

# Unlocking the Spiritual Potential of Games

## Reflections and Future Directions

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*Michele Fanelli and Magdalena M. Strobl*

The intersection of narrative, fiction, and spirituality has been a rich ground for exploration throughout history, with narrative frameworks serving as central means of expressing and engaging with spirituality, and tradition and narration serving as key components in religious expression. Narrative media and fictional spaces recurrently stimulate critical reflection on belief and morality, occasionally creating unexpected interplays between popular and sacred culture. Goethe's *Faust*, for instance, highlights the connection between spirituality and identity, raising questions about personal moral beliefs, distinguishing belief as a communal practice and spirituality as intimate and private. Contemporary cultural productions are no less, as they offer virtual spaces to explore new spiritual modes and expressions. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of fictional worlds as a source of spiritual solace and meditation, offering virtual environments where to seek peace and tranquillity, as exemplified by the popularity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* among individuals living under lockdown. In my personal experience (Fanelli), digital games as well as digitally repurposed Pen and Paper Role Playing Games have been shown to be effective and reliable methods of providing me with the best available proxies for social experiences, enabling me to connect with friends who I was not permitted to meet in person. Although I cannot assert that I was actively seeking a sense of transcendental belonging, it is evident that subconsciously, I was searching for a sense of tranquillity through my affiliation with the tribe. Games supported me (Strobl) in two significant ways during the lockdowns of the pandemic. First, videogames helped me by offering a way to be more present in the moment and focus on the games' storylines or the actions of my avatars. By immersing myself in a virtual world, I could take a break from the stresses and unpredictability of the real world and experience a sense of control and accomplishment during troubling and uncertain times. Second, virtual environments also allowed me to play board games during this period. This possibility connected me with friends and family safely and engagingly and thus, a feeling of belonging and community was created. Ultimately, this mindful practice of gaming and communal connection helped me cultivate a state of tranquillity and peace. This book explored the possibilities and significance of fictional spirituality and spiri-

tual expression practices. While religious themes in fictional works have been analyzed extensively, the role of spirituality in interactive art and fiction has not been extensively studied. Through a wide array of perspectives from various academic fields and practices, this anthology aims to address this gap and offer a fresh look at how narrative and fiction intersect with spirituality, providing a deeper understanding of the role of fiction in expressing and exploring our spiritual lives.

*Epiphany* is a Live Action Role-Playing game designed to facilitate personal transformation, exploration of spirituality, and philosophical questioning through symbolic enactment, ritual, and play. The game is fashioned as a spiritual retreat, where players are free to explore spiritualities within a community dedicated to growth and validation. Sarah Lynne Bowman has experience designing and participating in larps, and she believes that the qualities of role-playing can be applied to therapy and research as a vehicle for change. *Epiphany* is based on *Mage: The Ascension* and, as such, it features consent-based mechanics, player-driven plots, and collaborative storytelling. *Epiphany* focuses on player-generated content throughout the event involving structured workshop classes during the day, unstructured play at night, and a black box area. Two problems in incorporating spirituality into larps are cultural appropriation and the possible derailment given by a powerful magic play system, which the designer tried to prevent by designing the game to emphasize realistic, embodied play and limiting the focus on powerful magic. They also encouraged the players to avoid cultural appropriation and stereotyping by playing characters from their own cultures, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and races. Nonetheless, players were fostered to express aspects of their identity that they do not usually show society. In conclusion, *Epiphany* is a larp designed as a tool for personal transformation, exploring spirituality, and philosophical questioning through symbolic enactment, ritual, and play. The game employs built-in structures for reflection, debriefing, and processing to concretize insights gained by players. By avoiding cultural appropriation and stereotyping, the game creates a safe space for players to explore aspects of themselves outside of social norms.

Menachem Cohen shares his experience of using the RPG game *Dreamchaser* to examine existential questions and conduct spiritual direction. Through his initial engagement with role-playing games, he realized their, in his words, transformational potential. This experience prompted him to start working with RPGs and to try to understand the healing powers such games can have. Due to the role-playing aspect of RPGs, these games represent a good medium for spiritual direction as they allow players to experience introspection, discovery, and transformation in a safe and constructive space. For instance, letting their character live through experiences and process emotions they usually would not as themselves. However, creating a bond of thoughts and feelings between the players and their character is necessary to be effective. For this reason, the author adapted the game *Dreamchaser*, which can be used to work on personal questions, challenges, and goals and as a tool for therapy and spiritual direction. In this RPG, the player must write down a goal or a dream, their role, and the Milestones. Afterward, players move through each Milestone to reach the central Dream. These sessions include an organic flow of play and talk, ultimately supporting the player's growth. Even though the main focus was on *Dreamchaser*, Menachem argues that *Dungeons & Dragons* and other RPGs, such as *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* or *Polycule*, can be used for such spiritual guidance as the mechanics, rules,

and settings help in navigating the world and challenges, and therefore, support the work of spiritual discovery. He concludes by including future research interests in dungeon design and guide creations. In the end, Menachem's article displays the possibilities of RPGs and spiritual direction for personal growth.

The seeking of spiritual experiences through Live Action Role Play seems to be a recurrent and desired phenomenon, especially by non-spiritual players, despite their attachment to a rational and scientific model for interpreting the world. From Anna Milon's interviews with players of *Curious Pastimes*, a LARP game that traces its setting and rule system to modern paganism, emerges how in make-believe spiritual events, such as the funeral of a character, the mental and emotional boundaries between the character and the player fade as the emotions bleed through, making the events perceived as very close to a real-life spiritual experience. This pursuit of make-believe spirituality offers another perspective on the relationship between magical and rational thinking, i.e. not necessarily dichotomous or opposing but complementary, offering thus a richer perspective for interpreting lived experiences. While role-playing, the fantasy world is temporarily accepted as real and disbelief is suspended. Bleed, the phenomenon where feelings and thoughts from the character transcend into the player and vice versa, allows fantasy and reality to be in a complementary fashion, shifting the relation from a distinction to a conjunction. In the New Paradigm, faith and fantasy are believed to serve the same function: compensation and comfort. The rational model of thought, however, denies this comfort. Entering the Magic Circle by suspending disbelief allows the players to maintain a rational-materialist outlook in their daily lives and experience enchantment in the game space, thus acquiring the comfort of magical thinking without forsaking the rational one.

Being an application of Doris C. Rush and Andrew M. Phelps' existential and transformative game design framework, the videogame *The Witch's Way* weaves together autobiography and fiction to explore themes such as identity, meaning, purpose, and connection, making use of mythical imagery and symbolism as well as ritual enactment. The game's spiritual exploration utilizes mythical imagery and ritual enactment to promote a sense of connection and harmony with nature. Through the protagonist's journey of becoming a witch, the game emphasizes the development of magical abilities, which the authors consider supremely natural and derived from the balance and harmony with all living things encompassed in the energy web. The blossoming of these magical abilities is synonymous with authenticity and living according to one's True Nature, requiring the player to drop into wordlessness and access oneness. The game promotes a holistic and intuitive approach through creative rituals that revolve around play and creativity, meant to challenge the intellectually dominated perception of the world. Overall, this game provides an immersive and transformative experience that encourages rediscovery and personal growth while promoting a more sustainable and ecocentric worldview. *The Witch's Way* demonstrates how integrating autobiography, fiction, spirituality, and game design can be used to explore important themes in a transformative and engaging way. By emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings, and recognizing the intrinsic value of nature, the game promotes an ecocentric philosophy that contrasts anthropocentrism. *The Witch's Way* is an excellent example of how game design can be used to promote personal development and explore meaningful existen-

tial questions, and how fiction and metaphor can facilitate introspection and personal growth.

Live-Action Role-Playing games have the potential to help individuals emotionally prepare for life-threatening health issues, as demonstrated by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, who took advantage of his personal experience to incorporate the themes of death and dying in larp game design. He believes that the symbolic enactment of rituals in games can be a natural extension of human spiritual and religious practices. The fear of death endured immutable throughout human history and, although it has been a constant source of wonder and spiritual exploration, humans avoid even referring to it, resorting instead to idioms to describe it. Through time various cultures faced the fear of death, trying to alleviate this concern by offering versions of the afterlife or providing arguments why it shouldn't be feared. Existential death anxiety is a topic of psychology and philosophy, with various attempts at comprehending, measuring, or accepting it. When the author faced mortality during the summer of 2018, they were surprised to see that among resignation and frustration, they also felt at peace. The unexpected tranquil response is most probably due to their involvement in Nordic larp games centered on the themes of death and dying. Role-playing impacts identity, as embodying a character alters the sense of identity and the state of consciousness. Additionally, through the bleed phenomenon, it is possible to affect every part of our emotional, cognitive, and physical being. Specific subcategories of bleed can even address components of our fear of dying. Role-playing games can facilitate growth and change in how we think about and prepare ourselves for our inevitable deaths and can become powerful tools for transformation and self-development.

A. Rose Johnson examines the characteristics of the new wave of interest in witchcraft practices, which, possibly stoked by the rise of interest for witchy aesthetics and crystal collecting, makes its way among Gen Z and millennials. While a plethora of available resources are accessible to budding practitioners, each has specific advantages and disadvantages. For example, old-fashioned, racial, or inaccurate historical notions of witchcraft practices may be found in published materials in shops or libraries. A thorough treatment of Wicca, like Buckland's *Complete Book of Witchcraft*, may not be suitable for younger practitioners, and its reliance on the Gardnerian Wiccan origin story may damage his credibility. Therefore, some potential practitioners may turn to the internet, specifically TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr, for information on witchcraft practices. Tumblr stands out among these social media platforms since it is more inclusive and less strict, allowing users to learn about different traditions, sects, and secular paths. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for collective versions of witchcraft that empower practitioners to create their paths by picking and choosing the gnosis that suits them. One such gnosis is pop culture witchcraft, which combines fan practices with witchcraft practices and achieved great popularity on Tumblr. Pop culture spells are more accessible and approachable for beginners compared to published texts, using shorthands and symbolism that relate to traditional witchcraft practices, making them easier to understand. The process of sharing and reblogging content on Tumblr makes pop culture witchcraft even more accessible and customizable, allowing for conversations with authors and the addition of personal notes and suggestions. In conclusion, pop culture witchcraft offers a more accessible and customizable version of such prac-

tice that appeals to a younger generation of practitioners and provides an inclusive and collective approach to learning.

While there are multiple noteworthy linguistic, semantic and methodological parallels between ceremonial magic and immersive technology design, Maria Saridaki and Mariza Dima focus on how the two fields can be combined to create transformative, immersive experiences, and do so by proposing a framework of design pillars for mixed reality experiences. For the authors, ceremonial magic can be seen as a system for comprehending the world, allowing practitioners to navigate the varied forces that compromise and shape material creation including exploring its social and embodied aspects. Technology and magic's relationship has a rich history, which shines anew in front of the possible applications of magicians' psychological techniques to the design of mixed reality technologies such as AR glasses. The goal is to create meaningful experiences that elicit emotional responses and invite reflection. Relying on the key features of ceremonies and magic rituals, the authors propose a framework of design pillars for mixed reality experiences based on four qualities: orientation, transitions, enaction, and meaning-making. Referring to the audience, they also propose a shift from the term 'viewer' to 'participant' to acknowledge the importance of all senses and the embodied nature of the experience. The previously mentioned four qualities are essential in mixed reality experiences, whose design should balance the use of anchors and give space to the participant to achieve the goal without breaking the experience. Finally, the authors claim that their exploration is but a simple first step, and much more can be achieved with the insights from experts in both fields.

Felix Schniz believes that videogames can offer players spiritual experiences, as they offer unique and accessible approaches to engage with spiritual imaginary. Spirituality and play are intertwined, both encouraging a state of mind that transcends ordinary reality and follows its own modes of meaning-making. As such, the notion of the sacred-earnest act is explored in relation to videogames, as these offer new spaces where sacral play can be enacted by creating a virtual home for the sacred-earnest and offering hard-coded boundaries in which human interactions occur. Similarly to the objet ambigu, videogames have multiple interpretations and meanings. Players' exploration of video game worlds, which may involve spiritual engagement, can lead to introspection and a better understanding of themselves. Furthermore, videogames offer a feasible strategy for modern people who want to believe in spirituality but consider themselves too secular to do so. Another discussed topic focuses on how academic writing should not discourage the use of the first-person voice, as it is essential for expressing personal and spiritual emotions, for instance, in analyzing the contemplative aspects of walking simulators. At which the author proposes the methodology of close performing, born from the combination of the situationist approach and the literal method of close reading, and involving playing a game several times while making observations using a four-step process: immediate observations, short-term actions, long-term insights, and cascading notes. This methodology aims to balance personal observations with their abstract embedding and helps identify a game's patterns and core motifs. Finally, the author shares his experience playing the walking simulator *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, highlighting the game's immersive qualities and applying the designed methodology. Overall, Schniz concludes that

spirituality is a universal need for belonging and meaning, and videogames offer infinite potential for spiritual realization.

Frank G. Bosman discusses the complex and varied use of in-game violence within video game narratives, focusing on five narrative properties: motivation, trivialization, dehumanization, moralization, and problematization. Violence is often used in videogames to motivate the protagonist for revenge against an enemy faction, occasionally causing a dissonance between game mechanics and narrative, presenting violence as justifiable in retaliation for earlier violence, a rule usually applied only to those who win the conflict. Trivialization is a defining characteristic of in-game violence, where violence is portrayed as fun and consequence-free, creating a power fantasy for the player. This property is linked to the inconsequentiality of violence and death to the text-immanent player, with most games allowing the player to die and respawn endlessly at no or low costs. The text also discusses the property of alienation in violence in digital games, where players experience diminished perceptions of the in-game enemies' human qualities leading to their dehumanization. Many games feature dehumanized adversaries, allowing players to postpone or sidetrack any moral objections involved in the created mayhem. Reversely, in some other cases, games try to make the player reflect on the morality of the in-game violence through moralization and problematization. *Spec Ops: The Line*, taken as an example, challenges the military shooter genre's criticism as a propagator of violence by providing a narrative that directly transfers the moral responsibility for the player's actions to the player and addresses the player directly through loading screens and in-game dialogue. Players' fascination with in-game violence is shown in the properties of trivialization and dehumanization, while moralization reflects an ambiguous attitude towards in-game violence. Lastly, problematization signals to players how immoral their actions in the game actually are, and this game's communication of moral ambiguity towards in-game violence is somewhere between fascination and terror.

Leonardo Marcato uses a spiritual approach of conscious gaming to explore the connection between digital games and spirituality by examining games such as *Planescape Torment*, *Bioshock Infinite*, *Life is Strange*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, and *Sid Meier's Beyond Earth*. One can critically analyze these videogames as cultural products that convey messages about potential pasts, present situations, and future scenarios in a language that resonates with players. Digital games, both indie and high-budget productions, have the power to impact players' worldviews by offering an immersive experience that can push the boundaries of game involvement. Unlike movies, digital games allow for existential involvement in the game, which can extend to all aspects of a player's life. The author argues that from a philosophical perspective, the relationship between playing modern digital games and spirituality is a compelling subject. It can help in understanding what the advancement of technology means for the fundamental element of Human nature and how it evolves in the contemporary world. The article also examines the concept of trans-humanism, which is historically and culturally tied with spirituality. The idea of digital agency, avatar, and immersion can open the ground for discussions on trans-humanism, post-humanism, and how to define Human nature and evolution. Marcato concludes that digital games can have a spiritual dimension that needs to be explored further. The immersive nature of digital games and the existential involvement of



players in them make them an important medium to understand the relation between Humans and technology and how they connect to spirituality.

There is a specific structural and functional cohesion to the design of sacred spaces in isometric top-down computer Role Playing Games, with a teleological rationale behind spirituality and religion. Mateusz Felczak examines the spatial narrative created by sacred architecture in the genre mentioned above, focusing on space, verticality, map layout, and how game mechanics connect with interactive and non-interactive elements of those architectures. The object of this analysis can be found in fantasy-themed or post-apocalyptic titles, whose meaning and function of religion and spirituality must be understood through the spaces' spatial design. One interpretation is modularity and interactivity, for example, temples, chapels, and natural areas, built from the integral building blocks of gameplay, prioritizing assessable explorability and interactivity. In these games, the neomedieval architecture of sacred objects is formulaic and asset-driven, with negotiable power relations and modifiability through player action. The portrayal of religion in video games is influenced by the mythic-like structures of mythology scholars, and how sacred spaces are used to amplify the divine presence and create an 'unmediated' experience of religion. In cRPGs sacred spaces tend to connect with the natural environment, for instance, being associated with ruined temples and abandoned religious buildings, usually located distant from cities, whose paths are obstructed by natural habitats. The design of these architectures is often teleological, where the hero's progression through the game reflects the advancement toward godhood. The absence of gods in cRPGs can strike a post-secular note, and exploring sacred spaces often affords players more agency. To conclude, the evolving influence of *Dungeons&Dragons* on religion and play may impact future assessments of sacred digital spatiality in upcoming fantasy-themed cRPGs.

Lars de Wildt argues that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise includes religion in a perennial and esoteric manner, which leads consumers to construct meaning through bricolage. He approaches his research by doing a content analysis and including player and developer interviews. The franchise employs mysteries linked to the Catholic church to uncover the plot and conspiracies of different societies. The games also suggest that there is more underneath the surface of societies' history. De Wildt also notes that an increasing number of people turn to the secularisation of religion, that religion changes into privatized bricolage, and the ongoing inclusion of religion in media in the form of the esoteric, the mysterious, or the occult. The author continues that the *Assassin's Creed* displays religion as perennial, which means that throughout history, rituals and beliefs persist but slightly change. Additionally, this idea encompasses the belief that all religions stem from the same mysterious source. Next, de Wildt also argues for the esoteric nature of *Assassin's Creed's* inclusion of religion. He describes it as creating meaning through non-institutionalized practices. This includes eclectic traditions such as science, traditional religion, and historical secrets. In the videogame series, it represents as the knowledge transmitted and connects religions, mythologies, science, and other mysteries of history. Important to note here is that only a few have access to this insight. This exclusivity is because all media of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise needs to be consumed to derive the meaning of the presented religion. However, instead of an individual bricolage, the franchise provides a commodified puzzle to be solved. To conclude, this franchise uses the com-

mon truth of religious traditions and the combination of knowledge to create meaning and an understanding of the 'real' truth that only consumers of all media can access.

Graziana Ciola and Francesca Samà examine the representation and function of divine characters in the *Saint Seiya* manga, anime, and video game series. Through an analysis of various *Saint Seiya* video games released since the late 1980s, the article explores how the gods are portrayed, their role within the gameplay, and the distinction between the heroes in the games versus their manga and anime counterparts. The authors also examine how Masami Kurumada's interpretation of traditional epic narrative patterns is influenced by interactive storytelling and how cultural and religious syncretism play a role in the in-game experience. Of particular interest is the game *Saint Seiya: The Hades*, which is argued to offer a religious gaming experience deeply rooted in the game's narrative content. Its gameplay provides a tangible representation and opportunity for players to directly engage with the fundamental concept of *Ananke* or Necessity, which was a prominent aspect of Ancient Greek spirituality and worldview. This study highlights the importance of video game adaptations as building blocks of modern-day classical mythology and as an integral part of *Saint Seiya*'s continuing pop-cultural relevance. Furthermore, this work asserts the significance of the interactive format implemented by hybrid RPG fighting games in exploring different declensions of a traditional narrative structure across several new media. In summary, Ciola and Samà provide a compelling analysis of the representation and function of divine characters in *Saint Seiya* and highlights the unique and immersive gaming experience offered by *Saint Seiya: The Hades*.

David Stevenson investigates how Esotericism is increasingly embedded within Japanese role-playing game narratives and explores how these videogames reflect the occult complexity of non-canonical religious texts in a way that is repurposed as a form of religious experience. For those reasons, he examines four different JRPGs. Both *Final Fantasy VII* and *Xenogears* exhibit a constant miniaturization of humanity, with Humanity lingering at the bottom of a totalizing mythic order in this structural shift from the horizontal conflict of hero and villain to a vertical one. *Xenogears* specifically focuses on a religious myth that directly incorporates Judeo-Christian motifs and situates the player within the mythos while including a Jungian philosophy. The *Shin Megami Tensei* series then includes religious figures, demons, and deities and involves Gnostic eschatology represented in several figures. Next, references to many academics and its inclusion of Adam and Eves as antagonists, presenting as a 'Genesis' for machines, addresses *NieR: Automata*'s issue of gnosis. Through allusions to modern philosophy and religious characters, this game creates a modern myth in which the religious awakening occurs in the context of a world beyond enlightenment and history. All these JRPGs feature a retelling of creation myths and explore the theme of heroes fighting destiny. Additionally, these games intend to address the intricate spiritual dynamics of human life recurring in all these games. Stevenson's analysis shows that JRPGs serve as a unique modern conduit of religious expression which might be seen as an attempt toward the output of spiritual thought. He also highlights that these games rework old myths told from the dawn of time with the intricacies of modernity.

Marco Seregini and Francesco Toniolo provide an in-depth analysis of *NieR: Automata* and its rejection of several spiritual issues through a game studies and philosophical approach. The authors examine how the Council of Humanity and its location on the moon



creates a sense of superiority and distance to the player, and how humans attempt to reach this divinity through the shooting of missiles. The lack of communication also reinforces the distance between the creator and the creature. This shows, according to the authors, the sense of the precariousness of the creatures and their life. Next, the authors focused on the concept of faith and trust in divinity, and how *NieR: Automata* employs the religious phenomenon of betrayal in various ways including the rebellion by the Android A2, 'Pascal's ecumenicity, and the imitation of the religious systems by the Machines. 'Adam's rejection of his purpose and accepting the God of the opposite faction contributes to this theme. Another important aspect is the concept of sacrifice and hope. This is represented through the sacrifice of an 'individual's body, and with the loss of backup data that assures the replicability of the Androids. Additionally, the players themselves are asked to delete the game data permanently to help others. The endings further develop this idea. They display a picture between nihilism and hope in their vision of the world. The persuasion of a certain goal and the ending of the purpose of life after achieving it highlights this idea. Overall, the game promotes a secular spirituality that rejects following a God. In the end, Seregini and Toniolo highlighted how a world of war between Humans and Androids rejects spiritual ideas.

The *Dragon Age* series and *Hate* games illustrate that videogames can engage players with meaningful questions concerning spiritual doubt in two different ways. Sarah Faber explores spiritual uncertainty in these games and how they include postmodern fears, doubts, and alternative ways to determine the best religious practices. These videogames also display the practical difficulties of using religion as a moral compass. This research leads to the conclusion that the relation of the individual towards the existence and nature of higher powers and the questioning of such is one method employed by the *Dragon Age* series. In these games, divine magic and the existence of a God are constantly rejected and questioned. According to Faber, this leads to a complex relationship between the protagonist, the spiritual leader, and the NPCs. It raises the question of the difference between gods and influential people. The open-ended nature of these questions allows players to explore and come to their own conclusions. In contrast, the *Hate* games reflect on belief systems in terms of their impact on ethics and politics, demonstrating spiritual doubt on a societal level. In these games, the ancestors' approval complicates leading a good life, which serves as a deity-like figure due to its correlation with moral correctness. In the end, Faber demonstrates that these games offer unique perspectives on spiritual doubt both on an individual and societal level.

Leonid Moyzhes examines *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and how this game constructs a main religion, the Chantry, in its fictional world by relying on external views of religion. In the aforementioned game, the player can create their own story of the Inquisitor through dialogue systems and the decision system, influencing both the stance of your character and the Inquisition as an organization. The game portrays several dimensions of religion, such as social, mythological, as well as doctrinal and ethical. The Chantry itself is also tightly connected to political issues driven by text interpretations, which promote the use of religion to push specific political agendas. This portrayal also de-emphasizes the day-to-day religious life while creating a similarity of secular discourse. Moyzhes also argues that the American Protestant tradition has influenced the Chantry, which is encoded similarly to Medieval Christianity. The Chantry demands that

society is restructured according to their ideals, focusing on interpretations of sacred texts that lead to doctrine and ethics. Religious affiliation and heroic deeds are used to demonstrate adherence to these ideals, while emotion, ritual, and material dimensions are primarily ignored as having no inherent value. Moreover, the game includes the affordance of creating the Chantry as a positive organization to address problems on a societal and humanitarian level. Leonid Moyzhes demonstrates how the American-centric Protestant view and secularism influenced the Chantry through the idea of affordance, allowing players to exercise agency and interpret the game's ideological attitudes.

Christine Tomlinson takes a qualitative approach to explore religion in the *Dragon Age* series, analyzing its position in the game world and narrative and how players engage with it through online fora data. Multiple playthroughs – playing as different genders and with different backgrounds – and analyzing choices, experiences, and assessments of players' public posts in fora led to the results of this study. The author argues that, albeit the game incorporates religious elements of the physical world, the primary purpose is to convey its dynamics and social structures. The *Dragon Age* series also presents various belief systems that vary in emphasis across the games, creating both opportunities and tension. One central question that emerges in such a dynamic is the relationship between individuals and their interpretation and institutions. Character dialogues often represent such conflicts. Moreover, religion serves as a tool for the player to influence the narrative and the game's outcome. Tomlinson also argues that the players include their knowledge, beliefs, and morals, employing them to further develop and explore the game. Online discussions facilitate this process by drawing attention to different interpretations of in-game elements and providing solutions to appropriate choices that lead to the most positive and desirable outcomes. The fora also reveal that players often use religion for prosocial in-game behaviour. Overall, the *Dragon Age* series employs real-world knowledge to provide familiar religious aspects, such as dynamics, institutions, and beliefs highly discussed in online fora.

The relationship between spirituality and games is complex and multifaceted, of which the exploration has just begun. Live Action Role Playing games and Role-Playing Games have been found to offer opportunities for personal transformation, exploration of spirituality, and philosophical questioning, and can be used for therapy, spiritual direction, personal growth, and emotional preparation for life-threatening scenarios. Making-believe spirituality in LARP games can allow players to experience proxy for spiritual experiences while offering a basis for interpreting lived experiences. Games have been created to explore themes of identity, meaning, purpose, and connection, while fan communities use preexisting games to nourish new wave spiritual practices such as pop culture witchcraft. Spiritual practices and rituals, such as occultist ones, are reinterpreted and applied to new technologies, while different methodologies and frameworks are taken from other disciplines and repurposed to better understand and analyze the spiritual experiences that games can offer to players, including the examination of the spatial narrative created by sacred architecture in cRPGs, the portrayal of religion in historical games, and the themes and concepts of video games from a philosophical perspective. It is an object of inquiry also in which ways spirituality and religions are represented in videogames, as the scholars look at several game franchises and analyze how these use religion to create meaning and understanding for their

consumers. Videogames can engage players with meaningful questions concerning spiritual doubt in different ways, and they include postmodern fears, doubts, and alternative ways to determine the best religious practices, as well as the practical difficulties of using religion as a moral compass. Given the richness and complexity of the study of the fruitful relationship between spirituality and games, it is imperative to delve deeper into this field to gain a comprehensive understanding of its underlying concepts, as such an understanding can provide game developers and players with the necessary tools to fully appreciate and harness the value of spiritual experiences in gaming. Hence, this anthology emphasizes the need for continued research and dialogue to advance our comprehension of spirituality in games and unlock its potential for enriching both the gaming experience and the spiritual dimension of our lives.

# [transcript]

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