Light, Blood, Stone, and Order

The Religious Beliefs and Systems of *Dragon Age*

Christine Tomlinson

Keywords: *immersion; narrative; perception; religion; role-playing; videogames; world building*

Games with a focus on narrative often build rich worlds with intricate information about social, political, and cultural dynamics. This can include information about the role and influence of religion in the game world. This lore creates circumstances that can make the game world feel more fleshed out and realistic for games with an emphasis on story-driven play. Research on the place of religion in videogames is a relatively new and growing field of interest. This area of study investigates the narrative possibilities presented through the use of religious lore and the creation of religious beliefs and practices within games. Videogames can feature religion through characters, narratives, and even play mechanics (Ferdig 2014: 73–76). Although games that explore and teach about physical world religious belief are available (Anthony 2014: 29–39), narratives often present fictional religions that can sometimes function as critiques of physical world belief systems and institutions (Tuckett/Robertson 2014: 94–99). This can also be an opportunity for designers to incorporate social dynamics by establishing 'others' through religious difference and narrative events (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2019).

Videogames range in narrative content, from those with relatively little to those with rich lore and stories. For games in this latter category, there is often a great deal of worldbuilding that highlights possible social structures and dynamics (cf. Tuckett/Robertson 2014). These narrative elements mesh with issues of player agency (Wagner 2012: 120–1) and even self-perceptions in the context of play. In games that are narrative-heavy, this gives religion unique meanings and importance, as players can use these in-game systems of belief to evaluate their place in the game world, as well as the characters that they encounter. What part, then, do fictional religions have in the relationship between game content and players' perceptions and experiences, particularly in the context of role-playing?

This study considers religion in *Dragon Age*, a role-playing game (RPG) series from the development company BioWare, and its narrative influence on both worldbuilding and player experience (2009; 2011; 2014). Using qualitative methods, the inclusion of religion

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

in videogames is explored in two main ways: The first centres on the position of religion within the game world and game narrative. The second examines how players engage with religion as part of the game though an analysis of online forum data, which has been anonymised to protect user privacy. Following Ferdig's (2014) framework on religion in videogames, the project emphasizes game context (73–74) and player capital (76–77), or the knowledge the player possesses. The study considers both the representations of religion as part of the narrative and audience interpretations and use of these elements. In this game series, fictional religions provide grounding for many story events and characters, but they also shape players' perceptions and experiences with the game. Ultimately, while religion creates a game world that feels more socially familiar and real, players often incorporate in-game religion into a player capital internal to the game that allows them to use religion as a tool to influence narrative directions and outcomes.

Religion, Influence, and Society

Religion clearly has a large influence historically and socially. As videogames try to emulate society and social circumstances, religion is an obvious choice for a narrative addition. Beyond game content, however, it is useful to consider the forms and functions of religion in quotidian social life. Durkheim understood the existence and separation of the sacred and profane as defined by cultural elements that are set apart and protected – the sacred – and those that are mundane – the profane (cf. Durkheim 1961). In this sense, the profane is juxtaposed to and the sacred is necessarily linked to practices of "devotion" (Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014: 110). Despite the ability to arrange social meaning around religion in such a way, the actual forms that religious expressions and beliefs take are choices and, ultimately, become understood as preferences (Berger 2007: 23).

Early work on the topic of religion has emphasized the tendency to discuss religious belief in terms of one true belief system versus incorrect alternatives (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1945). With changes in culture and the structure of society – namely with the increase of heterogeneity in belief – religion's social and political positions shift substantially. Religious homogeneity of practice and belief allows religion to become central as a social influence and is assumed as part of a standard identity (Banchoff 2007: 14). With changes in social demographics and the proliferation of diverse religious belief, this assumption becomes more difficult.

This can also link to social and political tensions as part of globalization and becoming exposed to more religious ideas. Pluralism in a society can be a part of a democratic political process but also serves as a site for political and social tensions (Wuthnow 2007: 161–2). Religious marketplaces develop, placing religious groups in direct competition with one another (Berger/Hefner 2003: 5). Outside of broader social influence, there has also been a focus on and interest in influences of religion on individuals, including promoting prosocial behaviour. The relationship between belief and action is complex. For those who do not subscribe to religious beliefs, there is a tendency toward utilitarian approaches, while religious belief pulls people toward emphasizing set rules and authority as part of their motivation (Shariff 2015: 108).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Religion and the Religious in Games

Religion's social importance unsurprisingly translates to its inclusion in media. Although religion has also been featured to varying degrees in videogames, religious elements of videogames have often been overlooked in research (Campbell/Grieve 2014: 3–5). The work that has been done on this topic covers a broad range of applications, uses, and appearances of religion in gaming contexts (Bosman 2016: 28–29). While some games incorporate religious belief as a means of conveying physical world religious meaning and knowledge, others use religion in games more metaphorically or symbolically (Anthony 2014: 29–39). There is also a tendency of game narratives to critique religion by highlighting negative elements, as seen in game series like *Fallout* (Interplay Entertainment since 1997) or *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks 1994–1998; Bethesda Game Studios since 2002) (Tuckett/Robertson 2014: 94–99). Although there are some positive examples of religiously coded groups in the *Fallout* game series, the player frequently encounters groups in the post-apocalyptic landscape of the game that are represented as aggressive, misguided, or blinded by faith toward dangerous behaviours (ibid: 96). The *Elder Scrolls* series, while much more forgiving, grounds religious deities in the game's fantasy-based reality and often uses religion as a source of conflict and social division (ibid: 97–98).

On the other hand, fictitious religions in games can emphasize the social dynamics of religion and feature rich lore and ritual, with examples of ceremonies and religious practice (cf. Tuckett/Robertson 2014). *Mass Effect* (BioWare since 2007) has been a particularly salient and popular series to study in this context (Knoll 2015: 208–9). As allomythic games, the examples that take this approach pay particular attention to the possibilities of fictional worldbuilding offered by religious practice for narrative-focused games (Anthony 2014: 39–41; Bosman 2016: 34). In these cases, the religions and religious traditions represented in the game are entirely fictionalized and specific to the game world (ibid.). Some of these games, including the *Mass Effect* trilogy, have been discussed as serving as metaphors for physical world belief, despite focusing on stories removed from physical world reality. In this example, the protagonist character illustrates a story that resembles a Christian narrative, although the game world hosts a variety of religious beliefs and practices (cf. Irizarry/Irizarry 2014). Part of *Mass Effect*'s approach involves setting the player's character up as a saviour for the galaxy – and, in particular, humanity – in the context of a widescale galactic threat. The player is expected and has opportunities to fill the role of "liberator and redeemer" (ibid: 238). Adding these dynamics connects to the approach of incorporating videogame design elements that make games feel more familiar and comfortable, therefore increasing a player's sense of presence (Tamborini/Skalski 2006: 225–30). Virtual realms can be made more familiar by using religious signifiers as a worldbuilding tool (Gregory 2014: 137, 149–51).

Religion also plays a role in contributing to the agency that players experience with gameplay. Players can explore game content in unexpected ways as a result of the influence that they can have. This emergent play happens within the restrictions of the game and may produce unanticipated or unexpected results (Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 158; Schut 2014: 267–9). Representations of religion in videogames – as systems themselves – may offer similar experiences of emergent play and meaning making (Schut 2014:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

268–70). In some cases, however, religion can become mechanized as part of the game design and development process, restricting religion to something more procedural than influential (ibid: 256). As a result, mechanics in a game can limit and dilute the impact of many moral questions.

Alternatively, games that provide more agency in this context can present players with opportunities to act or play as god-like figures, able to oversee the design and outcome of games or tap into powers that can otherwise alter the game world immensely (cf. Schut 2014). Players can explore and experiment with issues and experiences of morality in the context of religious codes as defined by understandings from the physical world or the digital world in which the game takes place (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014: 232–3; Waltemathe 2014: 239). The company behind both the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games series, BioWare, typically highlights player choice as a mainstay of its games and puts players in a position where they must engage with struggles of morality (cf. Knoll 2015). In this context, players express agency through influence on the game's narrative and trajectory (cf. Murray 1997).

The decisions that players make in videogames that incorporate religious codes can sometimes influence the personality or in-game perceptions of the player's character. In examples like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), players are judged by the religious rules of the Jedi, allowing the disposition and recognition of their character to change based on the decisions that they have made (Waltemathe 2014: 250). Although discussions of one's character's religion may be of interest to players (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014: 231), this is not always clearly or explicitly included in the game. While religion is not included as part of the character creation process in *Mass Effect* (ibid.) or *Dragon Age*, the latter series often invokes belief for players as part of the role-play process and defines belief as part of the game-specific ethnic backgrounds that players can choose.

Beyond content relating to religion in videogames, there are also considerations of knowledge, ritual, and interpretations of sacred objects or places. Building on the idea of the 'magic circle', Wagner (2012) notes that the events within games are set apart from everyday experience in ways that allow players to engage in behaviours that would otherwise be unacceptable (132–4). Videogames and religion both produce experiences that are outside of what may be deemed mundane or everyday, but the ways that these events are viewed can be influenced by game contexts as well as player capital (Ferdig 2014: 73–74, 76–77). Using violence in a cathedral in a game, for example, can be read as a temporary challenge to authority and perhaps an expression of dissatisfaction (Wagner 2012: 130). Arguments ensue about whether or not spaces and places sacred to many in the physical world should also be deemed sacred in digital ones (ibid.).

Emotional Entanglements and Experiences with Games

Although they are not always related directly to religious content, the emotional dynamics and experiences related to playing videogames are also important to consider as part of this landscape. Videogames can sometimes surprise players with the morality-related questions that they ask and the introspection that they can inspire (Knoll 2015: 218–20). There are a variety of game elements that players become motivated and emotionally influenced by in the process of playing videogames. These attachments and concerns can

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

extend to in-game items and belongings (cf. Watkins/Molesworth 2012) as well as the connection that players feel to their character or avatar (Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014: 113).

These emotional bonds also extend to the game's story. In narrative-based games, players often want what is best for their character in the context of the story (Tomlinson 2021: 723–5). There is also an investment in the growth and development of their character, watching them gain skills and traverse the challenges of the game (Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014: 115). Morality and character reputation also become important parts of players' experiences in shaping and influencing a particular narrative. To achieve these outcomes, players may emphasize specific kinds of decisions over others (Knoll 2015: 220). In some ways, this becomes a means of making the avatar an idealized – and sacred – version of oneself (cf. Wang/Zhao/Bemossy 2014). Indeed, players feel inclined to be a force of good in the game world, trying to avoid negatively influencing the characters around them (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85).

These emotional investments and experiences are also shaped by the influence that a player has in the game. Videogames are inherently interactive and highlight the possibility of player choice within a system that includes some narrative and strategy elements (Ryan 2006: 203; Bosman 2016: 33). This sets videogames apart from other forms of media because of the agency extended to players (Wagner 2012: 121). Agency is complicated when it comes to videogames, however. While interactivity is a hallmark of games (Shinkle 2008: 907–9), agency is defined within the parameters of the game's design and requires balance with game mechanics and goals (Knoll 2015: 218–20).

This can produce a kind of enjoyable 'bounded agency' for players as they explore a videogame within the narrative parameters afforded by the developers (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012: 394, 401). This is a similar enjoyment to that of reading a predetermined story, where players can enjoy the experience based primarily on the story itself, rather than their participation in or influence on it (cf. Tanenbaum 2011). Players are in charge of shaping the world in many narrative-heavy RPGs, including games like *Mass Effect* (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012; Irizarry/Irizarry 2014) and, as the focus of this study, *Dragon Age*. Players are able to mould both their character and the narrative based on the decisions that they make, which can also influence the position of religion in the game world (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014: 235–45).

Methods

This project uses qualitative methods to analyse both videogame content and player experiences. As part of the lens applied to this project, I follow Ferdig's (2014) approach to studying religion in videogames, focusing on both game context and player capital. Game context focuses on the representations of religion present in the game within the design, whether this is environmental or related to the narrative (ibid: 73–74). This can include symbols, buildings, circumstances, or interactions in the game that are influenced by religion, and in-game rules that relate to religion. Player capital refers to players' knowledge and personal experiences as they might influence gameplay and interpretations of game content (ibid: 76–77). This encompasses religious beliefs as well as broader moral outlooks on the part of videogame players. This project extends this line of inquiry by

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

highlighting another element of player capital, however, by taking into account the ways in which players use game context in conjunction with their physical world knowledge and beliefs to make moral determinations. These elements are differentiated as external and internal player capital.

To better understand the use and position of religion and religious belief in the *Dragon Age* game series, a close reading approach is utilized (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011; 2012). Close reading allows for an in-depth analysis of media as text, which originated in literature studies and was expanded later to research on cinema and, more recently, videogames (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011). Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum note that part of this approach requires addressing the need to redefine common conceptualizations of 'texts' to accommodate visual media formats (ibid: 295–9).

The process also requires two fundamental approaches to gameplay experience – one that allows the researcher to engage with the game as a player and another that is more objective to assess these elements outside of immersive qualities (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012: 301–4). There are, however, complications to consider in a close reading. Two individuals studying the same game may have different interpretations and experiences of the game (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011: 299). In this study, this is partly addressed by incorporating a second set of data stemming from online discussions among regular players. This aspect of the analysis will be discussed more below.

Because of the broad scope and size of many RPGs, approaching the reading and analysis through specific lenses is essential (ibid: 304–5). In this reading, the emphasis is on discussions and representations of religion and belief across the *Dragon Age* series. To achieve this, multiple playthroughs were completed for each game (ibid: 298–300) and narratives, characters, and the position of religion within these contexts were explored. Notes were taken during gameplay to assist in the analysis. The notes focused on different elements of belief, characters' relationships to belief and in-game religious institutions, the impact in the game world of these institutions, and the player character's experiences with these game elements.

The close reading aspect of this study is based on approximately 657 hours of game play in multiple playthroughs across all three current games in the *Dragon Age* series. Specifically, *Dragon Age: Origins* ([referred to as *Origins*] BioWare 2009), *Dragon Age II* ([referred to as *DA 2*] BioWare 2011), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* ([referred to as *Inquisition*] BioWare 2014) are included in the analysis. In close reading, it is important to get a full sense for how everything fits together in the game, including narrative branches and departures (cf. Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2011, 2012). As with *Mass Effect*, each of the games in this series presents options to play different genders and in-game races, which means different voice actors and potentially altered story elements (Bizzocchi/Tanenbaum 2012: 396). Because of this, the multiple playthroughs also include playing as characters with different genders and backgrounds to better evaluate and situate the overall narrative context and experience.

Additionally, to explore players' choices, experiences, and assessments of these games and their narrative events, I analyse patterns and themes present in publicly available posts from online forums, including Reddit, Fextralife, and GameFAQs. Although posts are public, quotes have been deidentified and slightly reworded without changing users' meanings to protect privacy. For Reddit, partial data collection and

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

analysis is accomplished by using Reddit's official API through 4CAT to scrape for conversations (cf. Peeters/Hagen 2018). The computer-assisted analyses were used to establish broader patterns in discussion and illuminate the most commonly discussed terms, attributes, and concepts in the context of a religion-related conversation. This was accomplished through the use of word trees to determine associations, monthly histograms, and interactive flowcharts of terms across conversations.

For all forums, data was also collected and coded by hand to identify broad themes and patterns in discussions about religious content in these games. This approach involves identifying and highlighting patterns in conversation in terms of commonly discussed topics, ideas, approaches, and interpretations. Coding and analysis focused on player discussions of specific religions in these games, players' interpretations of their own characters' belief systems, discussions of narrative events and characters as they relate to institutions and belief systems in the game, and discussions of major choices and turning points.

For the purposes of this analysis and discussion, the primary focus is on shared major topics of discussion, rather than the most common decisions, except in the case of choosing a Divine (the new leader of the main church in the games) in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014). In this instance, there is an overwhelming trend in the approach of players and therefore this aspect will be discussed in terms of the shared choice. In all, approximately 2000 posts across these forums were hand selected and coded, while approximately 30.000 were collected and analysed with 4CAT using Reddit's API.

Findings and Analysis

Because this project assesses the religiously coded content, narratives, and experiences with three games in a videogame series, the findings focus on a relatively small portion of these games and the discussions that surround them. To understand how players use the religious elements of these games, it is important to first assess the position of religion in the overall game narratives. The games across the series focus on different elements of religion, its position within in-game societies, and its importance for individual characters. Through the narrative framing, meanings are conveyed to players about alliances, tensions, and morality. First, this section will focus on game content and the ways that religion is woven into the narrative across the series (Ferdig 2014: 73). Next, the analysis will turn to the perceptions that players have of these elements and the ways that they become tools to shape the game world. This extends discussions of player capital in the context of videogames (ibid: 76–77) to players' gained capital within the game.

Game Content

Rather than including examples of and information from physical world religions (ibid: 71–72), *Dragon Age* follows the trends of allomythic games (Anthony 2014: 39–41; Bosman 2016: 35), creating unique religious systems within a fictional reality. There are some elements of physical world religious inspiration called upon for the game content, however, and parallels can be drawn between digital and physical realities in ways that have

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

been similarly discussed in the context of *Mass Effect*. These in-game religious examples serve more than one purpose. In addition to adding familiar items to the game that may increase a sense of presence, this information also conveys in-game dynamics and illustrates social structures. Within these structures, the game establishes religious 'others' (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2019) by limiting the perspective and information provided. Although the religions and the individuals involved with them are fictional, they provide contexts and frameworks for moral decisions in the game (Ferdig 2014: 73–74).

The Religious Landscape of Thedas

Religion is firmly embedded into the world of *Dragon Age* (BioWare since 2009), with its prominence and importance increasing with each game in the series so far. The game world – Thedas – presents an array of religions and belief systems that often clash with one another, pose possibilities to the player, and serve to create narrative conflicts. Although the position of religion becomes more relevant and central as the games progress, characters with different backgrounds and beliefs are introduced and tensions between religious institutions and individuals in the game world are explored. In some cases, these belief systems come into competition with one another, setting a trajectory toward a kind of in-game modernity where the story allows the player to have a role in a burgeoning marketplace of belief. Although it is often difficult to completely disentangle the game context from player input and influence, the player's direct role and interpretations of religion will be discussed in more depth below.

Within the *Dragon Age* series, one religion is positioned as having the most influence and power in Thedas, while other belief systems are in positions with less political and social input. This also means that these less prominent belief systems tend to get less attention in the overall narrative across the game series. Among the religions introduced in the games, Andrastian belief and its Chantry church are tied largely to human worshippers, hold the strongest narrative presence, and are a dominant force in society. Humans are also portrayed as a largely aggressive and oppressive social force in the games. In some regards, this religion appears to mirror physical world Christianity, although it is mixed with other Abrahamic religious imageries. There is a creator figure in the Maker, a prophet – Andraste – who is also the Maker's bride, and a history of political influence alongside conquest.

In most of Thedas, the church and its adherents have the most political influence and power and the religion is broadly followed by most of the humans encountered in the story. In *Origins* (BioWare 2009), religion is present in the narrative, but in ways that are less related to player agency. Religion is also less of a central threat, catalyst, or driving force and more of a largely background element, although the player can encounter a cult-like sect of Andrastian belief. This is the beginning of a presentation of religious 'others', who are portrayed as dangerous at best and ultimately violent. This makes sense as a challenge to overcome in the game, but also presents contexts of other belief systems as potential threats. This is compounded by additional events tied to religion in the same game. The player can be responsible for a kind of movement toward modernity in the game by supporting a dwarven convert to Andrastian belief in establishing a Chantry underground in the dwarven city of Orzammar. While this decision is more ancillary to

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

the overall play experience, if the Andrastian dwarf is helped in his mission, it results in violent opposition to prevent the success of the newly established arm of the Chantry.

In the second game in the series (BioWare 2011), in-game religious beliefs, practices, and tensions are more heavily emphasized. Namely, the Qunari are shown more frequently and are given more detail than they had been through one primary representative character in *Origins* (BioWare 2009) but are also represented in a way that flattens (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2021) them into an essentialized characterization. The characters who represent the Qun – unless they are converts – all use the same or similar models, which are greyish toned, large humanoid creatures with horns. This design, in addition to the narrative positioning of the group in the game's setting of Kirkwall as unwelcome and discussions of their faith as confusing, represent them as 'others' in the lead up to an eventual fight against them as the act two antagonists. Approaching the battle against the Qunari, which is predicated on the theft of their sacred religious text, their leader establishes his distaste for Kirkwall and for those who do not abide by the Qun. In one exchange, he states, "Their actions are merely symptoms. Your society is the disease" (BioWare 2011: n.p.). This builds on the narrative's emphasis on characters and events that reveal the discomfort residents of the city feel toward the Qunari and, in some ways, appears to justify that discomfort by illustrating the harsh judgment felt toward those in Kirkwall. This, as with the violent reaction toward a Chantry in Orzammar, seems to convey a discomfort with religious pluralism in society.

DA 2 (BioWare 2011) also introduces a deeper assessment of the position of the Chantry in Thedas as it relates to issues of rights, access, and politics. The Chantry in this game and its influence on mages and their position in society become the narrative's climax. In this case, the Chantry could be read as the primary antagonist in the story, though the game provides evidence that the Chantry is potentially justified in aggressive and repressive actions against mages, who are frequently also encountered as dangerous, violent, and illustrative of the many fears the Chantry has instilled about mages in society.

The game poses additional questions about individuals versus institutions in the case of religion. Rather than serving as a critique of religion per se, as is seen in many games, this approach highlights the ways that individuals may interpret and use religion for their own means or with strong faith. Grand Cleric Elthina is a powerful leader in Kirkwall and tends to defer to the guidance of the Maker while avoiding taking strong political stances of her own. Petrice – first a sister, and then a mother in the Chantry – uses her position to manipulate the player and work against the Qunari based on her own desires and interests. Sebastian, on the other hand, is presented as a truly faithful believer. Only available as extra downloadable content (DLC), his character serves to provide additional insights into the Chantry, its workings, and its belief systems. He also frequently gets into arguments with other characters who are less faithful or are in direct opposition with the Chantry, serving as a mediating factor and conveyor of information. He does, however, reveal the fragility of faith when he is challenged and may, depending on the player's decisions, abandon his position with the church and potentially seek revenge.

The third game in the series, *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), builds on the more central role of religion in political and social tensions in some regards, while alleviating them in others. There is an acute focus on the teachings of the Chantry, including collections from

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

the Chant of Light. In this element of the game, the potential of the church for aggression is illuminated. One example of a line from this chant emphasizes the possibility of force, stating, "Those who oppose thee; Shall know the wrath of heaven" (ibid: n.p.). The church is given a more fleshed out duality. Although individuals have been shown as potentially manipulating the church and faith, here the church is revealed to be both a sanctuary and a force to be reckoned with. Their role in oppression and subjugation is also further highlighted, centring not only on their position in the now widespread fight with mages, but also the church's position in wars with the elves. These events ultimately led to the separation of elves from much of society and common clustering in dilapidated housing known as alienages in various cities.

Although other religions and belief systems are present, they remain underexplored in comparison. This is, perhaps, due to the prominence of the Chantry in terms of its scope of power and importance to the primary plot. Elven beliefs, which are more closely aligned with polytheism, are explored in more detail as the narrative stretches toward the in-progress fourth game. Elven gods are confirmed to exist and questions about the afterlife are posed. It is discovered that one can physically enter the city told to be inhabited by the Maker and elven creators. It is also revealed that the entities celebrated and upheld by the dwarven Children of the Stone, which focus on lifeforms coming directly from the earth and less on gods, may exist. This presents interesting implications for religious belief where faith is shaken by the sacred becoming more mundane but can also be read as supported by tangible evidence. The Qunari are also, to some degree, made to feel more relatable and less unfamiliar and menacing in this game. Their beliefs, including the concept of every person fulfilling a specific role in society, are explored further and in more depth. This is assisted by having a party member who can share additional information about the Qun, its followers, and its society. The Iron Bull, though physically alien and imposing, provides context for players to understand the individuality among the Qunari than has been previously implied through their lack of personal names (instead, being named in ways that reflect their role in society) or their focus on collective purpose.

Religion and Social Tension Through Narrative

The placement of the religions within the narrative also provides opportunities to examine social inequalities and other sources of discontent. To some degree, this serves as another means through which to establish realistic settings that feel more alive, but these social dynamics amplify that effect while also providing obstacles and challenges (Ferdig 2014: 74) to the player. As a result, religion makes its way to the centre of conflict and struggles between characters, whether these are relatively low stakes and meant to develop characters, as in the case of Sebastian above, or higher stakes and presenting major pressure points for large scale conflicts, as with the build-up toward the fissures in the Chantry. In this way, religion is used for the purpose of propelling the story forward as well as to address broader social problems in a fictional context.

The narrative positioning of religion also often serves to obfuscate information for the player. This aids in addressing which pieces of information a player can know and at what time to provide shocking, surprising, or compelling narrative moments. Dialogue from and between characters is used to influence the player's perceptions and actions in

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

the game. These conversations call motivations, realities, and circumstances into question. Characters lend credibility, instil doubt, and provide – often biased – context. Often, these perspectives are posed against one another.

In the case of *Origins* (BioWare 2009), while the player is being introduced to this world and the beliefs within it, characters who have direct experience with the Chantry under vastly different circumstances discuss their experiences. Alistair, who was given to the Chantry as a child, has more critical views than Leliana, who joined as a sister willingly. These viewpoints are also juxtaposed with those of two mages who have different experiences with the Chantry as well. Mages are required to live in Circles, which are guarded by Templar soldiers and prevent mages from contact with those outside or establishing families inside. Morrigan is deemed an apostate because she does not live in a Circle and Wynne has lived in the Circle and had her family torn apart by it. These characters present two vastly different viewpoints on the purpose and legitimacy of the Chantry's rule in this area. At the same time, the narrative also reinforces the fears instilled by the Chantry to keep mages separate from the rest of society, demonstrating possessions and the violent outcomes of magic deemed illegal by the Chantry.

Interactions and conflict between two characters of different faiths are common approaches for communicating narrative information and game lore to players. The game frequently poses possibilities to the player to allow them to make their own assessments and draw their own conclusions. It helps to position various non-player characters (NPCs) against one another in terms of viewpoint, some serving to critique and some in a position to support. While characters can share their stories and opinions directly with the player's character, they also interact with one another, providing additional context and insights. In the case of Morrigan and Leliana, they are positioned as opposing sides in debates surrounding the Chantry. One example of these exchanges is:

> **Morrigan:** It simply suits my view of the Chantry that one of their devoted sisters should turn out to be so full of hypocrisy.
> **Leliana:** There are good people in the Chantry. Many good people who are just there to help others.
> **Morrigan:** And apparently at least a few who are simply pretending to be good.
> **Leliana:** At least I was trying to be better than I was. At least I regretted the evil I'd done. Better that than be someone who has never loved anyone or anything, least of all herself. Anything but that.
> **Morrigan:** It seem that at least you got the self-righteousness part down. Well done. (BioWare 2009: n.p.)

These instances in the narrative not only provide contexts for individual characters but also support the worldbuilding that comes into play in making the social structures of a game. The tensions between characters also allow players to evaluate, assess, and make determinations about the game world surrounding them, ultimately informing their decisions and influencing the enactment of player agency, as discussed below.

These elements are further explored in *DA* 2 (BioWare 2011), which amplifies these issues and brings them to a breaking point. As with the previous game, there are smaller-scale conflicts and discussions that highlight religion among characters in ways that aim

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

to steer the opinion and perspective of the player. This most clearly comes through with Anders' – an apostate mage – impression of and interactions with the Chantry in the lead up to taking violent action against the church. This is one of the more contentious events in the game, which will be discussed more below, but it is also one of the stronger positions taken by characters.

Companions offer their reactions to the event, with most disapproving and the player character, Hawke, reacting and giving Anders an opportunity to define his choice to attack the church. Hawke, upon seeing the destruction asks, "Anders, what have you done?" (ibid: n.p.) Anders explains and defends his actions, which are unavoidable and unchangeable in the game's narrative, as necessary when he responds, "I have removed the chance for compromise. Because there is none" (ibid.). He also, however, takes care in other scenes to delineate between religious belief and the individuals who wield it, a recurring theme throughout the series.

This goes back to the tendency for the criticisms in *Dragon Age* to focus less on belief and more on the possibility of people using belief for their own ends and interpretations. He suggests, "The oppression of mages stems from the fears of men. Not the will of the Maker" (ibid.). Anders' anger, while aimed at the Chantry as an institution, is formed from the decisions of individuals as they relate to belief, not from the belief or religion itself. In this way, it is acknowledged that much of the political and social turmoil happening in Kirkwall and across Thedas is largely separate from religion. This approach introduces an interesting narrative use of religion. Rather than a means to critique belief or religious institutions themselves, this provides a perspective which shows beneficial and detrimental sides of religious practice through the actions of individuals. This is further addressed in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014) and can even be echoed by the player character. The player's character, the Inquisitor, can say at one point, "All of this happened because of fanatics and arguments about the next world. It's time we start believing in this one" (ibid: n.p.). This is one of the few more direct challenges to belief in the game. In many ways, the statement begins to dismiss the importance of the belief that increasingly surrounds the player throughout the game, but the statement still aims to highlight the individuals at the heart of these struggles.

Characters also establish their opinions in relation to broader game contexts. They can make observations, suggestions, and try to directly sway the player. This is regularly the case in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014). As one example, many characters use their understandings of religion to define and address some companion characters. Mother Giselle, a Chantry member who joins the Inquisition, expresses a great deal of concern over the addition of Dorian. This character is from Tevinter, a region that has taken a drastic step away from Chantry teachings in their own sect of Andrastian belief where a man serves as Divine instead of a woman and magic is upheld as desirable and a positive force in society. Many characters express similar reservations toward Dorian, not due to his identity as one of few prominent gay characters, but because of the religious chasm tied to his ethnicity. This is also applied to the character Cole due to his status as seemingly manifested from a spirit. Chantry teachings malign spirits and thus Cole is determined to be a possible threat by many characters surrounding the Inquisitor.

This also extends to broader assessments of the story as it occurs around the characters. In this sense, the potential criticism arises yet again, but is still not necessarily

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

geared toward belief and religion directly. Instead, the emphasis continues to be on the dangers of individuals and their interpretations. As Cole considers the intensifying conflict between the Chantry and mages fighting for freedom, he observes, "It's dangerous when too many men in the same armour think they're right" (ibid: n.p.). Religion lays the groundwork for possible fear and discrimination, but largely results from shared interpretations and can differ drastically between groups.

Reflecting pre-modernity patterns in religion, players are presented with narratives that invoke senses of normalized religion within religious hierarchies, which evolves across the span of the games. Initially, much of the religious 'outside world' is unexplored by the player, while they encounter the beginnings of shifts toward religious pluralism. This shift is sometimes violent and, in conjunction with the mystery that often surrounds other beliefs in the game, can serve to further in-game religious othering. The narrative also splits in a variety of ways that can accommodate interpretations that support the social and religious status quo or follow prompts that alter the religious landscape of the game, which will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

Player Content

Although design provides the framework for the player to engage with, play is the human element that brings the potentially unexpected into the game experience (Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 158; Schut 2014: 267–9). Players take the content and context of the game and create their own experience, using play to push back against design, explore, and define their own experience. The narrative contexts discussed above become a part of player capital, in addition to the external elements as outlined by Ferdig (2014: 76–77). This encompasses players' own religious beliefs and morals and the influence that these experiences have on gameplay and interpretation. This study expands player capital to include the in-game knowledge acquired and used by players. While players use physical world knowledge of religions and morality to assess and make sense of in-game religious beliefs and practices, they are also inclined to develop moral decisions – and player capital – in conjunction with their own moral leanings, community discussions, and game contexts. Religion in the case of *Dragon Age* is interwoven in these discussions, becoming a tool that players use to create a particular moral image of the world.

Each game in this series gives players information about the in-game world and the figures and institutions that build it. This helps players develop a body of in-game knowledge that contributes to their decision-making. Players use online spaces to discuss narrative elements, character backgrounds, and dialogue and to engage in metagaming (cf. Donaldson 2016) that involves religion as a means of shaping the story. Information in the game and religious contexts within the narrative become a form of player capital and a tool to further their gaming experience.

This also affords players another avenue through which to explore morality, society, and their influence on a game's world. The majority of players in their discussions note wanting to create the best possible outcome for the narrative and the people in it. Religion, then, becomes another opportunity for players to be a positive influence on game worlds (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85). The narratives of these games, as discussed above, present players with a variety of ways to experience religion through this

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

environment. The character the player chooses has in-game connections to specific religious beliefs and backgrounds based on their identity. In addition to implied or prescribed beliefs and knowledge, the player is able to declare their own beliefs in many cases by choosing viewpoints to support. This provides players with a multitude of factors to consider for the avatar that they inhabit the world as. As an elf, does the player choose to express their belief in creators? As a human, do they choose to express themselves as working for the Chantry or as an atheist?

Player Capital Inside and Outside of the Game

Player capital has been discussed as largely related to knowledge and understandings from outside of the context of the game, but there are elements of player capital that also appear to stem from interactions with the game content itself. Players who are deeply engaged with the content and use online spaces to discuss it often rely on in-game contexts and circumstances to develop their interpretations and understandings of morality in the scope of the game. This does not, however, prevent them from also using their physical world understandings to evaluate and interpret game content. There is an interaction between these knowledge bases, allowing players to make decisions based on a complex mixture of morality that fits within both their physical world and game world contexts.

Players often use existing knowledge of religion and morality to explore fictional religions in *Dragon Age*. Players try to determine how physical world religions may relate to in-game examples of religion, drawing parallels between the elven pantheon and various polytheistic traditions, as one example. Consensus is often difficult to achieve in these discussions, however. When considering the Qun, players try to define the belief system within the context of various political and religious philosophies, attempting to make the system feel more familiar outside of the game context. This results in users debating the Qun as either a representation of Islam, a political philosophy, or a non-theist belief system. In part, this was sparked by comments from one of the lead writers on the game, according to these discussions. In these regards, users rely heavily on their own interpretations of physical world religions, including biases that cause some players to read both the Qun and Islam as highly repressive by nature.

While these discussions aim to better understand the game world in a more grounded context, these online spaces for discussion become sounding boards to feel out other players' decisions in the game as well. Players ask one another which choices they made, debate the best possible outcomes, and find support for their interpretations. This can allow players to reaffirm their decisions in the context of a broader moral structure among the body of players. This is illustrated in the general agreement in who to place as Divine in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014). On the other hand, there are some events that challenge personal moralities and interact with internal player capital in ways that deny the possibility of consensus. One of the largest discussion points when it comes to religion in the game is the debate about the morality of Anders' actions in *DA 2* (BioWare 2011). Players return to these discussions repeatedly, trying to make sense of the game world and their actions within it.

With the case of Anders' attack, players appeal to their senses of morality both inside and outside of the game context. External player capital is used to discuss the event from different angles. Some suggest that the oppression exerted by the church against

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

the rights of mages is enough to justify the attack, while others contextualize this event as a terrorist attack for which there is never a justification. On the other hand, players also form opinions based on the contexts provided by the game. They note that the Chantry has been exploitative in its political role and that Anders, being an apostate mage who has seen no good results from working within the system, is justified in his actions, particularly because they are a catalyst for a major rebellion in the next game. Some of these discussions are more nuanced in their use of internal and external player capital. In one discussion, a user mirrors many of the sentiments expressed across the forums:

> You can understand Anders' actions without supporting them. I know why he attacked the Chantry. His concerns were ignored and you can't get the attention of a violent institution without violence when you are desperate and mentally ill. But killing hundreds of people and harming even more by blowing up a building is still abhorrent. More people need to understand this distinction. (User, GameFAQs)

In this case, external capital has been used to familiarize being possessed by a spirit through the lens of mental illness to help make sense of this event. The user also incorporates internal capital through their assessment of the Chantry as a violent institution. Most discussions of this incident acknowledge the struggles between mages and the Chantry and note the wrongs committed on the part of the church, but while players use similar approaches to understand this game event, a moral consensus is difficult to achieve.

Players also use internal capital to develop religious backgrounds for their characters, even if this is not necessarily facilitated or supported by the gameplay itself. This borrows from game lore and information as well as personal interests and motivations and can involve the development of elaborate religious backgrounds for these characters. Players introduce their own interpretations of tensions for their personal characters in ways that expand beyond limitations to their agency. For example, a user outlines the background they have given their Inquisitor character, stating:

> My [elf Inquisitor] believes in elven gods and is a true believer. He is serious about his Dalish heritage. He is interested in and respects other cultures, except for the Chantry. After everything the church has done to elves, he can't respect them. If the Chantry is involved, his snark goes way up. He is also very clear that he is not the Herald of Andraste. He would be happy to sit down with any other group though and discuss culture and religion with them. He thinks it's fascinating and is a major nerd. (User, Reddit)

These discussions often extend to how the player navigated choices and the narrative as their character, trying to ensure that they embody the appropriate choices. Even in cases where players disagree on specific interpretations, arguments allow players to grapple with the complexities of belief, considering in-game history, ethnicities, and whether or not belief and support of the church are the same thing.

In many cases, while the mechanisms and motivations of discussion are similar – comparing notes, asking for advice, and exploring how different groups and beliefs fit

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

together in the game world – the outcomes are frequently quite divergent for players. One of the most important religious turning points in the game belongs to *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), where players must use their experience in the game (or over the series) to assess who the best Divine would be. In this case, there is largely agreement in the decisions made. For most players, they determine that Leliana is the best option, choosing to establish a church that will enact change and reduce the focus on controlling mages. These conversations, however, emphasize the ability for the choice of Divine to alter the political and social landscape of Thedas.

There are more personal ways that players use external capital to assess the game content based on their individual experiences and knowledge. In some cases, players address the religious information in the game based on their own experiences with religion. These discussions are more about making the game content familiar in a much more personal way than the approaches discussed above. As one example, a user mentions:

> I started thinking about the Chantry and I have to save that BioWare did right by religion. I'm Catholic and I noticed parallels between the Chantry and Catholic Church. There are representations of the Crusades, there is celibacy for priests and priestesses, the Divine is like their Pope, Tevinter's split from the Chantry due to Andraste sounds like the Christian and Jewish split, etc. (User, Reddit)

While often tethered to physical world information, these discussions would not be as detailed and significant to players' experiences with the game without their in-game player capital. There is a frequent blurring of the lines between player capital based in the physical world and that which exists solely based on in-game understandings.

Religion as a Tool

These narrative and player elements culminate in players finding new ways to use information to shape these stories. Players engage in a range of discussions highlighting game content, events, and contexts that centre on their position within the narrative as the main character. Players discuss their choices and opportunities but also use this to expand their player capital as it relates directly to the game. While external experiences and knowledge can have influence and bearing on how players interact with game content (Ferdig 2014: 76–77) and despite the bounded enjoyment achieved through experiencing an intended story (Tanenbaum/Tanenbaum 2010: 16), players are invested in comparing their choices and exploring narrative possibilities. This emphasizes knowledge of not only game events and outcomes but the specific inner workings of the political and religious belief structures across the societies in Thedas. In these regards, religion is viewed not only as a part of the social tapestry of the game, but also as a tool through which to shape the game world, particularly as it spans across the series.

In one exchange between users, the politics and tensions involved with belief in *Origins* are discussed (BioWare 2009). This case is regarding the potential establishment of a Chantry in Orzammar, the underground dwarven city with little religious and ethnic diversity. As an illustration of in-game player capital and assessment, the users consider:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

> I agree that there can be compromise and mutual respect between the Chantry and Dwarven society. It didn't turn out that way as dwarves can be defensive about their beliefs and the Chantry wants to use Brother Burkel's death to wage a crusade war. I don't think there's a good or bad guy in this case, but neither side has respect for the other. But you are right that the Chantry could do a lot to help the casteless and poor in Orzammar. It would never work unless the dwarves agree to outside influence and the Chantry doesn't have an ulterior motive. (User 1, Fextralife)

> That's the issue with religious freedom. The freedom to believe one thing also means allowing different beliefs. So I helped him establish the Chantry. Anything else that happens is out of [your character's] hands. (User 2, Fextralife)

This discussion highlights common interactions across these online forums among players. There is an interest in doing things 'right' unless players are experimenting with perceived evil playthroughs where their intention is to create the worst possible world state. These experiments usually take place after a full true playthrough is complete. In the context of shaping the world and player capital, however, this discussion illustrates the interest that players have not only in shaping game events but producing a positive outcome.

This reflects previous work noting the drive that players often feel to be a positive force in game worlds (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85; Tomlinson 2021: 722–5), but also contributes to our understanding of how players engage with in-game religion as part of this approach to play. Given players' interest in influencing videogame stories and the mechanics afforded by this series of games, it is perhaps not surprising that these interpretations and conversations culminate in using religious structures in the game for the benefit of the narrative. This is true in cases where players hope to improve the game world as well as negatively influence it as a digital social experiment.

In most cases, players use the choice of the Divine as a tool to establish particular outcomes in the game's society. Players may choose from three characters that they encounter as possible companions and advisors, but the outcome is also influenced by their other actions and decisions throughout the game. This includes whether the player sides with Templars or mages early on, who they ally with throughout the game, and how they establish themselves in terms of their character's religious beliefs. A faithful Inquisitor, for example, is more likely to support the more moderate and conservative choices of Cassandra and Vivienne, respectively. An Inquisitor driven by power, vengeance, or doing what appears to be the objectively 'right' thing is more likely to lead to a potential outcome of the most progressive Divine option, a 'softened' – or more empathetic and less violent – version of Leliana.

Players discuss the paths and routes to these outcomes, share the trajectories of their own games, and assess the potential results of each option in shaping the game world. While many choices spark divisions among players, this is an area where the majority of players share opinions and lean toward the most radical and progressive option in Leliana. In these discussions, the possible narrative – and game world – outcomes are weighed against each other. As one example, a user confirms their thought process:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

> I choose Leliana. She wants to fully reform the Chantry. Cassandra is too linked to the old ways. She wants improvement, but she really just wants a polished version of the old Chantry. Vivienne would just reinforce the problems from the past and things would just get back to the point they are at now. And people would not trust a mage as Divine. Why bother rebuilding the Chantry with someone who can't get support? (User, Fextralife)

Even in cases where there is dissent, this comes from an individualized understanding of the Chantry's position and influence in Thedas. Players still hope to select the best possible person for the role and use this choice as a tool to shape things and influence change for the positive. For one user who represents the less common choice of a moderate Divine:

> I have a lot of doubts about Leliana's major changes. She would cause a schism. She's too revolutionary and that won't work with a lot of people. We'll have to see what effect this has in the long run (maybe there will be none because of BioWare's illusion of choice). But I think Cassandra is the best Divine choice. Her changes will be practical, pragmatic, and sensible. She's much more likely to get things done without splitting the Chantry. (User, Reddit)

Based on the options and opportunities presented by religion in this series, players use this as another tool in their kit toward forming and influencing the story within the provided possibilities and parameters offered by the game. This approach to play encourages the expansion of knowledge and engagement online to explore which directions the narrative can travel as players make determinations that shift the story.

Conclusion

Religion can add to the complexity of a videogame narrative, particularly in cases where a fictional religious landscape grants more detail to a game world. This chapter has taken into consideration the narrative context of the *Dragon Age* game series as well as the player capital involved (Ferdig 2014: 76–77) with religious narratives in these games. *Dragon Age* takes an approach to religion that acknowledges the social dynamics observed with social homogeneity of belief and conflicts arising from increasing modernity and diversity (Berger 2007: 23). In the games, it is common for characters to assume belief in the presence of those with certain in-game ethnic backgrounds as a standard and presumed identity (Banchoff 2007: 14). This lends a degree of social realism to the game world and narrative, while also generally providing the familiar dynamics of religion, religious institutions, and religious belief.

The series focuses on just a few examples of fictional religions but emphasizes religious, social elements alongside examples of intricate lore (cf. Tuckett/Robertson 2014). To some degree, players have a level of agency that intersects with this lore in that they can use it to shape broad outcomes (Schut 2014: 256–60) although their characters are bound to specific belief systems based on their in-game ethnicity. Outside of direct player influ-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

ence, the narrative covers some of the more troubling elements related to the possibility of competing for adherents and influence.

Often in cases where belief systems are encroaching on new territory, they are met with resistance and potential violence. Because the game world is on the precipice of establishing a more robust religious marketplace (Norris/Ingleheart 2007: 41), there are many social assumptions reflected in the story as well. This interacts with the social framing of religious beliefs as correct versus incorrect (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1945). However, this is complicated by the events in *Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), which pull religious belief away from the sacred and into the world of the tangible or profane (cf. Durkheim 1961).

Additionally, while many games can use religious dynamics as an opportunity to critique religion and religious institutions as part of their gameplay and narratives (Tuckett/Robertson 2014: 94–99), the *Dragon Age* series uses religion as an opportunity to build the game world in familiar and realistic ways (Tamborini/Skalski 2006: 225–7) while also using it as a social critique of individuals, interpretation, and how institutions can be used to further specific goals. Even in instances where characters are vehemently or violently reacting against the Chantry, the focus on individual misuse, misinterpretation, or malfeasance is amplified in character dialogue. This is an interesting approach but makes sense in the context of the centrality of religious belief and practice in these games. Yet it also places players in a position where they, too, come to use institutions to advance their own interests and goals. This commentary is often mirrored through players' use of religious elements, like the choice of Divine, to shape their ideal view of the game world.

This yet again highlights the element of player agency involved with play (Wagner 2012: 121). While agency is an important element of a largely interactive medium (Shinkle 2008: 912), there are boundaries that ensure that play happens within prescribed options (Tanenbaum/Tanenbaum 2010: 15–16). Despite this, however, players find engaging ways to make the story their own in online discussions that form a kind of emergent play (Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 158; Schut 2014: 267–9). In these cases, players use forums to give additional context and backstory to their character, as well as compare the decisions that they made in the game.

These discussions also emphasize an important form of knowledge that is applied in the decisions that players make. The game content and context (Ferdig 2014: 71–74) provide ample information for players to learn, consider, and employ as part of their play. This creates a player capital internal to the game that players can share with one another to help move the game narratives toward the most positive or desirable possible outcome. Videogames, however, are also not wholly separate from "reality" (Campbell/Grieve 2014: 5). External capital in the form of personal morality and religious belief come into play (Ferdig 2014: 76–77), but players integrate this with their in-game knowledge and experience to assess and judge in-game events and decisions.

Because religion is incorporated to some degree as a mechanic (Schut 2014: 256) in this sense, players can use it as a tool to help them shape the game world in the image that they desire. For most players, there is a vested interest in ensuring positive outcomes for the game world (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85; Tomlinson 2021: 722–25), which tend to manifest most commonly in the form of using religion to create progressive change. Regardless of external player capital, there is an investment in engaging in prosocial behaviours (Shariff 2015: 110) in the game world. This aligns with the trends of players hop-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

ing to exert a positive influence on games and the characters that inhabit these digital spaces (Murzyn/Valgaeren 2016: 84–85; Tomlinson 2021: 722–25).

Although this study is limited to players of *Dragon Age* specifically and RPGs more broadly, it adds to the current discussion on the possibilities related to and implications of religious belief in videogames. This expands the concept of religion as a game mechanic (Schut, 2014: 256), but indicates that players are invested beyond religion functioning as a simple button to press to achieve a limited response. It also adds to the concept of player capital, which players form based on physical world and in-game knowledge and experience. Both of these elements are explored by players in online discussions where they examine their interests, hopes, and desires for the game world and use religion as one of the ways that they can engage in and support in-game prosocial behaviour.

References

Anthony, Jason (2014): "Dreidels to Dante's Inferno: Toward a Typology of Religious Games." In: *Playing With Religion in Digital Games*, pp. 25–46.

Banchoff, Thomas (2007): "Introduction." In: Thomas Banchoff (ed.), *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–18.

Berger, Peter L (2007): "Pluralism, Protestantization, and the Voluntary Principle." In: Thomas Banchoff (ed.), *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 19–30.

Berger, Peter L./Hefner, Robert W. (2003): "Spiritual Capital in Comparative Perspective." In: *Spiritual Capital Planning Meeting*, pp. 1–6.

BioWare (2003): *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, San Francisco, CA: LucasArts.

BioWare (2009): *Dragon Age: Origins*, Edmonton: Electronic Arts.

BioWare (2011): *Dragon Age II*, Edmonton: Electronic Arts.

BioWare (2014): *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Edmonton: Electronic Arts.

Bizzocchi, Jim; Tanenbaum, Joshua (2011): "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences." In: Drew Davidson (ed.), *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, pp. 289–315.

Bizzocchi, Jim; Tanenbaum, Joshua (2012): "*Mass Effect 2*: A Case Study in The Design Of Game Narrative." In: *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 32/5, pp. 393–404.

Bosman, Frank G (2016): "The Word Has Become Game: Researching Religion in Digital Games." In: Gregor Ahn; Simone Heidbrink; Tobias Knoll (eds.), *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 11, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, pp. 28–45.

Campbell, Heidi; Grieve, Gregory Price (2014): "Introduction: What Playing with Religion Offers Digital Game Studies." In: Heidi A. Campbell; Gregory P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–24.

Donaldson, Scott (2016): "Metagaming and Subversive Play in League of Legends." In: *Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, pp. 118–32.

Durkheim, Émile (1961): *The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life*, New York, NY: Collier Books.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Ferdig, Richard E. (2014): "Developing a Framework for Understanding The Relationship Between Religion and Videogames." In: Simone Heidbrink; Tobias Knoll (eds.), *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, pp. 68–85.

Gregory, Rabia (2014): "Citing the Medieval: Using Religion as World-Building Infrastructure in Fantasy MMORPGs." In: Heidi A. Campbell; Gregory P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 134–53.

Irizarry, Joshua A./Irizarry, Ita T. (2014): "The Lord is My Shepard. Confronting Religion in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy." In: Simone Heidbrink; Tobias Knoll (eds.), *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, pp. 224–48.

Knoll, Tobias (2015): "'Are Those the Only Two Solutions'? Dealing with Choice, Agency and Religion in Digital Games." In: Simone Heidbrink; Tobias Knoll; Jan Wysocki (eds.), *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 7, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, pp. 207–26.

Murray, Janet H. (1997): *Hamlet on The Holodeck: The Future of Narrativity in Cyberspace*, New York, NY: The Free Press.

Murzyn, Eva; Valgaeren, Evelien (2016): "Our Virtual Selves, Our Virtual Morals: Mass Effect Players' Personality and In-Game Choices." In: *2016 International Conference on Interactive Technologies and Games (ITAG)*, pp. 82–86.

Norris, Pippa; Inglehart, Ronald (2007): "Uneven Secularization in the United States and Western Europe." In: Thomas Banchoff (ed.), *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 31–58.

Peeters, Stijn; Hagen, Sal. (2018): "4CAT: Capture and Analysis Toolkit," Computer software. Vers. 1.0.

Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred Reginald (1945): "Religion and Society." In: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 75/$\frac{1}{2}$, pp. 33–43.

Ryan, M. L. (2006): *Avatars of Story*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Salen, Katie; Zimmerman, Eric (2003): *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge, MA: MIT press.

Schut, Kevin (2014): "They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality." In: Heidi A. Campbell; Gregory P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 255–76.

Shariff, Azim F (2015): "Does Religion Increase Moral Behavior?" In: *Current Opinion in Psychology* 6, pp. 108–13.

Shinkle, Eugénie (2008): "Video Games, Emotion and The Six Senses." In: *Media, Culture & Society* 30/6, pp. 907–15.

Tamborini, Ron; Skalski, Paul (2006): "The Role of Presence in The Experience of Electronic Games." In: *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses, And Consequences* 1, pp. 225–40.

Tanenbaum, Theresa Jean (2011): "Being in the Story: Readerly Pleasure, Acting Theory, and Performing a Role." In: Mei Si; David Thue; Elisabeth André; James Lester;

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Theresa Jean Tanenbaum; Veronica Zammitto (eds.), *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, Berlin: Springer, pp. 55–66.

Tanenbaum, Karen; Tanenbaum, Theresa Jean (2010): "Agency as Commitment to Meaning: Communicative Competence in Games." In: *Digital Creativity* 21/1, pp. 11–17.

Tomlinson, Christine (2021): "Priority Pixels: The Social and Cultural Implications of Romance in Video Games." In: *Information, Communication & Society* 24/5, pp. 717–32.

Tuckett, J. D. F./Robertson, David G. (2014): "Locating the Locus of Study On 'Religion' In Video Games." In: Simone Heidbrink; Tobias Knoll (eds.), *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, pp. 86–107.

Wagner, Rachel (2012): "Religion and Video Games: Shooting Aliens in Cathedrals." In: Terry Ray Clark; Dan W. Clanton (eds.), *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices*, London, UK: Routledge, pp. 118–38.

Waltemathe, Michael (2014): "Bridging Multiple Realities." In: H. A Campbell; G. P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 238–54.

Wang, Jeff; Zhao, Xin; Bamossy, Gary J. (2014): "The Sacred and The Profane in Online Gaming: A Netnographic Inquiry of Chinese Gamers." In: Natalie T. Wood; Michael R. Solomon (eds.), *Virtual Social Identity and Consumer Behavior*, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, pp. 109–24.

Watkins, Rebecca; Molesworth, Mike (2012): "Attachment to Digital Virtual Possessions in Videogames." In: Russell Belk; Soren Askegaard; Linda Scott (eds.), *Research in Consumer Behavior* 14, Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 153–70.

De Wildt, Lars; Aupers, Stef D. (2019): "Playing the Other: Role-playing Religion in Videogames." In: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22/5-6, pp. 867–84.

De Wildt, Lars; Aupers, Stef D. (2021): "Eclectic Religion: The Flattening of Religious Cultural Heritage in Videogames." In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27/3, pp. 312–30.

Wuthnow, Robert (2007): "Religious Diversity in a 'Christian Nation': American Identity and American Democracy." In: Thomas Banchoff (ed.), *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 151–70.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461921-019 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND