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Reporting Religion: Narrating Religion in Gaming Journalism

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Abstract: Increasingly issues of religion are reported by non-specialists or specialists in other fields. This study explores the narrative frames employed by gaming journalists in reporting about religion in video games. This was done through semi-structured interviews with gaming journalists (n=17) and an exploration of their produced gaming reviews (n=116) in relation to games with religious narratives. The study argues that journalists largely did not identify much regarding religion in their own content--even more explicit religious presentations were argued to have little role in a "game." However, the clearest religion journalists identified was gaming itself, presenting the experience of gaming as its own form of religious activity.

Keywords: gaming journalism, religion, gaming, narrative, lifestyle journalism.

**Note: This is the ACCEPTED version of this manuscript. Hence, minor changes may not be reflected in this piece.*

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In the first-person shooter game, *Bioshock Infinite*, the protagonist is tasked with entering a religious community in order to rescue a young woman. However, to even enter the community, the protagonist must undergo a baptism. This creates an interesting situation in that essential to the nature of the first-person shooter is the idea that the player is looking out through the game avatar's eyes. So in a way, the player must submit to a baptism. And then, once inside, the religion only gets deeper. The young woman the player must rescue is referred to as the Lamb and the Savior.

The religion in the shooter game was too much for Breen Malmberg, a gamer and devout Christian. Malmberg eventually, very publicly, returned the game. In an interview with the gaming journalism website Kotaku he said,

> I am basically being forced to make a choice between committing extreme blasphemy by my actions in choosing to accept this 'choice' or forced to quit playing the game before it even really starts […]Of course I cannot hold true to my beliefs and also commit this act, so I am therefor[e] forced to not play the game. (Hernandez, 2013, April 16)

The religious narratives in gaming emerge out of a community of actors: game players, game producers, and gaming journalists. Players will discuss religion informally through in-game communication (Perreault, 2015), through their fan communities (Perreault & Laughlin, 2019; Perreault & Mueller, 2020) and develop their own religious narratives using the procedural rhetoric of games (Bogost, 2008). Game producers at times are explicit in articulating the religious perspectives within their games (Schott, 2017). Yet of these actors, the journalist is the actor often required to provide an authoritative voice regarding the presentation of religion

(Hoover, 1998; Wright, 1997; Mason, 2010)—and yet, this would necessarily be something a gaming journalist would be untrained to address (Silk, 1998).

Religion tends to be represented poorly in journalism (Hoover, 1998) although the particularities of the pitfalls in reporting differ by media system (Thompson, Perreault & Duffy, 2017; Perreault, 2014). Readers express frustration that religion coverage doesn't connect with them (Silk, 1998), and misrepresents them (Hoover, 1998). Yet, as a form of lifestyle journalism, gaming journalism is a type of journalism structured and designed in order to be responsive to its gaming audience (Perreault & Vos, 2018, 2020).

To that purpose, this study explores the narratives created by gaming journalists in their coverage of religion in video games. Gaming journalism provides a fruitful avenue of exploration in that the GamerGate debates about journalistic ethics—discussed explicitly below—illustrated the significant strides gaming journalism has made in professionalism (Perreault & Vos, 2018) and the subject matter that they cover—illustrated by titles such as *Immortals Fenyx Rising, Assassin's Creed: Valhalla,* and *Church of Darkness*—is more religious than many realize. This study will argue that gaming journalism largely assessed religious depictions in gaming to be merely window dressing—imagery with little narrative impact—but saw gaming itself as a religious activity.

Narrative Theory

Narrative research focuses "attention on the way in which narrative strategies and conventions shape interpretations of journalistic events" (Lule, 1990, p. 272). Exploring news from a narrative perspective enables "a critique, a determination of whether or not…discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy and desirable guide to thought and action" (Fisher, 1984, p.

351) and can help to reveal foundational opinions about the nature of reality and humanity (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005). Most important for this analysis, narratives bring attention to what a society sees as reasonable and appropriate (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998) and through the analysis of these narratives the researcher "can find a new perspective on matters often left assumed or unexamined" (Lule, 1990, p. 272). The researcher using narrative theory explores settings, characters, narrators, heroes, and themes—in other words, the elements that contribute to a narrative.

Narrative theory (Fisher, 1985; Foss, 1996; Herman & Vervaeck, 2005; Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998) emphasizes the degree to which human beings are storytelling animals and tend to conceptualize the world according to heroes, villains, and plotlines. Narrative theory also helps identify the degree to which media make meaning out of events by applying culturally engrained stories to help explain what's happening (e.g. campaign horse race coverage may be narrated as a "tortoise and the hare" story). This approach employs the dynamic nature of narratives as a means with which to assimilate and understand new information (Hertog and McLeod, 2001). They are the more tangible expression of the narratives that structure the connections between broad concepts and content.

An important step in narrative analysis occurs through identifying the narrative devices employed—in particular by watching for the linguistic structures such as metaphors, visual icons, and catchphrases that indicate a particular narrative (Gamson & Modigliani, 1966). Lule (2004) also notes that the narrative researcher identifies elements within each text narrative that "provide context for figurative language: actors (or agents), settings (or scenes), actions (or acts), chronology (or temporal relations) and causal relations (or motives)" (p. 182). Such

elements need to be "exposed, criticized, belabored, used up" (Sontag, 1990, p. 182). For the purposes of this research, the primary narrative elements aimed to be uncovered are religious narratives.

Religious Narratives

While readership studies continually indicate that readers are interested in the topic of religion, this is nevertheless complicated by a difficulty in defining exactly what religion is. Few would have trouble recognizing and identifying particular religious traditions, so it is "perhaps surprising that there is little agreement about what religion is, or indeed, if 'it' is anything distinctive at all" (Harrison, 2006, p. 133). The difficulty resides in the "desire to separate a 'religious' from a 'secular' realm" (Harrison, 2006 p. 147), yet as Orsi (2013, 1997) indicates in his concept of *lived religion*, this then excludes the religion "best approached…by meeting men and women…in all the spaces of their experience" (Orsi, 1997, p. 7). The present study will not be able to offer a firm definition of what the "it" is in religion that at once makes it often recognizable as religion, yet is also nearly impossible to articulate. Building on Orsi's (2013) concept of *lived religion*, the present study does hope to be able to provide an operational definition that will allow this research to clearly identify the religion that might not be readily obvious, yet serves as part of the *lived religion* that is identified by players and, in turn, video game reviewers. Orsi (1997) noted four aspects of religious practice that will be used to identify the religious narratives appearing in games: (1) a sense of the "idiomatic possibility and limitation in a culture"—that is, the limits of what can be "desired, fantasized, imagined, and felt," (2) an understanding of the knowledge of the individual in a broader culture—how the individual knows what they know through their body, (3) an understanding of the social

structures such as moral responsibilities, expectations in regards to the allocation of resources, and cultural rituals as seen through marriage and kinship, and finally, (4) a sense of the tensions that strain within those social structures. This *lived religion* is often referenced through the imagery of religion or religious institutions in that this imagery can "confirm, manifest, express or promote a belief," which for the imagery's creator is "operationally religious" (Boyan, 1967, p. 487).

This concept of *lived religion* opens the door to possibilities of religion that exists outside of the religious institutions: the fanaticism of supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump (Sheldon, 2020), devotion to celebrities like Oprah Winfrey (Lofton, 2011), and—as will be addressed in this piece—perhaps even the religious nature of gaming itself. However, religion itself is often an a complicated, unusual concept for journalists and *lived religion* is even more so. Journalists tend to emphasize institutions in their coverage do their most peacemaking, informative reporting when mitigating conflicts which has clearly identified institutional leaders (Perreault, Duffy & Morrison, 2017).

Gaming Journalism

While other niche areas of journalism, such as immigration (Perreault & Paul, 2019), sports (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2018), and fashion (Motazerghaem, & Bagheri, 2020), have received attention for their coverage of religion, gaming journalism has yet to be explored. This is potentially a result of gaming journalisms perceived place in the field.

Within the journalistic field, gaming journalism is portrayed as "lacking professionalism, still consigned to a lower and marginal form of journalism" (Perreault & Vos, 2020, p. 172). This is likely a result of gaming journalisms origins in gaming-oriented public relations. However, this

occurs despite the fact that journalists not only affirm gaming as a fruitful journalistic topic (Perreault & Vos, 2020), but even see the potential of gaming to enhance journalism itself (Vos & Perreault, 2020). Nevertheless, it is field that finds itself "on the fringes when it came to topic orientation, audience orientation, style orientation, orientation by voice, and likely in terms of orientation by political engagement and professional status" (Perreault & Vos, 2020, p. 172). As Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) note, gaming journalism is often accused of having problems related to its organizational structure and its ethics—problems raised publicly in the midst of the GamerGate controversy (Perreault & Vos, 2018).

The 2014 GamerGate controversy saw gaming journalists responding to accusations of a cozy relationship with the gaming industry and attacks on women involved in all aspects of gaming journalism, criticism, promotions, and development. GamerGate, a male supremacist hate group, attacked gaming journalism for a too-close relationship with the gaming industry and that a growing number of reviews lacked "objectivity" (Dewey, January 29, 2015). GamerGate activists argued that gaming journalists were pushing a "social justice" agenda in their reviews (Dewey, October 14, 2014). In 2014-2015, this became a social media frenzy that led to death threats against prominent game developers and gaming journalists before largely dissipating (Perreault & Vos, 2018). Nevertheless, as Perreault and Vos (2018) indicate, GamerGate became a useful avenue for gaming journalists to articulate their place within the journalistic field. It must be acknowledged that connection with industry indicated in GamerGate occurs in other forms of lifestyle journalism (Hanusch, 2014) and, while journalists highly criticized gaming journalists for mangling their management of GamerGate (Perreault & Vos, 2020), it also bears noting that such hate groups have proven devastatingly effective at

leveraging many forms of journalism in order to create a platform for themselves (Perreault, Johnson & Klein, 2020).

Contemporary gaming journalism emerged out of business and technology journalism – a result of the unique nature of the medium (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009) and was one of the first niches in journalism to make the push toward digital-only, mobile oriented newsroom. So while lifestyle journalism was written into the subfield early on, it's technological push may have also heightened its orientation toward the audience (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020; Perreault & Stanfield, 2019; Usher, 2012). Despite the difficulty in assigning a clear moniker to gaming journalism, it is worth noting that this research will identify all participants in the study as *journalists* as opposed to *critics*, given that criticism still fulfills a facilitative function of journalism by mediating social commentary (Christians et al., 2009).

Reviews are attractive to audiences in that reviews help audiences make decisions about a particular piece of culture. Hall (2001) argues that reviews "provide summary and background information that contributes to the [buyers'] decision…by indicating whether the subject matter is interesting to them" (p. 402); hence, the reviewer then sees themself as having a "role with the primary function of organizing, administering, or managing information for others" (p. 402). Game reviews are then useful analytically in that they can show what "trends exist" in representation and also how the "game's reviewers regard these representations in their advice to potential players" (Ivory, 2006, p. 106), but also can get a sense of how the public feels about a given piece of culture (Hall, 2001). In light of this, the present research seeks to explore:

RQ 1: What narratives are most privileged in gaming journalism?

RQ 2: How are religious beliefs narrated in gaming journalism?

Method

This study conducted a multi-method analysis to address the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with gaming journalists (N=17), and a textual analysis was performed on gaming reviews (N=116) in both 1993 and 2013 to be able to get a thorough picture of gaming journalism. The reviews were first selected by collecting video game reviews from *Joystiq, Kotaku, VICE, GamePro Magazine, Forbes, IGN, Polygon, RPGFan, RPGamer, The Guardian, The New York Times, Electronic Gaming Monthly, Game Informer* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Potential interview subjects were initially identified by noting reviewers who appeared commonly in the news organizations.

It is worth emphasizing that this study assumes that the video game reviewers exist within the gaming journalism subfield in particular and the broader journalistic field in general. While all journalists interviewed in this sample had experience reviewing, some journalists were only conducted reviewing as a small part of their overall position while others it made up the entirety of their work. This assumption is both practical and theoretical—in gaming journalism, there are many cases where journalists also conduct reviews and so drawing the line between journalist and critic becomes problematic. As a form of lifestyle journalism, it is assumed that the form itself is designed to have a guidance function that would be built into criticism (Hanusch, 2014).

After data was collected from both gaming reviews and interviews with gaming journalists, a narrative analysis was applied to both the interview transcripts and the gaming reviews. Initial narratives were drawn from the interviews and then compared to the textual

analysis in order to confirm consistency. The analysis of the production was informed by semi-structured interviews with 17 gaming journalists from a variety of publications—*Joystiq, Kotaku, VICE, GamePro Magazine, Forbes, IGN, Polygon, RPGFan, RPGamer, The Guardian, The New York Times, Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *Entertainment Weekly*. In these interviews, journalists were asked how they found stories, collected stories, what went into a "good" games journalism review, and specific questions about religion coverage as related to their own work.

Interviews are especially valuable in studying journalists in that it provides clarity in understanding their work production process as well as the content they produce (Gans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978). Interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to nearly an hour and a half. Interviews were conducted over a three-month period beginning August 2014 and concluding November 2014. The number of interviews allowed the researcher to perform multiple interviews at some gaming journalism. Journalists who reviewed digital games or edited reviews of digital games were privileged in the selection process and this limited the sample size. The narrative analysis was conducted on news game journalism reviews from many of above publications from 2013 and, ten years prior, 1993 in order to more comprehensively speak about not only the nature of religion coverage in gaming journalism but also its trajectory.

These interviews were conducted via Skype and phone and drew journalists from *IGN, Kotaku, Electronic Gaming Monthly, Forbes, Polygon, The Guardian, VICE, RPGFan, RPGamer, The New York Times, Entertainment Weekly*, and *Joystiq*. All journalists interviewed were granted anonymity given that this study is most interested in the narratives about religion at an

institutional level. In the analysis that follows, participants are labeled solely by letter as is the recommended ethical approach according to the American Psychological Association.

Of the journalists interviewed, 15 were male and 2 were female with an average of 8.6 years experience writing and reporting on games. While more men than women inhabit the niche, the exaggerated difference in the sample is owed to the GamerGate controversy, given the dangers women faced in reporting on gaming at the time (Perreault & Vos, 2018; Massanari, 2017). The vast majority of gaming journalists worked in New York and San Francisco—hubs for the gaming industry. Of the journalists interviewed, 4 were editor-in-chief, 3 were reviews editor, 3 were senior reporters/writers, and other journalists included 3 freelance journalists (with regular **outlets** for their writing), a senior editor, a managing editor, a news editor and a senior art director who serves as the authority for games at his or her publication.

The year 2013 presented a unique emphasis on religion in the games released and reviewed (Fahey, 2010, 5 April). Reviews are an effective journalistic product to explore for narrative in that they serve as a sort “evaluative journalism” (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009, p. 3). Reviews are a place where, naturally, journalists execute a normative approach in telling readers what they should or should not purchase (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009) and where they are most likely to have to play a game as a part of their research.

The text study analyzed two sets of gaming journalism. The first set was drawn from publications in 2013 and the second set was drawn from a similar list of publications from 1993. First, the texts were looked at as a collective whole of 116 articles and then the coverage between the two time frames was compared. Seventy-four articles were drawn from the 2013

text study and forty-two were drawn from 1993. If the same game was reviewed by multiple publications the author determined these reviews were preferable for analysis as this allowed for examination across publications to determine both commonalities and differences in how publications assessed religious narratives; hence, many of the reviews emphasize the high-selling, big-budget games that are more likely to be reviewed and discussed in a wide range of gaming magazines.

Initial narratives of gaming journalism were identified in order to address the first research question before looking more specifically for the narration of religious beliefs in the second research question. By identifying the structures first, this would help reveal the limitations and capacities of narrating religion. This was done by first identifying dominant plotlines and protagonists and antagonists, and then identifying settings, actions, and causal relations.

Narratives were drawn from across discourse in the interviews and reviews, but data will indicated below with interviews indicated by participant letters and gaming review text given standard citations in the analysis.

Narratives of Gaming Journalism

In RQ 1, the question is posed "What narratives are most privileged in gaming journalism?" The three narratives were identified in the data and all operated at a foundational, definitional level, by elaborating the definition of gaming itself. The dominant narrative presented in the data presented gaming as an embodied experience, capable of digitally *transporting* the player.

Gaming as Embodied Experience

Gaming journalism texts privileging the narrative of the embodied experience tend to be heavily story-focused and anecdotal from the outset. Typically, the protagonist of such stories is the author, and by extension the game player, who is experiencing a new world through the game. Stories tend to linguistically indicating that a game takes you to different places; e.g., it *transports* or *travels*. This narrative was indicated through interviews with journalists who frequently emphasized the power of the digital game in providing the sort of experiences discussed by Gee (2003)— that a game can not only mentally immerse you in a place, but through the mediated haptic interactivity of a controller or keyboard, allow players to experience something new. In interviews, gaming journalists also thought of these new experiences as being tied to choices in identity and encountered ideas.

For example, in a review of The Secret of Monkey Island for *GamePro Magazine*, a reviewer noted that players should “prepare for a voyage” (Otter Mattic, February 1993, p. 56). The article is written in second person, e.g. "You navigate Guybrush through this sea faring adventure via a point-and-click interface that’s easy to learn and familiar to PC and video game players alike” (p. 56). In the case of Otter Mattic (February 1993), its clear that there is a line that exists between player and avatar in that it is the avatar that is on a digital journey—the player is simply making that journey possible. Here the line between avatar and actor is diminished—the gaming reviewer *is* the hero of the video game—and hence also attached causally to the motivation to win or complete the story. Similarly, in a review of *Equinoix* from *GamePro Magazine*, the author noted, “As you traverse each kingdom...." (Unknown Gamer, May 1993, pg. 80). It is just a brief statement but the sentiment reveals an assumption rooted in the narrative in the article, that the player and avatar are one. The player is not of course,

physically traversing anything—the player is holding a controller and looking at a television screen, but the digital character is doing quite a bit. The assumption in the embodied experience narrative, many times, is that the avatar and the player are one: the avatar has the benefit of the players experiences in other games, and the player is able to see a new game through the eyes of the avatar.

Such experience is not always about location, but about the personalities encountered in the game's narrative. In Martin (January 30, 2013), he reviewed *Fire Emblem: Awakening* for *Joystiq* and compared the game to a soap opera. What brings the game to life, Martin (January 30, 2013) argued, are the stories and characters. In the review, he introduces the characters by first name without providing the reader any information about the character—it expresses and anticipates a degree of familiarity with the story. It assumes perhaps that the reader is already sharing in the same narrative and encountering the same personalities, perhaps bringing them into their lives in even intimate settings in that "you can visit *Fire Emblem* at any time, pulling out your 3DS on the bus or on your lunch break or before dozing off at night" (Martin, January 30, 2013). This paints a picture of gaming as an all-consuming activity, thoroughly interwoven into the fabric of one's daily secular activities.

The other minor narratives identified perceive gaming more as a singular activity that is simply a *part* of a person's day.

Gaming as a Family Activity

In interviews gaming journalists at times conceptualized gaming as a method of play tied to family. One participant noted that she grew up playing digital games with her brothers and as she grew older, games continued to be important to her—in that it connected her with her

family (Participant D). Many journalists had similar stories. When asked how they became interested in digital games, some talked at some length about being introduced to games as a child: playing *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* with their father, *Tetris* with their mother or fighting with older siblings for the chance to play *Contra III*. Such responses express a level of nostalgia for the social activity of gaming, which gives the activity value beyond that of the game itself. As a result of these personal experiences, the activity takes on an additional dimension. Another journalist noted that while he began playing games in kindergarten and had vivid memories of playing prior to school in the mornings, he wanted to wait until his newborn son "gets a little older" in order to share the hobby with him in a meaningful way (Participant E). Participant E stressed the importance of the social elements of play, while indicating his desire that this social element be integral in how his son is introduced to games.

The importance of these family experiences with games appeared in the texts as well. Colin Moriarty of *IGN* opened his review of *The Puppeteer* by noting that his girlfriend, who observes him playing games for work frequently but does not play games herself, stopped what she was doing to see the game. By using this personal experience as an opening anecdote, he is revealing something he found to be a unique aspect of the game—that it appeals to family members who don't typically play games (Moriarty, September 6, 2013). In a review by Robertson (November, 14, 2013), the writer similarly effusively praises *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds* for its ability to unite generations.

In short, in this narrative, games are defined nostalgically with the writers as protagonists—reflecting on their own life story and how gaming fit in with it.

Gaming as Business

In the narrative of gaming as business, the stories typically start out with financial information about the status of a game developer and these stories typically tend to revolve around large budget console or personal computer game releases. The protagonist in these narratives is the game developer who has either excelled or failed to create a financially successful game. In these reviews, the game is seen as fitting in with some larger story about the financial viability of a company as a whole, the business practices of a company, or the vitality of the gaming industry. Time is often integral to these narratives in showing the financial progress of a company, which is central in these reviews since "narrative is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of a temporal existence" (Ricoeur, 2010).

In a review of *The Sorcerer's Kingdom* in GamePro Magazine (Staff, June 1993), the reviewer steps into the review by initially talking about the game developer. In this case, the company that made this game went without releasing a new title for years, but in 1993 produced one of the few role-playing games available for the console system.

The clearest indication of this narrative is in the reviewing rubric itself. In 1993, a rubric that addresses sound, gameplay and graphics was explicit, often with ratings granted to each individual category. Yet such a rubric persists in some publications even in 2013. This rubric provides context for the actions of the game developer, or even just the act of the games' release. At times that rubric is implicit—only noticeable by the topics addressed in the review—and at times explicit with paragraphs set aside for each category. But why is such a rubric necessary? If gaming is business, then it follows that elements of a new business product need to be dissected in order for potential customers to know whether they should buy.

The audience for this narrative is not the game player, but the game consumer, in that the assumption is that the player is purchasing games and as an investor in a particular product, they are stakeholders in the news about the company. These narratives of family activity, embodied experience, and business then also inform the ways in which religion can be discussed.

Narrating Religion

In RQ 2, the question was posed "How are religious beliefs narrated in gaming journalism?" The previous section elaborated on the narratives that defining gaming—these narratives should be seen as the context that limit and provide opportunity for religious narratives. For example, if one considered the narrative of Gaming as Business, then the only religious narratives that might be relevant could relate to the financial appeal of a game. The religious narratives in gaming journalism appeared in three predominant ways:

The Backdrop of Religion

This narration foregrounds gameplay mechanics and so narratives are backgrounded. Kat Bailey in a review of *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, a Japanese role-playing game, notes that the franchise is known an emphasis on "a menagerie of cuddly, bizarre, and occasionally terrifying demons," which "the player not only must combat," but also "recruit" (Bailey, July 10, 2013). The presence of demons would initially seem to be hallmark religious imagery, where the religious elements might be discussed. But Bailey (July 10, 2013) identifies the game as a part of the "monster-collecting" genre—not unlike *Pokemon*. So instead of adopting the name demon, she collapses it as a gameplay feature hosted by other games. In short, Bailey sees the use of the term demon as a largely incidental religious term that is not descriptive of the actual

narrative and largely unimportant in terms of the actual experience of playing the game. As a result, Bailey (July 10, 2013) spends little time discussing the concept of demons in the game and more time discussing the gameplay features. This is indicative of the "idiomatic possibility and limitation" (Orsi, 2006, p. 7) in game reviewing that places the possibility of demons from Judeo-Christian texts/folklore outside the bounds of what games represent.

Similarly, one study participant (Participant A) argued that explicit depictions of religion are not all that prevalent in games in that religious elements tend to be used as background material in a game. He noted that after playing the game *Wolfenstein*, a first-person shooter game in which the enemies are Nazis, he got the sense that the main character EJ Vlaskiewicz was Jewish. The creators of the current game in the franchise said they wanted the main character's background to be an unanswered question. Yet the original creators of Wolfenstein confirmed that the character was intended to be Jewish. Participant A noted that he "found [the creator's reticence to confirm the character's faith] strange because this could be a compelling aspect of the game, to have a game where you're machine-gunning Nazis to know that the character that you're playing is Jewish or not, would add an extra level of interest" but he admitted that knowing this wouldn't necessarily change the nature of the gameplay itself (Participant A).

He notes that religion is most often "wallpaper" that has little impact on the interactivity (Participant A). Similarly, another participant (Participant G) noted that this "set dressing" is made to communicate "a certain either 'this is uncomfortable, I am in a scary house and there are crucifixes.' Or 'this is a good area' like in *Diablo*, there are crosses now and you've made into the good spot."

Religious narratives are spoilers

Indicating a religious narrative could be seen as a way to spoil the story of the game. This is predominantly a movie critique approach in that religion becomes ignored or minimized because it is related to a plot point that would "spoil" the game. Spoilers are highly critiqued in film reviewing literature in that the author is “putting off audiences” if they “give away plot details” or even just “technical secrets” (MacDonald, 2016, p. 32).

In a review of *Devil May Cry*, Jess Conditt of Joystiq places the setting of the story as the Internet since the game received significant negative feedback initially from an online, reactionary fan base. She then describes the heritage of the main character Dante as being the product of the union between an angel and demon but prods little deeper (Conditt, January 15, 2013). In the gameplay, she notes that the player can swap “angel and demon weapons on a whim” (Conditt, January 15, 2013)—this phrase implies that the religious elements of the game are innately tied to gameplay and thus unavoidable for discussion. Yet she does not go any further in describing the religion of the narrative in that—like a film review—it might spoil something about the game to know more about who Dante is fighting and why.

Similarly, in the review of *Bioshock: Infinite*, Xav de Matos of *Joystiq* alluded to the major topics discussed in the game: race, religion, and class. Yet de Matos avoids spoiling the ending.

> But the ending is marvelous, and you'll have to trust me when I say that BioShock Infinite's final section – dedicated entirely to its narrative – handily disposes of any minor gripes (de Matos, March 25, 2013).

All of this together reflects the narrative strategy regarding reviews articulated in McDonald's (2016), that a *bad* review gives away too much of the story. Hence, there are cases where the religion maybe written into the subject matter but it may simply reveal too much to discuss it.

Religion is in the Experience of the Game

This is more of a self-revelatory writing approach, in that it explores the mystical experience of gameplay itself. This approach appears very rarely—and not at all in the current text sample—yet in interviews several gaming journalists indicated that they had written from this narrative in regards to specific games.

In an interview with a senior writer at GamesBeat, he described the game *Journey* produced by thatgamecompany in 2012. *Journey* is an award-winning game that drew attention for its clear religious message (Parker, August 2, 2012). The GamesBeat journalist noted:

> So thatgamecompany has a game *Journey*. It has … a very religious message about how you start on a journey, stick with it, it gets hard, you may die and you may be reborn and along the way, you are going to sort of come out of your journey, but ultimately the experience is solitary or discrete. I think there have been some very creative approaches to weaving religious belief into games (Participant P).

Similarly, in an interview, an editor introduced a game he considered "mystical" (Participant L): *Dark Souls*, which has been discussed often in regards to its near-legendary difficulty (Dahlen, January 9, 2012). The editor noted that the experience of playing the game is mystical in that "it is a path to enlightenment" (Participant L). He noted that there was a "release" in completing the game because it is so challenging (Participant L).

Religion is discussed most explicitly in Religion is the Experience, which as noted earlier, appears much more rarely as opposed to Religion as Backdrop or Religion as a Spoiler.

Conclusion

This study explored the way in which gaming journalists narrate religion through interviews with gaming journalists (n=17) and an analysis of gaming journalism texts (n=116). This was done by first identifying the narratives written into gaming journalism, which were built upon differing conceptions of gaming, and then locating the discourse of religion within the narrative. The way that religion appeared in gaming journalism makes sense when examined through the lens of the narrative. For example, if gaming is business then it would make sense to possibly not discuss religion at all unless it had a clear impact on a person's purchasing decision. If the religious elements may have an impact on purchasing then it would be worth considering as a "spoiler"—something that could potentially decrease the value of the video game if discussed in too much depth. The other two definitions of gaming—as a family activity and as an experience—are interactive definitions of gaming. Hence, it would make sense that religion be seen as a backdrop to game. The rare case when religious plot elements would be worth discussing would be if they affected the actual interactive nature of the game. That is, if the religion was experiential. And it should be noted, that gaming journalism texts and gaming journalists identified a few games where this was the case. But in particular, several gaming journalists discussed *Journey*, a game with little text and context, where an understanding of the story and purpose of the game comes quite literally from the journey. The journey in the game culminates to an ending that has implications for questions of sacrifice and the afterlife. But the reason the religious elements of this game were acknowledged was

because of its experiential nature. It is worth noting a difference here in the datasets. The interview texts served to provide useful context for the content in the reviews, in particular, interview texts did a good job of denoting the religious representations that occurred in games even when not explicitly indicated in the reviews themselves.

However, what this study demonstrates is that the religion identified most clearly in gaming journalism is actually gaming itself. In other words, while gaming journalism largely did not engage with or narrate the religion in games, this may be because the most religious experience identified is not an experience traditionally classified as *religion*. Prior literature in *lived religion* has supported the conception of gaming as religion (Wagner, 2012, 2014; Campbell & Grieve, 2014), and the data in this study offers clear support. In the narrative of Gaming as a Family Activity, gaming journalism indicated a sense of the "structures of social experience" as well as a sense of the "tensions" within these structures (Orsi, 2006, p.6). By acknowledging the role of age in introducing his son to video games, Participant E is indicating the role that gaming plays in the social structure of his family and indicating his value for introducing it in the appropriate manner. Through the lens of *lived religion,* the introduction of gaming sounds almost alike to a coming-of-age religious celebration. In the narrative of Gaming as Embodied Experience, the gaming journalism indicates an "understanding of the body in culture" through the identification between the "self" and the "avatar" (Martin, January 30, 2013; Unknown Gamer, May 1993). Gaming in this narrative then becomes an awareness of the perhaps transcendent experience of exploring a world through the body of an avatar. And in the narrative of Gaming as Business, at once this serves to provide limitations and possibilities for religious experience when employed. It could be critiqued in this conception gaming could

simultaneously serve as both a "product" and a "religious experience"—yet this does not innately separate it from other religious phenomena as this has also been a critique of Scientology and other "traditional" religious traditions (Behar, 1993, May 6; Frantz, 1997, March 9). Yet at the same time, this narrative does address structures of social experience in that it has a stake in the allocation of financial resources.

What this study aimed to examine was the coverage of religion in gaming journalism by examining the institutional level of the field. This study hence employed not only interview but also text analysis to examine the production of the content. The institution provides a definition of religion, which circumscribed attention to a form of religion that is both relatively rare in appearance and perhaps rarer still in discussion. Furthermore, examination of texts separated by a 20-year period also illustrates that this approach is by no means new. The definitions of gaming narrated were as plentiful in 1993 as in 2013. While the journalists never explicitly described the gaming activity as a "religion," they nevertheless articulated practices that align with Orsi's (2006) conception of a *lived religion*. Through this lens its then also more understandable why "traditional" religious depictions were not as explicit in this study. This study demonstrates that as a form of "evaluative journalism" then (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009, p. 3), what gaming reviews actually evaluate about religion are only certain appearances of religion. Furthermore, this provides an indication of how lifestyle journalists more broadly address issues of religion when it is tertiary to their specialty—they root it in the issues central to their niche and in gaming that is predominantly the gameplay experience.

Furthermore, in that narrative theory helps identify that which a society finds reasonable and acceptable (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998), it is also worth considering the degree

to which this limited narratives of religion as experiential, spoiler, or backdrop are indicative of societal feelings of religion more broadly. Certainly, an increasing apathy toward religion has been highly reported (Lipka, 2015, May 12) and the narrative of religion as backdrop and spoiler provide further evidence of that. Yet it could be that the most religious activities occurring—such as gaming—are those not readily narrated as religion in journalism.

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