Negotiating Spiritual Uncertainty through the Lens of Videogames

Individual and Societal Struggles with Belief Systems in the *Dragon Age* and *Hate* Series

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Introduction

One way of looking at the relationship between videogames and spirituality would be to broadly identify two trends: Some embrace the potential of speculative fiction to emphatically confirm the existence of higher powers and explore how that impacts a diverse range of fictional societies as well as game mechanisms – bringing forth concepts from divine magic to entire professions such as miracle-working clerics and paladins, to the appearance of physical avatars of the gods. Meanwhile, the second group of games use the backdrop of fictional settings to mirror our contemporary uncertainties, doubts and questions about religion and spirituality much more closely, leaving the existence of higher powers suspended in perpetual doubt. This chapter takes a look at the second group and explores the functions and outcomes of asking spiritual questions that are extremely pertinent to us today in interactive fictional narratives which remove those questions from their usual context.

Videogames are well-suited to the exploration of spiritual doubt, in particular, because they are ever only an assortment of options and possibilities without the player's input. Thus, they can forcefully convey the weight of spiritual doubts and the difficulty of having to make a decision anyway: If the player does not decide what their stance on the matter in question is – and the consequences can be wide-reaching in some games – the game simply will not continue. Anyone who has ever played an RPG knows the tyranny of a blinking cursor, waiting for you to make a decision you feel extremely torn about.[1]

1 'You' in this case consciously conflates the player and the player character. Players may, of course, make in-game choices reflecting what they think the player character would or should do, rather than their own, real stance on an issue. However, the distinction is largely irrelevant with regard

Thus, I argue that videogames are indeed an extremely fitting medium to explore difficult ethical questions and issues of spiritual uncertainty.

To this end, the present chapter conducts an analysis of the treatment of spirituality in two very different game series: BioWare's triple-A high-fantasy *Dragon Age* series (since 2009) on the one hand, and, on the other, indie developer Christine Love's critically acclaimed but comparatively much smaller, lesser-known sci-fi visual novel series consisting of *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012) and its sequel *Hate Plus* (2013). Both series are excellent examples of how "digital games often rely on important cultural and religious content to drive both the narrative and gameplay, utilizing these modes as unique forms of cultural communication and valence" (Campbell/Grieve 2014: 2). *Dragon Age* and Christine Loves' *Hate* games engage with postmodern fears and doubts surrounding the potential absence of a higher power and the practical difficulties of using religion as a moral compass, as well as the potential alternatives for finding guiding principles to ethical living. The two games doing so in extremely different contexts – regarding narrative genre, type of game, and even production budget – promises to provide a more well-rounded and nuanced answer to the question, 'How do videogames portray spiritual doubts?'.

Both the *Dragon Age* series and the *Hate* games portray societies that are deeply conflicted in their relationship to spirituality, and are trying to work out what the implications of their spiritual uncertainty should be for some of their most pressing moral issues. These issues, though at first glance highly specific to the two fictional societies, actually drive very directly at spiritual doubts and moral problems that are either highly relevant in the real world today, or timeless concerns. As this chapter is going to show, the important contribution science fiction and fantasy (SF&F) videogames can make to the debate around these topics is twofold: (1) They remove these issues from their usual context just enough to allow us to see them with new eyes, unencumbered by firmly entrenched positions, age-old arguments, and biases. This could be said of SF&F stories in any medium, of course, but this narrative strategy can be applied with unusual force in games, because (2) games insistently prompt the player to actively engage with and take a position in these debates, since the game simply does not continue without the player's input.

Games as a medium are so particularly suited to producing engagement with difficult issues because they are, in Eric Zimmerman's terms (2004: 158), explicitly interactive. Unlike novels or films, which feature cognitive and functional interactivity, but exist as complete works independently of their audience, games exhibit explicit interactivity, i.e., they only work and fully take shape if players interact with them, and require "Participation with Designed Choices and Procedures" (ibid.). Spiritual doubt integrates fruitfully into this environment, as doubt already implies the great difficulty in choosing one of multiple options; making the player choose anyway can be a powerful way to make them consider their own position in debates to which they may have otherwise remained undecided spectators.

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to the particular concerns of this chapter, since the player (unless they pick an option at random) still has to engage with the issue and make a decision on what they consider a justifiable position, whether for themselves or for their main character – and indeed, if the two differ, this friction can deepen their engagement with the topic.

Knowable Divinity

In order to explore the dynamic of spiritual doubt and choice in videogames, it is necessary to make a brief detour and first take a look at some firmly established tropes and well-known clichés relating to spiritual certainty in videogames, before then delving into the analysis of how *Dragon Age* and the *Hate* games subvert these familiar narratives.

Many games associated with the narrative genre of high fantasy, and especially many role-playing games (RPGs) – including the various subsets such as tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) –, have developed, over several decades, a familiar trope of 'knowable divinity'. This is only one aspect of why, as Stef Aupers points out, "there is often an affinity between play on the one hand and spirituality on the other" (2015: 76). In this context, what 'knowable divinity' means is, quite simply, that divinity in many high-fantasy settings is a matter of not necessarily believing so much as knowing.

The mythopoeic environment of high-fantasy storyworlds in general lends itself to the inclusion of the divine among its many incarnations of the mythological, otherworldly and supernatural (cf. ibid: 78–79). Gods and divine beings tend to feature heavily in the lore and background stories of such fictional worlds. Often, the most pious inhabitants of these worlds are imbued with magical powers in return for their service to the gods. From games in the *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition, to many contemporary bestsellers such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), players are familiar with the concept of divine magic: High-fantasy storyworlds that involve both organised religion and magic often include the possibility for clerics and other devoted believers (priests, paladins, shamans, druids, etc.) to channel spiritual energy in palpable manifestations to heal, cause damage, transform objects or work other miracles.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to games, but appears in many high-fantasy texts across different media. What is special about the representation of this type of reliable divine intervention in interactive environments is that players can actually explore divinity by applying the scientific method. For example, by repeatedly performing actions such as prayers or spells depending on divine magic within the game, players can empirically answer the question whether there really is a higher power in that storyworld in a fairly straightforward manner – after all, there is objectively perceptible, reliably repeatable proof that the gods interact with the daily lives of ordinary mortals in well-ordered, predictable patterns. If a cleric's prayer for healing is answered swiftly and effectively, every time, the existence of a divine power is all but proven.

The gods in these storyworlds are real and knowable. Their steadfast divine support conveys a comforting sense of confirmation, a feeling that one's prayers are heard and perhaps even answered, but the extent to which divine intervention is predictable and recreatable in these games also reduces miracles to a mundane, mechanical process which quickly becomes devoid of spiritual meaning. Players certainly do not rejoice and praise the gods every time a healer casts a spell. If the gods dispense blessings like a bubble gum machine, they lose much of their mysticism and dignity. 'Having faith', in the sense of persevering in one's religious belief even in the face of adversity, is no longer

necessary. The gods in these fictional worlds are knowable to an extent where belief becomes obsolete.[2]

A complete loss of mysticism is rather at odds with the internal logic of belief. If believing is no longer necessary, what distinguishes a deity from a natural law? High-fantasy RPGs in general are quite good at prompting this realisation, though few engage further with it.

Religious Uncertainty in the *Dragon Age* Series

In terms of Jason Anthony's typology of religious games, the *Dragon Age* series falls into the category of 'allomythic games', i.e., "[g]ames that explore nonexistent traditions […], providing a first-person way to step into these traditions and practice them." (Anthony 2014: 39). The series is a rather typical representative of this category, given that Anthony observes that "the deepest examples of these [allomythic games] belong to longer fantasy and sci-fi RPG environments, where deep narrative is key to gameplay" (ibid.). However, *Dragon Age* also breaks with some of the standard ways for fantasy RPGs to portray religion – outlined above –, even though it seems, in many regards, like a typical high-fantasy setting at first glance.

Applying the high-fantasy repertoire (cf. Iser 1978: 69) and the rule of minimum departure – audiences assuming that a storyworld works either like the real world or, "[i]n the case of fantastic texts [… like a] landscape constructed on the basis of other texts" (Ryan 2014: 45), i.e., using the repertoire to make assumptions about the storyworld that are not explicitly stated or contradicted in the text – new players may at first think that some of the familiar rules around spirituality in fantasy settings apply here. Drawing on general knowledge about these types of settings, it seems natural, when the Chantry is first introduced as a major organised religion in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), to assume that it reveres a very real deity (referred to as 'the Maker') and that this religion's most important prophet, Andraste, is to be taken at face value. However, *Dragon Age* soon begins to undercut this familiar pattern.

The first grain of doubt is, arguably quite elegantly, integrated into the game mechanics. The only characters in the game who can gain access to healing abilities are 'spirit mages', whose abilities explicitly come from bonding with a benign otherworldly spirit. Spirits are considered definitely non-divine and potentially dangerous beings. Their reality is beyond question, however, given that the appearance of (malignant) spirits is a common problem which shapes much of the storyworld's power dynamics. Representatives of the Chantry may take care of the sick and wounded, but they do so by means of regular medicine, not by working miracles. There is no playable cleric class, and when a former Chantry sister, Leliana, joins the protagonist's group, her skillset has nothing to do with her faith, although it is made clear more than once that her belief remains strong. There is even a possible outcome in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* ([referred to as *Inquisition*] BioWare 2014), the third part of the series, in which Leliana becomes the new Divine,

2 This is not a value judgement, but merely an observation on the way game-mechanical representations of divinity interact with the logic of belief.

the highest spiritual leader of the Andrastian Chantry. Even in that capacity, however, Leliana is shown as a shrewd politician, informed by her past as a rogue and spymaster (that being her skillset in terms of the games' rules), not a devout miracle worker.

Building on these slightly suspicious incidents, part three of the series, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* goes into greater detail regarding the Chantry and questions of faith, as the protagonist themselves stumbles into a position of spiritual leadership. The protagonist has a vision at the start of the game and is left with a magical mark on their hand as a result, which several characters interpret as a sign of divine favour. Consequently, the protagonist is thrust into the role of a prophet, 'the Herald of Andraste', and later becomes the Inquisitor. In dialogues throughout the game, the protagonist is repeatedly prompted to express their opinion on whether they are indeed touched by the Maker, or whether they are a sceptic, rejecting the religious explanations projected onto their experiences by devout Andrastians. The player is confronted with a religious legitimisation of the protagonist's quickly growing political power and has to decide not only what they (or their player character) think of the matter, but also whether and how much to exploit other characters' beliefs in order to attain goals that are pragmatic rather than religious in nature. The game thus turns a very personal question – 'Do you have faith?' – into an unavoidable political issue.

Doubt about the straightforward existence of the Maker is reinforced when, much later in the game, the vision and the mark are indeed explained by events other than divine intervention, and the villain of the game, Corypheus, goes so far as to boldly claim that he has found proof on his travels into the Fade (the realm of spirits and magic) that the gods do not exist: "I have seen the throne of the gods, and it was empty." (BioWare 2014: 'In Your Heart Shall Burn') The protagonist is repeatedly given the opportunity (and sometimes obligated) to explore their interpretation of these developments in conversation with other characters. Further interest is added to the ongoing back-and-forth about the legitimacy of the protagonist's position as spiritual leader by a minor character named Mother Giselle, a Chantry priest who repeatedly presents counter-narratives to the potential disillusionment the protagonist encounters through Corypheus and the revelations about the vision and mark. She points out that Corypheus might have reason to misrepresent his experiences in the Fade, and that mundane explanations for certain events do not preclude the possibility that these events are also expressions of a divine will (BioWare 2014: dialogue at Skyhold). The game never delivers a definitive answer to these issues, leaving all possibilities open and the player suspended in uncertainty, having to make up their own mind about whom to believe.

Thus, *Dragon Age*'s superficially standard high-fantasy representation of religion actually turns out to contain much more uncertainty than usual, more closely resembling faith and religion as we know them in our own world: Religion plays a big role in some people's lives, but it remains up to the interpretations of the individual whether we see the events around us as expressions of a divine will, natural laws, or coincidence and chaos. The characters in the *Dragon Age* series increasingly negotiate crises of faith strongly resembling our real-world uncertainties. The Maker cannot be proven, but in the end, his existence is not conclusively disproven either. Faith here remains faith in the sense of believing without knowing.

The series takes a slightly different approach, exploring another nuance of spiritual doubt, in its portrayal of the culture and religion of the elves. By the end of *Inquisition*, it becomes clear that several of the game's characters, notably Flemeth and Solas, are actually figures from elven lore who have been wandering the world for thousands of years. In dialogue, they refer to more such figures, more or less proving those characters' historical existence, too. However, even this apparently straightforward revelation that some of the elven gods and other beings of legend are real, physical presences within the storyworld raises more questions than it answers. Instead of engaging with the fundamental uncertainty of whether or not there is a Maker, the elven gods represent questions about the nuances of divinity. It is confirmed beyond a doubt that there is a factual basis for the elves' religious lore, but the feeling of security that dogma can provide is dissolved by the finer details of that confirmation – both in the exact nature of the historical basis of the myths and in the characters of Solas as Flemeth themselves, who blatantly subvert expectations (the audience's and the storyworld participants') of what gods might be like.

Aside from their magical powers, Solas and Flemeth first appear as fairly plain characters of limited means. Flemeth turns out to be able to shift into a dragon if the player decides to fight her in *Dragon Age: Origins*, but her human appearance is that of a rather unkempt older woman living in a swamp, and Solas appears as a plainly-dressed lone traveller, an elf with nothing more to his name than the clothes on his back. Once their true identities are revealed in *Inquisition*, however, both of them appear in more elaborate, stately clothing and, in Flemeth's case, with clean and regally dressed hair. Their behaviour to each other and the fragments of ancient elven history Solas reveals to the player (if his approval rating is high enough) express a highly contested concept of divinity. In their final confrontation at the end of the *Trespasser* DLC, Solas tells the protagonist:

> **Solas:** Your legends are half-right. We [the elves] were immortal. It was not the arrival of humans that caused us to begin aging. It was me. […]
> **Main Character**: The Evanuris were elven mages? How did they come to be remembered as gods?
> **Solas:** Slowly. It started with a war. War breeds fear. Fear breeds a desire for simplicity. Good and evil. Right and wrong. Chains of command. After the war ended, generals became respected elders, then kings, and finally gods. The Evanuris.
> (BioWare 2014: 'Trespasser')

So the conceptual arc of elven religion in the games goes from uncertainty, followed by seeming confirmation of the gods' existence as Solas' true identity is revealed, to that revelation being quickly undercut by a relativisation of history: The figures of the legends did exist, and they were powerful immortals. But does that make them gods? At the time, all elves were immortal and connected to magic. Accordingly, Solas questions the Evanuris' claim to divinity and repeatedly refers to them as "false gods" and "would-be gods" (ibid.).

This raises questions about the exact nature of divinity. What traits qualify a being as a god? Are power and immortality sufficient characteristics, or just habitually associated? How important is a fundamental difference between ordinary people and a di-

vine being, and does that add an additional dimension in which divinity is essentially dependant on context (i.e., because all elves used to be immortal, would gods, for them, have to be something more, whereas immortality is sufficiently different and grand to the understanding of humans)? Can an ordinary being become divine, through the acquisition of power or through their historiographic portrayal? Should divinity be understood as quasi-axiomatic, without a point of origin, or might it be relative? Can the Evanuris' claim to divinity be considered retroactively validated, given that they appear very much like gods at the time the story takes place, when the elves have become mortal and their connection to the Fade, the source of all magic, has been weakened? And how should we gauge the significance of Solas confirming parts of elven lore as historical fact – does this strengthen the respective religion, or is a confirmed basis in historical fact fundamentally at odds with the nature of religious belief, because solid facts dissolve the need for believing?

There are no definite answers to any of these questions. They are a matter of perspective and philosophical outlook; accordingly, it seems appropriate that the game raises these questions without answering them, leaving it up to the players to engage with these issues and find individual answers. The series simply provides a fictional context for questions we would, perhaps, be more reluctant or might not even think to ask when the same issues arise in more familiar settings, such as the question what the probable reality of Jesus as a historical figure means for Christianity.

Overall, it can be found that the *Dragon Age* series incorporates some rather meaningful and wide-reaching reflections on spirituality and religious doubt in what is also a highly entertaining mass-media product. The games largely leave it up to the player whether or not – and how – to more deeply engage with this spiritual, theological and philosophical material, but reflecting on these issues is one dimension of engagement being very clearly offered and prompted by these games.

Spirituality and Society in *Analogue: A Hate Story* and *Hate Plus*

Indie developer Christine Love, creator of *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012) and its sequel *Hate Plus* (2013), takes a very different approach to exploring questions of spirituality in a videogame series. While *Dragon Age* shows religion as definitely relevant to the power dynamics across nations and societies, but focusses on the individual's response to spiritual questions and uncertainties, the *Hate* games emphasise the societal impact of spirituality. These games engage with spirituality as it interacts with ethical and political concerns, following the power shifts and eventual destruction of the society inhabiting a generation spaceship, the *Mugunghwa*. Rather than concerning themselves with more philosophical questions about the existence and exact nature of higher powers, the *Hate* games take an interest in the direct effects belief systems have on the everyday lives of people in a society increasingly shaped by spiritual concepts, and critically reflect on the relation between spirituality, morality, and politics. Spiritual uncertainty is, in a sense, not an individual question here, but a societal one: Which values can we build a 'good' society on? Which spiritual aspects feature into that decision, i.e., how can (and should) our shared beliefs inform collective ethics, the definition of 'normal' behaviour, and laws?

How does waning belief interact with political dissent? And what may happen when a society superimposes a new system of beliefs and values on the existing population for political purposes?

Over the course of the two games, the player slowly pieces together the history of the now-dead generation spaceship, taking on the role of a somewhat nebulous investigator[3] who is being paid by a historical society to explore the fate of the lost ship (according to the intro screen). To players not particularly informed about Confucianism, the society of the fictional spaceship may seem secular enough at first glance; there is little to no mention of deities, prayer, or priests. However, there is a pervasive emphasis on tradition and ritual, which are revered and followed with a decidedly dogmatic air, and the occasional but emphatic mention of 'the ancestors', leaving a sense of perhaps not a religious, but very much a spiritual society.

This makes more sense when you learn in the second game, *Hate Plus*, that the social system aboard the ship has a real-world model: It is very intentionally created, after a failed rebellion, as "a new dynasty founded on Confucian principles", based on the historical Korean Joseon Dynasty (Love 2013: 'Declaration of a New Dynasty'). Confucianism is not quite adequately described by Western ideas of religion, as it inhabits a more complex position somewhere at the intersection of philosophy, scholarship, and religious practice (cf. Yao 2000: 30–46). However, it qualifies as a spiritual practice in the broad sense of the term[4]: Xinzhong Yao succinctly states that "[w]hether or not Confucianism is religious is a question of debate [but a working baseline is that] Confucianism is a tradition open to religious values" (ibid: 10–11).

Confucianism is an old and very influential school of thought, which developed a multitude of variations depending on the era and region it was practised in (cf. ibid: 4–9). The Confucianism of the Korean Joseon era referred to in the *Hate* games is thus, on the one hand, already a quite specific subset of Confucianism, but on the other, still a fairly broad template for Love's fictionalised version of Joseon Confucianism in space, given that the Joseon era spanned over 500 years (1392–1910).[5] In terms of Anthony's typology, this means that the *Hate* games occupy a somewhat liminal space between allomythic games – "explor[ing] nonexistent traditions" (2014: 39) – and didactic games which "directly or indirectly educate players about a specific [religious] tradition" (ibid: 35). Given that the *Mugunghwa*'s society is based on a real-world spiritual and cultural system, but portrays a fictionalised derivate thereof, it is arguable which of the two categories is more appropriate. Anthony himself includes games like *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games 2010) –

3 The investigator never visually appears on-screen and is characterised mainly through the dialogue options the player chooses.

4 If there is one thing scholars of spirituality agree on, it is how very broad, malleable, dependent on individual interpretation and hard to clearly define 'spirituality' is (cf. Callahan 2017: 49–51; Sulmasy 2009: 1635). However, they tend to find that religion and spirituality are "related constructs" which "inform each other" (Callahan 2017: 44). In the context of this chapter, a highly condensed way of describing the main distinction between the two is that religion is theistic, whereas spirituality is a broader term, encompassing theistic as well as other meaning-making practices that are supported by a set of beliefs or views about the unknowable.

5 Confucianism itself recognises the spiritual dimension of games and play, to a degree, given that "the venerable game of Go held a place in Confucian practice" (Anthony 2014: 25).

a rather liberal interpretation of Christianity, twice-removed from its subject as the game is based on a medieval poem (Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*) based on Christian ideas – under the broad umbrella of didactic digital games (Anthony 2014: 35), which seems to provide a precedent for viewing the *Hate* games as part of that category, too. (Whether it is didactically sound – or culturally sensitive – to educate players about real cultures and religions via fictionalised versions thereof is a different question.)

Love's representation of this fictional but historically rooted Confucian spirituality is a very critical one. The societal system created aboard the ship in the aftermath of the rebellion is frequently aligned with cruelty, oppression, ignorance, and the loss of advanced knowledge in science and the arts. What remains is a society more interested in looking back – far back – than looking towards the future, and which in the end reaps a fate consistent with this lack of care, culminating in the deaths of everyone on board. In order to analyse how these games portray spirituality (or lack thereof) and its implications for society, I am going to particularly look into the role the collective of ancestors plays as a spiritually relevant entity in this setting, supported by considerations of the dynamic between spirituality and worldly knowledge, and the portrayed relationship between spirituality, gender and class in the *Hate* games.

Instead of focussing on divinity and what a potential higher power might want from humans, the more concrete spirituality represented in these games is concerned with two main objects: (1) striving towards the ideal self as an aspiration that gives life meaning – bringing to mind the loosely associated concepts of spiritual enlightenment and ascension, even though they are not directly mentioned – and (2) honouring the ancestors, whose approval is understood as synonymous with a clear indicator of moral correctness. In this sense, the collective of ancestors in this fictional society takes a place loosely equivalent to a deity – they are a higher power, imperceptible in the material world, and believers in the concept arrange their lives according to a set of rules this higher power supposedly approves of. The ancestors also have shrines (cf. Love 2012: 'Brought home') and temples (cf. Love 2013: 'Royal Wedding'), one of the clearer markers of religiosity in this fictional society.

There are a few interesting problems with how this concept is portrayed in the games, in terms of logic and consistency[6]. Because the post-rebellion leadership of the *Mugunghwa* has established a political system hinging on spiritual justifications, these logical gaps in the spiritual foundation work to suggest and reinforce some of the points of criticism against the social system that different characters in the games raise. The narrative thus utilises inconsistencies in the spiritual system (which are, as belief systems go, not an entirely uncommon occurrence) in order to undermine the moral and political systems which the *Mughungwha*'s leaders are supposedly basing on spiritual premises. There are several ways in which these inconsistencies relate to the fictional society's political discourse.

6 To be quite clear: What I am discussing in the following is exclusively the portrayal of ancestor worship in these two games. I am not making any statements about ancestor worship as a real-world spiritual practise, but only its fictionalised representation in this very specific setting.

First, the ship's political leaders are fond of contrasting the supposedly morally corrupt society before the rebellion with the older, 'good' society of the Joseon era. In his address to the people in the aftermath of the rebellion, the newly minted Emperor states:

> We have become a society dominated by power-lust, greed, and promiscuity. It's time to stop living in the moment, time to stop worrying about politics, and instead worry about being better people.
> We must build a society that would make our ancestors proud. […] Let's make society right this time. Let's forget all those things that modern society has falsely said are important and remember that family, loyalty, compassion, and stability matter above all else. Our society today pales in comparison to our glorious past […] but perhaps we could look back to them and learn from their traditions that we've eschewed. […] Let us be filial and just, and understand what that truly means.
> Instead of pursuing money, let us dedicate ourselves to becoming better people. Instead of being promiscuous, let us dedicate ourselves to being parents. […] [L]et us devote ourselves to creating a society that will make our ancestors proud again!(Love 2013: 'Declaration of a New Dynasty')

As this excerpt shows, there is some very clear black-and-white thinking in the Emperor's rhetoric. The way he speaks of the moral failings of a past society strikes some familiar dystopian chords, most notably in the demonisation of modern society and in the transparent attempt to paint "worrying about politics" (ibid.) as opposed to a moral life. The recent past is presented as a clear example of moral corruption, deceitful and wrong, and binary comparisons between the status quo and the moral ideal are consistently drawn throughout the speech. The presented solution is to look further back, to a time before moral corruption, "our glorious past" (ibid.).

This rhetorical strategy blatantly disregards the fact that, for following generations, the people who supported the rebellion will also become ancestors. Ancestors who clearly, violently opposed the Emperor and the political and ethical system he considers right. This seems to imply that the spiritual practice of ancestor worship is a mere fig leaf to the ruling class of the *Mugunghwa*, instrumentalised to justify the status quo, practised without much inherent consistency or, apparently, sincerity. The spiritual practise is used to externalise the wishes of the ship's leadership and give these wishes an aura of objectivity and legitimacy that fades when examined more closely. Consequently, it only makes sense to discourage people from "worrying about politics" too much (ibid.).

The Emperor chiding people for being politically-minded or "constantly grasping for more power" (ibid.) is an obvious attempt to quell dissent. Another rebellion becomes less likely when people focus on bettering themselves in the smaller sphere of their own influence, rather than in a societal context. Confucian texts provide a basis for justifying this stance, if one is inclined to interpret them that way. The teachings of Confucius in the *Lunyu* include the sentiment that "[s]imply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers, a man can exert an influence upon government", and that, consequently, one need not necessarily get more directly involved (*Lunyu* (1980) 2: 21, cited in Yao 2000: 24).

Less congruent with Confucian ideals is the antagonistic relationship between spirituality and knowledge in the *Mugunghwa*'s society. This cultural dynamic is most clearly expressed through Hyun-ae, one of the main characters. She is put into cryostasis as a

teen because she suffers from a yet incurable illness, long before the rebellion that becomes such a turning point for her society. Hyun-ae is awakened by her family's descendants generations later, only to find that, far from having achieved the scientific progress that would allow her illness to be cured, these descendants have lost much of the knowledge Hyun-ae's contemporaries held, and now "everyone is so stupid" (Love 2012: 'Broken Promise'). Her stasis pod is no longer even recognised as such and is understood as an "egg", and the Korean writing system of *hangeul* is no longer in use, replaced by Chinese characters, making texts from Hyun-ae's time indecipherable (Love 2012: 'At least use my real name!'). In *Hate Plus*, it is revealed that during the rebellion, much of the ship's digital archive was deleted, and the emerging leadership consciously changed the writing system to sever all connections to the 'corrupted' past. Overall, it becomes increasingly clear that the new rulers chose to base their system and their legitimacy on a spiritual foundation, and that they perceive education, critical thinking, and scientific knowledge as a threat to that system. This perceived binary of knowledge versus spirituality actually goes against certain aspects of Confucianism itself, which is a highly scholarly tradition (Yao 2000: 17–20). Thus, to be precise, the *Hate* games can be read not necessarily as criticising Confucianism itself, but the ways it has been used as a political tool to oppress and silence people.[7]

Many other symbols and physical embodiments of knowledge and learning are also purged or lost during the rebellion. Oh Eun-a, president of *Mugunghwa* University before the rebellion, sides with the reactionary faction to help bring about the new, neo-Confucian order, trading away her position as head of an intellectual organisation to become the new Emperor's wife and champion the message that women should concern themselves with domestic affairs and be kept from having an education.

Women's knowledge and experiences, in particular, are routinely erased by the new system. The AI guiding the player character through the ship's logs explains:

> [… I]t's traditional for women's letters to be deleted after being read, so the disk space can be reallocated. Women weren't really supposed to read or write. Certainly, the nobles did! It's just the idea was that spending time on education got in the way of the important virtues for women, which was serving her husband. So in practice… even if a woman was literate, she could at least excuse it by destroying her words afterwards. It's less pretentious if at least the writing wasn't permanent.
> (Love 2012: *Hyun-ae's commentary on 'Insufferable child')

This passage not only encapsulates the repressive and misogynist nature of the neo-Joseon social order on the ship, but also very neatly illustrates the crucial difference between morality in theory and in practise. Just because women are not 'supposed to read or write' does not mean that none of them do; it is merely a taboo subject and

7 Whether it might be problematic that a white Western game developer portrays Korean history with these very strong implied judgements, is a different question – one that comes down to walking the fine line between cultural relativism on the one side and universally standing up for human rights on the other, to hopefully arrive at a reasonable and respectful balance. Trying to settle this sensitive and complex issue is not the objective of this chapter, but it is worth noting.

covered up accordingly. While that may seem obvious when put in these terms, the distinction actually shows an important depth of insight, on Love's part, into the nuances of historical moral systems. Scholars of real-world historical morality sometimes struggle with the fact that officially published and hence more widely available sources, such as conduct books, tend to discuss ideals, but to find out how people really incorporated (or rejected) those ideals in their daily lives, one must look into more personal sources such as diary entries and letters, which is exactly the storytelling perspective the *Hate* games rely on.

Consistently with the disdain for women's perspectives that is expressed in deleting their letters, "[o]fficial genealogies don't list women normally. Wives are noted by their family names, and daughters are omitted entirely" (Love 2012: 'Kim family tree'). They are simply not important enough to be recorded in any capacity other than wife and mother, and even then, it is their function, not their individual merits that matter to this society. In a similar vein, the Emperor's address to the people at the beginning of his reign implies that he is speaking exclusively to the men aboard the ship: "we must be better husbands and fathers, be more devoted sons, be more respectful brothers" (Love 2013: 'Declaration of a New Dynasty'). Women are thus excluded from politics not only by preventing them from taking any official office, but, it is strongly implied, they are not supposed to be taking even a more passive interest in the shape of following political speeches – if they do, they will find clear indicators that the speaker is not talking to them. Given that Emperor Ryu makes this address shortly after the failed rebellion, as the new system is being instated and women will, in fact, not yet be used to their new role as subservient and domestic creatures, their exclusion from the emperor's speech is not the casual by-product of a long-standing tradition that simply fails to think of women, but a new, pointed exclusion, clearly intended to show women their place. What measures such as this rhetoric, the deletion of letters and the omission of women's names in genealogies do is create a more and more impermeable barrier which prevents knowledge about women's lives and experiences from reaching wider society or history, and prevents women from accessing knowledge about society – especially women of the lower classes, who, it is implied, are less likely to (be able to) break the taboo of women's literacy than noblewomen are (cf. Love 2012: *Hyun-ae's commentary on 'Insufferable child'), and thus have no means of interacting with the ship's written communication systems.

In short, *Analogue* and *Hate Plus* explore a historical spiritual system by projecting its revival into the distant future. Spirituality is interwoven with moral and political issues in this society, and the three cannot always be clearly distinguished. Christine Love presents a science fiction setting that is different enough from our lived reality to allow us to see its issues and challenges with new eyes, but many of the moral and spiritual topics explored by the game are actually familiar – issues like arranged marriage, gender inequality, the suppression of literacy or censorship. The spiritual uncertainty that is explored in the *Hate* games focusses not on the existence or exact nature of the gods, but on how to lead a good life. This is, as this analysis has shown, a spiritual question in the context of a society that elates self-improvement and equates appropriate behaviour with pleasing the ancestors. Spiritual uncertainty also arises out of the way spirituality aboard the *Mugunghwa* is not a self-reliant system, but subjugated to and amalgamated

with political purposes – so to doubt the political system is to doubt the spiritual system, and vice versa.

Conclusion

As the present comparison and analysis has shown, two of the general directions engagement with fictional practices of spirituality and spiritual doubt in videogames can take are (1) exploring philosophical questions about the existence and nature of higher powers, and how the individual relates to these fundamental unknowables – as in the case of the *Dragon Age* series – and (2) reflecting on the impact belief systems can have on ethics and politics, and thus shape political structures as well as the more mundane aspects of daily life – as in Christine Love's *Hate* games.

Dragon Age: Inquisition utilises a superficially quite typical high-fantasy setting, but, unusually for high fantasy and the group of allomythic games, rejects the commonly associated concept of divine magic, and even introduces a villain who flatly claims to have proof that the Maker does not exist. The protagonist must negotiate the spiritual expectations of the people around them and explore their own status as a spiritual leader in conversation with the game's NPCs. Complicating this debate on the doubtful existence of a higher power, the game's narrative about the long-lost culture of the elves raises additional questions about the meaning of divinity: Even if the gods are (or were) real, what exactly makes them gods, as opposed to simply powerful people? The game thus explores two very fundamental spiritual doubts that contemporary audiences might very well relate to.

In contrast, Christine Love's *Hate* games engage with spiritual doubt not so much on an individual level, but in an intensely political context. These games are concerned less with questions about the existence of higher powers, but with how supposing they exist can shape human societies, considering topics such as philosophy and morality, ethics, and (pseudo-)spiritual justifications for hierarchies and political systems. The games effectively show how blurring the lines between these concepts can make political and spiritual doubt difficult to distinguish, thus indirectly also reflecting on the potential merits of secularising the state.

As this selective analysis shows, videogames certainly have the potential to engage quite deeply with questions about spiritual uncertainty that are meaningful far beyond the screen. The opportunity to interact with and reflect on such topics is presented in-game in many shapes and forms (cf. Anthony 2014: 34–44); in the end, it depends on the player whether, as Leopoldina Fortunati says, we treat games "as a new opium of the people", or whether we engage with their "offer [to be] a field of experimentation" (2015: 293) and recognise their potential as "an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture" (Campbell/Grieve 201: 2). The unique mediality of videogames definitely supports this reflective potential, as the continuation of any game depends on the player taking action. A novel or film may show a character's deep emotion as they grapple with spiritual doubt, but a game, putting the player more directly into the protagonist's shoes, asking them to make the protagonist's choices, can make you feel it.

Games provide us with a safe environment to explore moral and spiritual issues, while also forcing us to confront questions that may seem entirely too large and intimidating in the real world. Is there really a higher power guiding your life, or is it all chaos and coincidence? Is basing your politics on a spiritual system a clever or a terrible idea? Only you can tell – and, in the context of these games, you really rather have to.

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