Religion According to Bioware

Religious Dimensions of Chantry in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

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This article presents analyses of the way videogame *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware 2014) constructs the image of main religion in the fictional world of Thedas – the Chantry. I propose to use a theory of dimensions of religion introduced by Ninian Smart, encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall and concepts of **protostory** and **affordances** from game studies to present the architecture of internal relations between different aspects of this (imagined) religion. I claim that, despite positioning the protagonist as a member of religious organization, the game mostly relies upon external view of religion, natural for secular society. It is also worth noting that, while Chantry is aesthetically influenced by Middle Age Christianity, its construction of religious dimensions reminds mostly of American Protestantism.

Videogames and Reality

Videogames have complex relationships with the real world. Thomas Apperley in his book "Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global" introduces the concept of **resonance** to describe different intersections between a global context of the game and local contexts of players (Apperley 2010: 21).

Apperley, citing number of different works, claims that such intersections can take a variety of forms. For example, players can recognize in a game a familiar cultural imagery, visuals or narratives previously seen in movies, literature or history books, as described by King and Krzywinska (2006: 75). On the other hand, Galloway asserted that the gaming process itself must resonate with the social reality a player lives in, providing a sense of 'social realism'(2006: 83).

Games are also capable of illustrating ideologies, reenacting notions about the inner workings of different systems, both technical and social, encoded in our culture. This also refers to Sebastian Möring's (2015) idea about games as simulations of metaphors,

developed regarding independent project *Marriage* (Rod Humble 2007). Möring's (2015) draws attention to the fact that despite *Marriage's* (Rod Humble 2007) developer claim that his game is a statement about his personal experience of a married life, its gameplay serve as a procedural metaphor for popular narrative of married life in general (Möring 2015).

The idea that games simulate not real objects, but different texts representing real objects in a broadest possible sense, allows for much better understanding of this medium. It would be appropriate to recall the definition of **resonance** given by Adam Chapman based on Apperley's works: "*resonance* describes the sensation of interpreting a representation of the game as relating to something other than only the game's rules, as referring to something not entirely contained within the game itself and of the everyday world in which we live" (Chapman 2016: 36). We should keep in mind that this definition includes ability of games to refer not only to our day-to-day life, but also to books we read, TV-shows we watch, news we hear, and general the discourse in which we speak, socialize, live, and think.

A good example would be global strategy games, that Chapman views as an attempt to create interactive history books or, more accurately, interactive historical narratives (2016: 231–265). According to him, those games resonate not with the real-world events themselves, which are always more complex than any simple simulation, but with different texts and set of texts on corresponding subjects (ibid: 36). This is akin to how fantasy games such as *Dragon Age* series (BioWare since 2009) resonate with the whole body of works in genre of literature fantasy. For example, the motive of elves losing immortality and striving to gain it back, that apparently is going to be the base of the central conflict in the future fourth part of the *Dragon Age* franchise, refers back to works of J. R. R. Tolkien, which laid the foundation for modern understanding of this imaginary race in popular culture.

This, however, does not prevent videogames in practical terms from making statements about real objects, and statements they make could often be pretty convincing, as Ian Bogost pointed out in this book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007). A game is always training a player, and if it happens in an environment that reminds the player of real-world objects, concepts or situations, such as war or state, this training becomes a rhetorical statement (ibid.). And it is all the more convincing because it creates a sense of neutral conservation and experimentation, letting players to feel that they understood principles of a system or phenomena by themselves, without outside influence (ibid.).

However, since players are not exposed to the logic of the real phenomenon, but to the logic of the texts, the need for ideological analysis and critique of videogames and is obvious and urgent. It would be appropriate to recall the writings of Frasca, who described videogames as simulations, defining simulations in such a way: "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system" (2003:223.). The most interesting part here seems to be "maintains to somebody" (ibid).

A game would always be a simplification of reality and even of a retelling of reality. If that is the case, how does the game, a secondary, simulating, system, codify its similarities with the primary, simulated, system? At what point the level of the simplification

would become too much to hinder the recognition? Games, scholars and journalists often comment on the ways different games represent different phenomena, but how exactly the game create the idea that it represents a particular object or the system from the real world, and maintains it across thousands, sometimes – millions of games from around the world?

Möring's research demonstrates that just the name of the game and color-coding of its elements could be enough to make it a simulation, in this case a simulation of relationship of partners in marriage (2015). This, in turn, implies that gamers take it upon themselves the to maintain the similarity. They do not just passible consume the cybertext of videogame, but actively, of not always consciously, look for different signs (like the game's title) signaling its supposed interpretation. But how exactly those signs work? Moreover, how do the games simulate different primary systems that are close to each other? How does the game become the simulation of a tragic war story? Or a heroic one?

That brings us to the main issue of this research: how do developers codify religion? What elements of real religions, mediated in turn by our broader culture, seems to be necessary for the players to recognize a spiritual tradition in a simulating system? And what elements could be excluded or relegated to the background? Developers inevitably, although often implicitly, build a hierarchy of objects and phenomena inside a major system, represented in a game; an analysis of such hierarchies, especially in commercially successful projects, could help us to understand the modern perception of simulated phenomenon.

Videogames and Religion

Videogames are full of elements, resonating with different religions, and they exist at many different levels.

In shooter games, horror games, arcade games and action games players often must oppose monsters, inspired by religious mythology (*DOOM* (id Sodtware since 1993) and *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio since 2005) franchises), or followers of aggressive religious teachings (*Outlast* 2 (Red Barrels 2015). Sometimes plots of such games refer to real-world religious conflicts (*Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (Danger Close Games 2012)), at other times they make fantastic assumptions to elucidate some social problem connected with religion (*Bioshock: Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montreal 2018)). And yet, at other times they try to distance themselves from modern agenda, using 'cults' simply as a way to dehumanise antagonists and make their extermination morally acceptable (*Metro: Exodus* (4A Games 2019), *Blasphemous* (The Game Kitchen 2019)).

In global strategies players often must take upon themselves the role of a religious leader (*Europa Universalis IV* (Paradox Development Studio 2013)), a religious reformer (*Crusader Kings III* (Paradox Development Studio 2020)) or a secular ruler, who have to interact with spiritual leaders and confront religious beliefs of his people (*Total War* franchise (Creative Assembly since 2000)). Surprisingly we can see the similar motive in the spin-off of the famous *Sims* series – *Sims Medieval* (Maxis 2011). Such games give developers a lot of room to make procedural statements about religions and believers, often

initiating a whole procedural discussion about traits of different religions and possible ways their history could (and could not) have gone.

Real-time strategies offer a more simplistic scheme, using simulations of religious institutes and building as a source of specific in-game bonuses (*Age of Empire* franchise (Ensemble Studios since 1997), or explicitly trying to make a statement in support of some religious tradition (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (Inspired Media Entertainment 2006), *Quraish* (Afkar media 2005)). It would be appropriate to remember, that the rise of modern real-time strategies is closely tied with so-called 'god games', such as *Populous* (Bullfrog Productions 1989), that allowed a player to try themselves in a role of a deity.

At the same time, we can see a lot of indie games allowing a player to become a leader of a religious community (*Cultist Simulator* (Weather Factory 2018), *Shrouded Isle* (Kitfox Games 2017)) or rethinking religious narratives (*Binding of Isaac* (McMillen/Himsl 2011), *Never Alone* (Upper One Games 2014)). Such projects, sometimes explicitly provocative or educational, but usually aiming simply to entertain the gamers, refer to aspect and forms of religion often overlooked by mainstream games, providing different optics.

Finally, almost all of these elements in one way or another are present in RPG genre, where we can find antagonists inspired by religion, as well as opportunities to play as a religious person, a mythical hero or even a demigod, and particular mechanics and game situations simulating miracles, conversion or theological debates. RPGs create the feeling that modern videogames industry readily appropriates almost every aspect of religions, existing or historical, from myths and particular practices to religious ethics or philosophy.

This raises the question whether we could, and should, look at the player as at the specific type of a religious scholar as similar to the way that multitude of games about history makes players all over the world to become, as Chapman called them, players-historians (2016: 22). The article by De Wildt and Aupers address this notion by proposing the idea of appropriated pop-theology produced by gamer community itself (2019.). The industry, knowingly or accidentally, created a vast and rich space for discussion, verbal and procedural, about religions, spirituality and related topics.

How should religious scholar approach this situation? It is obviously necessary to analyze what image of religion as whole and particular religious teachings are created by the industry, and that task requires new methods. This discussion already inspired a number of works, for example, the anthology *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* and *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, three issues of Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet (Heidbrink/Knoll 2014; 2015; 2016), individual monographs like Bainbridge's *EGods* (Bainbridge 2013) and articles like Vit Sisler's work on about orientalism and Islam in video ames (2008). I specifically want to mention Geraci's analysis of videogames from a phenomenological perspective using works of Ninian Smart (2012: 101–14).

This article is not a debate, but a continuation of aforementioned emerging tradition. I propose to dissect the image of religion in videogames using the concept of religious dimensions by Ninian Smart (1996), while analyzing the games themselves with the help of encoding/decoding by Stuart Hall (1991), adapted for videogames by Arianna Shaw's (2017), the concept of **protostory** from Koenitz's *Narrative in Video Games* (2018) and the concept of **affordances** appropriated by Jonas Linderoth (2011) from James Gibson's (1986) works on ecological psychology.

While this article focuses on a single imagined religious tradition in a single, though relatively big, game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), its main purpose is to provide and illustrate a method of research that could be applied to other projects that includes some sort of simulation of religion. There are three main research questions: what hierarchy of religious dimension does the game create? What perception of the religious sphere is this pushing the player towards? And what ideological schemes and spiritual traditions does this resemble?

Dragon Age: Inquisition

Dragon Age: Inquisition is an RPG from BioWare studio, widely known for their role-playing games. It is a third installation of the *Dragon Age* series, started in 2009 with *Dragon Age: Origins*. This is a role-playing game in a fantasy world, built around a long tradition of transferring into games an imagery originating from the books of J.R.R. Tolkien and mostly American sword-and-sorcery novels. That tradition itself started with tabletop role-playing games such as the *Dungeons and Dragons [referred to as DnD]*, created in 1974, which was, in turn, transferred into a digital format, laying a foundation for modern RPG genre. *DnD* influence on it was extremely important for quite some time: events of one of the earliest Bioware's projects, the very popular *Baldure's Gate* series (since 1998)), took place in one of the official *DnD* settings and used a simplified set of *DnD* rules.

But the events of *Dragon Age* games take place in their own world, Thedas (an acronym from The *Dragon Age* Setting (Gose 2022)), created by the game developers themselves, although with multiple elements borrowed from a well-known set of fantasy genre tropes. In each part of the series, a player must create a new protagonist and encounter a new plot and a central conflict. Nevertheless, many elements of game world, NPCs and even consequences of player's decisions were transferred from one game to another, in order to create a sense of consistent history of the game world. In addition, several themes unite the entire franchise, being mentioned in every installment. One of them is religion and its place in society.

Each new protagonist goes down in Thedas' history under a title, associated with their deeds and achievements, allowing the developers to maintain the illusion of a shared universe while providing the player with opportunity to name their character, by avoiding mentioning of a name, a race or a gender of heroes in later games. The player's character in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) was called The Grey Warden and in *Dragon Age II* (BioWare 2011) – The Champion of Kirkwall. The protagonist of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is called The Inquisitor or The Herald of Andraste, the prophetess and founder of the main monotheistic religion in Thedas.

Customary to the genre, a player can change a character in accordance to their own taste. The game offers three character classes (mage, warrior and rogue), two genders (male and female) and four races (elf, dwarf, human and giant-qunari) to choose from. Different combinations of race and class produce a different specific origin story, but all explain why before the start of the game, main character came to the Conclave. It is the meeting between representatives of two opposing sides in a civil war, Templars and mages, whose conflict engulfed several countries in Thedas.

This conflict broke out around the issue of magic: Templars, a radical religious order, advocated a strict control over mages, up to complete submission or extermination, while mages as a political force called for softening or removing the restrictions. This problem in turn provoked a crisis in the dominant religious organization in Thedas, the Chantry, which led to religious leaders calling for peace talks at the Conclave.

Whatever origin story a player chooses, the Conclave breaks down because of a magical explosion that kills all attendants except for the main character, who gains the ability to close the Breaches, gates between the material world and the spirit world, the Fade, that starts to open all over Thedas. Because of this power, the protagonist soon becomes a member and then the leader of the Inquisition, a religious organization striving to reform the Chantry and resolve many ongoing conflicts, including the one between mages and Templars.

The game offers limited relative freedom of action, allowing a player to create their own unique story of the Inquisitor, for example, making their main character more liberal or more conservative in different walkthroughs. This is achieved mainly through two game mechanics: a dialogue system which allows a player to choose the stance of the Herald of Andraste on specific issues, and the decision system, demanding decisions on how the Inquisition as an organization approaches different situations.

Both mechanics revolves around picking one among limited number of given options. In some cases, those options are encoded as a possibly right or wrong, thus creating a feeling that the player may make a mistake, for example, while deciding what type of agents to send on a mission. In other cases, like when someone asks the main character about personal religious views, there are no clear indication that it is possibly to choose wrong in a strict sense. Instead, those choices serve as a way to establish the image of the Inquisitor. Those choices still can have procedural consequences, often improving or lowering relationships with companions, but the game positions such consequences as symmetrical to each other, in order not to restrict a player's freedom.

I chose *Dragon Age: Inquisition* for my analysis for multiple reasons. First, this is a commercially successful project from a well-known studio, a part of a big multimedia franchise aimed at a wide audience. All this makes this game a representative example in terms of discussing the modern videogames industry. Secondly, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* includes many separate elements resonating with religion at different levels of the game. The main character is a religious figure, accompanied by religious companions, representing different spiritual traditions of Thedas. A special status of the protagonist is founded upon their unique religious position, and the main story of the game develops around a confrontation with a mythological figure, Corypheus, one of the ancient rulers of Tevinter Imperium, who have committed an analog of Abrahamic Original sin.

Thirdly, the RPG genre has a long history of representation of religion in different ways, from the images of enemies and companions of main characters to mechanics simulating miracle workers and plots revolving around mythologies or a religious conflict. There are so many examples, that we can talk about the full-fledged tradition of representation of religion in Western RPGs, and an important pillar of this tradition is Bioware, studio that created *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

This leads to the fourth reason: the *Dragon Age* series and *Inquisition* in particular attempt to break with the established approaches of portraying religion in RPGs. Specifi-

cally, it offers a new way to look at the divine, which was analyzed in detail in my article *Dragon Age: Inquisition: Christian Message in a Post-Secular World* (cf. Moyzhes 2020). However, while acknowledging a unique trait of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, we must admit that its logic of portraying a religion is closer to previous projects, which can be established by analyzing the game through Smart's theories. But before that, it is necessary to understand another important issue in discussing religion videogames: how does the player interact with the game's narrative?

The Masks of the Player

Videogames as medium offer players a lot of ways to interact with them, and each of them begs for its own research. A player can act as a sportsperson, as a consumer of content, as an operator of a technical device, as a creator. Different games highlight certain "masks" of the player, sometimes, as in esports, aiming at one specific aspect, while sometimes trying to produce many different niches, aiming to support as many 'masks' as possible.

In case of a representation of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* it's necessary to discuss three of such 'masks': explorer, director and reader.

Player as an Explorer

The best way to understand this player's position is through the concept of **affordances**, suggested by Jonas Linderoth (2011) and based upon ecological psychology of James Gibson (1986). Gibson defines **affordances** as such: "The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill." (1986: 127) From the point of view of ecological psychology chapmoned by James Gibson and his wife Eleanor, our perception is based not around enriching different discrete elements of the environment with meanings, but around detaching of objects, tied to specific actions, from an uninterrupted continuity of the world around us (Gibson/Pick 2000: n.p.). A person who sees an apple, understands that it is an **affordance** to satisfy their hunger. Stones provides an affordance to throw them, a tree is an **affordance** to hide behind it and so on.

Gibson sees great importance in a process of learning which he conceptualises as a process of adapting to an environment that endows a subject with the ability to perceive specific objects and potential actions associated with them – the **affordances** (ibid: 127). For example, an acquired ability of a skilled climber to see ledges in seemingly smooth mountain surface provides an **affordance** to ascend, or an ability of the gamer to recognize the symbol of their favorite game on a stranger's T-shirt inside the crowd provides an **affordance** to start a conversation.

It is necessary to emphasize that **affordances** exist neither in an environment itself, passively waiting to be found nor in the mind of a subject, who is free to impose them on the outside world around them but in a 'dialogue' between those two systems. This is highlighted by using the word 'offered' in a definition above. Individual who is better adapted to the environment sees more possibilities for different interaction and uses them to achieve their goals more efficiently. This, in turn, can affect further inter-

actions between a subject and an environment, often serving as a way to create more **affordances**.

Developing the ideas of ecological psychology, Linderoth suggests considering a videogame as a digital environment that a player gradually explores, uncovering its secrets (2011: 8). From his article, "gameplay is to perceive, act on and transform the *affordances* that are related to a game system or other players in a game" (ibid.). A game teaches us to play it, adapting our perception to a digital environment it creates. Such view reminds the concept of procedural rhetoric by Ian Bogost, that is founded upon an understanding of a videogame as a system training a player to act in the specific logic dictated by a digital world (2007:28), and the ideas proposed by Apperley, who suggested that a videogame adapts a player to itself (2010: 25–70).

Metaphorically, a process of searching for **affordances** could be presented as a simplified version of acquiring scientific knowledge. This is especially true for videogames, where the time between an action and its result is often shortened, and specific reasons for success or failure are highlighted. The gaming process in such a model could be presented as a series of 'hypotheses' and 'experiments' proving or disproving those hypotheses.

For example, in a shooter a player can formulate a hypothesis that adding a telescopic sight to a weapon will allow them to kill an enemy at a greater distance and then try it out during walkthrough. Experimenting in such a way with every or most of the weapons, a player builds a hierarchy of ways to murder virtual enemies offered by the game, with each step walking closer toward a unified theory about which weapons are the best for different in-game situations. Each combat encounter serves as a way to use a previously accumulated knowledge in practice and, also, as another 'experiment', proving, disapproving or clarifying previously formulated hypotheses.

Search for **affordances** is often only part of a task and should be supplemented with realization of an **affordance** found; this could depend on additional factors, for example physical or mental capabilities of a subject. Linderoth cites the example of a football game: both a player, a trainer and a devoted fan could see an **affordance** to score a goal, but only a player is fit and skilled enough to realize this **affordance** (2011: 6–8).

The same dynamics could be often seen in videogames. Global strategies usually focus on searching for **affordances**, successful combinations of different in-game mechanics, while their realization is mostly reduced to pushing a few buttons. Meanwhile, platform games focus on realization of **affordances**: most of the time players do not need much experience to see an **affordance** for an action leading to victory, but to act out on this perception is often a test of coordination reaction. Finally, some games, like fighting, require both a skill to find **affordances**, mentally adapting to a digital environment, noticing hitboxes and remembering opponent's scheme of attack, and a fast enough reaction to implement this knowledge.

The duality of searching for and realizing **affordances** highlights their inherently subjective nature that is obvious in an example with a hypothetical search for an ideal weapon. Some players, especially professional esports players, would try to collect data that could at least pretend to be objective in terms of which weapon is better or worse, in order to ground their assessment on numerical indicators of damage, rate of fire and so on. However, many other players during their 'research' would be looking for a weapon

best suited for them personally based on a combination of different, often irrational, factors, depending on their preferred mode of playing a game. This mode in turn could depend not only on a game itself, but on a multitude of different factors, including previous gaming experience and capabilities of a device on which a game is played. Nevertheless, in this case player still behaves as an explorer uncovering secrets of a videogame.

Player as a Director

The concept of **affordances** also allows us to consider how videogames produce meaning or, more specifically, how they provide players with an environment, a scene of some sort to make their own statements. This process could be described through the cycle of perception and interaction. Specific elements of the game **resonate** with a player, reminding of the objects and concepts that exist outside a game. For example, a character with a certain aspect would be associated with a pop-cultural image of a medieval priest.

Such elements work as 'myths' as described by Rolan Barthes (1976), especially in having a quality of impressiveness, that allows them to evoke a lot of associations immediately, without additional 'decoding' (Page Number). This is especially noticeable in mainstream videogames since many visual, audial, procedural, and narrative elements of them belong to what Danielle Kirby called the **fantastic milieu** (2013). This concept, based upon the Campbell's **cultic milieu** (1972: 120), describes a speculative fusion of a multitude of fantastic text and specific tropes, characters and aesthetic conventions, shared throughout the entire Western (mostly US) pop-culture (Kirby 2013: 2–3.).

The fantastic milieu and the process of recognition are fundamental for all modern entertainment media. But videogames add one more dimension to it – the actions of players themselves. Because of an interactive nature of games, many objects evoke association with the possible ways a player can interact with them. Thus, initial resonance not only creates expectation of what player is going to see or hear, but also what kind of situation player would be able to create.

These expectations initiate a process of searching for **affordances**, realization of which can work toward the creation of such situations. For example, after being given a control of the character, whose image resonates with that of a religious figure, a player could form an expectation that they would also be given **affordances** to perform rituals, convert other characters into their character's religion or fight heretics. It is easy to see that those expectations are already deeply ideological and subjective, closely tied with both player's personality and wider cultural context. Fantastic milieu here serves as a way to ensure the predictability of local context for products developed by global corporations.

Apperley propose a term for the type of **resonance** that could be evoked by an in-game situation created by the player itself in order to experience the recognition – a **configurative resonance** (Date: Page Number). It includes, for example, an approach to playing out romantic relationships between the main character and their companion in RPGs in a way that reminds player of ideal relationships in their eyes, creating a situation that "corrects" the outcome of a specific historical event in global strategy game. For example, if the player tries to repel the Mongol's attack on Baghdad in *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox Development Studio 2012) not only because of in-game concerns of maximizing the re-

sources, but also because of the out-of-the-game concerns, a **resonance** between a situation created by the player and the images of Mongols retreating from Baghdad it is a **configurative resonance** situation.

It should be noted that a **configurative resonance**, in turn, works as a **resonance**, evoking a new set of expectations, which player seek to satisfy through another set of **affordances**. If this cycle continues throughout the game, it creates the feeling of freedom and consistency, while breakage of the cycle may cause frustration. For different players specific details of such a cycle would also differ, reflecting their particular local context, but while a game as a whole is able to satisfy the expectation for **configurative resonance** created by it, players can interpret away individual episodes where this does not happen. Such development of a videogame from one point of **resonance** to another is especially noticeable in projects that Gonzalo Frasca calls *paidia*, which focuses on evoking a sense of freedom (2003: 228). This type of games includes such examples as *Sim City* (Maxis 1989), *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) and to a lesser extent, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Linear games use the same principle to make their story more convincing, to mask an absence of specific ludic opportunities and as a way of training and adapting a player to a new digital environment. For example, in survival horror games the monsters' design and cinematic effects of their appearance are supposed to **resonate** with something we must escape from – and a game offers a lot of **affordances** to do that. Because of that, a player is less likely to make a ludic mistake of trying to simulate a conversation with the monsters and does not feel frustrated by the absence of such game mechanic, since all interactions with different opponents they encounter are limited to fight or flight.

This logic frames a player as a 'theatrical director'. Developers provide them with a 'play', containing a potential for different interpretations, and resources to realize them. However, as with a director in a theatre, a player does not have absolute freedom. Hartmut Koenitz and his collegues calls the totality of all the stories, inherent in a game on a level of technical **affordances** for player's actions, a **protostory** (Roth et all: 99). Specific stories, in turn, are instantiated by a player during each particular walkthrough with game helping to create some stories while hindering, or outright forbidding creation of others.

A **protostory** does not include all the stories that could theoretically happen with the characters and circumstances provided by a game. Even projects promising a maximum freedom, such as global strategy games like *Crusader Kings III*, constructor games like *Minecraft*, colony simulation games *Dwarf Fortress* (Bay 12 Games, 2006) or even game openly presented by their creators as story generator (Sylverster 2019), like *RimWorld* (Ludeon Studios 2013) could not include all resources that would allow a creation of all stories that seems logical to each player, for obvious technical reasons. The best proof of this restriction is the abundance of modes created by players to give themselves as a community more creative freedom.

Furthermore, stories that are potentially included in a **protostory** usually form a hierarchy of difficulty in terms of creation. For example, in RPGs like *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003) or *Arcanum* (Troika Games 2001) the **affordances** to tell a story resonating with the image of a triumph of Good over Evil are much easier to find and realize than the **affordances** to tell a story resonating with the victory of Evil over Good. At the same time, in many global strategy games it is easier to play in capitalistic and colonial logic,

than in any other, even if **affordances** for alternative approaches to state building and economy are technically included in a **protostory**.

This hierarchy of stories from easiest to more and more difficult and, in the end, to impossible, lays a foundation for analyzing videogames as a means of expression. But such analysis would be impossible without considering the ability of a player not only to modify an in-game situation, but to confer on it their own meaning.

Player as a Reader

Mikhail Fiadotau (2017) in his article "Phenomenological Hermeneutics as a Bridge between Video Games and Religio-Aesthetics" draws attention to the dual nature of a player. Inspired by Karhulahti's works (2015) he writes: "We both interpret games, as we would a novel or a theater play, as expressive sequences of symbols and, concurrently, 'perform' them based on our interpretation of their mechanics and rule system" (Fiadotau 2017: 166). In the end, every story in a game is instantiated not on screen but in a player's mind. It applies to all types of videogame's narratives, whether embedded or emergent (Salen/Zimmerman 2003). Without devaluing the differences between those two categories, it is important to notice that both of them apply only to a set of events on screen, which creates a potential for interpretation and completion of the story by a player.

It is not always easy to perform such an interpretation. Just as games teach us to interact with a digital environment, they teach us to read it correctly, to turn pixels into narratives. Radde-Antweller noticed that during a research involving interviews with a group of player who played *Bioshock Infinite* and described their own perception of its religious symbolism, some people without previous experience in playing videogames struggled to see any coherence in events happening on screen that could be compared with and analyzed as they could have analyzed a film or a book (2017: 84–85).

We are taught to understand which elements of the videogame are a part of UI and exist only for the player (diegetic) and which are real in a game world (extradiegetic); which actions of our avatar should be perceived as a part of a bigger narrative about them as a main character of the story; and which serve as a procedural game convention, related to genre specifics or technical constraints. At the end, we build a line of events, consistent in time, ignoring all instances of a character's death and loading from saves, although it should be mentioned that some games, especially Japanese, are making efforts to include these instances into a game's narrative.

This gaming literacy could be conceptualized through the idea of **affordances**. But to do this we have to add to practical or **in-game affordances**, presented inside a game system as objectively existing technical possibilities to change a digital configuration in some way, another category – **interpretative affordances**. I use this term to signify opportunities provided by a game to interpret events happening inside it in specific ways. Every walkthrough and even every in-game situation are not in themselves instantiated stories, but just fleeting cultural artifacts requiring additional, though, often, miniscule, effort to 'read' and interpret them.

Some interpretations are without a doubt easier to come to than others, just as it may be easier to create one sequence of in-game events than others. Moreover, these two

levels of **affordances** often overlap: an increase in practical difficulty to create some configuration hinders an acceptance of the interpretation that leads to the desire to create this configuration as the right one.

It is much easier to complete *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* while attempting to create a **configurative resonance** between this game and the narratives from books and movies idolizing American soldiers. It is also easy to interpret the game as a statement in support of the US military, extolling their role in maintaining world peace and calling for sympathy toward the toll it takes on their families. But, in principle, it is possible to search and find both the potential technical **affordances** for another courses of action, like beating the game with minimum violence, as well as **interpretative affordances** for another reading of a story we create – for example, as a statement against American militarism, exposing problems of modern USA foreign policy. It would be harder, but it is still possible.

In many cases our cultural background suggests particular interpretations of in-game objects and narratives, and these interpretations in turn already contain in themselves intended courses of actions. Therefore, we would search for corresponding in-game **affordances**, as was discussed in the previous section. However even if we are unable to find possibilities to create **configurative resonance** that would support our initial interpretation of the game as a correct one, a game can still provide us with interpretative possibilities to maintain our first interpretation, dismissing only specific parts of it and not declaring it false as a whole.

In this way, a player can turn a heroic story into a tragic one based around pragmatic impossibility of ethical victory. The initial **resonance** some extremely pacifistic players may feel between imagery of *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* and anti-war narratives would still be maintained, with each failure to complete a level in pacifist way related to lack of **affordances** for pacifist walkthrough not disproving, but confirming a pacifist reading, although with a tragic overtone.

Thus, a **protostory** expands even more, and now includes not only hypothetical totality of all technically possible in-game situations, but all totality of their possible interpretation. At the same time, it maintains both inner hierarchy and strict limitations. This polyphony could be understood through the concept of encoding/decoding, suggested by Stuart Hall: creators of media product encode messages into their work, that in turn are decoded by an audience, using culturally determined clues, signifying which possible readings are 'right' and which are not (1991n.p.).

But alongside those clues, videogames leave **interpretative** and sometimes even in-game **affordances** for alternate readings. Depending on the loyalty of a player-interpreter to game's clues, every reading could be referred to either dominant, oppositional, polemicizing with dominant, or negotiated, which exists between those two extremes. And this, unsurprisingly, leads us back to the idea of **affordances**; in this case, **affordances** to decode media product in different ways. We should once again remember that **affordances** do not exist in an environment by themselves but are introduced there in a negotiation between an environment (videogame) and a subject (player) who can create their own imaginary **affordances** for actions as well as interpretations, as described by Adrianna Shaw (2017).

In the end a game cannot impose any reading on a player-interpreter, it can only signify a dominant reading, that experienced players-interpreters can bypass, using their skill as player as well as interpreters. This process is clearly demonstrated in the article *Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic*, where Kristian Bjørkelo (2020) examines how American nationalists from the Stormfront forum interpret the game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), appropriating walkthrough on a side of Stormcloaks as a statement in support of their ideology (Bjørkelo 2020).

But in a full accordance with the concept of **affordances** a game isn't just a clean slate open to all possible interpretations. It can in particular put a player in different contexts. We can see in Stormcloaks, Thalmor and Empire metaphors of different political powers and have different opinions about whether they are right, but the existence of such opposition itself puts the *Skyrim* in context of politic – at least politic of the fictional world of Tamriel. And that context continues to exist as part of Skyrim, although some especially stubborn players may choose to ignore corresponding bunch of quests, they could do so only consciously, thus accepting the fact that political themes are present in *Skyrim's* **protostory**.

Other plots and mechanics presented in this game in turn create **affordances** to interpret it as a statement about ecology or about achieving personal happiness despite a raging war. At the same time the game gives a lot less **affordances** for any statements in context of discussion about artificial life forms, prospects of space exploration or pros and contras of planned economy. Its **protostory** doesn't contain neither nor **interpretative affordances** to touch those themes.

I propose to use this optics on representation of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and consider, how exactly this game constructs a religious context itself. Starting from the name, the game explicitly encodes its sensitivity to religious themes, and its main plot reinforces this feeling again and again, repeatedly offering, and even forcing player character to participate in religious debates, conflicts and practices. Most decodings of the game, both dominant and oppositional, would include some interpretation of religion presented there, first of all – the Chantry, and through it, some interpretation of religion as a singular phenomenon.

As a religious scholar, I understand that the traces of religion could be found in every aspect of human culture and in any work of art in particular, even if it does not contain explicit references to existing or fictional religious traditions. For example, Irizarry and Irizarry (2014) in their article "The Lord is My Shepard" demonstrate that the very image of Commander Shephard from *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), another popular videogame series from Bioware, has clear messianic connotations (Irizarry/Irizarry 2014), and Fiadotau (2017) in his article mentioned above draws attention to the influence of Buddhists religious philosophy and aesthetics on the design of Japanese visual novels. But it would be much harder to put these games in a context of discussion about religion than *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

And this raises a question: how games encode the religious context? What elements of religion have to be included in a game so that its **protostory** could be used to make stories about religion? What elements are signified as most important and what elements do not even deserve to be mentioned? In their game, BioWare, unwitting religion scholars-developers, implicitly answered such question as what the main components of the reli-

gion are. And to illuminate these answers I'll use the concept of religious dimensions of Ninian Smart.

Niniam Smart's Dimensions of Religion

Ninian Smart is a Scottish-born British theologian and religious scholar who worked in the second half of the 20th century. In his works, Smart consistently fought against the dominant Christian-centrism in the study of religion in British science of his time, and, more broadly, against any form of essentialism in religious studies. Fitzgerald notes fear of reductionism was a constant in Smart's works (2000: 66–67) The implicit, but important goal of his work was to overcome the desire of religious scholars in the first half of the 20th century to search for the fundamental core of religion as a separate sphere.

Throughout history different researchers suggested that a religion is based upon social relations (Durkheim 2008), a special type of human experience (Otto 1958), a structure of human psychology (Jung 1971), an idea that the world is divided into a profane sphere and a secular sphere (Eliade 1987). But most often this tendency for reductionism manifested in the idea that religion fundamentally revolves around relationships with a God or, more broadly, with the supernatural, expressed, for example, by Tylor (2012) who defined religion as a "belief in spiritual beings". Western philosophy of religion, deeply rooted in theology, often gravitated toward this optic, even as it was trying to offer more complex definitions. Smart, who came into religious studies through his research of Chinese and Indian texts, could not agree with such an interpretation of religion, since they transformed inherently European ideas of 'natural' and 'supernatural' in strictly European understanding into universal categories.

The problem Western research face trying to conceptualize Eastern spiritual traditions was commented by a number of researchers, for example, Storm (cf. Storm 2012). For the purpose of this article the alternative philosophy of religion suggested by Smart seems more important. From his point of view, this sphere of knowledge should be preoccupied bot with the search for the one true definition of religion, but with ways to organize and systemize our knowledge of the field. For this purpose, Smart suggested the concept of seven religious dimensions, which he described as different mechanisms for preservation of religious experience.

Smart hoped that an analysis of religion through the prism of these layers, lacking any semantic or chronological hierarchy, would help scholars to escape the confines of Christian-centered paradigm and find balance between historical and non-historical parts of religious traditions. Most importantly for the purpose of this article, Smart attempted to abandon the question of 'what religion is' in favour of question 'what religions there are?' Smart thought that religion studies should always concentrate on particular traditions, churches, movements and congregations, and his sevenfold scheme was supposed to be used as a tool for such historical analysis built from the ground up.

Smart (1974) claimed that these dimensions are present in any religion and even in any ideology, for example, in Maoism. However, in different traditions, and even in dif-

ferent communities, specific layers may dominate or stay at rudimentary level, and form completely different relations with each other (ibid.).

Here is the seven dimensions of religion suggested by Smart:

(1) Doctrinal dimension – intellectually coherent expression of the main ideas of a specific religion. It includes theology and religious philosophy, intellectual speculation on the about the nature of the world, the human and the divine, if a religion in question has such a category at all.
(2) Mythological or, more broadly, narrative dimension contains religious stories. It is very important sphere in many religions, from polytheistic tradition with their rich mythology to Christianity, Islam and Judaism, whose adherents give great importance to mythic origin story of their respective religions. At the same time in some Eastern teachings, like Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, mythological dimension may be less noticeable and universal, with particular stories varying greatly from one smaller school of thought and even single community to another, varying greatly from one congregation to another.
(3) Ethical dimension – a totality of traditionally prescribed norms of behavior, including a stance on what actions are considered good or part in terms of morality, as well as specific religious laws and restrictions.
(4) Ritual dimension, which can also be called practical, includes all actions performed or, on the contrary, avoided by followers of a religion as a part of a religious practice. It includes prayers and ascesis, wearing of specific clothes and other forms of control over a person's appearance and practical prohibitions without broader ethical or legal basing.
(5) Experiential or emotional dimension describes states of a psyche, especially intense and saturated with religious content. In different congregations, the experience of such states by ordinary believers could be encouraged and even proclaimed as fundamental for religious life or they can be framed as extraordinary. Another important difference is whether those states are supposed to be reached during a communal ritual practice, or individually, thus relegating them to the domain of private life and religiosity.
(6) Social dimension is an external manifestation of religion in social systems and interpersonal relationships. This sphere contains the ways religion functions as a society: an organization of congregations, church hierarchy and relationships between mentors and their students. It also encompasses the way broader society and religion influence each other.
(7) Material dimension was proposed by Smart in 1989 (Smart 1989), to describe a domain of material artifacts, created by a religion or endowed with certain meaning by it. This dimension consists of religious buildings, images, venerated natural objects, relics and tombs of significant people, personal material symbols of religion (like a cross) and so on.

Finally, in some of his latest work (1996:10), Smart proposed an eighth dimension associated with political and economic spheres of religious traditions, but in this article we would focus on seven dimensions, most often mentioned in the context of his theories.

It is not hard to notice that specific phenomena, practices and objects may belong to different dimensions. For example, many rituals depend on the use of material objects and are dedicated to induce a certain state of mind. Depending on the personality of believers, fasts and similar practices could be seen as a part of ritual, ethical or social dimension. And many religious stories and myths become a subject of research of theologians as symbolic descriptions of religious doctrines. To sum up, there are many interactions between dimensions, which only confirm Smart's anti-essentialists idea: if we cannot draw boundaries between specific spheres inside a religion, how can we discuss its origins from one specific source?

It may seem that the use of the anti-essentialist model to analyze videogames is counterintuitive. Videogame is always essentialist, since by its very nature it must endow objects inside itself with unambiguous properties, first, for technical reasons, and secondly, to endow a specific a predictable **resonance**.

But **resonance** lays in the center of this analysis, in this case, a **resonance** between a set of ludic and narrative elements of the game world and a very **idea** of religion. Using Smart's methodology, we can look at religions presented in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, first of all – at the Chantry, and see how game priorities certain religious dimensions to create a situation of interaction with a (fictional) religion. Based on that we can conclude what understanding of religion as whole determines the image of this phenomenon in this videogame.

Both Smart's anti-essentialism and a videogame essentialism should be taken into account here. When games include elements resonating with religious practices, buildings, narratives or experiences, they inevitably build clear distinctions between them, encoding, which actions relate to the ritual dimension and which to ethical, where the debate is about social issues and where it is determined by doctrinal dilemmas. Even when there are multiple dimensions present, create an **affordance** to simulate, for example, satiation of making doctrinal decisions because of socio-political or personal reasons, this intersection is very clearly marked. All of this allows scholars to observe which dimensions of religion are at the forefront of religion in general.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that, as in any other case of game interpretation, players could introduce their own meanings in a **protostory**. For example, by experiencing **resonance** between specific episodes of the game and dimensions of religion that were not encoded in these elements of the game, like in case of playing out or just imagining religious emotional experience of a character conducting an elven ritual that was supposed to serve purely practical reasons of opening a door.

Thus, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* serves as a set of **affordances** to interact with different aspects of religion. Among these **affordances** are both **in-game affordances**, allowing to create specific digital configurations, and **interpretative affordances**, allowing to perceive these configurations and particular elements of the game, such as characters or quests, as a way to interact a specific religious dimension. Both types of **affordances** could be called the **affordances to engage**, and serve as means provided by the game to include elements, serving as simulations of a specific religious dimension, in particular story instantiated from **protostory**.

Based on how easy it is to find and realize **affordances** to interact with them I propose to distinguish two categories of religious dimensions of the Chantry: core and pe-

ripheral. Core dimensions are those, interactions with which are explicitly included in the **protostory** of the game: it is hard or even impossible to avoid them both in practical sense and in interpretative, 'reading' them as something not resonating with religion. In turn, interactions with peripheral dimensions depend on specific actions of a player, acting as a director or as a reader, and could easily be absent in a specific story. This distinction allows highlighting dimensions that game use as a way to encode religiousness.

Realization of all **affordances to engage** could be mediated by a protagonist of the game, mainly through mechanics of dialogues and political decisions which game uses to simulate engagement between Herald of Andraste and different religious dimensions. The Head of the Inquisition can often make important decisions, express their opinion on variety of topics and ask religious character questions about their beliefs. But such mediation is not a necessity. The act of reading myths and theological texts of the Chantry by players themselves is an instance of a realization of **affordances** to interact with corresponding religious dimensions without mediation by the player's avatar. Although such action could be easily interpreted as extradiegetic, i.e., not belonging to the game world.

Extradiegetic nature of such interactions makes them easier to ignore, so dimensions engagement primarily through such **affordances** fall into the peripheral category. At the same time, obtaining such information could provide a player with **interpretative affordances** to construct a story or even encourage making certain in-game decisions when present with a choice, even if options offered do not refer to religious elements directly.

Religious Dimensions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

The Social Dimension

The social dimension is at the center of the depiction of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The main character is constantly addressed by their title, the Herald of Andraste or the Inquisitor, reflecting their social status within the Chantry, despite the fact that according to game narrative those titles were created from scratch or borrowed from historical chronicles of Thedas on an **ad hoc** basis. A noticeable part of the game revolves around a protagonist's attempts to legitimize their organization and themselves as its leader in the eyes of the rest of the Chantry and the leaders of the most powerful states in the region.

Alongside partaking in the main plot and fighting Corypheus, a main character also determines who among would assume the position of the Divine, the leader of the Church similar to Catholic Pope in terms of political power, since the previous Divine, Justinia, died at the Conclave at the very beginning of the story. Possible candidates are closest allies of the Inquisitor: their right hand in the Inquisition Cassandra Pentaghast, the leader of its spies Leliana and another companion – the mage Vivienne. Depending on who among them would gain the position, and Inquisitor's answers in dialogue, especially in the course of fulfilling their personal quests, at the end of the game players are told informed how Chantry policies changed in accordance to the views of the new Divine.

The very mechanics of this election reflect an ambiguity of social processes: by making certain decisions, a player fills in a hidden scale of support for each candidate, not knowing whose chances they raise and how much. While it is still relatively easy to predict which candidate would win by the end of the walkthrough, a player still must constantly face a simulation of social processes that stays true to itself until the very end. The game does not allow to access information on the likely winner directly, or to influence the outcome of the elections, for example, by simple investing of resources, thus emphasizing importance of social aspect of religion.

This reflects the increased focus on the social dimension of religion, which characterize the entire game. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* provides **affordances to engage** with both parts of this dimension: religion as a society (through the elections of the Divine, debates inside the Chantry and attempts to legitimize a new religious organization) and religion inside the wider society (through negotiations with nobles and rulers and Inquisition's participation in resolving political conflicts). Most importantly, the game demonstrates an inextricable connection between these parts of the social dimension. The decisions made during 'external' negotiations affects chances of the specific characters to become the Divine and, more broadly, relationships between characters inside a religious organization. Allying the Inquisition with a particular group could lead to conflicts and stating a position on major social issues of Thedas, such as the conflict between mages and templars or the rights of elves, provokes reaction not only from secular rulers but also from other members of the Chantry and the Inquisition itself.

The **protostory** of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* offers a lot of **affordances** to interact with the social dimension of religion, both mediated by a protagonist and game mechanics, and addressing player directly by providing them with information about the structure of the Chantry. Any non-opposition reading of the game would support the idea that a religion is a form of social relations, closely tied with a society it exists in. Such approach easily fits into the tradition of Western RPGs, invariably demonstrating social and political sides of religion. Still, even among them *Dragon Age: Inquisition* stand out because of the scale of attention paid to this dimension as well as the quantity of **affordances** to create different configuration in this sphere offered by the game. This nuanced approach greatly distinguish *Dragon Age: Inquisition* from most of the games in the same genre, where the social dimension of religion is often reduced to a conflict between conservatives and liberals inside religious organizations.

The Mythological Dimension

The second dimension, which without a doubt could be called a core one, is the dimension of religious narratives. RPGs usually pay much attention to myths of their fictional universes, creating plots and central conflicts around confrontation between gods and their enemies and often referring to ancient histories or long-forgotten prophecies from specific religions. Videogames such as *Arcanum*, first two parts of *Baldure's Gate* series (BioWare since 1998), *The Elder Scrolls III-V* (Bethesda 2002; 2006; 2011), *Divinity: Original Sin* (Larian Studios 2014) revolves around continuation or reimagining myths of fictional religions. Even a main character of post-apocalyptic *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios 1998)

owes their status of the Chosen One to the myth about their ancestor – a protagonist of the first part of the series. And *Dragon Age* as a series maintains this tendency.

In the first part of the series, the central conflict, that between sentient races of Thedas and underground Darkspawns, is explained by one of the main legends of the Chantry: a story about the magisters of the ancient Tevinter Imperium, who tried to enter the Golden City, the abode of the Maker. As the result of this sacrilege, clearly resonating with the story of The Tower of Babel, magisters turned into first of so-called Darkspawns, monsters dwelling underground, while the Golden City itself was desecrated. After this, the Maker decided not to contact mortals again, deeming them 'unworthy'.

This myth is repeatedly mentioned in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*: Corypheus, the main antagonist of the game, is one of those magisters and he offers his own version of events, stating that the Golden City was already empty at the time of his arrival. Even more frequently, the game mentions another narrative: the origins of the Chantry. Many years after the failed experiment of the magisters, Andraste, the wife of a chieftain of Alamarri tribe, enslaved by the same Tevinter Imperium, with her song attracted the attention of the Maker to the world for the first time in many centuries. He promised to give mortals one more chance and ordered the woman, who received the title of the Prophet, to spread his teachings. In the sacred book of the Chantry, the Chant of Light, this is recalled as follows:

> For you, song-weaver, once more I will try.
> To My children venture, carrying wisdom,
> If they but listen, I shall return. (BioWare 2014: n.p.)

These words became the foundation of a new religion, and under its banner humans and elves enslaved by Tevinter rebelled and after a long war achieved freedom, creating their own countries. But Andraste herself died before that. Her husband, Maferath, betrayed her and doomed the Prophet to death. However, her disciples continued her work and eventually converted most of the humans and many elves into her teaching.

The game includes a lot of **affordances to engage** with the mythological dimension of the Chantry's teachings. A player is introduced to relevant stories through dialogues with the participants of said events, like Corypheus, who express their own opinions about them, and through reading their retelling in game's codex. In some dialogues, protagonist may present their own opinion on fundamental stories of the Chantry. At the same time, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* differs from many other RPGs in the way it uses the mythological dimension of religion not only as a retelling of events happened but as a separate narrative. It is encoded as developing inside the game world in accordance with the laws of its genre: different characters offer their own interpretation of its stories and mention how the Chant of Light has changed over the centuries. For example, the Canticle of Shartan, describing the role of elves in Andraste's revolt was excluded later to justify a human invasion of elven lands. And the restoration of these passages into canonic text made by one of the possibly Divines at the end of the game is encoded as a major political victory in the struggle against the oppression of elves.

Another layer of interacting with mythological dimension in the game is the myth of the main character themselves. According to the game, their legitimacy as a leader of Inquisition stems from the idea that they were saved and gained special powers at the behest of Andraste. And when this explanation turns out to be untrue, at least literary, a player has to choose how to interpret the situation and whether their character should reveal the truth or maintain their myth for the sake of collective good or personal political power.

It is also worth mentioning that the game use different approaches to mythology to encode principal differences between religions. Spiritual traditions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are differentiated not only by objects of worship per se, as, for example, religions in *DnD*, but more fundamentally by the nature of their central myths. Elven pantheon is revealed through stories resonating with traditional polytheistic myths, lacking clear ethics and taking place in mythic time. Qun doesn't have a clear myth, which allows it to resonate with the popular notion of Eastern religions as being more of a "philosophical tradition". And fundamental myths of the Chantry are pronouncedly placed in the history of the fictional world, resonating with myths of Abrahamic traditions.

Interestingly, while discussing specifically narrative religious dimensions, it is hard not to notice the similarities between the main myth of the Chantry and the central narrative of Islam: Andraste reaches the Maker 'from below' as his Prophet, whom he called upon after her own prayers, not as the messenger he sent. She ruled her followers personally as a big community, even a tribe, to the point that she led them into battles. And, finally, her widespread title is literally the Prophet. But aesthetic similarities between the Chantry and Christian imagery, as well as the death of Andraste because of the betrayal, masks that resemblance for many players.

In any case, the game sets mythological dimension as an important part of a religion that influences all other dimensions: change of myths indicates the change of political landscape, rituals, and ethics and so on. It also implies a close attention to the dimension from players themselves: a complete interpretation of the game's plot is impossible without considering Chantry's myths.

The Ethical Dimension

The ethical dimension of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is somewhat controversial. On one hand, the game repeatedly draws attention toward two ethical issues of the Chantry's doctrine: the position of mages and the status of elves. One of the main tenets of this religion, repeated several times in dialogues and texts, goes as this:

> Magic exists to serve man,
> and never to rule over him.
> Foul and corrupt are they
> Who have taken His gift
> And turned it against His children.
> They shall be named Maleficar, accursed ones.
> They shall find no rest in this world
> Or beyond. (BioWare 2014: n.p.)

The importance of this tenet is strengthened by practical concerns: every mage can potentially contact demons of the Fade and turn into a monstrous Abomination. In accordance with this tenet, mages across all regions of Thedas under the Chantry's rule were controlled through a special institution of Circles, magic towers, places under supervision of the Order of Templars, humans, trained to fight mages. However, abuse of power and extreme zeal of Templars in the second installment of the franchise led to the beginning of a civil war between them and rebel mages, and one of the goals of the Inquisition in the third game is to end this conflict and, more broadly, to determine the future policy of the Chantry towards mages.

Similarly, a player is introduced to the religious basis for elves oppression. While long ago some of them were helping to establish the Chantry, in time a conflict broke out between this mainly human religion and its former allies, ending in so called Exalted March, a military campaign that put an end to the last elven state. After that, elves were made to live in a subjugated position, and the question of morality of this state of things, particularly in the light of a historical part these people played in the foundation of the Chantry, is also raised throughout the game.

Both issues create a lot of **affordances to engage** with the ethical dimension of religion. The Inquisitor discusses opinions of different characters, who assess the position of mages and elves in the light of theology or political expediency. Also, through dialogues players are presented with different views on magic specific to different cultures of Thedas, and their character can express their own ideas on these issues, both personal, influencing only their relationship with the closest companions, and political, determining the outcome of the whole civil war and transforming the Chantry's doctrine.

At the same time, a player almost never faces any other sides of the Chantry's ethics: its views on murder, private property, state, supposed virtues and vices not concerning magic. Even the text of The Commandments of the Maker that could be found and read in the previous two parts of the series is not included as a whole in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, although specific characters cite fragments of it, mainly the mentioned above passage concerning magic. The game not only offers little in-game **affordances to engage** with other sides of Chantry's ethics in dialogues, but also little **interpretative affordances** to attribute specific decisions of a player to fulfilling or deliberately violating ethical norms of the Chantry, because they are practically absent from the game. Of course, the previous part of the series and the **resonance** between the Chantry and Abrahamic religions provides a general idea of the values promoted by this religion, but the drawing so much attention to certain questions while completely ignoring others is worth mentioning.

Clearly, no game, even an educational one, could provide **affordances to engage** with a full spectrum of ethical teachings of such a big and intellectually diverse religion as is simulated in *Dragon Age* in the form of the Chantry. Nevertheless, it is important that the ethical issues that the game highlights are the ones mostly tied to other dimensions of religion: social and mythological. That constitutes religious ethics as something on one hand important, but on the other hand secondary to the interpretation of sacred texts and to the socio-political situation.

The Doctrinal Dimension

The doctrinal dimension of the Chantry revolves around relations between the material world of Thedas and the spirit world of the Fade. Any mortal being is tied to both realms: their body belongs to Thedas and their soul provides the connection with the Fade. The Fade in turn is always imitating the material world, feeding on emotions and thoughts. That's why its creatures, spirits and demons, are tied to different conceptions, encoded as negative (sloth, rage, fear) or positive (Justice, Faith). Fade is also the space where, according to the teachings of the Chantry, the souls of sleeping mortals go and form where the energy, allowing mages to control reality, comes. That is why mages are susceptible to manipulations by evil denizens of the Fade – the demons, who can provide them with more power. In the center of the Fade lies the abandoned Black City – a former abode of the Maker. The deity himself according to the Chantry's teachings left his creation, but the souls of the dead travel through Fade to rest by his side.

A distinctive feature of the doctrinal dimension of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, uniting it with other RPGs, is its inextricable ties with mythology. Ontology, cosmology, and anthropology of the Chantry are deeply rooted in its mythology and the specific actions of the Maker. The Fade is the first world created by him, but since spirits inhabiting it, as it turned out, were incapable to created anything lasting, the disappointed Maker created a new world, Thedas, and inhabited it with creatures combining spiritual and material nature, that allows them to create: humans, elves, and dwarves. Spirits envied mortals, and that lead to the appearance of the first demons – another story resonating with Islam, and, to the lesser extent, with other Abrahamic religions, in which rebellious spirits are often viewed as fallen angels, not initially morally neutral jinns. At the same time, the notion of afterlife connects with the motive of the Maker leaving the world after the transgression of the magisters. Mythology mediates different parts of the doctrine, combining it into a coherent structure, rarely encountered in real world religions.

This approach is largely due to the fact that religious doctrine in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* often serves as a literal description of the world: the Herald of Andraste enters the Fade in the flesh, battles demons and sees spirits. It also serves as a way to give a player an **affordance** to criticize the Chantry's beliefs: inside the game world, there are a set of characters denying or at least questioning the Chantry's doctrine, sometimes, like in a case of elven mage Solas or embodied spirit Cole, by their mere existence. This in turn raises doubts about the variety of mythological stories as well.

As a result, the doctrinal dimension in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* has an ambiguous position. The main character is often involved in dialogues and events, which can be connected with the Chantry's doctrine, but these interactions are not built into in-game religious discourse. Journey to the Fade and interactions with demons are introduced as a part of usual game process, lacking direct religious connotations, although a player obviously has **interpretative affordances** to read them accordingly on their own volition.

In fact, the most obvious **affordances to engage** with the doctrinal dimensions that allow its attribution to core dimensions are provided by scenes of a doubt, episodes where a player is faced with necessity to agree or disagree with a character denying one of the doctrine's elements, like the very existence of the Maker. Still, there are no **affordances** to influence the doctrine of the Chantry as it is through those dialogues, unlike with mytho-

logical, social and ethical dimensions. Chantry doctrine will remain the same after the end of the game even if a main character would personally express doubt in its specific claims.

Therefore, while *Dragon Age: Inquisition* recognizes the importance of doctrinal dimension of religion, it portrays Chantry philosophy as something excluded from other contexts. As a result, doctrinal dimensions are depicted as a most conservative part of religion, where any deviation from official teaching not only plunges into heresy, but risks to withdraw the speaker from religious context altogether, turning them into a sort of fantasy natural philosophers. The association of doctrinal dimension in the fame with a parallel reality, forbidden for most people and available only to initiates, seems symptomatic.

The Emotional Dimension

The sphere of emotion in videogames is problematic: although such projects as *Sims* series (Maxis since 2000) or indie games like *Haven* (The Game Bakers 2020), *RimWorld* or *Cultist Simulators* demonstrate that a simulation of feelings and even complex emotional stories is quite possible, those games can still be considered an exceptions. Consequently, the representation of the emotional dimension of religion in videogames is often very limited, and in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* it is one of the peripheral dimensions.

The game pays little attention to the emotional experience of believers and does not include any mentions that followers of the Chantry are seeking to achieve some specific psychological state, such as a mediation or a religious ecstasy. In full accordance with the social orientation of the Chantry, this religion directs a believer 'outside', to a surrounding world that they should change according to the teaching of Andraste, not toward their own psyche.

At the same time the game still includes several episodes, potentially providing **affordances to engage** with the emotional or psychological side of religion, although such interaction is possible more through interpretation than through the game mechanics directly. At the end of the first chapter, Corypheus attacks the initial base of the Inquisition, Haven, forcing heroes and ordinary members of the organization to escape into cold mountains. During the following cutscene of the impromptu council of the survivors, conflicts between the main character's companions established earlier escalate, encoding the scene itself as a desperate moment heralding the end of the Inquisition.

Then of the NPCs, Mother Giselle, raises spirits of her comrades by singing one of the Chantry's hymns: 'The dawn will come'. She is joined by almost all characters, which resonates very well with similar scenes from movies and literature and could, potentially, be interpreted as an example of believers reaching a specific emotional state through ritual, especially since the characters who did not join in the song are not members of the Chantry.

In addition, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* stands out among many other RPGs because it includes elements, simulating a religious faith: in certain scenes, the Herald is asked by their companions whether they believe in having a divine mission or in the existence of the Maker. Such dialogue happens after a disclosure of some important information of mythological or doctrinal nature and provides the player with a freedom to choose from

multiple options without clear indication which one is the 'correct' one, or even if there is a correct answer to the question. This ambivalence is confirmed by the end of the game, since during the entire walkthrough the player is never told the truth about the Maker's existence or his role in Thedas. That provides an opportunity to play as a character, moved by the faith in an Abrahamic sense, who maintains it even in face of the facts that might put it in question.

The very phenomenon of a religious faith in real world religions is rarely considered as a part of the emotional dimension, but in the context of videogames even such fleeting interest in a psyche of believers can be seen so rarely that it deserves a special mention. However, it should be noted that both in dialogues about faith, and in the cut-scene with Mother Giselle's song, the emotional dimension could be introduced only by a player themself, who might as well interpret such episodes in another way. For example, as a simple moment of inspiration, lacking direct religious connotations, or as intellectual debate without any emotional investment. Because of this, the emotional dimension of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* stays among peripheral ones.

The Material Dimension

The material dimension of religion in the game is strictly peripheral. At first glance, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* includes a lot of **affordances to engage** with this side of religion if the players already interested in it. There are specific designs of clothing for priests, Templars' uniforms, religious buildings, in one of which a main character spends a lot of their time, sacred images, artifacts and locations important for the Chantry.

But it doesn't take a lot of effort to ignore this sphere neither in terms of in-game actions, nor in terms of interpretation. The player does not learn anything about traditions and specifics of Chantry architecture, has no influence on the design of clergy's vestments or even understanding what it signifies. There are no quests in the game directly addressing the material side of religion: resources and wealth of the Inquisition is spent on relief efforts and its own military force and spies net while stemming from donations by powerful rulers and factions made, again, for political reasons. The player does not face problems such as protection of pilgrims, building or rebuilding temples or other issues that could have concerned a character in their position.

This could be explained by the fact that, in the end, the material dimension of religion in the game serves, primarily, as a tribute to neomedievalistic aesthetics, traditional to the genre of fantasy role-playing games. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* includes elements of the material side of religion necessary to visually encode the Chantry as reimagining of Medieval Christianity despite the fact that its mythological, doctrinal and other dimensions could have easily resonated with other religions. Such connection between the material dimension and recognition hinders the creation of **affordances to engage** it more closely, promoting the portrayal of this side of the Chantry as something inherent, unchanging and unimportant.

The Ritual Dimension

The ritual dimension also falls into the peripheral category. Despite the fact that the main character could position themselves as a religious leader and is always surrounded by a number of deeply religious characters, Chantry's rituals are almost absent from the game. The whole Dragon Age: Inquisition mentions only two rituals.

First, there are funerals, performed through cremation in memory of Andraste's death in fire. It becomes a focus of the side quest **Homecoming**, during which the main character must find bodies of people, drowned during the flood, and provide them with proper burial. But funerals themselves are conducted by an NPC-priestess, and a protagonist couldn't even attend them, so the exact nature of this ritual remains unknown to a player.

Second, there are prayers, depicted in the game several times. In a chapel located in the Inquisition's citadel a player can overhear prayers of ordinary clergy serving in their organization. During certain dialogues with two important characters Leliana and Callen, they can be seen in the midst of a prayer. Finally, the Inquisitor themselves could cite the Chantry's prayers in specific scenes, for example, when they are told that they are considered the Herald of Andraste.

While such episodes create **affordances to engage** with the ritual dimension, they are obviously disproportionally rare if we consider the fact that the game itself revolves around religious organization. Funeral rites are referred in a side quest, praying Callen could be seen only if he is in romantic relationships with a protagonist, and the Inquisitor themself could easily refrain from citing any ritual formulas. A player could easily finish the game without ever encountering or paying attention toward rituals of the Chantry.

The ritual dimension as well as the material serves more as a neomedievalistic sign. Prayers additionally highlight the already established religiousness of specific characters and serve as a shibboleth in case of the Inquisitor's own remarks, providing a player with an **affordance** to signify their beliefs. It is also interesting that the ritual dimension is depicted as being a deeply personal part of religion. Scenes of prayers serve as a way to emphasize corresponding character's confusion and their trust toward the Herald, and in **Homecoming** an introduction of a ritual in the game is justified through a natural disaster that brought a personal issue of death into a social sphere. At the same time ordinary social rituals are nonexistent, which is especially noticeable because of the great importance of the social dimension of religion in the game.

Conclusion

Geraci suggested that we should not expect any videogame to include all seven dimensions of religion. However, precisely because of that the question of which dimensions and what relations between them would end up in a **protostory** is of particular interest. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* highlights social and mythological dimensions, depicting doctrinal and ethical as derivatives from them, and other three as less important and more personal sides of religion.

Such a view of religion is a view of an external observer, looking at it from the outside. The Chantry is considered to be first of all a big social structure inextricably tied with political issues in which it is driven by interpretations of a limited number of texts: it's not hard to notice, that this view of religion bear similarity to secular discourse, provided in particular by media or school curriculum in history.

A protagonist of the game is at least a nominal member and even a leader of a religious organization, and there are **affordances** to create an image of a main character resonating with an image of a believer. However, a day-to-day religious life does not get a lot of attention, which is facilitated by the peripheral positioning of ritual and emotional dimensions and the politicization of the ethical dimension. To be religious in Thedas means to maintain and promote a specific political agenda, concerning not only members of the Chantry but also a lot of people outside it, in particular, elves and mages. Religious debates are political debates are not mediated by ritual or some other dimensions.

Moreover, while the Chantry is encoded, mostly through the material dimension, as similar to Medieval Christianity, the scheme of religious dimensions elucidates the influence of American Protestant tradition on construction of this imagined religion. Chantry is depicted as a strict hierarchy of dimensions where an interpretation of sacred text produces doctrine and ethics, in turn demanding to reorganize a society in accordance with a specific ideal. Emotional, ritual and material dimensions in this scheme is of secondary concern, they don't have any value in themselves and serve only as a means to fixate other spheres of religion, a way to remember the heroic deed of the religion's founder or to demonstrate your personal religious affiliation publicly.

Ultimately the image of the Chantry is consistent with the logic of popular discourse "religion vs spirituality" (for example Hanegraaff, 2000), elements of which often find their way into videogames. Still, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is unique because in this game 'religion' is not encoded as an undoubtedly wrong side in this speculative opposition. The game's **protostory** includes **affordances** to create a story of the Chantry as an organization capable of admitting and fixing its mistakes and acting as a positive force for change, addressing social and humanitarian problems.

Still, the main purpose of this article is to provide an illustrative example of a usage of the methodology described above to analyze a particular game. The value of the concept of religious dimensions by Ninian Smart, combined with the idea of **affordances** as applied to the research of videogames, is that it allows considering a player's agency while also addressing implicit and unconscious ideological attitudes of a game itself, which provides a player with resources to make statements and to interpret. In this particular case, we can see how modern notions of secularism and American-centric Protestant view on religion define the image of the neomedievalistic Chantry in the fictional world of Thedas.

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