldn't bear on him. Clearly, Thane is a conflicted character and his religious practice is presented in a compelling fashion. His religion is personal and non-intrusive—it doesn't keep him from being able to participate in the mission before the team but rather motivates him to atone for guilt that he claims he should not bear. And as players, Thane's religion is compelling because it allows him to do the violence he must do in order to save the galaxy.

Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

The story of Oblivion takes place on the continent of Cyrodil. The game play is so open and ranging that players can have very different experiences based on the choices they made and what quests they pursue in different orders. The protagonist of the game is

an unnamed character who's in a prison cell (for what purpose and whether the imprisonment is rightful is never revealed) and happens to be in the cell when the king of the realm, Uriel Septim VII, needs to pass through the character's cell in order to escape assassination. He's killed in the process and passes on the Amulet of Kings to the character—entrusting him to take it to Martin Septim, his illegitimate son, in order to save the realm. And while this is the main plot of the story and involves a messianic plot and gates to hell, there are other quests the player can take part in. The scene examined here is from a side quest called the “Knights of the Nine”—a downloadable expansion released shortly after the original game.

The background of the quest involves a hero named Pelinal Whitestake who long ago slew the Ayleid sorcerer-king—who had worked to enslave the other races of Cyrodiil with the help from demonic daedra. The hero managed to kill the king's physical body, but his spirit lived on and in turn enslaved Whitestake. Nine knights, in armor that appears significantly like that of the Knights Templar, took up Whitestake's relics to use them to strike down the king. But they failed, turned on each other, and lost sight of their mission. The main character prays at each of the shrines for these fallen knights and their ghosts appear to him, asking him to take up Pelinal's armor and confront the sorcerer-king. The scene examined here occurs at the completion of the quest, after the character has slain the sorcerer-king and set the ghosts of the Knights of the Nine at peace. He has a conversation with the one remaining Knight of the Nine:

Sir Berich: “You redeemed my soul from the evil that had ensnared me. For that I am forever in your debt. The old bitterness that seemed so important to me in life -- what is that now? How to weigh that against my very soul?”

Character Response: *Sir Caius?*

Sir Berich: “The evil took hold of me the day that I slew Sir Caius on the Priory steps. I baited him, knowing his temper, and then I killed him when he drew against me. I killed him in cold blood, with the holy Sword itself! I could have

disarmed him or wounded him. But a cold pride had taken hold of me, and so I slew him, and went to war, and never returned. The evil grew upon me until I became cruel, a tyrannical ruler, a terror upon the land. In death, evil held me even tighter than in life. Thanks to you, that all is behind me. Sir Caius and I will go to Aetherius side by side, as of old. The gods are truly merciful.”

The story is Berich tells is redemptive. Berich appears in the uniform of the Knights of the Nine. He is translucent and blue—an indication that he is a spirit and not a man. The language he uses about soul redemption and mercy is not unlike that of orthodox Christian thought. But here this is an organized religious group that uses violence as their means of achieving goals, which is fair if this is a thinly veiled depiction of the Knights Templar. It’s worth noting also that the religion of Cyrodil is polytheistic with different races and groups worshiping different gods. The main deities of the game are the “Eight and One,” thus the deified connection to the Knights of the Nine. But largely, this appears to be a rather positive depiction of an organized religious tradition. The characters in the story are fallen, but redeemed through the actions of your character who takes part as a member of the order. But as in Castlevania, this story presents holy warriors who must perform violence in order to achieve to do their holy work.

Assassin’s Creed

Assassin’s Creed tells the story of Desmond Miles, a bartender kidnapped by a corporation that is interested in accessing memories encoded in his DNA. The Abstergo corporation has a machine that can access the memories of ancestors. In terms of gameplay, Assassin’s Creed is skates a thin line between an action game and a role-playing game. It was deemed worth examining for the purposes here because it does contain a vast narrative experience. The Abstergo Corporation is interested in accessing the memories of Desmond’s ancestor Altair ibn-La’Ahad, who was an assassin. In

Altair's world, there are two competing forces: the Templars—who are societally accepted and are overt in their power within society—and the assassins who work in the shadows and seek to subvert the powers of the Templars. Set during the Crusades, Altair begins the game as being a disgraced assassin who must assassinate a number of Templars in order to regain his former status. As the game progresses, Altair discovers that each of the targets have something in common—they're all seeking a powerful relic known as the Piece of Eden, which has the power to control people's minds. They're seeking the relic in order to draw people to their cause. In his ninth and final assassination, his target reveals a tenth Templar—the assassin who's worked as Altair's superior. In the scene examined, Altair confronts his superior Al Mualim who has the Piece of Eden and is using it to control people. Following this scene, Altair kills Al Mualim, after discovering the location of the other Pieces of Eden. When Desmond comes out of the machine, he discovers the Abstergo is modern-day front for the Templars and they plan to use his information to find the additional pieces of Eden.

The scene is set in broad daylight. Altair is glowing, his body suspended with arms outstretched—controlled by Al Mualim through the Piece of Eden. The following conversation follows.

Altair: "Tell me, "Master"... why did you not make me like the other Assassins? Why allow me to retain my mind?"

Al Mualim: "Who you are and what you do are twined too tight together. To rob you of one would have deprived me of the other. And those Templars had to die. [sighs] But the truth, is I did try, in my study, when I showed you the treasure. But you are not like the others. You saw through the illusion."

Altair: "Illusion?"

Al Mualim: "That's all it's ever done, this Templar treasure, this Piece of Eden, this word of God. Do you understand now? The Red Sea was never parted, water never turned to wine. It was not the machinations of Ares that spawned the Trojan War, but this! Illusions! All of them!"

Altair: "What you plan is no less an illusion--to force men to follow you against their will!"

Al Mualim: “Is it any less real than the phantoms the Saracens and Crusaders follow now? Those... craven gods who retreat from this world that men might slaughter one another in their names? They live amongst an illusion already. I'm simply giving them another, one that demands less blood.”

Altair: “At least they choose these phantoms.”

Al Mualim: ‘Oh do they? Aside from the occasional convert or heretic?’

Altair: “It isn't right.”

Clearly, the conversation makes some interesting claims about religion. Al Mualim's claim is that the Piece of Eden, not God's work, resulted in the perceived parting of the Red Sea, the turning of water into wine etc.—an explanation that fails to account for the power of the “Piece of Eden” itself.

The religion presented here is problematized. Throughout the game, the Templars are the primary enemies in the narrative. Yet at the conclusion of the story, the player discovers that Altair's superior is as corrupt, if not more so, than the Templars. And while Al Mualim claims he means to end the Crusades, his method imposes on the free will of the populace. So in this case, the narrative problematizes organized religion but at the same time creates a postmodern picture in which there isn't a viable alternative. Neither the secularists nor the Templars had pure intentions with the Piece of Eden.

Conclusion

What all of these games show, and what should have been anticipated, was the connection of religion to violence. There is a broad literature on violence in gaming. Violence is conflict and drama. And conflict and drama are key to making a good game. As narratives have become increasingly deep, religion has become a part of the stories of the protagonists and antagonists. So the fact that religion would end up being tied to religion is not unexpected. Given religion's checkered history with violence in reality, it could also be seen as reflective.

It should be acknowledged that this sample has more emphasis on violence than many might. These games do place an emphasis on Crusader narratives and thus the stories are trying to work through the theological and sociological questions that academics are still trying to work through—how did this happen? Why?

This research presents a good picture of depictions of religion with in the past three years and is representative of what religious depictions look like at this particular time (2009-2012). That said, this research has its limitations in that the games picked here did exclude mobile and Wii games—the Wii being a very popular console among children and families with young children. In future research, it may be useful to examine depictions in Wii games, perhaps *Legend of Zelda* as one that has gained longstanding popularity. A question raised in the research is one which has plagued a number of people (developers included): what is a role-playing game? This researcher found himself looking at games described as role-playing games and others described as action games—at times finding them remarkably similar. The issue here is a good one. As technology has improved, developers have taken advantage of the opportunity to tell better and deeper stories. Role-playing games historically have been characterized by the narrative structure, but one must pose whether that is still a fitting description since an increasing number of games have that narrative structure. And to what degree is one “playing a role” in any game?

This study also may be representative of the certain set of console systems—it cannot be said to be representative of the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System generation of games or the 16-bit Super Nintendo/Sega Genesis generation of games, etc.

Those games, like novels or articles or art, are placed in a particular technological and cultural context although there are similarities in what has been presented.

The picture presented of religion in the analyses shown here is a problematized one. This researcher initially went into this project thinking that organized religion would be shown in a bad light, and it often was, but more individualized “unorganized” religion was not shown to be somehow superior. It would be safe to say that what we do see in these scenes is a problematized view of religion and one that sees religion as a motivator of violence.

Bibliography

- Abell, Catharine and Bantinaki, Katerina, ed. *Philosophical Perspectives on Depiction*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Babovic, Branislav. "Combat Systems in RPG Games." In *ActionTrip*, 2000.
- Barton, Matt. "The History of Computer Role-Playing Games Part I: The Early Years (1980-1983)." In *Armchair Arcade*, 2006.
- Berger, Peter. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Harpswell, ME: Anchor, 1990.
- Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Persuasive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.
- Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1976.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1957.
- Fielder, Joe. "Atari Aged." In *GameSpot*, 2002.
- Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Gombrich, E.H. *Art and Illusion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1976.
- Kaye, Sharon, ed. *Lost and Philosophy*. Edited by William Irwin, Blackwell Philosophy and Popculture. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008.
- Lopes, Dominic. *Understanding Pictures*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- McCullough, J.J. "Nintendo Censorship."
- Murdoch, Julian. "God's Pr Problem: The Role of Religion in Videogames." In *Gamespy*, edited by Dan Stapleton. San Francisco, CA: IGN Entertainment, 2010.
- Nazifpour. "The Top 10 Coolest Religions in Video Games."
<http://www.gamefaqs.com/features/top10/2152.html>.

- Peacocke, Christopher. "Depiction." *Philosophical Review* 96, no. 3 (1987): 383-410.
- Potter, Tiffany and Marshall, C.W., ed. *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*. New York City, NY: Continuum Books, 2008.
- Rehak, Bob. "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar." In *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York City, NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Rilstone, Andrew. "Role-Playing Games: An Overview." In *RPGnet*, 1994.
- "Rpg Fan: The Definition of a Role-Playing Game!". In *RPG Fran*, 1998.
- Seay, Chris. *The Gospel According to Lost*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009.
- Vestal, Andrew. "The History of Console RPGs." In *GameSpot*, 2007.
- Winston, Diane, ed. *Small Screen Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009.
- Wolf, Mark J.P. and Perron, Bernard, ed. *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York City, NY: Routledge, 2003.

ⁱ These questions continue to motivate religious study. What constitutes religion? Does the depiction of a practice used in religions constitute a depiction of religion? Is there a meaningful differentiation between depictions of the spiritual and depictions of the religious?

ⁱⁱ See GetReligion.org and TheRevealer.org. The two websites tend to run along ideological guidelines. GetReligion.org is typically considered more conservative and is more popular than the more liberal TheRevealer.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are a number of great sources on this topic. See Kaye, 2008; Potter and Marshall, 2008; Seay, 2009; Winston, 2009; Wolf and Perron, 2003.

^{iv} See Nazifpour, 2010; Murdoch, 2010.

^v Part of what has contributed to the conflict over the term “role-playing game” is the rise of “WRPG” or Western Role-Playing Game. Role-playing games in West arose out of paper-and-pencil role playing, grew into free-choice open adventure personal computer games before reach consoles. These games tend to use the term more freely, including elements of shooting games for instance, and allowing players more non-linear play. In comparison, the tradition of the JRPG, from which *Final Fantasy* arises, is much more linear in play.

^{vi} Clearly there are other games with clear depictions of religion that could have been included in this study. Playstation Portable games *God of War: Chains of Olympus*, *Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth* and *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona* were useful games in terms of conceptualizing the connection between religion and gaming. They were ultimately excluded as case studies to better narrow on console game imagery. Ultimately, the conclusions of this study also hold true from the games mentioned above. And there are countless games that could be examined from prior systems that have religious imagery similar to many of the elements seen in these games: the *Breath of Fire* series, earlier *Final Fantasy* installments, *The Legend of Zelda* and the like.

^{vii} Most Castlevania games follow the same basic plotline as *Lords of Shadow*—the holy warrior with something at stake who must confront a great evil. *Lords of Shadow* is a different take on the genre because Gabriel slowly loses himself during the course of the game. The big twist at the end of the game is the discovery that Gabriel Belmont is in fact Dracula. There are frequent allusions to Gabriel losing himself to violence and hate. Gabriel himself is ashamed for much of the game of what he’s had to do/willing to do to bring his wife back to life. In the end, the game falls into the trop of many Japanese Role-Playing Games—that you can fight evil with evil. In a downloadable pack, Gabriel becomes a vampire himself in order to fight “The Forgotten One” and save humanity. This complicates the relationship between good and evil in the game. While there is clearly a line between holy and unholy presented in the game, the fact that Gabriel must eventually become unholy in order to commit a holy act is the flip side to what happens throughout the course of the game—Gabriel doing holy acts through violence.

^{viii} Note that while Thane’s religion provides the space for violence, it would be hard to label this a wholly negative depiction. Players wouldn’t like Thane if he was a pacifist. Players need Thane to be violent in order to save the galaxy. In a way, it would be seen as negative, crazy and perhaps selfish if Thane’s religion had caused him to give up fighting.