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Frank Bosman and Alexander Darius Ornella (eds.)

**Paradise Lost**  
**Presentation of Nostalgic Longing**  
**in Digital Games**

**SCHÜREN**

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# JRFM

## JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

**JRFM** is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

**JRFM** publishes peer-reviewed articles in English that focus on visual and audiovisual media, feature film, documentary, advertising, interactive internet-based media and other forms of communication in their interdependencies with contemporary or historical forms of religion. It critically reflects on theories and methods, studies on intermediality, phenomenological and comparative approaches to media and religion across different cultures and periods. The main focus lies on contemporary phenomena, but diachronic analysis of the interaction between religion, film and media is also promoted as an essential facet of study.

**JRFM** is edited by a network of international film, media and religion experts from different countries and with professional experience in research, teaching and publishing in an interdisciplinary setting, linking perspectives from the study of religion and theology, film, media, visual and cultural studies, and sociology. It was founded in cooperation between different institutions in Europe, particularly the University of Graz and the University of Zurich, and is published in cooperation with Schüren publishing house, Marburg (Germany). It is an online, open-access publication with print-on-demand as an option. It appears twice a year in May and November and encompasses generally 4–6 articles.

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# Contents

Frank Bosman and Alexander D. Ornella

## **Editorial**

Paradise Lost: Romanticizing as Playing the Imagined Past 7

Ken Wong, Frank Bosman, and Alexander D. Ornella

## **“Giving Back”**

An Interview with Video Game Designer Ken Wong,  
by Frank Bosman and Alexander D. Ornella 13

Frank Bosman

## **Video Game Romanticism**

On Retro Gaming, Remakes, Reboots, Game Nostalgia,  
and Bad Games 25

William Sims Bainbridge

**The Virtual Rebirth of Paganism** 45

Vuk Uskokovic

## **SKOOL DAZE**

A Plea for Dissentience 69

Ye Yuan

## **Reconfiguring Daoist Cultivation in a Video Game**

A Case Study of AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR 105

Sina Krottmaier and Chiara Zuanni

## **Paradise Lost – and Found Again**

METRO 2033, the Ghosts of the Past, Moral Choices,  
and Game Rewards 133

## Open Section

**Brent Yergensen**

### **The Devil as Doppelgänger**

Instinctual Faith and the Exhausted Rant of Evil in LAST DAYS IN THE  
DESERT (US 2015)

157

## Media Reviews

**Lioba Behrendt**

### **Book Review**

**Kristin Merle / Ilona Nord (eds.), Mediatisierung religiöser  
Kultur. Praktisch-theologische Standortbestimmungen im  
interdisziplinären Kontext**

(Mediatization of Religious Culture. Practical Theological  
Assessments in an Interdisciplinary Context)

175

**Hannah Griese**

### **Song Review**

**Little Simz, “Introvert”**

181

**Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati**

### **Festival Review**

**Venice Film Festival 2022**

There is no Alternative to Family

189

**Franz Winter**

### **Book Review**

**Alvin Eng Hui Lim, Digital Spirits in Religion and Media**

Possession and Performance

198

# Editorial

## Paradise Lost: Romanticizing as Playing the Imagined Past

*Paradise Lost* is not only the title of John Milton's famous epic poem (1667) but also a philosophical-theological notion linked to and emerging from the Fall from Eden in Genesis. It expresses – or imagines – the human experience of a definite rupture in history, with its inextinguishable urge to return to the time before the rupture and its yearning for an idealized version of this past. Throughout history, this longing has been expressed in artwork, architecture, and literary works, and it is perhaps best observed in the Romantic era, with its preference for the past, the future, and the contemporary exotic.

Today, the notion of “Paradise Lost” has far from disappeared, finding post-modern manifestations in contemporary art and literature as well as in the revival of (secular) nationalism and (religious) fundamentalism. The 20th and 21st centuries have also seen the emergence of new arenas for narratives and iconographies of “Paradise Lost”: popular culture and digital games. Within the field of game studies and the history of digital games, their technological developments, their game play, and their graphics and user interface design, the notion of “Paradise Lost” can be traced in three ways.

In the past decade, the game industry has been witnessing a surge in retro-gaming as a kind of narratological, ludological, visual, and technological longing for the early age of gaming. For example, some modern games have (re-)introduced the concept of perma-death (*WASTELAND 2* [Deep Silver, AT 2014], *HADES* [Supergiant Games, US 2020], *XCOM* [various, 1994 – present], the *Diablo* series [*DIABLO*, *DIABLO II* and *DIABLO III*, Blizzard Entertainment, US 1997 – present]), and retro-graphics has become a deliberate design approach in contemporary games (*CUPHEAD* [Studio MDHR, CA 2017], *CELESTE* [Matt Makes Games, CA 2017], *UNDERTALE* [Toby Fox, US 2015]).

The industry – and the consumer – has also witnessed the emergence of various remakes of old-school classics (1942 [Capcom, JP 1984], BALDUR'S GATE [various, 1996–2016], ODDWORLD: ABE'S EXODDUS [GT Interactive, US 1997] and ODDWORLD: SOULSTORM [Oddworld Inhabitants, US 2021]). In other words, the present longing for the past, or for the early (or golden) age of gaming, manifests itself in and through the game.

Some games explicitly employ and reflect on the idea of a rupture in human history, that is, the loss of an earlier (potentially utopian) state that is yearned for but beyond reach (for example, HORIZON ZERO DAWN [Guerilla Games, NL 2017]). This lost period could be medieval times, paradise, pre-9/11, pre-COVID in light of prolonged lockdowns, and so forth.

The current issue presents contributions from scholars and also from professionals and practitioners who have been involved in or witnessed key developments in the gaming industry. In their own way, the essays either reflect on games reimagining the past (Bosman) and providing users with opportunities to experience and engage with such a reimagined past (Bainbridge), or they bear witness to processes of game development (Uskoković). Yuan situates this process of reimagining in a Daoist religious and cultural context, and Krottmaier and Zuanni flesh out the (sometimes hidden) moral choices players face when romanticizing the past in and through digital games.

For this issue, we had the pleasure to talk to game designer Ken Wong. Wong was the lead designer of the game MONUMENT VALLEY, released in 2014 by ustwo games ltd. The game received the 2014 Apple Design Award, and reviewers almost univocally praised it for its immersive experience and beautiful aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> The aesthetics of the game and how reviewers responded to the design prompted us to reach out to Wong. In our conversation, Wong talks about the idea of giving back as driving the game design process and about colonialism, history, and original sin, and he walks our readers through the design process behind the game. We also reached out to ustwo games ltd, and they kindly allowed us to use a screenshot of the game as cover for this issue. We thank ustwo games ltd and hope the cover image encourages our readers, in particular those who might not consider themselves video gamers, to approach digital games not as simply a mundane leisure activity, but as a rich arena for social and cultural discourse.

1 AppleInsider 2014; Marchiafava 2014.

As editors, we think that both the successful aesthetics of MONUMENT VALLEY, the immersive M.C. Escher-style graphics, and the ideas that emerged throughout the game design process make visible social phenomena relevant to scholars of religion as well as social scientists. Or, drawing on our conversation with Wong: the time (2014) was ripe for a game like MONUMENT VALLEY to be released.

Frank Bosman, guest editor of this issue and known for his work on religion and video games, introduces this issue in his article “Video Game Romanticism: On Retro Gaming, Remakes, Reboots, Game Nostalgia, and Bad Games”, in which he explores interrelated but distinguishable notions like “retro gaming”, “remakes”, “reboots”, “game nostalgia”, and “bad games”. Bosman discusses all these concepts based on a communication-oriented analysis of video games, differentiating between text-external and text-internal forms of game romanticism. This leads him to the conclusion that video game romanticism, in all its forms, categories, and modes, unites the gamer communities’ longings for an unspoiled, idealized past by, in, and through the medium of video games.

William Sims Bainbridge, a sociologist and scholar of religion and technology at the National Science Foundation, provides us with a study entitled “The Virtual Rebirth of Paganism”. In his article, he discusses the opportunities provided by digital technologies for bringing to life mythologies as well as past times and past cultures. Such a bringing-to-life often involves a reimagining of the past, that is, a combination of history and legends, in a time of vast cultural transformation. Bainbridge looks at these processes of reimagining the past from the perspective of repaganization and argues that video games can be a tool in and for these processes of repaganization.

Vuk Uskoković is a scientist and engineer. His contribution, “Skool Daze: A Plea for Dissentience”, provides a unique insight into how the gaming industry developed and how specific milestones influenced future developments. While Uskoković does not write from a religious studies perspective, his contribution is important for scholars of religion and video games. Particularly valuable is his argument, as scientist and engineer, that both sciences and the arts are “exercises in imagination”. This imaginative element provides a space for scholars from various disciplines to meet and discuss worlds of meaning we collectively and individually contribute to. He invites us to reflect on the close relationship between imagining, reimagining, creating worlds of meaning, and technological development and possibilities.

Ye Yuan is currently undertaking doctoral research at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études – PSL*, Paris, with a project on religious practices in central Hunan from the mid-18th century to the mid-20th century. Yuan’s article, “Reconfiguring Daoist Cultivation in a Video Game: A Case Study of *AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR*”, is an important discussion of how Chinese popular culture engages with philosophical and religious traditions and ideas. In his case study, Yuan demonstrates how the video game *AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR* (GSQ Studio, CN 2019) draws on, borrows from, and reinterprets Daoist ideas and traditions. Yuan analyzes how religious and cultural traditions, in other words a look into the past, are being reimagined in popular culture if and under what circumstances such reimaginings might be considered “authentic” and whether “authenticity” actually matters.

Sina Krottmaier is a research assistant at the Centre for Information Modelling, Austrian Center for Digital Humanities, University of Graz, with a research focus on video games, and Chiara Zuanni is Assistant Professor in Digital Humanities at the University of Graz, Austria. In their contribution, “Paradise Lost – And Found Again: *METRO 2033*, the Ghosts of the Past, Moral Choices, and Game Rewards”, they discuss how the game *METRO 2033: REDUX* (4A Games / Deep Silver, UK/AT 2014), set in post-apocalyptic Moscow, weaves situations into the game play that prompt the player to engage in a moral evaluation. The player can gain moral points, which have an impact on the outcome of the game. Importantly, Krottmaier and Zuanni discuss how the game romanticizes and criticizes the past and how these representations are linked to the hidden moral system in the game.

The Open Section features a contribution by Brent Yergensen, associate professor of Communication at the University of Texas at Tyler. Yergensen discusses the film *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, a 2015 production by Rodrigo García. The film imagines Jesus’ encounter with the devil during his 40 days in the desert. Yergensen offers us his thoughts and analysis of the film in light of the notion of evolutionary faith instinct. The concept of faith instinct, Yergensen explains, emerged in public discourse in the context of evolutionary theory in the years preceding the release of the film. Yergensen not only looks at the film through the lens of faith instinct discourses, but also analyzes how García illustrates and visualizes the concept.

This issue demonstrates the richness of academic discussion of game nostalgia and its actuality. Understanding the present is always connected to collective understanding of the past and its appreciation and appropriation in the present. The future is only understood when it has become its

past. The present is in between, forever challenged to negotiate what was and what is strived for. Nostalgia is a powerful tool in this negotiation, and scholarly research into the nostalgia phenomenon is both necessary and inevitable.

We thank our contributors and invite our readers to indulge in the intellectual richness of their contributions. And in the spirit of this issue, we also invite our readers to imagine themselves sitting in a comfortable chair in the library of a country house. The fireplace radiates warmth and emits a hissing, popping, and crackling. As you read these articles, you sip a cup of tea, a glass of whiskey, or whatever allows you to go back to an evocative past. Enjoy!

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# “Giving Back”

## An Interview with Video Game Designer Ken Wong, by Frank Bosman and Alexander D. Ornella

### Abstract

In this interview, conducted by issue editors Frank Bosman and Alexander D. Ornella in August 2022, Ken Wong discusses the relationship between video game design, video game aesthetics, religious imagery, and cultural storytelling. He discusses how (secularized) religious tropes, ideas, and images can become part of the game design and the story of the game, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. He discusses how the ideas of “giving back”, atonement, and forgiveness can become elements of successful video games.

### Keywords

Video Games, Atonement, Original Sin, Sacred Architecture, Religion

### Biography

Ken Wong is an artist, designer, and game developer from Adelaide, Australia. He was lead designer of the iconic mobile game MONUMENT VALLEY (2014) for ustwo games. For his own studio, Mountains, he was the designer and artist of FLORENCE (2018). Both works were awarded BAFTA Game Awards and Apple Design Awards. Both games have been exhibited in museums around the world, including the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, MoMA, and Seoul Museum.

**Frank Bosman & Alexander D. Ornella: Aesthetics, gameplay, story, and religion. How do these fit together in the competitive and booming video game industry? What role do aesthetics design choices play that might help lift the player out of and beyond the everyday? Ken Wong is the lead designer behind the 2014 game MONUMENT VALLEY (ustwo games), which critics praised for its aesthetics. Thank you, Ken, for joining us! Who is Ken Wong?**

**Ken Wong:** I’ve been developing games for about 20 years now. I began as a concept artist and then became an art director. I’m probably best known for my work for ustwo games as lead designer on a game called MONUMENT VALLEY, which came out in 2014. Later on I founded my own studio called Mountains Studio, where I was the lead designer of a game

called FLORENCE, which was also very well received. Now I'm a bit of a free agent, trying to figure out what my next thing is. When I was younger and started my career, I was very much into video games. The older I get, the less time I spend playing games, but I find myself becoming a curious observer. I feel like I learn so much about games from listening to the experiences of others.

**Bosman: Now you describe yourself as a free agent, as someone who is free to find out what your next move will be. Do you want to keep producing indie games or do you want to join a major studio?**

**Wong:** I'm not sure yet. I've been fortunate to have had a really wide variety of experiences and that I have my own studio. But at the moment, I'm not sure if I want to make another game of my own design at my own studio or whether I want a more collaborative project. You've caught me at a bit of a transitional period in my life.

**Bosman: As a scholar of religion and video games, I'm curious what your religious upbringing has been, or religious context, or your religious identification? Maybe you don't have one, or maybe you don't want to share. That is perfectly fine, but I'm just always a bit curious to know where you are coming from.**

**Wong:** I grew up Roman Catholic. My parents are from Malaysia. My father is from a Catholic background, but my mother was Buddhist and then converted later. I participated in church and went to Sunday School and was baptized and confirmed. But when I was a teenager, I decided that church wasn't for me, and I sort of stepped back. I'd say that I'm a spiritual person, but ultimately I'd probably identify as an atheist.

**Bosman: So, you would identify as both spiritual and as an atheist?**

**Wong:** I guess they are all labels, but yes. I feel like we are spiritual beings. Science and rational thinking can help us understand the world around us, but not necessarily provide answers to philosophical questions, for everyone. I think the best approach is to let people believe what they want to believe as long as they are not harming others.

**Ornella: You said you grew up Catholic; so, you grew up immersed in a rich cultural, material, and visual tradition that comes with Catholicism. To what extent, do you think, has that exposure or immersion influenced your way of thinking about aesthetics, visual design, narratives, labels, or gaming? I'm asking because when playing MONUMENT VALLEY, the player comes across a number of fairly obvious religious references.**

**Wong:** I think that a lot of it was on a subconscious basis. It might be interesting for you to know that I'm not much of a storyteller and I don't

play a lot of narrative games. I'm often asked regarding MONUMENT VALLEY: Did the story, aesthetics, or gameplay come first? And it was very much in the order of gameplay and aesthetics and then much later the story. The story has an important role in the final work, but it was not the origin. I think I came to it instinctively rather than intellectually, and it makes sense that I was drawing on my upbringing, whether consciously or subconsciously.

The story is subtly and sometimes explicitly about forgiveness. The game's protagonist, Ida, is guilty of something, she's done something wrong and she's seeking forgiveness. What she has to ask forgiveness for is not explicitly answered. But we as developers, I think, our belief was that she'd actually stolen artifacts from these monuments, and the reason that you're playing MONUMENT VALLEY is to put these artifacts back. The other influence behind the idea of forgiveness was that I grew up in Australia and a big part of being Australian is recognizing that these lands were stolen from the Aboriginal people. And Australia was an extension of the British Empire, and the British Empire stole many artifacts from around the world.

Video games frequently revolve around killing, defeating, taking. And I thought, if not from an ethical point of view but from a creative point of view: what if we invert that, couldn't that be interesting if you are actually trying to put back, and to give away?

I think that's part of growing up as an Australian: that you acknowledge that land was stolen from the original custodians of the land, and that there are wounds to heal, injustices to correct, and reparations to be made.

I think there's also an aspect of Christian theology, the concept of original sin or that we are all sinners and that we all need to atone. So that's where the idea of putting things back in the game came up. This idea came quite early on and informed the rest of the piece: this a journey not of conquering or of winning, but perhaps of trying to set things right in the world and to redeem oneself.

**Bosman:** You talked about the themes of atonement and asking for forgiveness, asking for gifts, you talked about something that may not be forgivable. As a game theologian, I find it fascinating that you brought up the term "original sin". I think it's fascinating that philosophical or existential or theological themes are discussed within a developer team and find their way into the game.

**Ornella: I want to go back to the game and your growing up in Australia. Who is “Ida”, the game’s protagonist?**

**Wong:** At the end of the game, we see Ida ascend as a bird with a crown. That’s not the first time we’ve see Ida this way! A bit earlier in the game, in the chapter “The Descent”, we see that the mirror reveals her true form, as the Crow Queen or Crow Princess. The idea is that she is the Queen or the Princess of these bird people and that by stealing the artifacts – we just call them artifacts, we don’t know what they are – she doomed her people. She cursed the crow people to forget how to fly; that’s why we see them sitting around in the game, sort of a bit annoying and mindless. I feel it’s sort of an archetype, perhaps a leader or a king who shows hubris and ends up dooming their people? We thought it was interesting that it was up to her to try and right this wrong.

**Ornella: Looking at the aesthetics of the descent, the ascent, the transformation of Ida and her people: are Ida and her people dying and rising from the dead? There are rays of light beaming the crow people away, rapturing, I’m tempted to say. Can we use the word “resurrection”, redemption, death, dying, and rising again, here?**

**Wong:** Yes, certainly. I mean, I don’t think it was a prosaic process of here’s the story that we want to tell and here’s what this symbolizes. In a way we were sort of borrowing symbols from theology and utilizing them to resonate with the audience. Almost in the way that the Arthurian legends are constructed, or *Lord of the Rings*. We were borrowing from religious Christian imagery without necessarily telling the story of Christ or telling specific Biblical stories. And yes, there’s this element of rapture, of ascent, of descent or redemption; these interpretations or themes you mentioned are all valid. I think we avoided the need to create a watertight narrative by just sort of scattering these symbols and saying: it’s up to the player to put it together and take away what interpretation they will come to.

**Bosman: You just said developers often take all different kinds of stories that are already there without necessarily retelling them individually or exactly. Would that point to what in my own research I like to call the cultural persistence of Christian narratives, thoughts, ideas, and imagery?**

**Wong:** You’re making an interesting point here. I didn’t sit down and write down: here is what I believe, how I was brought up, and how I was raised. I didn’t even think about Christianity until after the game was completed. And then I looked back and I realized that there’s a lot of symbolism there and that has probably to do with how I was raised as

well as how the other seven members of the team were also raised. We all collectively formed the game together. In a way it was how you described it, it certainly was not a conscious process.

**Ornella: Talking about this - unconscious - writing of religiously informed ideas into the game: obviously the game was a huge success and it got fantastic reviews. People enjoyed playing the game. Do you think that these religious undercurrents present in the game contributed to its success? And if so, why do you think these religious undercurrents resonated with the audience?**

**Wong:** The game succeeded in several different ways. The thematic aspect may actually not have been the deciding factor. For some people, it was just a neat puzzle game, and the art and narrative were not a big draw. For other people, it was an audio-visual experience and that was their big take-away, and they might not have connected with the game on a thematic level at all. Then there were people that appreciated the shortness of the game and that they could finish it in roughly 90 minutes.

The game came out at a particular time, and in a way was a counter-offer to what was trending at the time, and it found an audience. And for people who didn't connect with the game on a thematic level but on a audio-visual level or because they liked the puzzles, I think the game provided them with something that perhaps other video games didn't provide them with.

Many video games are a form of power fantasy. They create scenarios like: hey, what if you had amazing powers? Every time you died, every time you were shot in the head, you could be resurrected and try again; even if you fail, you'll level up and eventually you'll succeed; and there's a certain satisfaction you get from that. MONUMENT VALLEY presented a different sort of satisfaction, where you were not just given all the powers. I think that this was perhaps refreshing for a lot of people, and I think MONUMENT VALLEY was part of a movement that tried to explore different themes within video games.

The earliest videogames were good at representing numbers and binary states like "alive" or "dead". It makes sense to simulate sports, combat, accumulating wealth. I don't have anything against games built around these mechanics, many of my favorite games are among them. As technology and game design have evolved, we've gotten better at simulating things that are not so quantifiable - narratives, emotions, relationships. I see MONUMENT VALLEY as part of the movement to explore these alternative themes.

Ornella: Talking about power fantasies: Robert M. Geraci, in his book *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* (2014), argued that some people find meaning in games because they can be a hero in the game or they form communities around their gameplay that they experience as *meaningful* communities. Some of these players might have mundane and repetitive jobs in their everyday lives but feel they are valued and taken seriously by these communities they form around gameplay. In a Games Developers Conference talk you gave in 2015,<sup>1</sup> you argued that people might find it comforting when playing MONUMENT VALLEY to see the whole world in one place; that everything that the player needs to solve is right in front of them. That idea of being in control in MONUMENT VALLEY sounds somewhat similar to WORLD OF WARCRAFT players reporting a sense of control and the experience of being a hero. Could you maybe expand on the idea of control and comfort in the context of video games?

Wong: Fantasy comes in many forms. I suppose I should try to break down what I meant by a power fantasy. I think your example of WORLD OF WARCRAFT is very good: in that game, you're the hero and can only level up. Even if you're terrible in the game, if you keep at it, eventually you'll keep ascending in power: you'll do more damage, gain more skills, get access to more areas. There's no aging, there's no true loss, you're forever going upwards. Miraculously, they make millions of players feel like the hero.

But fantasy can come in many forms, as you noted. One fantasy is having control over all of your problems. Very early on, we thought about adding panning to MONUMENT VALLEY, so that we could create larger puzzles, but we quickly realized that it's nice to have all the clues you need to solve a problem in front of you, contained in a single screen. There's also something nice about these small, contained worlds that often feel somehow easier to digest.

Another interesting example are gardening games. You take the activity of gardening from real life but simplify and streamline everything. Often you don't need to worry about overwatering, or the seasons, or the amount of light, or pests. Gardening games realize the fantasy of easily raising a garden, perhaps one that couldn't exist in the real world.

1 Wong, Ken: The Art of Monument Valley, Presentation at the Games Developer Conference 2015, San Francisco, March 2015, <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1022299/The-Art-of-Monument>, also available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0X8-5PpYVg>, minute 13.

So, I think games can serve many different fantasies. I think a big part of MONUMENT VALLEY's success can be attributed to the game fulfilling a different kind of fantasy to what was popular at the time, especially on a mobile device.

**Bosman:** You just talked about how developers might consciously or subconsciously infuse their games with religious ideas. But let's talk about what happens with the audience. For example, when I was playing MONUMENT VALLEY and Princess Ida came along, I immediately had to think about Mount Ida, probably because I was raised in an environment where the Greek and Latin classics were very important. In Greek mythology, there's Mount Ida on Crete, the mountain of the goddess, and I thought: MONUMENT VALLEY, goddess, mount, Ida, princess, and it all made perfect sense to me. You said that players may or may not take in what you as developer consciously or subconsciously write into the game. But at the same time, individual players can find meaning in your game that you did not put in there, neither consciously nor subconsciously. That raises the question: where does meaning in the video game come from?  
**Or: where is meaning in a video game situated?**

**Wong:** I think that it's up to the viewer. They bring their own experiences to the game and what they thus see in art is a valid interpretation. We can try and provoke those memories and experiences. There's also a cultural memory we can touch on by naming things, or the color schemes we used, some of that is going to resonate with people. For people of different backgrounds, it will resonate in different ways. By creating a diverse range of environments, for example a tomb or a monument on top of a mountain, I think we are basically pulling at threads, we are pushing certain buttons. Whether playing the game makes people cry or laugh or relieves them from boredom, I don't really mind. If our work gives them something to think about, or leaves them with an emotion afterwards, I think we've done our job. I try to downplay meaning as something the author would inscribe. Rather, I like to think that art can be more powerful when it's a dialogue between the prompts that the author leaves and how the viewer responds to it.

**Bosman:** In the last 15 years, there has been an ongoing discussion about the status of video games as a piece of art. In your opinion, are video games art?

**Wong:** I used to answer yes, games are art, or at least they can be art. That's how we think about moving images: we usually recognize film as a form of art. What about television? What about advertisements, YouTube videos, and pornography? It's arguable whether all moving images are

art, but they have the possibility of being art. I see games the same way. Certain video games function as art, and we have video game critics and essays on video games and some games are also shown in museums.

However, at the present moment my answer to your question whether video games are art is that it doesn't really matter. If society argues about the definition of art, it seems futile to me to try to answer whether video games meet the definition, or why that's important to answer. It really doesn't make much of a difference to most people. Let's forget about these labels and let's look at how video games operate within culture. Games are a popular pastime. They make us cry. We connect over them. Games can really change people's lives. Games operate on a cultural level. We make games that cover a wide variety of topics: death, cancer, love, family, politics, philosophy. I think it would be very hard to make a sincere and serious argument that games cannot be art. But again: I don't really care because I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing, and the video games industry is going to keep doing what it's doing. Regardless of whether games are art or not, they will continue to make loads of money; to enrich our lives; and to be part of our cultural discourse.

**Ornella: MONUMENT VALLEY was released in 2014 and you said the game had to be made at that particular point in time. But it also was a time – Obama was still president of the United States – where the world might have felt a bit more under control. What role or purpose or function would you say a game like MONUMENT VALLEY could have today, at a time that feels much more chaotic and out of control?**

**Wong:** I feel like I don't have my finger on the pulse of the games industry as a whole as much now, compared to 2014. So, I'm not sure if I'm equipped to answer this question well. Many have observed that video games were very important to people during COVID-19 lockdowns – either as soothing escape or as a way to stay connected with friends and family.

It's interesting how video games have always allowed us to escape from reality, while also often helping us understand our reality.

**Bosman: I would like to ask you about ludonarrative dissonance, the conflict between the narrative of the story and the narrative of the gameplay. Could you reflect on this based on your game experiences?**

**Wong:** I think that was on our minds as we were creating the game. Many games seem on the surface to be violent or antisocial, but I think players are actually engaging with them more like sports. Violence might be part of the attraction, but I think for many it's much more about a sense of

competitiveness, or accomplishment, or cooperation. The fact that you are killing someone is almost removed from real world killing because obviously they resurrect again in the next round, it becomes more like paintball. I think this is something that non-gamers often don't understand. Games can have narrative dissonance but still be really successful.

That said, MONUMENT VALLEY and FLORENCE attempt to minimize that dissonance. I tried to design gameplay that reflected the narrative and the themes.

**Bosman:** Could you give some advice for people who are trying making video games. Should they start with the story, with the narrative, and then try to find the appropriate gameplay for it, or should they start with the gameplay and then create the story around it?

**Wong:** I think that all approaches are valid. I'm inclined to say: be conscious of what you are doing. However, sometimes creating instinctively or naively can also turn out to be an advantage.

MONUMENT VALLEY is the product of the very specific chemistry of the environment, the team members, the particular time, and the audience. We were very lucky that everything managed to come together. Going forward, we can't replicate those specific circumstances, so sometimes it's hard to extract words of wisdom to pass on to others. I think the best chance you can have is to understand your most valuable resource: your team. What their strengths are, and how to channel them, how to get them to harmonize.

**Ornella:** Is there something that we can learn about society, about culture, about religion by looking at the games that people play at any particular point in time?

**Wong:** That's a good question but I've not given it much thought, so I don't want to speculate, and I'm not active enough as gamer. But what I can say is that games operate as a kind of subculture and that subculture has various movements within it.

**Bosman:** In MONUMENT VALLEY, you can see traces of the work of Escher. Can we talk about the idea of sacred geometry here?

**Wong:** What happened here was that I'd been thinking about how to make a game about architecture. At that time, I looked at an image by Escher called *Ascending and Descending*, with its infinite stairs. What struck me was the building in the middle of it: it's not quite isometric and when you're looking at it, it's kind of from a bird's eye view. There's nothing beyond the building, it's just a void space and there are charac-

ters outside the building and on the steps. It does look like you could go into the building and eventually end up on those steps, and I thought to myself: would it not be interesting to be that character and your goal is to get to the top of this building? But in order to get there, you have to open up the building and figure out the path. So that was the inception, the spark of the idea that led to MONUMENT VALLEY: it's about navigating to the top of a building.

When we sat down to actually create the architecture, I tried to draw my own building. I did that from an isometric viewpoint, and the thing about drawing things in isometric is that perspective flattens out and it's possible to create impossible connections. I realized this as I was drawing it, and I made a mental note: I have to make sure that I don't create impossible connections. But then I showed this to a programmer and I said: could we actually create impossible connections? And the programmer said yes, absolutely. And that led us to embracing impossibility and experimenting with optical illusions. We tried to make things look one way, but then used the power of video games, the skills of our programmers, and some maths behind the scenes to accomplish things that are basically illusions.

When it comes to the term sacred geometry, I think that most people, especially mathematicians, feel that there's something beautiful about numbers. But in MONUMENT VALLEY, you don't see raw numbers, everything is expressed in terms of units and space and lines and volume. In other words: you don't see raw numbers but everything lines up perfectly; when things move in MONUMENT VALLEY, they line up perfectly. You can have something that moves from A to B and it joins in a way so that there's no seam. Often, that's part of the illusion. And when something lines up perfectly, our brains find it just satisfying. It makes it feel like this is the world as it should be; or that there's something spiritual or godly about how things are lined up in such a harmonious way. I'm afraid I don't have better words to express this, but I think sacred geometry was a term that we just tossed in there to express something that we were feeling but perhaps had not necessarily researched. It was more of an impressionistic process of "this feels right", rather than "this is our thesis".

**Bosman: What you are saying sounds a bit like numbers having to do with harmonizing things and when things are harmonized, or in harmony, people tend to be glad about that. Many people seem to like things that are – or at least seem to be – in harmony or in synchronization with one another.**

In the beginning of this interview you brought up the term original sin and you talked about the stolen land in Australia. It seems that the idea of original sin emerges in a number of other modern video games, for example BRINK (Bethesda Softworks 2011), or METRO EXODUS (Deep Silver 2019), or REMEMBER ME (Capcom 2013), or HORIZON ZERO DAWN (Sony 2017).

**Wong:** I wonder if it has something to do with atonement for colonialism; that we are all collectively reckoning with that. It might have permeated our culture so strongly that it's become part of the fabric of who we are, and when you confront someone with the imagery, they automatically get it. It's just such a useful device, especially in video gaming. If you create a story around the idea that our people ruined the world, we now have to go on a quest to restore harmony, I think a lot of people can identify with that, no matter what their background is. Original sin has become such a strong fabric of our culture which I don't even think is constrained to a Christian concept. And it might be interesting to look at non-European cultures and contexts. For example, World War II is a big part of Japanese popular culture, and you can find a lot of post-apocalyptic themes there.

**Bosman:** There's the term "ancestral sin" in anthropology and it seems to be imbued in a lot of cultures: the idea that the next generation has to bear the consequences of our choices.

**Wong:** Since you are mentioning this: I spent five years living in China and making games in China. And China strikes me as an example of a society that doesn't really gel with that concept, as far as I know. It's not appropriate to talk about the sins of the country historically, it's very taboo; not just taboo: censored. It's also not appropriate to talk about the shortcomings of your parents, that's also very taboo. The correct attitude is to honor their father and mother in China. I think this would be interesting to further investigate: how does the concept of original sin resonate with a Chinese audience, if at all?

**Bosman:** You said that it's convenient to use the concept of original sin because it gives the player a framework, a reason to go on the quest to restore what was broken by those who came before us. When you talk about what we or our parents or grandparents did wrong, it sounds almost a bit like you are talking about a paradise lost?

**Wong:** I guess I hadn't thought about it that way. If we think that that term links to the idea of the Garden of Eden, I think it speaks to a romanticized view of the past. For example, a contemporary romanticization of the British Empire perhaps, a lost golden age? It's actually really interest-

ing how some video games romanticize agrarian lifestyles or feudal lifestyles without addressing any of the shortcomings: you've got peasants and you've got princes, it all seems great, they all live happily with one another. This again makes me think of contrasts and Chinese culture, in particular contemporary Chinese culture. There exists a concept of "paradise lost": Chinese culture does romanticize older eras in Chinese history. But unlike in Western thinking of paradise lost, in Chinese culture, I don't think there's necessarily a desire to return to those values or times. I think culture is very much propelled into the future, so the idea of "paradise lost" comes with that twist and I think it would be worth exploring these differences in more detail.

**Bosman and Ornella: Thank you Ken, for spending this time with us. It has been great (virtually) meeting a real-life actual video game developer.**

**Wong:** Thank you, it was a bit of a trip down memory lane and it was a great opportunity to discuss questions you usually don't get asked or don't have the opportunity to explore with media or in media interviews.

# Video Game Romanticism

## On Retro Gaming, Remakes, Reboots, Game Nostalgia, and Bad Games

### Abstract

In recent years, a relatively new phenomenon in the video game industry has emerged: the reappraisal of games from previous generations by individual gamers in combination with the production of new games aesthetically and/or ludologically clearly based on these older games. The phenomenon has been described as “retro gaming”, “game nostalgia” or “vintage play” and has been associated with parallel phenomena like reboots, remakes, and “bad games” (or *Kusoge*). As a primer for this special issue of the *Journal of Religion, Film, and Media* on “Paradise Lost”, the author identifies and describes all these interrelated but distinguishable notions as forms of “video game romanticism”: they appropriate a romanticized version of our collective past to construct an appealing digital, interactive, narrative complex.

### Keywords

Video Games, Romanticism, Retro Gaming, Nostalgia

### Biography

Frank G. Bosman is a theologian of culture and a senior researcher at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. He is the author of many articles and books on the relation between culture, theology, and faith, and focuses on the role of religion and religious themes in video games. In 2019, he published a synthesis of his previous research on religion and digital games in *Gaming and the Divine. A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (London: Routledge). In 2022, together with his colleague Archibald van Wieringen he published the monograph *Video Games as Art. A Communication-oriented Perspective on the Relationship between Gaming and Art* (Berlin: De Gruyter).



Fig. 1: Keyrings with a TETRIS (1984) or PAC-MAN (1980) game, produced by Fizz Creations GMBH. Photo by Frank G. Bosman.

## Introduction

In October 2022, I was visiting some old friends in Mere, England, who took me holiday shopping at the local B&B Bargains. B&B Bargains is one of those British megastores whose selection of offerings follows precariously the sequence of the seasons and other unidentifiable indicators known only to its own management. Browsing through the Christmas cards of various qualities and USB cables of various sizes, I stumbled upon two very peculiar keyrings – each was a miniature version of an old GameBoyesque handheld offering, either TETRIS (Alexey Pajitnov, various 1984–) or PAC-MAN (Namco, JP 1980; see figure 1).

The TETRIS one promised “original sounds” and “original gameplay”, while both games’ boxes featured screen shots of monochromatic gameplay. The choice of games, one from 1984 and the other from 1980, combined with the adjective “original” seemed to be aimed at adult costumers lured in by a

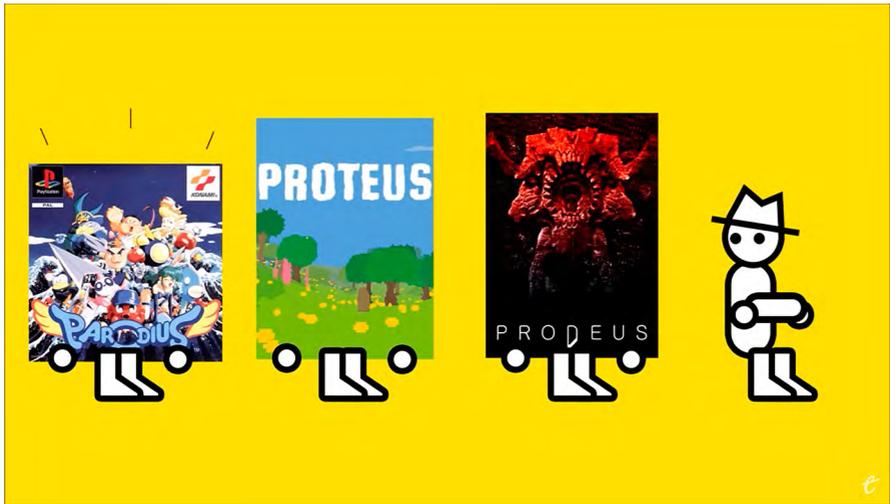


Fig. 2: YouTuber-cum-game reviewer Yathzee sarcastically comments on the similarities in name of the games PRODEUS (2022), PROTEUS (2013), and PARODIUS (1997). © The Escapist.

trip down memory lane. It seems harder to imagine that the younger generations, used to the ludically and aesthetically superior qualities of 21st century games like HORIZON ZERO DAWN (Guerrilla Games, NL 2017) or RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 (Rockstar Studios, US 2018), would fall for a cheap knock-off of a decennia old device and ditto games.

During the same holiday, I watched one of my favourite video game review channels. Yathzee’s “Zero Punctuation” reviews, published on The Escapist’s YouTube channel (1.22 million subscribers in October 2022), combine the aesthetically pleasing flow of a British storyteller with the sarcastic criticism of a postmodern game enthusiast. In his review of the DOOM clone PRODEUS (Bounding Box Software, US 2022; see figure 2), Yathzee described the games as yet another “boomer shooter”:

The ongoing glut of indie retro boomer shooters has proved the absolute mother fuck out of 20 year nostalgia wave theory. So now I am just trying to think of a way to exploit it. Maybe we could broadcast a popular children’s cartoon in which every episode’s plot is resolved by a character setting themselves on fire, then wait twenty years and buy a controlling interest in every major burn ointment manufacturer.<sup>1</sup>

1 Yathzee 2022.

PRODEUS' developer summarizes the game accordingly as

a first-person shooter of old, reimagined using modern rendering techniques and technology. Experience the quality you'd expect from a modern AAA game, designed with retro aesthetics and gameplay that invoke the tech-imposed limits of older hardware.<sup>2</sup>

Boomer shooters are a “90s-style retro FPS subgenre” that owes its apparent appeal and commercial success to an older gaming audience who fondly remembers the olden goldies of the gaming industry, like WOLFENSTEIN 3D (id Software, US 1992), DOOM (id Software, US 1993), or QUAKE (id Software, US 1996). Not incidentally the first two have seen recent reboots in the form of WOLFENSTEIN. THE NEW ORDER (MachineGames, US 2014) and DOOM (id Software, US 2016).<sup>3</sup> Other boomer shooters include games like ION FURY (Voidpoint, DK 2019), PROJECT WARLOCK (Buckshot Software, PL/GE 2018), and NIGHTMARE REAPER (Blazing Bit Games, CA 2022).<sup>4</sup>

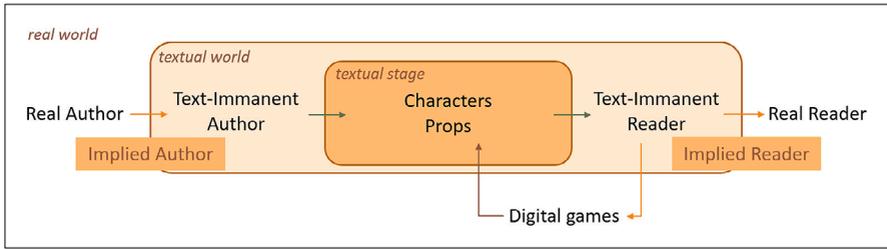
These are only a few examples of a more recent video game phenomenon identified by labels like “game nostalgia” or “retro gaming”. The relative novelty of the phenomenon is of course caused by the also a product of the relative newness of the video game medium. If the majority of adult gamers started playing games as kids or adolescents in the late 1970s and early 1980s, only by the late 2000s and the early 2010s were they old enough to develop feelings of nostalgia for their childhood video games. At the same time, appreciation of older games and/or their aesthetic is not exclusive to older players: younger players are into retro-looking, pixelated games like SHOVEL KNIGHT (Yacht Club Games, US 2014), THE BINDING OF ISAAC (Edmund McMillen, US 2011), or BROFORCE (Free Lives, US 2015).

In this article, I want to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, or rather interrelated complex of phenomena, related to appreciation of “the game old”, including definitions and a typology of material forms. Under the notion of “video game Romanticism”, as I have chosen to name the phenomenological complex mentioned above, I will discuss video games as both subject (entities actively “doing” the romanticization) and object (entities the romanticization process passively is “done to”). In the discus-

2 Bounding Box Software 2022.

3 Macregor 2022; Iwanluk 2022.

4 Fox 2022.



Scheme 1: The unique property of video games in terms of their communication: the entanglement of the text-immanent reader and its in-game character (avatar).

sion of games as the object of romanticization, I will address the interrelated but distinguishable notions of retro gaming, remakes and reboots, game nostalgia, vintage play, and “bad games”.

As to methodology, I will utilize the Communication-Oriented Analysis (COA) of texts (see scheme 1).<sup>5</sup> The COA distinguishes between the text-internal communication (between text-immanent author and reader) and the text-external communication (between the real author and real reader), and between the implied author and implied reader, posing as the possibility conditions of the communication between the textual world and the world outside the text (also known as “paradigm builders”). This methodology is also applicable to non-traditional texts such as series, films, and digital games.<sup>6</sup>

But video games, as ludo-narrative constructs merging play and storytelling, feature a unique communication feature: the entanglement of the text-immanent reader/player with its avatar-character (see scheme 1 again). This means that the game’s story is told to, by, and through the text-immanent player, although within the limits that the text-immanent author allows. The text-immanent author tells the game-cum-story to the text-immanent reader, as would be the case in any traditional text, like a book or a film. But in the case of video games, this immanent reader is (co)telling the game’s story by making all kinds of in-game decisions by interacting with its in-game avatar (in a quantity and quality that differs according to the game’s genre). This immanent reader-becoming-author is, however, always secondary to the initial immanent author, who guides and limits the space the immanent reader has for following its own path.

5 Bosman / van Wieringen 2022.

6 Cf. Bosman / van Wieringen 2018; 2021.

The COA is very useful in the context of the romanticization of video games in all its shapes, forms, and modes – as I will discuss in detail below – because this methodology differentiates between the various communicative instances that are “responsible” for the act of romanticization. I will return to this point at the end of the article.

One final remark. This article serves as a primer for the special issue of the *Journal of Religion, Film and Media* entitled “Paradise Lost: Presentations of Nostalgic Longing in Digital Games”. Since the articles in this issue deal with all kinds of different but clearly interconnected notions surrounding games and nostalgia, it is instructive first to delve into these ideas, to create a more comparative and methodological outlook. The topic of religion is therefore not specifically addressed in this contribution.

## Video Games and Romanticism

The term “Romanticism” (*Romantisme* in French, *Romantik* in German) denotes a specific intellectual movement that started at the end of the 18th century as a protest against the mechanical worldview of the Enlightenment, the politics of the *Ancient Régime*, the dominance of the neo-classical aesthetic, and the practical superiority of Western capitalism.<sup>7</sup> The Romantics materialized this protest by the idealization (or “Romanticization”) of the “other” in a geographical, psychological, or historical sense: the child, the animal, the exotic, the monster, the lunatic, the primitive, the peasant, and the naive.<sup>8</sup> These “others” were imbued with notions of spiritual, ethical, and moral superiority that stood in stark contrast to the industrialized, urbanized, and desensitized modern citizen living in one of the major cities of the Western world. The current surge in popularity of everything “medieval” in the form of an idealized depiction of the Middle Ages in novels, films, and games also belongs to this romanticization phenomenon, just as re-enactments of “historical” events do.<sup>9</sup>

Video game Romanticism, as an application of the general understanding of Romanticism to the field of video games, is *the idealization of the past, presumed technologically inferior but culturally, socially and/or spiritually superior to our time, by means of video games*. This idealization or romanticization of

7 Alsen 2000; Travers 2011.

8 Berlin 1999, 6–18.

9 Elliott 2017; Apel 2012, 47–76.

video games can take one of two concrete shapes: video games can be the subject of this romanticization, when games are the means by which the idealization of the past is realized, or they can be the object of romanticization, when games themselves become the material of this idealization of the past. The notion of nostalgia springs to mind as an alternative for video games Romanticism, but since the idealization of the past can also be appealing for those without an active memory of that past, I reserve the former notion for gamers who long for the games they can actively remember having played in their youth. I will address this category in more detail below.

This idealization of the past can be done, and often is done, by means other than video games, like novels, films, or music, but because of the unique communicative property of video games as a medium – their necessarily interactive nature – this form of romanticization is not merely an outside witnessing of the reconstructed past, but far more an *active engagement* with and *actualization* of this past by the player. As Sean Fenty states:

Video games may be, for some, artifacts of a past they want to return to, but video games also offer the seduction of a perfect past that can be replayed, a past within which players can participate, and a past in which players can move and explore.<sup>10</sup>

When reading a book on medieval knights, watching a movie about the American War of Independence, or listening to a Baroque opera, the reader/viewer/listener may be highly emotionally and psychologically involved in what the medium communicates, but they are technically limited to the position of witnessing what the (text-immanent) author of the story has set out. By contrast, in the case of a video game, as we saw above, the (text-immanent) reader of the game is very much involved in – even needed for – the unfolding of the game’s story. Where some games are more ludically focussed, others are more narratological. Abstract games like TETRIS do not have much of a story to tell, while walking simulators like THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Café, UK 2013) do not offer much of a gameplay challenge. Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that even TETRIS can be narratologically analysed. Janet H. Murray, for example, regards this game as an enactment of laborers in capitalistic societies.<sup>11</sup>

10 Fenty 2008, 22.

11 Murray 2017, 178.

In the realm of video games, every romanticization happens because of the active engagement of the player, who actualizes this romanticization by the very act of playing the game. The process of romanticization can take place on the level of the immanent reader of the game text, when the idealization of the past is part of the text-internal communication of the game (in the case of games as the subject of romanticization, retro gaming, remakes and reboots), or on the level of the real reader of the game text, when the idealization of the past is done by individual real players (instead of the text-immanent one), who attribute this idealization to the game from an outside perspective (in the case of game nostalgia, vintage play, and bad games). I will address these differences below in more detail.

A game like *SUPER MARIO BROS* (Nintendo, JP 1983) can be the object of players' nostalgia, who may remember playing the game as a child, but the game does not feature any romanticization in and of itself; it has to be attributed to the game by (real) players. A game like *KINGDOM COME. DELIVERANCE* (Deep Silver, AT 2018), by contrast, features a romanticized version of the European Middle Ages as a core element of its story and game play, without any need for external attribution of romanticization by individual players whatsoever.

## Video Games Romanticizing

The first form of video game Romanticism is when video games are the “actors” in the process of romanticizing themselves, that is, the medium by which the idealization of the past is executed. When video games are romanticizing, they *appropriate a romanticized version of our collective past to construct an appealing digital, interactive, narrative complex*. This appropriation includes medievalism, with games like *FOR HONOR* (Ubisoft, CA 2017) and *CRUSADER KINGS II* (Paradox Development Studio, SE 2012), orientalism, with *ASSASSIN'S CREED* (Ubisoft, CA 2007) and *PRINCE OF PERSIA* (Ubisoft, CA 2008), and Nordic mythology, with *ASSASSIN'S CREED. VALHALLA* (Ubisoft, CA 2020) and *HELLBLADE. SENUA'S SACRIFICE* (Ninja Theory, UK 2017).

The ongoing appropriation of the medieval times in books, games, and films has been given the term “medievalism”. Medievalism, or Neomedievalism, is the notion of postmedieval analysis and usage of medieval phenomena in modern cultural objects, including video games.<sup>12</sup> Richard Utz argues

12 Kline 2014, 4.

that these kinds of modern cultural texts do not so much want to re-enact history as it was as use that history as playful scenery for creative imagination. According to Utz,

Neomedieval texts no longer strive for the authenticity of original manuscripts, castles, or cathedrals, but create pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history and historical accuracy and replace history-based narratives with simulacra of the medieval, employing images that are neither an original nor the copy of an original, but altogether Neo.<sup>13</sup>

The Orient, or “the East”, has also been present in Western narratives at least since Antoine Galland’s first European translation of *The Arabian Nights*, in 1704–1717.<sup>14</sup> In this stereotypical depiction, “the Orient” is passive, irrational, and conservative, as famously described by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*.<sup>15</sup> Jack Shaheen in turn demonstrated how Eastern stereotypes have emerged in Hollywood, and Vit Šisler later did the same for video games. Šisler concludes in his famous article from 2008 that the portrayal of the Middle East in games depends on the genre:

Adventure and role-playing games typically portray the Middle East in fantasy or quasi-historical manner, exploiting “Orientalist” imagery, whereas action games and especially first-person shooters present the Middle East in a contemporary and decidedly conflictual framework, schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies.<sup>16</sup>

With modern awareness of cultural appropriation – the appropriation of the cultural expressions of a minority culture by a majority culture – the Romantic idealization of the past has come under political, cultural, and scholarly scrutiny. One result has been the introduction of political-cultural disclaimers for video games and the deployment of cultural sensitivity officers within larger game-developing companies and publishers. Games and series like *WOLFENSTEIN* (reboot), *TOMB RAIDER* (reboot), and *ASSASSIN’S CREED* (since *ASSASSIN’S CREED SYNDICATE* from 2015) feature disclaimers that seek to

13 Utz 2011, v.

14 Marzolph / van Leeuwen 2004, 556–560.

15 Said 1978.

16 Šisler 2008, 214.

avert claims and accusations of Nazi glorification, cultural appropriation, and heteronormativity respectively.<sup>17</sup>

## Video Games Romanticized

The second form of video game Romanticism is when video games are the object of idealization, that is, *the medium itself becomes the object of the idealization of the past*, presumably embodying the reconstructed past for which is longed. The longing can be directed towards the software (the games) and/or towards the hardware (the console or personal computer). This second form can take four different modes of its own: retro gaming, remakes and reboots, vintage play, and game nostalgia in the strict sense of the word.

### Retro Gaming

The first mode in which video games can be romanticized is retro gaming: *the appropriation of older video games' aesthetics and/or mechanics in modern games*. This is not a return to the older “pixelated” games of the NES 8-bit or the Sega Genesis – on native consoles or through an emulator (see below) – but the reuse of the look and feel of those games in new releases. As indicated earlier, SHOVEL KNIGHT, THE BINDING OF ISAAC, and BROFORCE are well-known examples. As Michael Thomasson summarizes in his chapter on “retrogaming”: “Many new retro games do choose to use more horsepower than their predecessors but keep the feel of classic gaming intact by implementing an art style that mimics or gives a nod to the classics.”<sup>18</sup>

This reuse of older games can take aesthetic or mechanical forms. In its aesthetic form, retro games’ designers consciously utilize the “primitive”, low resolution graphics of 8-bit image processing and colour banding. Originally compromises out of technological necessity, these aesthetics become a new style and are sought after for creative reasons alone. The same applies to the clunky, synthesized electronic music by the programmable sound generator usually used in older 8-bit games.

The other form of reuse is mechanical, that is, it lies not in the actual technology involved in making these games in a physical sense, but in the

17 Bosman / van Wieringen 2022, 68–70; Wainwright 2019, 152–183; Bosman, 2015.

18 Thomasson 2014, 341.

mechanics inside the game itself, like jumping, racing, or puzzle solving. Retro games are well-known for the high difficulty spikes and their unforgiving nature, a feature paramount in the reintroduction of limited lives and/or “continues”, also known as permadeath, “the permanent loss of a player’s character in a video game”.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, the early games were played in arcades (in the 1970s), where players were encouraged to insert as many coins as possible into the machines, which lacked the technological and practical ability to save a game to continue later. Subsequently, when games were played at home on a console instead of an arcade (in the 1980s), the financial need to limit the number of tries for players was nullified, and the possibility of saving a game’s progress, either by a password, consisting of preset codes, or by a battery-powered save system, was introduced. In recent games, saving is done automatically by the game itself, circumventing the player’s need to save manually.<sup>20</sup>

The reintroduction of limited lives or permadeath does resemble the old idea of the arcade machines but is, on a deeper level, a response by game developers to demands, made, in particular, by hard-core players who want a challenging game environment in which every decision counts.<sup>21</sup> While games such as *SPELUNKY* (Mossmouth, US 2008) and *THE BINDING OF ISAAC* feature permadeath prominently, other games, especially in the role-playing genre, like *DIABLO 2* (Blizzard North, US 2000) and *DIABLO 3* (Blizzard Team 3, US 2012), offer “an optional, extra-difficult mode”, which is permadeath.<sup>22</sup>

## Remakes and Reboots

The second mode in which video games can be romanticized is in remakes and reboots of earlier games. Both remakes and reboots rehash earlier videogames but in slightly different ways. Remakes are *the re-publishing of older games on modern platforms*, while reboots are *the re-imagining of older games in modern games*, sharing key ludic and/or narrative elements. Remakes tend to stay closer to their source material, while reboots are freer of their inspiration. Both forms ensure that older games can be played by new

19 Mazzeo/Schall 2014.

20 Bosman 2018.

21 Griffin 2014.

22 Frome 2016.

audiences by releasing them to modern consoles and PCs, aligning with contemporary computer games' standards, both visually and technologically.

Examples of remakes include *CASTLEVANIA. SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT* (Konami, JP 1997) from the original PlayStation to Xbox360, PlayStation Portable, and PlayStation 4; *SID MEIER'S COLONIZATION* (MicroProse, US 1994) on DOS to *CIVILIZATION IV: COLONIZATION* (Firaxis, US 2008) for Windows and Mac OSx; and *DAY OF THE TENTACLE* (LucasArt, US 1993) for DOS and Classic Mac OS to *DAY OF THE TENTACLE REMASTERED* (Double Fine Productions, US 2016) on Windows, Mac OSx, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Linux, and iOS.

Examples of reboots include *TOMB RAIDER* (Crystal Dynamic, US 2013) restarting the series with the same name that started in 1996 with an identically named game (Core Design, UK); *WOLFENSTEIN. THE NEW ORDER* rekindling the *WOLFENSTEIN* series that started in 1981 with *CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN* (Muse Software, US); *PRINCE OF PERSIA* that reignited the series with the same name that – again – started with an identically named game (Broderbund, US 1989); and the 2013 *DMC. DEVIL MAY CRY* (Ninja Theory, JP) reboot of the *DEVIL MAY CRY* series, started in 2001 (Capcom, JP).

## Game Nostalgia

The third mode of romanticized video game is game nostalgia in the strict sense: the *“fond return” of an older generation of players to the video games of their youth*. The wide variety of free and simple-to-use emulators contributed greatly to the realization of this game nostalgia. Emulators are software (or sometimes also hardware) that enables one computer system (the “host”) to behave like another one (the “guest”).<sup>23</sup> Versions are available for – among others – NES, SNES, Nintendo 64, GameCube, Wii, Game Boy, PlayStation, PlayStation 2, and PlayStation 3. A PC is usually the host for the older video games, but some modern consoles, like Nintendo's Switch or the PlayStation Classic, also present the possibility to download and play older games.

Sean Fenty describes this phenomenon:

For some, classic video games have become powerful nostalgic artifacts, not only as reminders of another time and place (a tether to a longed-for past) but as yearned-for states of being, desired spaces in and of themselves – digital homes to which gamers yearn to return.<sup>24</sup>

23 Dor 2014.

24 Fenty 2008, 20.

Of all the forms of video game Romanticism and its idealization of a past, game nostalgia is the most direct one: it involves older players' pleasing memories of their gaming past. These players play the past they can actually remember, but their reconstruction-by-video-game is nevertheless an idealized one. They want to play the old games because of their association with "simpler" times, with childhood and adolescence, with the family and friends with whom the game-playing was shared. This nostalgia is not a longing for a historical reconstruction of the past, but a reconjuring of an idealized version of that past. As Fenty describes, games "offer the seduction of a perfect past that can be replayed".<sup>25</sup>

Video games, because of their necessarily interactive characteristic, are perfect for this kind of nostalgia. Fenty again:

Nostalgia is the yearning to return to a place – to a state of being; and video games are places – they are states of being; and because they are stored, unchanging data, they tease with the hope for a possibility of return, if only we can regain access to them.<sup>26</sup>

On the one hand, games share the capacity of other (digital or analogue) mediums like books or films to capture the past as it was experienced once upon a time, but on the other hand, games can be interacted with, making the idealized reconstruction of the past interactive, an experience of (re-)creating rather than witnessing one's own past.

## Vintage Play

The fourth mode of romanticized video game is another kind of nostalgia, experienced not by those who can actually remember the (idealized) past, but by those who are too young to be able to do so: the reappraisal of older video games by modern players. Again, emulators play a big role in this reappraisal, since they make the older games readily available to new and younger audiences.

This kind of video game romanticization is embedded in a larger cultural trend for vintage, starting with but not exclusive to vintage clothing. Tracy Diane Cassidy and Hannah Rose Bennett identify vintage as the "response

<sup>25</sup> Fenty 2008, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Fenty 2008, 22.

to the negative publicity and effects of fast fashion”.<sup>27</sup> In this aspect, vintage gaming resembles the culinary trend of slowing cooking, in which time, effort, and dedication put into “authentic” hand-made food are most important.<sup>28</sup> As Cassidy and Bennett formulate: “Vintage fashion can be seen as a form of stability against a rapidly changing environment, which helps consumers to reconnect with a time gone by where things were simpler.”<sup>29</sup>

In their longing for “old-fashioned” and “authentic” products, slow gaming *and* slow cooking both betray themselves to be the heirs of Romanticism and its idealization of the past. It is vintage, rather than nostalgia, since most of these slow gamers, like the slow cooks, do not have an actual memory of the past longed for; they long for an idealized version of their collective past.

## Kusoge: The Pleasure of Playing Bad Games

We turn now to another category of video game, connected to the previous ones but clearly different from the rest: Bad Games. These games are not “bad” because they feature bad characters or satanic plotlines, but because they are regarded as games of a very low quality. Some older games are sometimes classified as such and, quite paradoxically, appreciated as such. A definition of bad games can read: *often older games that are perceived as severely inferior technically, narratologically and/or ludologically, while at the same time precisely these characteristics become the source of the players’ enjoyment and appraisal*. This appraisal can be *active or passive*, the former involving the actual playing of the bad games, while the latter involves watching other gamers play bad games.

Lists of such games – while the label is highly subjective – usually include BAD STREET BRAWLER (Beam Software, AU 1989), CUSTER’S REVENGE (JHM Ltd., US 1982), DESERT BUS (part of PENN & TELLER’S SMOKE AND MIRRORS, Imagineering, US 1995), E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL (Atari, US 1982), and THE GUY GAME (Topheavy Studios, US 2004).<sup>30</sup> The E.T. game is credited with singlehandedly causing the 1983 video games crash in the United States. While it did not

27 Cassidy/Bennett 2012.

28 Pietrykowski 2004.

29 Cassidy/Bennett 2012, 242.

30 Muir-Taylor 2022.

actually do so, the game has become the symbol of bad games overloading an already saturated market.<sup>31</sup>

Pop culture has always had a fascination with bad works, especially if they are intentionally funny.<sup>32</sup> Cinema has its “paracinema”, the enjoyment of bad movies: a subculture of “oppositional taste”.<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Sconce defines such subculture as aimed at the valorization of “trash” films that “have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate culture” not by giving them any cinematic merit but by using an “ironic reading strategy” that can “render the bad into the sublime”. If cinema has its paracinema, videogames have “kusoge”, a Japanese compound term that combines *kuso* (“crap”) and *gêmu* (“game”), celebrating the same oppositional taste and sentiments.<sup>34</sup> But more, games force players to participate in the game’s “badness”. As columnist Clive Thompson summarized: “When a game is bad, it’s just bad [...] It’s impossible to distance yourself from the badness. It’s not like chuckling while watching an actor screw things up, it’s like being forced to screw up yourself.”<sup>35</sup>

While bad films are witnessed, enjoyed without participation in them; players of bad games do not have that luxury – they have to get their hands dirty, so to speak (for example, in the entanglement of text-immanent reader and avatar in video games). That is also a reason why YouTube shows about people who play these kinds of games are so popular. Emily Flynn-Jones distinguishes between two modes of enjoying *kusoge*: those who enjoy playing bad games, and those who enjoy seeing other people play bad video games.<sup>36</sup>

Bad games are not necessarily romanticizing or romanticized video games, or vice versa. Nonetheless, bad games and romanticized games do have a tendency to overlap. And just as in the case of nostalgia and vintage play, the label “bad” is placed on these games by individual players. The aesthetic, ludic, and narratological “badness” of games like *E.T.* and *DESERT BUS* is for nostalgic players connected to their childhood, not exclusively to these specific games, but to an era in which video games were generally of

31 Ferreira 2019.

32 Navarro-Remesal 2017, 133–136.

33 Sconce 1995.

34 Therrien 2019, 14; Flynn-Jones 2015, 325–226.

35 Thompson 2007.

36 Flynn-Jones 2015, 335–336.

a lesser quality in comparison to modern ones. In this sense, bad games are simply an extrapolation of the general feel of the games of that era. This reckoning probably explains the appreciation too: it is not the games that are longed for, but what they represent.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have given an in-depth exploration of an interrelated complex of phenomena, all associated with the appreciation of older games under the notion of video game Romanticism. All modes of this romanticization include an idealization of the past, either by the world the game conjures or because of the game itself. Because of the interactive nature of video games as a medium, this construction of the idealized past is not simply witnessed, but actively created by the act of playing the game.

From a communication point of view, these different kinds of romanticization of video games are localized in different aspects of the communication process (see table 1). In the case of the romanticizing of video games, the communication takes place by the implied author and implied reader. These “paradigm builders” guarantee possible communication between the world of the text and the world outside the text, including the socio-cultural linguistics needed for any reader to understand the text under scrutiny. The idealization of the past – the Orient, the Medieval, the Nordic – takes place

Category	Communication
Video games romanticizing	text-internal/external (implied reader-author)
Video games romanticized	
Retro gaming	text-internal (immanent author-reader)
Remakes & reboots	text-internal (immanent author-reader)
Nostalgia	text-external (real reader)
Vintage Play	text-external (real reader)
Bad games	text-external (real reader)

Table 1: An overview of the different modes of video game romanticization and their finding places within the textual communication.

not between two texts but in the wider society of a given culture, in our case a Western European one. In the case of the romanticization in a game like FOR HONOR, the idealized past is only recognizable as a familiar cultural-narrative context when the player is initiated into that context: the text-immanent reader has per force been initiated, but a real reader may not have been.

Qua video games romanticized, two out of the four described modes are involved with the text-internal communication (retro gaming and remakes and reboots) and two with the text-external communication (nostalgia and vintage play). While remakes and reboots rely on an explicit intertextual relationship between the original material and the new versions of the games, the retro games have a more implicit intertextual relationship, not with a specific game, but with a genre of games. Nostalgia and vintage play are exclusively tied to the text-external real players of these games, since the identification of any game as “nostalgic” or “vintage” relies on individual players deeming it as such. A game is not intrinsically nostalgic or vintage, but is instead experienced as such. The same applies to the “bad games”: these games are not inherently or objectively bad products – though they could be argued to be so – but are deemed as such by individual players who “hate-enjoy” playing them.

Video game Romanticism in all its forms, categories, and modes unifies the longing for an unspoiled, idealized past by, in, and through the medium of video games. And as long as people continue to play games, this longing will continue too, in every generation again.

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# The Virtual Rebirth of Paganism

## Abstract

This article begins by examining how two very popular massively multiplayer online games, *DARK AGE OF CAMELOT* (Mythic Entertainment, US 2001) and *AGE OF CONAN* (Funcom, NO 2008), manage complex social and cultural structures. Both combine real history with legends, the first including the Norse pantheon of gods and the second emphasizing the Egyptian serpent deity, Set. They offer different degrees of fantasy and conflict between three primary factions of players, each represented as a culture or coalition of cultures. Against that background, a series of diverse examples suggest ways in which computer games and virtual worlds are exploring the modern meanings of ancient religions that were replaced by monotheism. The concluding section examines in closer detail the connections between religion and aspects of everyday life of virtual ancient Egyptians in *A TALE IN THE DESERT* (eGenesis / Desert Nomad, UK 2003). Postmodern gaming culture endorses tribalism, enjoys imagining the collapse of civilization, and seeks escape from traditional faith, possibly even from any coherent philosophy of ethics. However, this creativity is a form of idealism rather than criminality, imagining the rebirth of creative legends and total religious freedom, often through the metaphor of repaganization.

## Keywords

Pagan, Polytheism, Videogame, *DARK AGE OF CAMELOT*, *AGE OF CONAN*, *A TALE IN THE DESERT*, Virtual World, Online Game, Role-Playing, Secularization

## Biography

William Sims Bainbridge has written 30 academic books and about 300 articles or book chapters in areas such as technological innovation, social movements, and modern culture. He gained his first real computer game, a GENIAC, in 1956, and has explored the human implications of that technology ever since. His 1975 Harvard doctoral dissertation and first book were a social history of the space program, while his second book, published in 1978, was an ethnography of a modern polytheistic religion. Since the 1980s, he has programmed much educational and research software, and he has edited encyclopedias on human-computer interaction and leadership in science and technology. In 2020 he published two books: *Cultural Science: Applications of Artificial Social Intelligence* (New York: Business Expert Press) and *The Social Structure of Online Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Since 1992, he has served as a program director at the National Science Foundation. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the views of the National Science Foundation or the United States.

Many cultures have legends about an earlier and more natural time in their history, perhaps as a dim recollection of their origins as hunter-gatherer bands.<sup>1</sup> Not much over a century ago, respectable travelogues claimed it was really possible to visit the exact location of the Garden of Eden,<sup>2</sup> but in today's secular world Eden seems at best an abstraction that represents purity, or nothing more than a fantasy. Today's most innovative fantasies, computer games, suggest a radical outcome of human progress. If indeed science soon reaches its natural limits<sup>3</sup> and does not satisfy humanity's deepest desires, the spiritual result of secularization may not be the death of religion but its creative disintegration, a form of *repaganization* that restores the independence of every person, family, or community to seek its own hopes and construct its own legends.<sup>4</sup> One definition of "pagan" is "local", given that *pagus* was the Roman term for the smallest administrative unit of a province; perhaps many pagan religions of the future will be individually small in population but similarly vast in the aggregate.

A good starting point to consider this possibility is a rather angry stanza from an early poem by John Milton:<sup>5</sup>

Nor is Osiris seen  
In Memphian Grove, or Green,  
    Trampling the unshowr'd Grasse with lowings loud:  
Nor can he be at rest  
Within his sacred chest,  
    Naught but profoundest Hell can be his shroud:  
In vain with Timbrel'd Anthems dark  
The sable-stoled Sorcerers bear his worshipt Ark.

This is one of several stanzas describing the erasure of earlier gods in the ode "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", written in 1629 from the perspective of Christianity's vast superiority. Much of this article will explore virtual simulations of ancient Egypt, and Osiris was its lord of death and rebirth, who had himself been assassinated. Thoughtful atheists may agree

1 Lévi-Strauss 1970.

2 Newman 1876.

3 Horgan 1996.

4 Bainbridge 2013; 2017.

5 See <https://tinyurl.com/upynf6uk> [accessed 29 June 2021].

that Jesus really existed, as did Abraham, Moses, Mohammad, Buddha, and a host of other messiahs, merely demoting them to the status of religious leader rather than emissary from God. So, we may postulate that Osiris really lived, born perhaps 25 centuries before Jesus, and played a similar role, including being murdered and then resurrected. Setting aside the theological debates about the Trinity and the possible demigod status of Mary and the saints, Christianity is monotheistic. Ancient Egyptian religion, by contrast, was polytheistic, so a key social role for Osiris was mediating among the gods and between them and Egyptians, thus supporting the emergence of the Egyptian empire that combined many tribes with local deities. The virtual paradise in today's computer games, especially the multi-player virtual worlds that thrive online, is a return to tribalism and spiritual independence.

Many solo-player videogames require taking the role of a pre-scripted character, much like the famous “method acting” style promoted in traditional theaters long ago by Constantin Stanislavski, in which the actor is subordinated to the character.<sup>6</sup> But that would not work in massively multiplayer online games, not only because dozens or even hundreds of people are improvising simultaneously in the same virtual territory, but also because players tend to create multiple diverse characters to run sequentially in search of different experiences each time. In the examples considered here, the player generally operates a single character, often called an *avatar* if it significantly represents the player's personality and perceptions. The player's viewpoint is frequently above and behind the avatar, seeing it walk across vast landscapes, enter realistic buildings, swim in a lake, and even climb ladders or ride horses. The environment includes dangers like carnivorous beasts and enemies who may belong to gang-like cults and even attack in groups, which motivates players to form fighting teams themselves. Social games often place avatars in competing factions, composed of ethnic groups that collaborate, and players may create enduring teams, called “guilds”, “clans” or something similar, that may have hundreds of active members.<sup>7</sup> Avatars may loot armor and other valuables from defeated enemies, and the environment often supports gathering and crafting skills, such as mining metals then making them into swords and helmets.<sup>8</sup> These

6 Stanislavski 1964.

7 Bainbridge 2010b; 2020a; 2020b.

8 Bainbridge 2010a; 2019b.

*virtual worlds* may provide clues to how paganization might proceed in our future real world.

The research methodology employed here combines several techniques, especially participant observation ethnography and collection of statistical data when possible, for example conducting the equivalent of census counts through the systems provided to help players assemble both temporary teams and enduring guilds. Prior to beginning online research, I had studied many small religious movements, both observationally and historically, and “The Children of God (later named The Family International)” had assisted me in administering a questionnaire to over a thousand of its members.<sup>9</sup> I have experience with administering online surveys, but I found that more immediate observational methods worked better with the games, such as taking thousands of screenshot pictures of events and saving spontaneous public text messages shared by players in real time or on dedicated forums outside the game itself. Usually, I would explore the world using multiple avatars, each viewing it from a different perspective and having different skills for acting within it.<sup>10</sup> In later studies, researchers could use a different set of methods to assess the ways in which a player’s real-life religious orientation might reflect the supernatural experiences of the avatars.<sup>11</sup>

## Two Returns to Glorious Darkness

Snorri Sturluson stands outside the main gate of Jordheim, the capitol of Midgard, ready to tell stories but reluctant to discuss whether the philosophy behind his *Prose Edda* collection of myths dating from 1220 was based on the ancient Greek theory of Euhemerus, which proposed that the gods are merely exaggerated tales about real people of the historical past.<sup>12</sup> Just inside Jordheim stands a Valkyrie named Brienda, who offers a new weapon, saying, “This is the work of Odin and Thor. Our gods speak to us through four mighty oracles called the Visindakonar.” Jordheim contains both the Temple of the Aesir and the Temple of Jotuns, while a special wiki explains the polytheistic theology of Midgard: “Ours is the harshest of lands, and we

9 Bainbridge 1997; 2002.

10 Bainbridge 2014; 2016.

11 Blascovich/Bailenson 2011; Yee 2014.

12 Sturluson 1916.

are bred from strife and hardship. Aye, and our power is the power of the old gods – of Odin and Thor and all the Aesir – and of the Jotun, the great giants of lore. Norseman, Troll, Dwarf, Kobold, and our more recent allies the Valkyn and Frostalf, have joined knowledge and strength to unite the mighty forces of Midgard, and we all look upon the rich lands of Hibernia and Albion with some eagerness and hunger.”<sup>13</sup> Anyone can meet Sturluson today by entering the still viable 2001 massively multiplayer online (MMO) role-playing game DARK AGE OF CAMELOT (Mythic Entertainment, US 2001), because he is represented as a “non-player character”, with a narrowly defined role that does not include analyzing legends.<sup>14</sup>

*Euhemerism* is actually a profound concept that can be combined with modern thinking about secularization to produce a radical but somewhat plausible theory about our current cultural conflicts and the future of religion.<sup>15</sup> Beginning with the Renaissance, aggravated by the Enlightenment, and now promoted by secular ideologies of the sciences, religious authority is disintegrating in so-called “postmodern societies”, which may render monotheism too dogmatic and depose the Lord from his role as King of Heaven. This is not a prediction but a possibility, and after a period of confusion traditional monotheism may revive, because it offers a unified ethical system and potentially more satisfying psychological compensation for the trials and tribulations of life.<sup>16</sup> Yet many non-religious institutions and social movements now compete to take over these social-psychological functions, as sociologists are reminded by Auguste Comte’s argument that their classrooms must replace churches, proposed in his 1883 academic scripture, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*.<sup>17</sup> For some significant fraction of our population, secularization may constitute repaganization, revival of the style, if not often the exact mythology, of ancient pagan religions and often beloved fantasy, rather than confident faith. DARK AGE OF CAMELOT (DAOC) has three factions, of which Midgard represents Norse paganism. Albion, with its capital at Camelot, primarily represents English Christianity but includes other ethnic faiths, while Hibernia lacks a sacred religion but practices Celtic magic oriented toward Nature.

13 <https://camelotherald.fandom.com/wiki/Midgard> [accessed 29 June 2021].

14 Mylonas/Howarth 2005; Bainbridge 2013.

15 Levin 1959; Spyridakis 1968; Honigman 2009.

16 Stark/Bainbridge 1985; 1987; 1996.

17 Comte 1883.

Among the most problematic periods of history are Europe's Dark Ages, especially in the society ruled by King Arthur from Camelot with knights including Gawain, Lancelot, Percival and Tristan sitting at the famous Round Table. Yet whether Arthur actually existed and where Camelot might be found are open questions.<sup>18</sup> In a field study of the modern Neo-Pagan and New Age subcultures associated with Glastonbury, England, I visited Cadbury Castle, a ruined hillfort often identified with Camelot. Glastonbury itself is frequently identified with Avalon, where Arthur's body may be buried. Other legends hold that Jesus earlier visited the area, and after his crucifixion Joseph of Arimathea brought the Holy Grail and thrust his staff into Wearyall Hill, where it took root and survived as a tree for centuries. Always, some people doubted such legends, but skepticism became conventional in the Age of Enlightenment, while the subsequent Romantic Era revived hope in miracles, as William Blake mused:

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?<sup>19</sup>

Today, it is possible for anyone to visit Camelot on their home computer, and even go to Wearyall Hill on a pilgrimage. When DAoC launched in 2001, there were already other intellectually interesting MMOs, notably EverQuest (Verant Interactive / Daybreak Game Comp. US) from 1999, in which a human avatar can follow one of five newly imagined deities: Erolissi Marr (Queen of Love), Mithaniel Marr (Truthbringer), Rodcet Nife (Prime Healer), Karana (Rainkeeper), Bertoxxulous (Plaguebringer) or Innoruuk (Prince of Hate). A common structure of such games was for each player's avatar to belong to one of two or three major factions at war with each other, typically defending some territory that was safe for inexperienced players and holding battles on contested territories. On Sunday, 23 February 2020, I observed battles between Hibernia and Albion in DAoC, noticing that several of the Albion warriors belonged to a guild named Resident Evil after a videogame series that began in 1996. In the complex social structure, this guild with 50 members belonged to an alliance that consisted of 15 guilds, with a total membership of 2,981, as reported in table 1.<sup>20</sup>

18 Ashe 1968; Alcock 1971; Ashton 1974.

19 Blake 1946, 412.

20 <https://search.camelotherald.com/#/search> [accessed 29 June 2021].

Guild Name	Briton	Inconnu	Saracen	Highlander	Avalonian	Half Ogre	Minotaur
Guardian Council	341	153	185	168	105	61	36
Sedistic Torment	233	137	93	93	86	26	15
Ice Dragons	193	85	96	56	101	19	5
The Regulators	69	33	46	27	26	8	2
Lords of Gondor	33	19	24	11	5	3	0
Athenian Vanguard	38	15	11	11	5	0	1
ISALTYI	28	15	12	17	6	3	0
Two Clerics One Chalice	23	16	10	4	18	4	0
Resident Evil	12	10	9	8	9	2	0
Delusions of Candor	8	4	3	8	5	3	0
The Brethren	10	7	3	8	0	1	0
Dark Eagles	9	1	1	3	0	1	1
WaltDs	2	6	0	1	2	0	0
Kiss The Ring	2	1	2	0	1	0	1
Les Chevaliers Du Zodiac	1	3	1	1	1	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	1,002	505	496	416	370	131	61
<b>Proportion of 2,981</b>	33.6%	16.9%	16.6%	14.0%	12.4%	4.4%	2.0%

Table 1: Ethnic Distribution across an Alliance of Guilds in DARK AGE OF CAMELOT.

Each faction is a coalition of races, and three of those in Albion are clearly British: Briton (English), Highlander (Scottish) and Avalonian (inhabitants of the mythical Isle of Avalon, where the magical sword Excalibur was forged). Inclusion of the Saracens from Arabia may seem geographically incongruent, but a DAOC wiki explains: “Accompanying their kinsman Sir Palomides to Albion from the southern deserts, the Saracens bring a rich culture and technological acumen lost to most of the world in these dark days. Their foreign origin, along with their unusual speed and dexterity have often brought them accusations of thievery – accusations not always deserved, but which make them popular choices for scouting missions against the enemy.”<sup>21</sup> The Inconnu are a blue-skinned non-human race that live underground and serve Arawn, Lord of the Underworld, and at his command have joined with the other Albion races to battle their common enemy, Morgana le Fay, the evil enchantress. As their name implies, Half Ogres are hybrids of Humans and Ogres, and I hypothesize that Ogres could also be called Orcs as in *Lord of the Rings*. All three factions have a few Minotaurs, brutes with the heads of bulls and the bodies of muscular humans. Clearly DAOC has strong fantasy elements, but they are largely traditional and connectable with diverse cultures of the real European Dark Ages.

21 <https://camelothermaldfandom.com/wiki/Saracen> [accessed 29 June 2021].

In a series of remarkably evocative fantasies that ended with his own suicide, Robert E. Howard imagined that a crude but courageous Celtic barbarian named Conan challenged civilization in the very early Hyborian Age, from which no other records have survived.<sup>22</sup> A legacy from 2008 is the online resurrection of its forgotten civilizations, AGE OF CONAN (Funcom, NO 2008), which despite its horror heritage gives less emphasis to combat between factions than DAOC does. Howard had transformed real ancient history into fantasy, with only a slight disguise of reality. This might be called *meta-euhemerism*, magnifying the legend not of a real person but of a real society. Originally there were three Hyborian ethnicities in which one could create avatars, each with its own territory: Aquilonian (ancient Greek or Roman), Cimmerian (Celtic), and Stygian (Egyptian). Later a fourth, Khitan (Asian), was added, presumably to make Asian players feel at home. The main Internet server in recent years is named Crom, after Conan's god, which Wikipedia describes in harsh terms: "Crom is the chief god of the Cimmerian pantheon, and he lives on a great mountain, from where he sends forth doom or death. It's useless to call upon Crom, because he is a gloomy and savage god who despises the weak. However, Crom gives a man courage, free-will, and the strength to kill their enemies at birth."<sup>23</sup>

Table 2 reports data collected in October 2020 through repeated in-game searches of the avatars currently online, and the complete membership of a guild that was actively recruiting beginner players. The Priest classes were determined by the religions of the three original cultures. Aquilonians primarily worship Mitra, and we may speculate he was an adaptation of Mithras, while a specialized Conan wiki notes: "Some Mitraists are unique in having an unflinchingly monotheistic devotion to Mitra. While most people follow a type of henotheism, in which they acknowledged the existence of gods that they chose not to worship, some Mitraists hold Mitra as the only god in existence. Not unexpectedly, this exclusivist view of Mitra produced intolerance of other religions at times."<sup>24</sup> The Stygians primarily worship Set, the totally evil Great Serpent, which Wikipedia confirms "is a god of deserts, storms, disorder, violence, and foreigners in ancient Egyptian religion".<sup>25</sup> Given that their tribes are not civilized and Crom is not worth

22 de Camp / de Camp / Griffin 1983.

23 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyborian\\_Age#Crom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyborian_Age#Crom) [accessed 29 June 2021].

24 <https://conan.fandom.com/wiki/Mitra> [accessed 29 June 2021].

25 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Set\\_\(deity\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Set_(deity)) [accessed 29 June 2021].

Type	Class	Aquilonian	Cimmerian	Stygian	Khitian	Total	Guild
Priest	Priest of Mitra	30.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	8.6%	5.2%
	Bear Shaman	0.0%	17.5%	0.0%	6.9%	6.3%	7.9%
	Tempest of Set	0.0%	0.0%	26.3%	0.0%	7.5%	4.0%
Mage	Demonologist	0.0%	0.0%	27.2%	21.2%	10.5%	7.0%
	Herald of Xotli	0.0%	0.0%	11.2%	13.8%	5.0%	4.9%
	Necromancer	10.9%	0.0%	21.3%	16.7%	11.3%	11.7%
Rogue	Assassin	7.4%	3.0%	5.7%	12.3%	6.2%	7.0%
	Barbarian	4.4%	26.8%	0.0%	0.0%	9.5%	10.8%
	Ranger	6.7%	9.5%	4.1%	8.4%	7.1%	9.1%
Soldier	Conqueror	18.4%	22.0%	0.0%	0.0%	11.9%	13.3%
	Dark Templar	10.2%	12.3%	4.1%	11.3%	9.3%	10.0%
	Guardian	11.2%	8.9%	0.0%	9.4%	7.1%	8.8%
<b>TOTAL Number of Avatars</b>		430	473	437	203	1,543	668
<b>Mean Level</b>		65.0	65.8	67.1	68.4	66.3	30.3

Table 2: Survey of Classes and Races in AGE OF CONAN.

worshipping, Cimmerians have shamans rather than clergy as civilizations would define them.

The bottom row of Table 2 shows the average experience level of the avatars in a column, out of a maximum possible 80 that took scores of hours to achieve. The average was 66.3 among the 1,543 avatars in the main census, more than twice as high as the 30.3 in the beginner guild. The priests of Mitra and Set were more popular among the advanced players, and a news report from the game itself said that of the players who quickly reached level 80 in a temporary high-competition server named Saga of Zath, priests of Set were 10.6 percent of the total.<sup>26</sup> The other class categories were Mag- es, who are oriented toward magical attacks from a distance, duplicitous Rogues, and violent Soldiers. Originally, Aquilonians and Cimmerians could not be Mages, but after discussions with players, game designers made it possible for Aquilonians to be Necromancers, a technically interesting class that had been popular among Stygians because it could operate magical secondary avatars.<sup>27</sup> Following their serpent god, Set, the Stygians loved all forms of evil magic, so we must emphasize that this article will later explore versions of ancient Egypt that lack nasty combat altogether.

26 <https://forums.funcom.com/t/saga-class-distribution-level-80/248> [accessed 29 June 2021].

27 <https://forums.funcom.com/t/aquilonian-mage/65859;%20forums-archive.ageofconan.com/showthread.php?194436-Cimmerian-dark-templars> [accessed 29 June 2021].

## Halls of a Virtual Museum

Strategy games offer great contrast with role-playing games, for they are often designed for an individual player who gives orders to simulated armies rather than serving as a soldier inside an army. The most impressive historical series is TOTAL WAR, notably ROME: TOTAL WAR, dating from 2004, and TOTAL WAR: ROME II, from 2013. Generally speaking, the TOTAL WAR games (Creative Assembly / Feral Interactive / Activision, UK) take place on two levels, battles and wars. In the journal *The Classical World*, Paul Christesen and Dominic Machado described combat in ROME: TOTAL WAR: “Each battle begins with an introduction that lays out the historical context. The game then reproduces with considerable accuracy the topography of the battle site as well as the disposition of the opposing armies. Once the battle has begun, the player has the opportunity to zoom in and out of the battlefield and to see the action unfolding from above or to see what hand-to-hand combat would have looked like in ancient times.”<sup>28</sup> When the player wins a battle and Rome conquers another town in the war of expansion, the inhabitants must be dominated, so their shrines and temples are torn down by the player, and Roman religion is imposed on them, as a medium of social control.

GODS AND HEROES: ROME RISING (Perpetual Entertainment / Heatwave Interactive, US 2011) was a multiplayer role-playing game set in the time of the Republic that provided a meaningful basis for virtual exploration of an ancient culture, including interaction with its deities as well as architecture and technologies. In creating an avatar, the player would first select a class, such as soldier, and then select one patron deity, with the option in that case of Mars or Minerva. Each other class also had both a male and a female deity: gladiator (Jupiter, Fortuna), mystic (Bacchus, Trevia), priest (Pluto, Juno), scout (Apollo, Diana), and nomad (Mercury, Nemesis). The marvelous simulated city of Rome included an elaborate temple for each of these deities, plus temples for Neptune and Vesta in the central Forum. *Gods and Heroes* was a tragic case of a high-quality cultural product that did not have sufficient audience to be a commercial success, or even obtain sufficient investment to reach completion, for example never providing the scout and nomad avatar choices. Thus Rome fell again, a decade ago, and the gods vanished.

28 Christesen/Machado 2010, 108.

There are many theories about why classical polytheism was replaced by Christian monotheism in Rome, but the transition was certainly difficult, even disastrous. Saint Augustine responded to the catastrophe by postulating a City of God: “The heavenly city is far above thine, where truth is the victory; holiness the dignity, happiness the peace, and eternity the continuance.”<sup>29</sup> Long after the Renaissance, which revived civilization after the Dark Ages, Edward Gibbon considered whether Christianity caused the death of the Roman Empire or merely made that death less painful and concluded that Rome had over-extended itself and had always been doomed to fall.<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of the First World War, many European intellectuals considered the pathology of their own societies. They included psychologists like Sigmund Freud, who suggested that civilization caused discontent because it contradicted our natural primitive urges,<sup>31</sup> and Jacob Moreno, who argued we could be saved only through group psychotherapy role-playing that would create healthier intimate social networks.<sup>32</sup> Social theorists like Oswald Spengler and Pitirim Sorokin postulated that all civilizations are doomed to die eventually.<sup>33</sup> Sorokin, the founder of the sociology department at Harvard, suggested that a quasi-religious ideology would allow a new society to arise from chaos, united in what he called the *ideational* stage of development, which would gradually become more secular and hedonistic, what he called *sensate*, and then collapse back into chaos. His theory is ignored by sociologists today, despite the rising evidence that he was correct and we are rushing toward our own doom.

The highly popular and extensive ASSASSIN’S CREED series (Ubisoft, FR 2007) of solo-player games sends the player subjectively back to earlier eras of history, playing the role of a pre-scripted fictional character in the context of a hidden war between two high-tech mystical groups, the Assassins and the Templars. Both groups actually did exist but have been the focus of many legends, including rumors that both survive today and may shape our own history from their obscure hiding places. The Assassins were a sect of Shia Islam that came into existence around 1090 in Persia and Syria and became the focus of legends, most notably the tale of the Old Man of the Mountain

29 St. Augustine 1903, 103.

30 Gibbon 1880.

31 Freud 1961.

32 Moreno 1934; Moreno 1944; Bainbridge 2020b.

33 Spengler 1926–1928; Sorokin 1937.

popularized by the travels of Marco Polo, but were apparently eradicated around 1256.<sup>34</sup> In the chaotic context of the Crusades, they interacted, sometimes cooperatively, with the Templars.<sup>35</sup> In his 1818 history of the Assassins, Joseph von Hammer suggested that they had even been the inspiration for the Templars.<sup>36</sup> However, the myths about the Assassins seem to have been largely cooked up either by opponents or by story-tellers.<sup>37</sup>

The main action of the first ASSASSIN'S CREED game was set in the year 1191, when both the Assassins and the Templars were well established and active, but the second game began in 1476, when both supposedly had ceased to exist. The premise of the series is that both still exist as secret organizations, battling each other in the past through a form of time travel. Given that this rather violent set of games places an Islamic group in bloody conflict with a Christian one, the designers placed this message at the beginning of play: "Inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs." As the series developed, the legendarium expanded, going back to 1334 BC, when the Egyptian pharaoh Smenkhkare established The Order of the Ancients. A special wiki outlines the expanded legend, which dates the Knights Templar about 24 decades earlier than conventional history reports: "With the rise of Abrahamic religions and the decline of polytheistic religions across Europe and Asia, the Order began to decline and were eventually mostly wiped out by King Alfred of Wessex in 878 AD, who reformed the Order into the Knights Templar, otherwise known as the Templar Order."<sup>38</sup> Table 3 lists the first 11 main installments, with the number of Wikipedia pageviews (since 1 July 2015) and reviews on the Steam website, which distributes the entire series, all data as of 1 January 2020, along with the proportion of Steam player reviews that were positive.

Egyptologist Julia Troche at Missouri State University suggests that ASSASSIN'S CREED possesses real historical meaning, even if the two competing conspiracies are exaggerated legends: "Both groups are fighting for peace, but the Assassins believe peace can be achieved through liberty and free will, while the Order of the Ancients believe that strong rule and order is

34 Lewis 1952; Lincoln 2006.

35 Nowell 1947.

36 von Hammer, 1835, 216.

37 Daftary 2006.

38 [https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Order\\_of\\_the\\_Ancients](https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Order_of_the_Ancients) [accessed 29 June 2021].

Installment	Setting	Year	Wikipedia Pageviews	Steam Reviews	Positive Ratings
<b>I</b>	Third Crusade (1191 AD)	2007	2,224,288	6,880	82%
<b>II</b>	Italian Renaissance (1476–1499 AD)	2009	1,847,089	17,923	85%
<b>Brotherhood</b>	Italian Renaissance (1499–1507 AD)	2011	1,481,565	7,583	87%
<b>Revelations</b>	Italian Renaissance (1511–1512 AD)	2011	1,526,990	6,701	83%
<b>III</b>	Colonial era (1754–1783 AD)	2012	2,660,723	2,122	44%
<b>IV: Black Flag</b>	Colonial era (1715–1722 AD)	2013	3,199,622	26,825	87%
<b>Rogue</b>	Colonial era (1752–1776 AD)	2014	2,922,198	5,910	81%
<b>Unity</b>	French Revolution (1776–1800 AD)	2014	3,619,624	19,603	63%
<b>Syndicate</b>	Victorian era (1868 AD)	2015	4,854,397	10,349	76%
<b>Origins</b>	Ptolemaic Egypt (49–43 BC)	2017	3,959,467	37,835	84%
<b>Odyssey</b>	Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC)	2018	3,069,458	37,654	86%

Table 3: The Highly Popular Historical Role-Playing Series ASSASSIN'S CREED.

the only way to ensure peace. I hope this reminds my History 103 class of a topic we have talked about recently and many students wrote essays on – this tension between how to rule and questions surrounding the inherent selfishness versus goodness of people is truly a centuries old debate.”<sup>39</sup> The relevance to Egyptology is that the 2017 version, ORIGINS, not only takes place in Ptolemaic Egypt around 49–43 BC, but also had an optional educational version, which could be freely downloaded by owners of the game or purchased separately, titled DISCOVERY TOUR ANCIENT EGYPT.<sup>40</sup> The student visits a very large number and diversity of tour sites, listening to a guide’s narration and opening pages like those in a picture-oriented textbook, reproducing the narrator’s text in connection with reproductions of artifacts, sites, and more recent artistic representations.

One tour takes place at the Library of Alexandria, based on the appearance of the Library of Celsus at Ephesus because the original no longer exists, as this inside text explains: “Throughout the centuries, fires and wars between Christianity and paganism destroyed the library, leaving nothing behind.” Another tour admits, “While there have been no major discoveries pertaining to the Sphinx of Giza in recent years, theories and hypotheses

39 See Missouri State University History Blog <https://tinyurl.com/3bz8rj9p> [accessed 29 June 2021].

40 [https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Discovery\\_Tour:\\_Ancient\\_Egypt](https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Discovery_Tour:_Ancient_Egypt) [accessed 29 June 2021].

continue to emerge. Without validation provided by archaeological sources, however, they remain unsubstantiated.” At another point in that tour, an example of euhemerism is offered: “Originally a representation of the king imbued with the power of the lion, the sphinx was eventually viewed as a direct representation of the divine.” One may take these tours of ancient Egypt in the forms of several avatars, and I used one that represented Julius Caesar, thinking of the intellect expressed through his writings as well as his thirst for power when he climbed onto the back of the Sphinx.

The non-game virtual world *Second Life* contains many simulations of ancient Egyptian architecture, created from scratch by their owners, and the self-descriptions of three groups are worth quoting here. Temple of Nefertari (607 members): “a fantasy creation set in Ancient Egypt. The Temple has regular events like Belly Dancing, top DJ’s, Quests, cultural activities, costume, adult play areas and events. Enjoy exploring the temples, pyramid and palace. See the notice boards for events. Costumes, landmarks and information in the bazaar!” Children of the Nile (442 members): “Enter into a mystical world full of love and adventure. 1500 years before Christ, Rome was not yet built, the Greeks were not yet aware that they were Greeks, the Trojan War had not yet taken place, as in Egypt, on the banks of the Nile, a high civilization flourished, verifiable only with modern times. Be a part, join us now!” The Temple of Bastet (190 members): “Bast is the ancient Egyptian Goddess of cats. Visit her sanctuary shrine for pagan spiritual ritual and worship. Join for voice events, RP [role-playing] themes, and lectures.”

## The History of a Virtual Egypt

Repeatedly since 2003, role-play gamers have entered a barren simulation of the wide territory around the Nile and gradually built a civilization, climaxing after roughly two years with celebrations of success, then total ritualized destruction, followed by the launch of a new tale.<sup>41</sup> The tenth *telling* of *A TALE IN THE DESERT* began on 28 May 2021, and this study includes statistical data on the ancient Egyptian population at the conclusion of the ninth telling. In addition to participant observation research in five tellings, this section draws upon *A Wiki in the Desert*, which has preserved *TALE*’s history in ten connected editions.

41 Bainbridge 2018, 2019a.

Although marketed as a commercial MMO, TALE is a marvelous creative community of a few hundred friends around the world, in which players communicate closely with the game developers, some serving as volunteer managers. For example, starting late in the ninth telling, about six months of active communication about features under development for the tenth telling took place in a public Discord, involving 4 developers, 3 game managers, a 2-person events team, and 86 subscribers who were especially active members of the community. Additionally, A Wiki in the Desert, a public medium for communication, includes records of the rituals that ended the first telling. Two transcendent and possibly supernatural beings had shaped the history of virtual Egypt, the Pharaoh and the Stranger. As the end of Egyptian civilization approached, the Pharaoh proclaimed:

One year ago the Stranger presented us with 49 challenges. This is not the first time the Stranger has been in our midst. The ancients have faced him before. It's said that if a people can endure the challenges of the Stranger, then that civilization can live forever and it will be immortal. You've worked hard, and will prevail.

Oracles of Architecture: you've shown endurance and strength.

Oracles of Worship: you've shown unity of spirit and cooperation.

Oracles of Art: you've created real beauty.

Oracles of Conflict: you've shown cunning and strategy.

Oracles of the Human Body: you know our land.

Oracles of Thought: you've found wisdom and knowledge.

Oracles of Leadership: you've guided us through it all.

It's man's nature that he is at his best when challenged. Men reach peaks of virtue only when they are tempted toward evil. And that's why I invited Stranger into our land. Soon our children will rule this land, and they too will need strengthening. They too will need their virtue tested so that they may become powerful and good. So we must become the Stranger. We must create new challenges for our children. We must create new tests for them to pass. The last thing we must do before we pass from this world is leave behind the greatest Monuments of our civilization: the tests that will strengthen the next generation.<sup>42</sup>

42 [perl.atitd.wiki/tale1/Endgame](http://perl.atitd.wiki/tale1/Endgame) [accessed 29 June 2021].

The oracles were the most honored specialists in seven *disciplines*, starting with Architecture, where *tests* could be passed by building physical structures from virtual raw materials and manufactured components. Each monument belonged to a particular discipline and must be built by 127 avatars who had achieved required status in that discipline: 1 oracle, 2 sages, 4 masters, 8 scribes, 16 journeymen, 32 prentices, and 64 students. The lowest status in each discipline, initiate, had not passed a test and thus was not eligible to help, so the seven rituals served as demonstrations of the social status achieved by active players. Indeed, they succeeded in completing the rather demanding monuments, each of which added a new test for the second telling, while the last one was followed by total destruction of everything else the Egyptians had built.

Each telling is moderately different, for example using software algorithms to place at new locations the mineral resources that can be mined. By the fourth telling, when my ethnography began, the Art discipline had become Art and Music, while the Conflict discipline had been replaced by its opposite, Harmony. It was “about contributing to our Egyptian Society, and knowing your fellow Egyptian,” requiring meeting many Egyptians in the initiation quest, including one from each of the other six disciplines.<sup>43</sup> Tests became available as the avatar ascended a ladder of general experience, which was abolished for the ninth telling, and at level 5 an Egyptian could pass the Test of the Prophet in Harmony by predicting which other players would make the greatest progress. At level 7 the Test of Marriage became available in Harmony, at which two avatars would go through a wedding ceremony, after which they not only had the social status of spouses but also shared ownership of their properties. This group ritual must take place at a Common Altar, where a statue of a priestess kneels, following these instructions:<sup>44</sup>

One person should clear the altar of any items, and meditate at it in order to clear and reset any previous interactions with it. The first partner places a medium diamond on the focus on the statue’s left hand. The second partner places a medium diamond on the focus on the statue’s right hand. Five witnesses click on the altar and choose to “meditate”. The witnesses all need to meditate within a few seconds of each other, else it may be necessary to restart the ceremony. The couple themselves

43 [www.atitd.org/wiki/tale4/Principles\\_of\\_Harmony](http://www.atitd.org/wiki/tale4/Principles_of_Harmony) [accessed 29 June 2021].

44 [www.atitd.org/wiki/tale4/Test\\_of\\_Marriage](http://www.atitd.org/wiki/tale4/Test_of_Marriage) [accessed 29 June 2021].

	Archite- ture	Art and Music	Human Body	Natural Philosophy	Thought	Worship	TOTAL
<b>Initiate</b>	43	22	88	90	104	113	460
<b>Student</b>	24	13	83	49	61	62	292
<b>Prentice</b>	10	17	57	40	21	40	185
<b>Journeyman</b>	7	1	36	9	15	3	71
<b>Scribe</b>	4	5	21	10	11	0	51
<b>Master</b>	3	13	10	5	7	0	38
<b>Sage</b>	0	0	5	1	0	0	6
<b>Oracle</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	92	72	301	205	220	219	

Table 4: Advancement in Six Disciplines of A TALE IN THE DESERT.

do not meditate as part of the ceremony. If you hear music, the ceremony was a success. If something goes wrong, just clear the items and the altar, and try again. Remember to take the diamonds back when you're done!

The ninth telling reorganized the disciplines, removing Harmony and Leadership, adding Natural Philosophy, and moving some tests around, for example placing Marriage in Worship. In earlier tellings, a census of all the disciplines could be obtained at any University of Leadership, and this was moved to the Great Halls of three regional and ethnic factions that had been introduced with the eighth telling: Kush in southern Egypt, Hyksos in central Egypt, and Meshwesh including the northern Nile delta. Table 4 shows how many avatars had been initiated into each of the six disciplines and advanced to a higher status, demonstrating that they tended to specialize. The total number of avatars was 593 as of 19 December 2020, and the table reports 1,109 statuses, which means that the average avatar had entered only about two of the six disciplines.

Advancing beyond initiate ranks requires passing a *test* conducted as a competition in which early winners are celebrated but eventual success is available for any dedicated player. In the case of the Worship discipline, marriage would advance an avatar who had already been initiated. The classic starter quest in Worship is a group ritual that requires substantial resour-

ces: “Conduct a Vigil using a Sacrificial Bonfire built near an Altar. Visions will come to the participants describing required sacrifices. The visions will come faster as the Vigil increases in length. Scores are based on the number of sacrifices made, and of the length of the Vigil itself.”<sup>45</sup> Vigils became less competitive in Tale 9, redesigned “to generate benefit for all of Egypt via Religious Favour.”

Test of Festivals involved organizing a Worship ritual for very large numbers of players, but it began with preparations by a pair, who would make offerings at an altar to determine what exactly they would need to do during a later festival. Each of the Seven Gods required a different pair of items: Bastet: honey and camel milk; Hathor: male rabbit and female rabbit; Isis: honey and oil; Maat: linen and canvas; Osiris: flax and raw barley; Ra: medium quartz and medium topaz; Thoth: papyrus paper and candle.<sup>46</sup> Only one other Worship test became available in the ninth telling, which required 49 people to give great effort for a week to build a vast Megalopolis, with many walls, twelve towers, plus four gates and bridges. In fact, eight other Worship tests existed but were not available, with names like Beacons, Visions, Holy Shrine, Humble Priests, Ritual Mummification, and Ka. To gain access to a test, Egyptians needed to collaborate to unlock each one, primarily through donating raw materials or manufactured items in great numbers, and with Tale 8 the donation locations were moved to three geographically remote Universities of Progress.

The introduction of explicit factions in Tale 8 may have reduced the significance of tests in some disciplines, especially those like Worship that stress building community and did not directly enable practical skills. In earlier tales, each of Egypt’s many regions could become the home of a network of cooperative guilds that would donate resources like bricks and wooden boards to local university structures that were entirely simulated, thereby gaining for that region the ability to acquire a particular industrial skill or discipline test. Each telling needed to be different enough from the one before to be really interesting to veteran players. Also, at this point in its history, TALE was going through leadership changes. Originally owned by eGenesis, it had been taken over by Pluribus Games in 2014, and then in 2018 by Desert Nomad Studios, all three of which were very small and creative companies. The great mystery across all these years was why such a high

45 <https://atitd.wiki/tale9/Vigils> [accessed 29 June 2021].

46 [https://atitd.wiki/tale9/Test\\_of\\_Festivals/Testing\\_Your\\_Requirements](https://atitd.wiki/tale9/Test_of_Festivals/Testing_Your_Requirements) [accessed 29 June 2021].

Rank	Kush	Hyksos	Meshwesh	Total	Female	Married	Mean Guilds
Initiate	74	221	145	440	43%	40%	1.0
Associate	21	66	41	128	45%	59%	2.2
Member	10	18	20	48	46%	75%	2.7
Kinsman	6	10	7	23	57%	83%	3.1
Fellow	2	4	2	8	0%	75%	2.9
Patriarch	1	0	2	3	67%	100%	3.0
Elder	10	6	6	22	32%	95%	4.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	124	325	223	672	43%	50%	1.6

Table 5: Status System of A TALE IN THE DESERT at the End of the Ninth Telling.

quality and constantly innovating game was not popular, having only a tiny fraction of the players of many MMOs. One sad explanation may be that TALE is non-violent, making it nearly impossible for avatars to fight, and certainly they can never kill a competitor, even in fiction.

To explore the factions, using both the wiki and the in-game search system I was able to get information about 672 avatars at the end of 2020 for Table 5, including 79 who may have been minor “alts” belonging to players with multiple subscriptions and are not counted in Table 4. In addition to their faction membership, it was possible to learn their faction rank, gender, marital status, and which if any of the 24 guilds with 25 or more members they belonged to. Joining a guild required applying at its Guild Hall and being accepted by a leader, but was not automatically limited by faction or existing membership in another guild. Note that only the elder status in the faction rank system actually confers power, and this is a status system using terms very different from the discipline ranks. One gains status points with a faction by contributing, for example by finding rare herbs or donating materials in a complex advancement system called *research*. This is historically analogous to the development of industries in ancient Egypt, but is achieved by investing goods to open the possibility for Egyptians to gain a valuable skill such as blacksmithing or farming, which allows completion of many tasks that are integrated into the Egyptian socio-economic system.

Each avatar begins in a remote tutorial area called Welcoming Island, where early skills are gained through practice. Advancing to Egypt itself in the later tellings required selecting a faction, although it would be possible to switch to a different faction, and by the tenth telling there was considerable collaboration between the factions. The most populous faction, Hyksos, owned territory on the Nile in the middle of Egypt, thus more convenient for extensive travel, while Meshwesh held the North including the Nile Delta, and the least popular faction, Kush, was in the far south and remote from both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. The 43 percent female refers to the gender of avatars, not players, but many players are indeed women, and an unknown but apparently large fraction are older than the typical age of MMO gamers. Half the avatars have completed the Marriage Test and can share resources, in several cases representing married couples in the real world or two avatars belonging to the same player, who is technically able to operate both simultaneously. Of the 672 avatars, 43 belonged to at least five of the big guilds, with at least 25 members, and one had even joined 11 of them. The mean guild membership is a measure of connection between big guilds, because most players belong to one or even many small guilds not counted in that measure.

During my ethnography of the first month of the tenth telling, I focused on the connections between the polytheistic religion and practical aspects of life through three main activities: (1) helping to set up an ordinary six-member local guild with extensive manufacturing facilities, which we named Minions of Osiris, (2) joining the very special guild that built and supplied the research laboratories and that had 72 members as of 20 June 2021, and (3) checking the locations of common altars to update the map of altars in the wiki. In addition to competitive tests related to community, the Discipline of Worship offers skills that are related to life and thus render biology sacred, notably farming, horticulture, and animal husbandry. In addition to high status universities, the disciplines have more modest schools, where such skills can be obtained by paying tuition, which happens to be 100 of each of four vegetables for learning cooking at a School of Worship. Two types of seeds can be used to grow each vegetable, using water and following slightly different procedures to get the same results. Six of these eight seeds are named after ancient Egyptian gods: garlic (Apep's crop, Heket's reaping), onion (tears of Sinai, Amun's bounty), leek (Hapi's harvest, Horus' grain), carrot (green leaf, Osiris' orange).

My avatar learned "ritual item construction" at a School of Worship, encouraging him to adopt the *priest* specialization, which improved his ability

to do “dowsing, and anything that involves supernatural powers.” The specializations are combinations of attributes, represented by variables in the relevant action algorithms, to which temporary abilities may be added by eating a cooked vegetable with the desired quality or, in the case of priests, by praying at a common altar to a selected god. Osiris provides two points of “focus” that last a day and speed up several jobs, such as dowsing, wood carving, and prospecting for rare metals and precious gems. The other deities and their attributes are Amen Ra (strength), Hathor (endurance), Horus (dexterity), Isis (speed), Set (constitution), and Thoth (perception).

Universities of Natural Philosophy offer a Test of Astrological Alignment that requires groups of pairs of Egyptians to do a special ritual at a common altar, to see how similar or different they are: “As the ritual is completed, the two participants will immediately sense a special bond, or lack thereof.”<sup>47</sup> Universities of the Human Body connect very extensively with the altars: “The Test of the Bedouin is a special award given to those that prove themselves the best explorers of our land. When you visit an altar, anoint it with a drop of Cactus Sap. The longer that altar remains unanointed by others, the better. Every 24 hours, the best explorers will receive an advancement in the Test of the Bedouin.”<sup>48</sup>

A TALE IN THE DESERT is a nice model of how future paganism may function, given that the factions, guilds, and individuals both compete and collaborate. Nearly a month into the tenth telling, I had invested many hours anointing altars, so I commented in the Kush text chat: “Done 60 with no result.” Other members of my faction replied: “You gotta do a lot more than 60.” “At this point you are looking north of 120.” “If there’s 350-ish altars in Egypt you should aim for more than half... then again half these comments might be from people running altars hoping to discourage you.” “I am probably going to give the crazy people another month then do my runs.” When I started, early runners in the Hyksos and Meshwesh factions had reported the locations of several altars in the map on the wiki for the tenth telling, so I felt proud I was the first Kushite to do so. Then the fellow elder of my local guild suggested I keep the locations secret so our members could advance more rapidly than everybody else. The final discouragement was discovering that none of the altars had moved since the ninth telling, perhaps because the developers had concentrated on expanding the research

47 [https://atitd.wiki/tale10/Test\\_of\\_Astrological\\_Alignment](https://atitd.wiki/tale10/Test_of_Astrological_Alignment) [accessed 29 June 2021].

48 [https://atitd.wiki/tale10/Test\\_of\\_the\\_Bedouin](https://atitd.wiki/tale10/Test_of_the_Bedouin) [accessed 29 June 2021].

laboratory system, so the older version of the wiki map of altars from the ninth telling was still correct in the tenth. How cults of the future will share information, imagination, and memory may be a similar mixture of order and chaos.

## Conclusion

Over two centuries ago, Samuel Taylor Coleridge asserted that appreciation of fiction requires *suspension of disbelief*,<sup>49</sup> yet that may not be very different from *belief* if one lives in a culture that lacks a dominant institution that tells people what every good person must believe. My avatar in *A TALE IN THE DESERT* claims to have complete faith in Osiris, yet I myself am under no such obligation and hypothesize that Osiris was a real historical person, not a god. Outside the walls of Camelot or the villainous Templar cult, it is very hard to find historical Christianity in highly popular computer games, and the polytheism moderated by Osiris is rare as well. Yet during our time of cultural transformation with unpredictable outcomes, information technology and the religious freedom associated with secularization have allowed people to romanticize potentially utopian cultures from earlier periods of history. From moment to moment and across the full range of social situations we experience, faith and fantasy may weave together chaotically in the complex fabric of our future lives. We cannot predict whether a new Osiris will tie together the competing strands of hope, or whether agnostic despair will rule the coming Dark Age, or whether both utopia and dystopia will remain the fantasies of wandering dreamers.

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49 Coleridge 1817.

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# SKOOL DAZE

## A Plea for Dissentience

### Abstract

The historic sandbox computer game SKOOL DAZE, released by Microsphere for ZX Spectrum in 1984, is analyzed in the context of its importance for the game development industry, with conceptual parallels extended into the domains of natural science and arts. The ability to accomplish the game only by displaying rebelliousness in an inherently cruel academic system is connected with a similar principle applying to innovation in science and art. Both science and art are exercises in imagination that require mischievous playfulness, a point that is intrinsic to SKOOL DAZE. The article also makes the case for this game as a potential source of inspiration for the creation of conceptual art or science when viewed in a historical context. A sense of nostalgia about the early days of computer games pervades the paper, which ends on a confessional but high-spirited note.

### Keywords

SKOOL DAZE, Abandonware, Academia, Animation, Cognition, Creativity, Education, Indie, Metamessage, Nostalgia, Paradise Lost, Retro

### Biography

Vuk Uskoković, PhD, is a cofounder of the biotech startup TardigradeNano and a lecturer in engineering at San Diego State University. He was the founder and the director of *Wolfline, Inc.*, a demo design and software trade subsidiary to *Gremlinsoft*, a largest library of programs and games for Commodore 64 and Amiga in Yugoslavia in the 1980s and the 1990s. In the 1990s, he was in a Belgrade underground band *Tišina kod poluzvezde* as the lead guitarist and a songwriter. In the 2000s, he was a scientist at various educational and research institutions, including Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Jožef Stefan Institute in Slovenia, Clarkson University in New York, and University of California San Francisco. In the 2010s, he was a professor in the departments of bio-engineering, pharmaceutical and biomedical sciences, and mechanical and aerospace engineering at University of Illinois in Chicago, Chapman University and University of California Irvine, where he taught graduate and undergraduate courses on materials chemistry, physics of nanotechnologies, biopharmaceuticals, medical devices, and other subjects. He has authored over 200 peer-reviewed scientific articles and a dozen books. Alongside his dedication to research in natural sciences, he has published studies from multiple fields of arts and humanities (vuk.uskokovic@tardigradenano.com).

You ever felt so far gone you couldn't be sought?

During this journey there were some things I had to learn that couldn't be taught.

The flux from boy to man and how to be one, with questions to be answered like will I live to see one?

*Jon Deaux, 2016, Skool Daze, 131*

## Introduction: The Gateways to Science

Videogames can be gateways to worlds of meaning extending far beyond the relevance colloquially ascribed to them. One such world of particular interest to this author is that of the natural sciences, specifically those evolving within the confines of academia. In what follows I will weave threads of thought around different aspects of the development and graphic interface of a videogame of historical importance, namely SKOOL DAZE (Microsphere, UK 1984). In the process I will derive remarks of significance for the evolution of science and its spiritual roots.

Discoveries in natural sciences clearly prepare the ground for developments in the videogame industry. In turn, approaching science as a game can have innumerable positive effects on research creativity, as is evident from the discovery of scientific processes and products when researchers began to treat research as a game.<sup>1</sup> This is to say that not only does science form the bedrock on which videogames are built, but these games can also have a pronounced effect on science. The products of the videogame industry are rarely discussed, however, from the standpoint of their reverse influence on the creative process in the sciences to which they owe their existence. In this article I attempt to show that such connections can be inspirational and instructive for scientists from all disciplines. As a prelude to this argumentation, the historical events leading up to and following the development and release of SKOOL DAZE will be elaborated in the context of the importance of this game for the videogame culture of the 1980s and beyond. Still, the main focus will be on discussing the broader relevance of this game to numerous fields of human inquiry, ranging from natural sciences, to arts, to humanities. A particular emphasis will be placed on the analysis of the implicitness of dissentient, antiauthoritarian stances, explored here

1 Uskoković/Uskoković/Wu/Uskoković 2020.

in the context of immersion in the academic environment represented by the game. Last but not least, the text follows the structure of the Bible, starting off with historical remarks, then moving on to the elaboration of the merits of minuteness, modesty and rebellious newness, which leads to crucifixion and expulsion from the reigning ecclesiastical order, confession, the tumult of the dark night preceding the dawn of revelation and, finally, emersion in the sunlit meadows of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1, KJV), of childhood rediscovered once and for all.

## **SKOOL DAZE: How It All Began**

Imagine. It is 1983 and the first crash of the electronic game market has just begun.<sup>2</sup> The reason? The market is saturated with unimaginative games, most based on a few similar concepts, be they platform games in the style of *DONKEY KONG* (Nintendo, JP 1981), *POPEYE* (Nintendo, JP 1982), *BAGMAN* (Valadon Automation, FR 1982) or *MINER 2049ER* (Big Five Software, US 1982), shoot 'em up arcades à la *SPACE INVADERS* (Taito, JP 1978) or *GALAXIAN* (Namco, JP 1979), racing games of the *SUPER BUG* (Atari, US 1977) or *LE MANS* (HAL Laboratory, JP 1982) kind, or maze chases as in *PAC-MAN* (Namco, JP 1980) or *WIZARD OF WOR* (Midway, US 1980). Meanwhile, most adventure games are stylistic derivatives of *MYSTERY HOUSE* (On-Line Systems, US 1980), with more intricate plots but also a purely textual interface and no animated graphics. At this very time, in a rented apartment at 72 Rosebury Road in London, a husband and wife, David and Helen Reidy, run *Microsphere*, a mom-and-pop startup computer game development company with the Reidys its only employees. They had started a consulting firm a year earlier, but by 1983 had moved fully into videogame development. At around that time, the Reidys came up with the idea for a game that would prove unprecedentedly innovative for its times. The recession in the videogame market, which had become more profitable than the film industry or the music industry but would not begin to recover until 1985,<sup>3</sup> would harbor extraordinary opportunities for the Reidys.

But first, to implement the idea in a stylish manner, they needed a graphic artist. In search of one, Helen Reidy's mother connected with Keith

<sup>2</sup> Wolf 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Wallach 2020.

Warrington, the unemployed artist and son of a friend, who was training to become a schoolteacher, a profession Helen had also practiced at times.<sup>4</sup> With Keith's drawing input, the Reidys would go on to create one of the most beloved videogames on the 8-bit platforms: SKOOL DAZE.

We might think the married couple were motivated in their endeavors by a desire to save the videogame world from drowning in the mud of monotony, but this would be far from truth. As David Reidy pointed out two decades later, "I never really thought about how to make it unique or special. It was just a game."<sup>5</sup> And so, as centuries of innovation in science also testify, the simple and unpretentious play can lead to stunningly novel forms of expression even if no assault on an existing paradigm was intended. Here we begin to see how a game such as SKOOL DAZE can be considered inspiration for artistic or scientific expression, the principal focus of this article.

An example from the realm of science is helpful here.<sup>6</sup> In the 1930s, young researchers at DuPont were working on the production of artificial silk. When Wallace Carothers and their other supervisors were absent, they were horsing around and running along the long hallways of the research facility, drawing threads of polyester with straws and sticks. At one point, they figured out that stretching the polymer impelled the molecules to adopt an oriented structure with an increased strength. They returned to a polyamide substance they had previously discarded as it seemed unable to adopt a solid form due to a low melting point and repeated their "cold drawing" game. This is how they created Nylon, a material that would go on to revolutionize the textile industry. And the discovery, as we see, was owing to the discoverers' epitomizing one of young Wittgenstein's key maxims: "If people did not sometimes do silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done."<sup>7</sup> This is an immediate reminder that the relationship between science and games, including computer games, can be mutual. Science lies at the heart of videogames, while videogames can be excellent facilitators of scientific education and discovery, as rare, albeit outstanding, research on this topic has demonstrated.<sup>8</sup>

4 Mason 2019.

5 Green 2010.

6 Uskoković 2019a.

7 WITTGENSTEIN (Derek Jarman, UK 1993), 00:00:20.

8 Uskoković 2020a; An/Haynes/D'Alba/Chumney 2016; Orloff/Truong/Cira/Koo/Hamilton/Coj/Wu/Riedel-Kruse 2014; Das/Keep/Washington/Riedel-Kruse 2019.

## Rules of the Game: To Live By or Not

SKOOL DAZE was released for ZX Spectrum in December 1984, less than a year after its development had begun, and it became an instant hit. In October 1985, the game was released for Commodore 64, the home computer platform around which my gaming and hacking experience in the 1980s almost entirely revolved. In its default version, the game puts the player in the shoes of a character called Eric, who is a schoolboy, a troubled one too, as it is revealed to the player by the game description. Eric needs to find a way to recover a derogatory report locked in a safe in the headmaster's office. Why Eric's report is bad and must be stolen is never made clear, but this information is enough for the player to enter the game with the premise that Eric is a troublemaker and a hero at the same time. This simultaneity of being a hero and a troublemaker in an academic setting will resonate all through this essay, from the first of its lines to the last.

Each time Eric breaches the exceptionally rigid rules of the school, he gets assigned a certain number of lines to write as a form of punishment. Once he reaches ten thousand lines, he is sent home to write them and the game is over. In the only sequel to SKOOL DAZE, released a year later and called BACK TO SKOOL (Microsphere, UK 1985), lines could be erased by kissing a girl, Hayley, but here, the line attribution is irreversible. Each time Eric is given lines, the player is also punished, with a characteristic screeching, high-pitch two-note fourth interval. The same interval that produced Bill Evans' meditative melody in "Flamenco Sketches" played by Miles Davis' trumpet<sup>9</sup> here takes the form of a uniquely unpleasant and ear-piercing ostinato.

The game requires the player to guide Eric through one or more school days, with the ultimate goal of lighting up all the little shields on the walls and ceilings of the school to unlock the safe in the headmaster's office, then stealing the report and shutting down all the lighted shields. Shields that could be reached by the hand are switched on or off by jumping and hitting them. Other shields must be hit with a rock, either directly, from the nearest staircase, or, more commonly, by knocking down a teacher with a catapult first and then using that same tool to bounce another rock off the teacher's head and into the shield.

Eric's inevitable mischievousness aside, the game depicts schools as sites of tragicomic callousness and cruelty. In the school, pupils are exposed to

9 "Flamenco Sketches", by Bill Evans and Miles Davis (*Kind of Blue*, Columbia, New York, 1959).

constant conditioning via admonition from the authoritarian administrative figures. Eric, like all other students, is expected to be present in the right classroom for each assigned class and if he happens to be absent, the teacher will search for him through the school and penalize him with lines if he finds him before the bell rings. In-between the classes, the headmaster and three teachers roam the school to ensure order and discipline are maintained. Students are often punished for someone else's wrongdoings, an injustice only too familiar to us who have abided in various educational institutions for long enough. At the same time, however, the pupils, Eric included, are being constantly threatened by other schoolboys, including the punching bully Angelface, the nefarious, oft-catapult-firing Boy Wander, the swot and tattletale called Einstein, and a herd of smaller boys who occasionally trample over Eric in the hallway. Hence, the hero, like so many academic dwellers of the present and past, finds himself squeezed between the sordidness of the students and the corruptness of the administrative order, and he must find a way out.

That situation is familiar to academic appointees of all ages, from the cradle to the grave, save the silver-spooned few who have attended posh private schools or those who have been to democratic schools modeled after Alexander S. Neill's Summerhill, in Suffolk<sup>10</sup> or Mosse Jørgensen's Forsøks-gymnaset, in Oslo.<sup>11</sup> SKOOL DAZE, clearly, does not resonate with school systems of this latter type, which are alternatives to today's obsolete scions of the occidental educational systems of the industrial age, but provides instead a cartoonish parody of English public schools of the 1980s. During this unique time, pupils were perhaps sandwiched tighter than ever before or after between the top-down oppression of conservative authoritarianism and the bottom-up exhibitions of hooliganism from the days predating the Heysel tragedy, that is, prior to the methodical curbing of both.

In 1986, less than two years since the release of SKOOL DAZE, a videogame development company launched by British Telecom put out an even more frightening portrayal of schools. In this game, ironically called THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE (Firebird Software, UK 1986), not only was the school located on Road to Ruin, which led to Dolesville, but it also took the form of an empty edifice inhabited only by deadly objects that float in space and drain the schoolboy's energy. In addition to the more innovative graphic and

10 Neill 1960.

11 Jørgensen 1977.

character design employed in *SKOOL DAZE*, as well as its greater playability and more immersive experience, one essential component that has made this game stand out over *THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE* lies in its rootedness in realism and freeness from any supernatural elements, meaning that any criticism of the schooling system in it was guaranteed to be taken for its face value more readily. Putting the player in the shoes of a schoolboy attending one class after another while being bullied by classmates and punished endlessly by the school authorities was, simply, a more direct way of conveying the idea that there is something wrong with the end of the pipeline of the educational system.

In this rather bleak context, the major solace and source of amusement for the player and the schoolboy protagonist of *SKOOL DAZE* is lighting up the shields on the walls and ceilings. As it happens to many dreamers confined in cruel educational systems, the only way out is to look up and beyond their walls, evoking Socrates' musing, "He would like to fly away, but he cannot; he is like a bird fluttering and looking upward and careless of the world below; and he is therefore thought to be mad."<sup>12</sup> In Terrence Davies' *THE LONG DAY CLOSES* (UK 1992), a schoolboy's looking out the window and into the sky from a school somewhere in Liverpool transforms into a symphonic daydream and a source of elation more conducive to the genuine growth of his soul and intellect than is provided by hours grinding away in class and bending to the authorities and the peers. In any case, messing up with lights hanging from the wall and the ceiling leaves the teachers indifferent so long as they do not get to be direct witnesses of Eric's mischievous activity, in which case he gets punished with lines. Each teacher, however, except the history teacher, Mr. Creak, does get mesmerized once all the shields are lit and lured into revealing one letter of the combination to the school safe when hit with a rock. Mr. Creak, in turn, must reveal the year he was born in by assigning a historic battle to this year in his class. Like the letters revealed by other teachers, the year of birth of Mr. Creak changes each time the game is restarted. Moreover, because he is apparently very forgetful, Eric must write down the year of this battle on the blackboard for Mr. Creak to see it and only then would he utter the fourth and the final letter of the combination unlocking the safe.

The need to attend to history has resonances beyond this specific instance. Namely, the retro gaming experience, when put into a historical context, can provide inspiration for other domains in which we engage

12 Plato 1984, 456.

our creativity. Which other domains or disciplines we might revolutionize by opening them out at many different levels, this game may prompt us to ask ourselves. These questions are particularly worth asking during today's epidemics of illiteracy in the history and philosophy of science and arts. Decades in academia have convinced me that such illiteracy can turn even talented and hardworking individuals into generations of copycats and bandwagon opportunists.

Now, the link between the shields and the safe is odd and deserves our attention. As we have heard, for the safe containing the problematic report to be unlocked, Eric must light up all the shields on the school's walls and ceilings. In *BACK TO SKOOL*, a similar shooting of objects on the walls of the school unlocks the playground bicycle, a causal connection far harder to grasp, which is not even to mention that the bicycle is further needed to leap across the fence, enter the girls' school, release a mouse, steal sherry, use the sherry to get teachers back in the boys' school drunk, enter the now-open science lab storeroom, find a frog there, put it in a cup and drop it on the headmistress's head and thus acquire a key to the headmaster's safe containing the problematic report, a string of events that, as per my experience, makes the eyes of little ones light up with wonder, as if graced by an act of magic. Nevertheless, even the comparatively modest correlation between the shields and the safe in *SKOOL DAZE* is sufficiently ludicrous in itself, so much that it is justifiable only by the analogy of protection that both types of objects provide. I may even go as far as to muse over whether this cryptic connection can inspire us to observe it as a hats-off to analogical thinking, a big no-no in today's academia in spite of the fact that the most creative of ideas dawn on thinkers via strange passageways of analogies.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the answer, such childish connections between impossible things can be a key to creative reasoning, to magic born out of these neuronal apparatuses.

## Modest Means Can Lead to Great Outcomes

One of the magical aspects of *SKOOL DAZE* for the current generation of gamers is that it was squeezed within 48 kB of memory space, just a bit larger than the average email message today.<sup>14</sup> Even its plethora of bugs became a

13 Uskoković 2020b.

14 Alldridge 2013.

source of amusement, typical of a work whose innovative nature is so pronounced that it has the liberty to eclipse many of its technical and content-related shortcomings. Neither are the limited lines of classroom dialogue a big source of distraction because they veritably portray the monotony and boredom of school life. Even the gawkiness of the character movements, incomparably less sophisticated than, say, Dennis Caswell's somersaults and robot turns in *IMPOSSIBLE MISSION* (Epyx, US 1984) from earlier that year, can be said to have a certain charm to it, matching the constrictive atmosphere in the school, where mechanization of the intellect and the physique is the goal.

Despite the modest means with which the game was created, it stands today as one of the landmarks of videogame computing. It demonstrates how “so much can be done with so little”,<sup>15</sup> that is, how limitations in computational power due to a single 8-bit microprocessor on ZX Spectrum, only 48 kB of working memory, bitmap graphics, only about a dozen available colors and the infamous “color clash” limitation could be harnessed to produce a game that is more captivating than most games on today’s 64-bit computers with multiple processors, caches, registers and processing nearly a million times faster. This intrinsic minimalism of *SKOOL DAZE* invites us to consider how in any science or art, poverty can facilitate the derivation of groundbreaking concepts and principles. It would be, of course, overly simplistic to state that poverty *per se* drives the discovery of original concepts, let alone their testing and implementation in reality. Besides, as a former refugee and a survivor of the Yugoslav civil war of the 1990s, I know from direct experience how economic pressures can crush people’s dreams to gift something creative to the world. However, what is by no means preposterous is the idea that a lack of resources can force the creative mind to think outside the methodical norms of a resource-driven discipline. Very often, such deviations from the mainstream mental path can allow completely new solutions to existing challenges to be sighted, while, in contrast, an overabundance of resources can put the creative mind to sleep and turn it into an inert spinner of stale, paradigmatic ideas.<sup>16</sup> In natural sciences and popular arts alike, substantial funding and access to expensive tools and a massive workforce may well lead to the perfection of old, proven concepts; however, it is not a coincidence that big companies and big studios often reach out to small, in-

15 Sharopolis 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqAUWkoAKxl&t=479s> [accessed 7 January 2022].

16 Wu/Uskoković 2019.

timate settings working under dire resource limitations for ideas that may revolutionize their professions. Therefore, one of the key points that the immersive experience and conceptual innovativeness of SKOOL DAZE can instruct us about is the idea that meager resources necessitating economical approaches often turn out to be the drivers of innovative thought, whereas indulgence in wealth tends to put the brain behind the wheels of progress to sleep.<sup>17</sup> This idea forms the crux of a broader philosophy of life from which this discourse has emerged.<sup>18</sup>

A few examples illustrating the benefit of poverty for the derivation of revolutionarily novel ideas can be mentioned here. Impressionists, for one, painting hastily, in a heartbeat, using sketchy brushstrokes and spontaneous composition, in tune with their meager resources, brought down the stronghold of the lofty academic realism of their times. In turn, however, once socially recognized, their artistic movement was abridged by their focus on painting the gatherings of rich people who had embraced the movement and quickly formed tight and exclusive social circles around it. This was not conducive to the flow of creative novelty and broader social propagation and it directly contributed to the downfall of the movement, which proceeded equally rapidly as its former rise. We might also think of how the headlong writing style of modernists, which was adjusted to the goal of “acquiring elevation in the destitution of modern man”,<sup>19</sup> knocked down the house of cards of belletristic prose built in cozy Victorian clubrooms by the bourgeois social order and the gloved hands of wealthy writers and snooty rationalists. And so on. Which brings me back to my major scientific goal of demonstrating, as if through a magic trick of a kind, how immense the wealth of poverty can be, and how poor, deep down, riches truly are.

## The Antiauthoritarian Metamessage

Although hermeneutics of text rooted in the decipherment of secret messages and metamessages woven into it can be considered archaic and outdated for the last half a century at least, revisiting abandonware games calls

17 Uskoković 2020c.

18 Uskoković 2019b.

19 The Nobel Prize in Literature 1969, NobelPrize.org, <https://tinyurl.com/mnda5v5r> [accessed 7 January 2022]. The quote was used to describe the literary style of Samuel Beckett.

for abandoned approaches in their semantic analysis. Metamessages, here, are particularly interesting for the analyst, not only because they transmit holistic views of the overall present and past of the genre to which the relevant work belongs, but also because they can be more powerful than the messages atop of which they are built and disseminated. The message may sometimes be trivial even as its corresponding metamessage touches the greatest depths of the human psyche. In art, this can be said of Duchamp's urinal, of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, of Charlie Parker's sax solos, of Serge Gainsbourg's early seeds of trip hop and of Schoenberg's seminal atonal pieces. Jean-Luc Godard also exemplifies an auteur whose work owes its greatness primarily to serving as a critique of cinema rather than to its ability to immerse the viewer in a captivating cinematic experience. In other words, the metamessages of his movies have been far more significant than their direct messages.<sup>20</sup> Works conveying a powerful metamessage may not deliver to their consumers and interpreters as momentous empathetic content as mainstream art does, but they do embody resonant critiques of the art of their times and can for this reason be classified as major pieces of art.

Classroom teaching also sends out sundry metamessages in addition to the explicit messages pertaining directly to the content of the lecture. Gregory Bateson has pointed out that "Professor X gets up at the blackboard and lectures about the higher mathematics to his students, and what he is saying all the time is 'dominance, dominance, dominance', and Professor Y stands up and covers the same material, and what he is saying is 'nurturance, nurturance' or maybe even 'dependency, dependency', as he coaxes the students to follow his argument."<sup>21</sup> Thus, sadly, new generations who will demand the same obedience to authority as was demanded of them are crafted, even as, normally, they are unaware of these demands because they are emitted and absorbed by the subconscious spheres of their psyches.

SKOOL DAZE abounds with metamessages, which is not to say that any of them were deliberately incorporated into its semantic substratum by the game developers. Rather, it should be obvious to anyone who has ever created any art that the best art is art that surprises even the artist, not just the audience, with messages discoverable therein. As a result, the hermeneutic structure of every work of art is multifaceted, with different meanings ap-

20 Uskoković 2018.

21 Bateson/Bateson 1987, 33-34.

pearing to different interpreters inspecting it from different angles and using different tools for its dissection. As videogames are a subset of the visual arts, this principle applies to them too. The role-playing, open-world nature of games such as SKOOL DAZE is another factor contributing to the multiplicities of meanings discoverable during their interpretation, for depending on how the game is played, different perspectives on the meaning of the game will be revealed to the player.

A key metamessage conveyed to me by SKOOL DAZE is that rebelliousness is necessary – unjust laws of schooling must be broken if a member of the academic order is to walk through its hallowed halls and be deemed a success. The need for rebellion is evident when we consider that for the progress in a system or body of knowledge to be fostered, its deficiencies must first be recognized and a means of fixing them proposed<sup>22</sup>. From this elementary standpoint, any innovative stance constitutes a form of rebellion against the old state of affairs. Conversely, rebelliousness can be proposed as basic grounds for innovation in science and art. This explains why the more innovative the people, the greater the barriers placed before them by the guardians of the old order. In advancing humanity proactively, however, a high price may have to be paid in the form of repeated penalization by the authorities, a fate not so far from Eric's in this game.

Additionally, every act aimed at increasing the physical order in the universe is an act of rebellion against the second law of thermodynamics, a fundamental law of nature. Indeed, for any perceptual detail to be recognized by our senses, it must counter the anticipation of our constructivist sensual apparatuses<sup>23</sup>. On top of this, creative behavior can be said to be all about ceaselessly breaking habitual anticipation of the performer's next move. In fact, what the world, locked in the states of exorbitant conformism and engrossed by the spirit of followers rather than groundbreaking innovators, needs today is spirits who'd shake off this intrinsic lethargy and somnambulism by urging all to revisit the devastating effect that our socially predisposed propensity to act in accordance with our habits has on the creativity of our being in the world. Every communication, be it gestural, aural, sensual or verbal, has to rely on convention to convey its meanings, and yet it must break these very same rules of convention if it is to be inspirational and creative. Hence, not only may it not be a coincidence that the words

22 Uskoković 2019c.

23 Uskoković 2011.

“evolution” and “revolution” are lexically similar, given that revolution of one form or another stands at the root of every evolution, but we may now also ponder the move “from revolution to revelation”, as Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys sang with his characteristic ballroom solemnity,<sup>24</sup> for an upheaval in the mental realm paves the way for inventive insights and ideas.

The game discussed here, however, has many aspects, and this multifaceted nature of it is one of the reasons for the immenseness of its importance, if not influence, on the videogame culture in its formative years. It is at once a graphical adventure, an interactive role-playing game and a partial open-world life simulation with the elements of an arcade and a trivia. It has a goal, but it need not have it, as it can absorb the player into playing for the play’s sake; hence its sandbox game character. One might play to fulfill the objective, which is to retrieve the problematic report from the safe and then shut down all the flashing shields, but one can equally play to achieve a high score or to survive a day without receiving more than ten thousand lines. Or one might simply play for the pleasure of immersion in a virtual reality. That is, you are “able to ignore the main goal and simply entertain yourself by just moving around the school messing around and causing trouble.”<sup>25</sup> One user noted, “What’s interesting is that it was still one of my absolute favourite games, despite me clearly having no idea what I was supposed to be doing. That’s kind of brilliant, really. To create a gameworld that is so immersive and entertaining that the actual gameplay objective is literally irrelevant.”<sup>26</sup> Here, randomization of the side character movements and of the sequence of events in the school has been a key factor in rendering the game playable from this immersive life simulation standpoint, once again accentuating the merits of chaos and entropy for producing a lifelike animation that does not easily get boringly repetitive and predictable.

Further, as expected from a game descriptive of an educational setting, SKOOL DAZE does have an educational side to it as well. In addition to the rather sparse textbook information aired didactically during the classes, the game provides an opportunity for children at the elementary school level, who usually have their entire curriculum within a year delivered by a single teacher, to learn what it feels like to attend middle schools and high schools, where one must move back and forth between different classrooms and

24 “My October Symphony”, by Pet Shop Boys (*Behaviour*, Parlophone, UK 1990).

25 Retro-Sanctuary, <https://tinyurl.com/2vvpryar> [accessed 2 January 2022].

26 Whitehead 2011a.

each subject is taught by a different teacher. For example, when SKOOL DAZE came out in 1984, I was an elementary school student and playing this game was a unique way of learning how daily school life was structured for older children. In that sense, SKOOL DAZE reminds of a notable game released a year later, in 1985, VERKEERSRALLY (Radarsoft, NL 1985), which puts the player in control of a car driver who must drive around a large city in search of missing transmitters and is simultaneously being taught the rules of traffic.

This plurality of meanings, characteristic of all great works of art, is also evident from the fact that in many respects SKOOL DAZE is a game for children that is not really for children. On one hand, with emanations of violence lurking behind each corner, I consider SKOOL DAZE to be an authentic portrayal of the experience of attending elementary schools in the 1980s in my hometown of Belgrade, Yugoslavia. On the other hand, as a parent playing this game nearly four decades later with two youngsters of elementary school age, I find the brutality of the teacher and classmate characters in the game unbearable for their little brains. Playing the game with them brings about a worry that they would pick some behavioral cues from it, which solidifies my conviction that no parent today would want their children to attend a school like this. All the while, however, I have known that this contrast between affinity and aversion can cause great affection in the player, just as music that simultaneously shocks and soothes can uplift the listener much more than its one-dimensional counterparts can.

## Graphic Innovation and Open-world Experience

Another aspect where the game was unprecedentedly innovative for its time comes from its simultaneous portrayal of different events in the school by allowing for a cross-sectional view of the building, so that the player can see what goes on in multiple classrooms at once. Not only did the game offer a relatively smooth side-scrolling experience, but the perspective at any given spot resembled that of a comic strip where action could be observed in multiple frames at once. Sometimes the events in rooms other than that occupied by the protagonist need the player's attention, as is the case with Mr. Creak's potentially revealing his birth year, and sometimes they might directly affect the fate of the hero, as, for example, in the case of Boy Wander's accidentally lighting up a shield, Einstein's heading over to the headmaster to reveal Eric's plans or the headmaster's discussing Eric's fate

with another teacher in a remote office. This placing of multiple events into a single view without artificially splitting the screen, as in *SPY vs. SPY* (First Star Software, US 1984), *ALL RISKS* (Radarsoft, NL 1986), or *THE YOUNG ONES* (Orpheus, UK 1986), resembles the revolution introduced to the world of cinema by Jean Renoir in *THE RULES OF THE GAME* (FR 1939). It should be noted that the invention of this style, based on deepened perspective, was also owed to a spirit of rebellion, specifically to Jean Renoir's rebelling, implicitly, against his father's, the famous painter August Renoir's, obliteration of the depth of field in his late paintings.<sup>27</sup> This graphic aspect of the game was, in fact, so innovative that it would be some time before it was replicated, first in a game such as *THE GOONIES* (Datasoft, US 1985) and later in strategies such as *LEMMINGS* (DMA Design, UK 1991) or *WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS* (Blizzard Entertainment, US 1994), although it is still not often encountered in mainstream games, especially not in the indie role-playing genre. *SKOOL DAZE* also preceded David Crane's *LITTLE COMPUTER PEOPLE* (Activision, US 1985) as the seminal virtual-dollhouse life simulation game, by providing a cross-sectional view of a building where all the action took place. Primitive cross-sectional views of a house where the character moves were used in some earlier games, such as *BRISTLES* (First Star Software, US 1983), *GHOST CHASER* (Artworx Software, US 1984) and *MABEL'S MANSION* (Datamost, US 1984), but with its 3D perspective, fully furnished rooms and realistically drawn stairs, where one could even sit, *SKOOL DAZE* made it unmistakably clear to the player that that player is inside a house rather than in a random platform setting.

The game thus presented a giant leap in terms of game composition and graphic structuring compared to earlier prototypes of so-called nongame games, not only the simplistic ones such as *ALIEN GARDEN* (Epyx, US 1982), *WORMS?* (Electronic Arts, US 1983) or *LIFE* (Stack Computer Services, UK 1983), but also the more objective-driven role-playing ones such as *ULTIMA* (California Pacific, US 1981), *SWORD OF FARGOAL* (Epyx, US 1983), or *MURDER ON THE ZINDERNEUF* (Electronic Arts, US 1983). With the simultaneous focus on multiple characters and their comparatively elaborate interaction, the game was a step up from the less technically sophisticated role-playing games of its day, including *BELOW THE ROOT* (Windham Classics, US 1984) and *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* (US 1985) as the two sole interactive adventures by

27 *VOYAGE À TRAVERS LE CINÉMA FRANÇAIS (MY JOURNEY THROUGH FRENCH CINEMA*, Bertrand Tavernier, FR 2016).

Windham Classics, MAD DOCTOR (Sparklers, UK 1985), FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD (Denton Designs, UK 1985), RAGS TO RICHES (Melody Hall, US 1985), THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW (CRL, UK 1985) and Chris Hinsley's Wally Week series, including PYJAMARAMA (Micro-gen, UK 1984) and EVERYONE'S A WALLY (Micro-gen, UK 1985). Given this innovation in character multitasking embellished with an underground culture caricature, SKOOL DAZE can be even considered a bridge between these old-school role-playing adventures and the LucasFilm point 'n' click gems whose production was well underway and would take off a few years down the road with the nonlinear SCUMM masterworks of MANIAC MANSION in 1987 and ZAK MCKRACKEN AND THE ALIEN MINDBENDERS in 1988. For the latter, a particularly obvious allusion to SKOOL DAZE came in the form of a series of airplane scenes where the stewardess repeatedly tries to put Zak back in his seat, but he must clog the toilet sink, flood the restroom, blow up an egg in a microwave oven and rob the overhead bins to complete the task. Still, what separates SKOOL DAZE from all these various adventures is the sense of monotony and spatiotemporal confinement, which authentically portrays school life and thus serves as a witty criticism of it. In fact, in engaging the player in the tedious daily task of sitting in a classroom and listening to teachers' tirades, the game can be considered a precursor of the first massively popular life simulation game, namely THE SIMS (Electronic Arts, US 2000).

One of the most interesting ways in which the game revolutionized the concept of the videogame was by providing a partially open-world experience portraying an everyday setting for many users. Not only could characters be renamed, a new feature at the time, but one could also write on the blackboard at will and thus direct one's fate. One example of this is when Eric must test different combinations of letters by writing them on the blackboard to unlock the safe, which he either succeeds in or gets to be snatched on by Einstein for this misdeed and then penalized by the teachers. All of this provided some of the earliest instances of user-generated content in videogames, albeit rudimentarily. The choice of a school as the environment for this open-world concept is particularly interesting, as schools and educational institutions in general can be counted as traditionally amongst the most closed social systems, and in need of opening. This setting makes this pioneering effort to create an open world in a computer game extraordinary, especially because of its emphasizing the need for resistance to and rebellion against everything bad that schools epitomize: the authority of the teachers, the frustration of the child in confinement, the imposition of

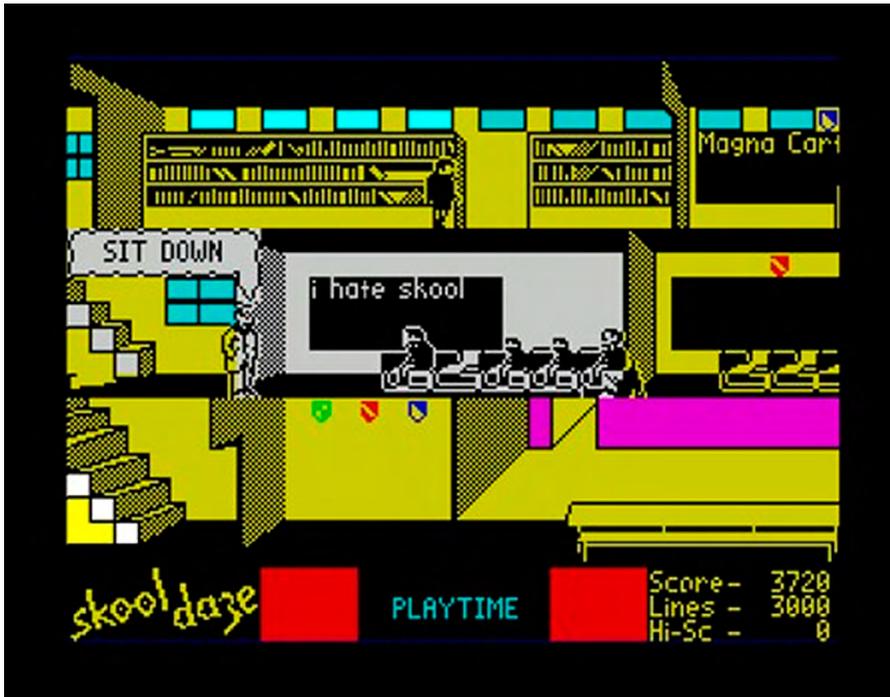


Fig. 1. A screenshot from SKOOL DAZE, showing Eric in class, sitting below a typical blackboard sign. The bell has just rung for playtime and the class is over. Eric, who had been told to sit down, is about to stand up. The science teacher, Mr. Rockitt, need not be listened to anymore.

creativity-draining behavioral norms, the enforced uncritical thought, the rewarded sycophancy, and so on. Even more importantly, however, going back to the overarching metmessage that tackles the state in which the videogame industry of the time found itself, it is of special importance for the discussion of conceptualism in science and art to note that SKOOL DAZE is a demonstration of the merits of mischievousness underscored by the grand mischievousness of its creators. In other words, an overt act of rebellion against the trends in game-making of their time is woven into the fabric of this particular game. As with the best works of art, therefore, the message, in this case the necessity of rebellion, makes itself apparent at different structural levels of the virtual world, both explicit and implicit, cognizant and subliminal.

In light of these subliminal messages, I have wondered if a boy who played this game in his pre-teenage years might have been influenced by it

later in life, without necessarily recognizing the source of his dislike of academic authority (Fig.1). Could SKOOL DAZE, with its technically sophisticated depiction of the troublemaker as a hero in an academic setting, be held responsible for his inclination for anarchist philosophies as an academician and for launching him on an academic career marked by repeated struggles with authority? Whether the answer to this question is affirmative or whether the game simply reflected sentiments the boy already harbored in those pre-teenage days is impossible to untangle.

## Lo-Tech Aesthetics and Its Failings in Real Life

The development of SKOOL DAZE started off small and ended in the same lo-tech spirit. David Reidy wrote the code on paper, “using the raw numbers of machine code rather than the friendlier assembler language [*sic*]”, and Helen Reidy typed it into the computer. Meanwhile, Keith Warrington, who did not have a computer at the time and did not even know what pixel was,<sup>28</sup> drew the black-and-white graphics on paper too; only later would they be transformed into a pixelated space. However, like many ideas unprecedentedly advanced for their times, the indie graphic adventures, like SKOOL DAZE, were destined for economic failure, a fate shared by the Reidys. Around the same time, across the Atlantic, in Boston, another short-lived company that was focused on innovation in the role-playing genre, Windham Classics, became defunct, a year or so after releasing its first game, the highly novel graphic adventure BELOW THE ROOT. These fiascos reflected the sentiment aired by Chris Crawford in November 1984, only a month before the release of SKOOL DAZE, soon after he had been laid off by Atari in the wake of the aforementioned videogame recession of 1983: “I will point out the sad truth. We have pretty much passed the period where hobbyists could put together a game that would have commercial prospect”<sup>29</sup>.

And so, thwarted by the poor proceeds from the game and with hopes of a career in videogame design dwindling away, the Reidys would soon move to rural Shropshire and Keith would buy a second-hand motorbike from the proceeds from the game.<sup>30</sup> The material for the second sequel, ERIC AND HAY-

28 Green 2010.

29 Darling 1985.

30 Green 2010.

LEY'S DECATHLON, was lost in the move, just the way Ryan Best's LGBT classic GAYBLADE (US 1992) disappeared too, like a bean in a Bunco Booth sideshow. They would get "real jobs", as David pointed out later. We need to chew over the tough idea that hobbies and small-scale settings may be the best ground for the discovery of new concepts, but their schemes rarely prove commercially viable. For, the dilemma of whether opting for research and development exploring totally new paths is by default going to lead to financial failure is likely to remain ciphered for as far as we could see. Whatever the answer, small settings will continue to be the best incubators of new directions in almost everything. As Steve Albini noted, "I don't think that there's anything holy about bands being small and inexperienced, but that's obviously where new ideas are going to come from, from people who have never played music before",<sup>31</sup> a rule of thumb that could be readily translated from the musical domain to science, art and videogame industries without losing any of its veracity.

However, if a new and original concept is to expand in popularity and hit the mainstream, it must resonate with a critical mass of creatively capable followers, who will coalesce around its nucleus and help it crystallize into a whole new movement. We can recognize today that SKOOL DAZE was a prime role-playing adventure that emerged from the defiant postpunk counter-culture of the early 1980s and carried a subliminal political message, which was unprecedented for the videogames of its day, but it did not form the nucleus for the creation of a corresponding new game genre. The inability of its creators to achieve this transition confirms the premise that as per one of the key metamessages of the game, creativity is antiauthoritarian *per se* and seldom associated with the management skills needed to facilitate the expansion of an idea into mainstream territories. Simultaneously with this failure to deliver an impactful cultural momentum, the whole videogame industry and programming world began their long slide from antiestablishment and subversive to submissive and compliant with the neoliberal economic principles where "the public gets what the public wants"<sup>32</sup>. And yet, SKOOL DAZE marks a unique moment in the timeline of the development of the videogame industry, when gaming could have taken a different turn and instead of becoming a bleak commercialized venue satisfying the tastes

31 Smith-Lahrman 1993.

32 "Going Underground", by the Jam (*Going Underground / Dreams of Children*, Polydor, UK 1980).

of politically brainwashed mainstreamers who would want ever more of the Great Giana Sisters, Pooyans and Turricans, the public could have been graced with more Frankies wanting to become film stars (FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD) or be on the top of the chart list (TO BE ON TOP, Rainbow Arts, GE 1987); more Gonches and Hollos listening to Walkman during class (GRANGE HILL, Binary Design, UK 1987) and Rockin' Rodneys looking for the lost cassette tapes (GHETTO BLASTER, Taskset, UK 1985); more Wallies walking in their sleep in search of alarm clocks that they forgot to wind before going to bed (PYJAMARAMA); more patients having to connect dreams with reality to escape mental hospitals (THE INSTITUTE, Med Systems Software, US 1981); more poster gluers fighting off gnomish hallucinations from inhaling paint vapors (POSTER PASTER, Taskset, UK 1984); more graffiti artists evading flowerpots thrown on their heads (GRAFFITI MAN, reLINE Software, GE 1987); more tappers hitting pub-crawlers with pints (TAPPER, Marvin Glass and Associates, US 1983) and stooges tossing pies at posh diners (THE THREE STOOGES, Cinemaware, US 1987); more Bozos staggering through the night and seeing pink elephants after visits to Gibbo's Joint (BOZO'S NIGHT OUT, Taskset, US 1984); more Andy Capps on a search for booze and kisses (ANDY CAPP: THE GAME, Blitter Animations, UK 1987); more Hoagies using toilet bowls as time machine conveyor belts (DAY OF THE TENTACLE, LucasArts, US 1993); more bastards rating high on their weeeometers, fartometers, drunkometers and smellometers (HOW TO BE A COMPLETE BASTARD, Sentient Software, US 1987); more Biff Barfs for TV hosts and physics department chairs and Barbara Bimbos from Airhead, California with computer programming as a hobby for guests (LEISURE SUIT LARRY GOES LOOKING FOR LOVE, Sierra On-Line, US 1988); more Basildon Bonds typing jokes into a computer while steering clear from flying Blunderwomen (THE ADVENTURES OF BOND... BASILDON BOND, Probe Software, UK 1986); more bar-patron-chased paparazzi taking photos of flirtatious models detained by Mr. Angrys (MR. ANGRY, Addictive Games, UK 1985); more Dustys flashing eyebrows in Lizard Breaths (IT CAME FROM THE DESERT, Cinemaware, US 1989); more Daglets playing in Tonetowns (TASS TIMES IN TONETOWN, Interplay & Brainwave Creations, US 1986); more jobseekers skating on leaves on their ways to interviews (INTERVIEW, Andromeda Software, UK 1984); more Willy Beamishes pulling down the school principal's wigs with their pet frogs (THE ADVENTURES OF WILLY BEAMISH, Dynamix, US 1991) and Mikies dodging the teachers' flying fake teeth (MIKIE, Konami, JP 1984); and, last but not least, more friars helping others find objects they have lost, from carrots to clarets, to find, symbolically, the object

they, themselves, have lost, that is, the Bible (FATHER TUCK, Mawhinney & Flynn, UK 1996). But this did not happen and what lies inscribed at the heart of this seminal videogame may help us understand why.

## Parallels with Academic Multiverse

This real-life story of the development of SKOOL DAZE, from lo-tech enthusiasm to commercial failure and professional slump, resonates with the adventures of a boy, who had played this game as a child, as he moved through academic hallways, classrooms and labs for the past four decades, during a time when he was not only a student and a scholar, but also an instructor and a mentor at a number of private and public universities. Like the Reidys' project, the lab for this boy's work was a mom's and pop's operation that churned out scientific *piatti poveri*, i. e., poor man's dishes, with means that were sometimes modest and sometimes sumptuous. At its best, the focus of this science for the soul has been on the creation of new concepts, whenever possible; hence its being inspired by conceptual arts. Alas, in this age of the increased industrialization of academic science, where the scientist has become an entrepreneur and derivative approaches that merely confirm the paradigmatic worldviews and augment the efficacy of methods already in place are prioritized over the exploration of fundamental new ideas, this has led to a failure and the closure of the lab. Caught in the dirty web of politics, which is these days prioritized over the quality of the science and teaching, the innovator is excommunicated, dismissed from this edifice where toeing the line is all that counts while rebels against the corruptness of this order are being ruthlessly weeded out.

If the reader thinks this discussion is already too confessional, be prepared for an even harder catapulting of rocks at the walls of academia,<sup>33</sup> like Eric's hitting of the school shields. The boy remained true to his desire to stay away from the departmental and collegial micropolitics because all he ever wanted in academia was to remain free like a bird, unattached to petty clashes of ego and living for praise from the heavens above, expecting instead no accolades or rewards from human magistrates or committees. Of course, basing one's professional stances and methods on unconditional, infinite love in a system run on hierarchy, stringency, conditioning, exploitation and fear can

33 Uskoković 2019d.

only result in one's reliving the fate of that good old miser, all along with His persecution, trial and liquidation (John 18; 19), in the midst of which one may find oneself spinning a string of thoughts that chimes with the words of the comic extraterrestrial character ALF: "I came from a distant galaxy on a special mission, to study your species and perform experiments. They sent me out in a space capsule. Now I live in a trashcan by your garage."<sup>34</sup>

It did not take the boy long to conclude that being in academia is not so different from playing Eric in a game of SKOOL DAZE: one can play by the rules and respect everyone, but bullies, tearaways and tattletales will gradually drag one down and have one expelled, so the only way to succeed is to be a rebel and fight, as Bhagavad-Gita would instruct (Gita 2:18; 2:37–38). A similar message is contained in a later open-world ZX Spectrum classic, THE GREAT ESCAPE (Denton Designs, UK 1986), where the prisoner-playing protagonist loses his morale regardless of whether he breaks the rigid rules of the concentration camp and is sent into solitary confinement for doing so or chooses to play safely and obediently, as if on autopilot; the only way for the protagonist to retain his morale is to contrive an escape from this life stockade. However, while in this later game morale could be restored when something useful is discovered or performed, the lines with which the authority punishes the player in SKOOL DAZE cannot be erased; it is only a matter of time, whether the boy plays it safe or plays it well, until he is excommunicated. The boy knew that sooner or later, he would be struck by a fate similar to that of a Montenegrin political dissident fond of "romantic rebelliousness", who cited "his romanticism, his honesty and his lack of personal ambition"<sup>35</sup> as reasons for his expulsion from Yugoslav politics, imprisonment for almost a decade and the prevention of the public dissemination of his views for almost four decades. The boy also stepped on the toes of oh-so-many Titoesque autocrats and members of the new breed of academic mobsters; their revenge for independence in action and thought has been brutal. Even as he knew what sort of punishment lay in store for him, he could not but justify his will to speak truth. Long ago he had resolved that he would be always a poet and never a politician; that he would always look up to prophets, not presidents;<sup>36</sup> and that he would speak truth

34 ALF S01/E26 (US 1986).

35 Russell 1995.

36 "Birdland", by Patti Smith, in SONG TO SONG (Terence Malick, US 2017), 01:26:20. Smith sings different lyrics than in the version of the song from *Horses* (Arista Records, US 1975): "The cross is just the true sign of a tortured woman standing there in the doorway,

and truth only and never turn to a cunning can that acts for the personal benefit alone. And since “poets, who have always been hated and feared by tyrants because they alone dare to freely say what is true, are sent down from heaven by the Gods to relieve the sufferings of mortals”,<sup>37</sup> he vowed that he would always, regardless of the consequences, disseminate truth and beauty across the parched podia of academia, with religious zeal and fanaticism. In these efforts, he knew he would always be, deep down and like Eric, alone, finding comfort in the words of the Bar-Kays saxophonist Harvey Henderson in Mel Stuart’s movie *WATTSTAX* (US 1973), later sampled in a Public Enemy song: “Freedom is the road seldom traveled by the multitude.”<sup>38</sup> The making of *SKOOL DAZE* epitomizes one such search for freedom, within the “desolation row”<sup>39</sup> of a small and intimate social setting rather than through massive corporate boards and commissions.

The attitude of the creators of *SKOOL DAZE*, evident in every detail of the game as well as in its overall spirit, has nested inside me ever since I played that game obsessively and ruminated about it endlessly in my spare time as a child. Still, through many a restless night, I wonder why I continue to be fascinated with this classic game and why “skooling” in terms of teaching students the merits of breaking the rules – be they of language, of communication, or of any other form of conduct or mental routine – remains inscribed on my own abstract classroom blackboard. Is it because neither I nor presumably greater old-school gaming enthusiasts than me<sup>40</sup> were ever able to shut down all of the flashing stars, pardon shields, and come to the end of this classic sandbox game? Is it because this exceeding level of difficulty of the game provided a subliminal impetus to make the tests I set as a teacher impossible to get a perfect score on, which irked today’s gamers, who require everything be playable and easily accomplishable, to such an extent that they catapulted me into a trashcan rather than to the apex of the academic pyramid? Is it because during those skool daze my eyes flashed with an honest resentment at an educational system wherein “the

dreaming of, dreaming of the prophet. They don’t want their children to be presidents but prophets, prophets, they’re dreaming of their children as prophets. They’re gonna come in, run through the fields, dreaming of animation”.

37 Wigglesworth 1999.

38 “Show ‘Em Whatcha Got”, by Public Enemy (*It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Def Jam, US 1988).

39 “Desolation Row”, by Bob Dylan (*Highway 61 Revisited*, Columbia, US 1965).

40 Alldridge 2013.

pupil is 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new; his imagination is 'schooled' to accept service in place of value... for most men the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school",<sup>41</sup> as Ivan Illich pointed out? Is it because my aim in schooling is, like Illich's, to deschool others, to liberate them from the shackles of dogmas that stifle the spirit, to erase all the knowns and musts and certainties and install infinite wonder in their place and then spray-paint a question mark all over it? All these questions and more remain, to make sure that this wheel of inventive ideas churning inside me does not stop spinning.

Regardless of it all, the walls that institutionalized knowledge builds around itself must be crushed. The Ivory Tower must be toppled and a more humane order erected on its former foundations. All the teachers training archers with arrows aiming for the heart, lined up as on the cover of 10,000 Maniacs' *In My Tribe*, should fall from the turrets of this castle and into the stockade, to make room for undefiled spirits, like Prince's Cynthia Rose, a schoolgirl who wore "different colored socks", who slurped "butterscotch clouds" for breakfast and who "had a happy face, just like the one she'd draw on every wall in every school".<sup>42</sup> If this eagerness to shake things up and break them down, calmly and benevolently, explains my fondness for the plethora of metaphors discoverable in this gem of the early-day computer games that SKOOL DAZE is, so be it. For now, in the name of the wall-crushing ambitions aired here, lest this essay on SKOOL DAZE, a game where almost every utterance on the blackboard is grammatically incorrect, remain incomplete, I will let my own kin tell a story in preschool language fitting the occasion. It will take us for a moment beyond the grimness of the world of SKOOL DAZE and into brighter and more innocent semantic spaces:

Skool daze was canceled and then it was school day and then the teacher comed and she was school and said hey I so happy I here kids and she gave you happy card and then the teacher sat on the chair and then he slept and he slept daytime and nighttime and even sunset and every day and he was too, too tired and went to sleep again and he transformed to a clock and children were doing fine and teacher was still sleeping and then he slept all night until daytime and then he transformed into a nothing and to you

41 Illich 1972, 2-3.

42 "Starfish and Coffee", by Prince (*Sign o' the Times*, Paisley Park Records, US 1987).

and to two teachers and then to skool kid and nobody was her teacher and then the teacher said school is canceled yeah but it was not canceled and there was a meteor and he tried to save the world but he couldn't and meteor was trying to destroy the whole universe and whole earth and ice-cream stores and houses and cars and city and plants and houses and cars and flowers and then children saw meteor and it was crashing and was covered with rocks and with purple slime in it but then there was friends there was family there was hope and there was heart that is the end.<sup>43</sup>

Lest the earth tilt from its axis and this paper fall into the stratosphere, here is a simpler story by her brother, too, on the same topic of skooling and its ordeals:

I'm near the swing. Stories are always happy.

Somewhere in the midst of these lines, I know, lies the key that unlocks the heavily guarded gates of the academic mansion run by maniacs. This is how the boy departed, with this key in his hands and a fresh kiss on his inquisitor's lips<sup>44</sup>, having drifted into a dark night, way beyond the dungeons and arrow slits of the Kafkaesque fortress of academia, vowing to find brighter study halls and homerooms in playgrounds<sup>45</sup>, nature<sup>46</sup> and dreams<sup>47</sup>. He has been free ever since.

## **Puny Is the Way Leading Back, to a Paradise Lost**

One final reminder from *SKOOL DAZE*, related to the ideology of poverty touched upon earlier, concerns the merits of minimalism. Compared to modern operating systems and videogames, which strike the users with stu-

43 Evangelina W. Uskoković, personal correspondence, 2020. Evangelina's story is a mélange of impressions from her own school days and from playing two of the arguably greatest games released originally for ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64, respectively, namely *SKOOL DAZE* and *MANIAC MANSION*.

44 Dostoyevsky 1880, Part II, Book V: The Grand Inquisitor, 322–344; von Foerster 1972. von Foerster retells the story of the Grand Inquisitor at the end of his paper on the nature of perception and puts it in a pedagogic context.

45 Uskoković/Uskoković/Uskoković 2022a.

46 Uskoković/Uskoković/Uskoković 2022b.

47 Uskoković/Uskoković/Wu/Uskoković 2023.

pefying showers of stimuli and provide colossal spectacles for the senses, SKOOL DAZE and many of its minimalistic brethren from the pre-ELECTRIC DREAMS (Virgin Films, 1984) era of computer games, such as IN SEARCH OF THE MOST AMAZING THING (Tom Snyder Productions, US 1983), LAZY JONES (Terminal Software, UK 1984), BELOW THE ROOT, ON-COURT TENNIS (Activision, US 1984), ONE ON ONE (Electronic Arts, US 1984), DUCKS AHOY! (CBS Software, US 1984), DONALD DUCK'S PLAYGROUND (Sierra, US 1984), PYJAMARAMA OR ELITE (Braben & Bell, UK 1984), to mention but a few favorites, show how much more can be accomplished with so little. That a simple change to the static picture on the screen after hours or days spent playing a textual adventure such as THE HOBBIT (Beam Software, AU 1982) and trying desperately to make strides in it can to this day produce a thrill that instantly colors the room with the shades of mystery may seem unbelievable to a younger generation of gamers, but there is an incredible richness, a treasure worth retrieving, buried within these impressions.

In fact, the thrill of finding out that beneath the surface appearances on the screen a whole world of codes and symbols lies hidden and awaits discovery, shimmering before a child's eyes like a sunken treasure, can be classified as an authentic religious experience. In a game such as HACKER (Activision, US 1985), therefore, the protagonist's harnessing a mysterious perceptual unit subject to constant malfunctioning in order to navigate subterranean channels in search of pieces of a document that, assembled, may help save the world represents an apt analogy between the hacking experience and the workings of a religious mind. After all, when we descend into the realities beyond the surface appearances, be they virtual or corporeal, is when we encounter the metaphysics of mystery, at the doorstep of which all the world's religiosities come alive. This is when the cognizance of God, that synonym for the mysterious depth dimension in our lives, may enter the juvenile mind, notwithstanding that the traces of the videogame's contribution to this grand awakening of a religious mind will likely disappear as the child grows older. Although interest in this connection between videogames and spirituality has hibernated for a very long time, almost disproportionately to the proliferation of ethereal, supernatural and godlike characters in games, a wave of curiosity about this topic has swept through academic literature in recent years,<sup>48</sup> giving hope of a new day in a new world nearing. Exactly four decades since the idea about SKOOL DAZE was

48 Heidbrink/Knoll/Wysocki 2015; Storey/Storey 2019; Bosman 2018.

born and since Mark E. Smith “became a recluse and bought a computer, set it up in the home, elusive big one, on the screen saw the Holy Ghost”<sup>49</sup>, pieces of the puzzle portraying the link between religion and videogames seem to be starting to fall into place.

And yet, the child who once delved into this serene world of über-simplicity, dancing mously between games to Rob Hubbard’s minimal chip-tunes such as the high score sequence from *MONTY ON THE RUN* (Gremlin Graphics, UK 1985)<sup>50</sup> or the themes from *CHIMERA* (Bits Studios, UK 1985)<sup>51</sup> and *TRANS-ATLANTIC BALLOON CHALLENGE* (Maxwell Technology, UK 1987)<sup>52</sup>, became lost in the thicket of codes and symbols, and now the child finds itself in the “shadowed forest”<sup>53</sup> of complexities that require endless clarifying, ordering, classifying and rearranging. The child has turned into a man, or is that indeed the case, the man asks, when he is a child in front of the computer screen, which brings us back to the words of Jon Deaux in the opening quote. Still, is a return to the wondrous simplicity of childhood what is required to save the world? What if children were to instruct their teachers how to relearn the art of play, so that the teachers might approach life as if it was a game instead of numbing children by imposing adult norms upon them? Just as children and animals learn about life by playing with creatures and objects around them, so too should our attempts to unravel the mysterious threads drawn all through the physical reality, not known to man yet or buried deep within the dust of the past, be savored with the spirit of a child. We may have lost sight of this holy stance because we inhabited for too long the dry terrain of prestige-driven adulthood, but could it be reinstalled in us by computer games?

Mine is the privilege of being the first generation able to replay early computer games with a sense of nostalgia that is completely new to humanity. In this process, millions of neurons can be switched on and their firing patterns may replicate those that they danced to when I was a child and magic would happen in my mental microcosm in an instant. One thing about the future that I am prompted to observe impromptu, on the fly, by this abstract immersion in the past is that future videogames will be a

49 “Eat Y’self Fitter”, by The Fall (*Perverved by Language*, Rough Trade, London, 1983).

50 Pixel Retro 2017, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=Q2EK5DGdDMU> [accessed 9 March 2023], 03:21:50.

51 Pixel Retro 2017, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=Q2EK5DGdDMU> [accessed 9 March 2023], 00:49:36.

52 Pixel Retro 2017, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=Q2EK5DGdDMU> [accessed 9 March 2023], 04:54:36.

53 Alighieri 1971, canto I, verse 2.

great opportunity to marry science and art, a linking to which I have been dedicated since reading Hermann Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* as a 17 year old. Mind you, I still dream of a future where the layman would be literate in natural sciences and technologies and arts and humanities all at once and where news from disciplines merging them in the most unthinkable ways would provide the major content for the mass media. The core of my academic work today is directed toward driving humanity in this direction and I see computer games as an indispensable medium for achieving this goal.

We know well that videogames integrate science, at the levels of both hardware and software, for which they can act as a superb testing device. However, their artistic potential is often ignored or disputed, usually because of a little interest by the designers to provoke empathy in the players.<sup>54</sup> Yet, games, which could be defined as structured entwinements of contest and play, often do exhibit artistic value. The paradigmatic example is chess, possibly the closest thing that humans have to the elusive combination of science and art that is the Glass Bead Game, but also the game that an artist such as Marcel Duchamp considered more aesthetic than the visual arts.<sup>55</sup> Should collaborative art forms increase in prominence and should human consciousness evolve away from seeking triumph for the ego and toward broader, more holistic and selfless perspectives, games of the future could increasingly be endowed with features of the arts – not the purely expressive only, but also the classical and the romantic, all along with their traditional emphases on beauty and harmony. If I have spent a lifetime pursuing the dream of sailing the vessel of science closer to the coasts of arts, then lying this boat ashore, sowing a seed from which a whole new kingdom of knowledge would sprout and leaving the scene beforehand, it is logical that I sympathize with the dream of videogames as “a viable medium for artistic expression”<sup>56</sup> with all my heart. The dire cost of having to exit the reigns of mainstream R&D to pursue these dreams pales in comparison with the faith that, lived out rightly, they will shape our spirits into something unsuspectedly beautiful.

In summary, games can be art and games can be our guide. Not only does a game like SKOOL DAZE capture a unique zeitgeist as “a quaint combination

54 Ebert 2005.

55 Fuchs 2013.

56 Crawford 2003, 260.

of post-war schooling and post-punk anarchy that flourished, briefly and brilliantly, in the parochial backwash of pop culture that was the 1980s<sup>57</sup>, and not only is it a punch in the face of the neo-Thatcherist conservatism in schooling, politics and elsewhere, but it can also serve as inspiration for creative endeavors in countless other disciplines. Musing over this game over the past half a thousand lines or so of this article, still enough to be erased by Hayley's kiss, took us on a ride on which you and I got acquainted with a plenty of systemic insights relevant for any domain where creative forces can be expressed. Any day, we could use this and similar videogames as memory lanes to slide down, sentimentally, and capture the stardust of inspiration emanating from them before using it as a source of analogical connections with other disciplines and realms of thought.

Life begins with staggering simplicity, continues with adventurous journeys through convoluted realms pervaded with challenging complexities and returns to serene simplicities towards the end. Maybe the story of how personal computers develop will take this cyclical shape too, and in a distant future, after the current obsession with aggressive displays of sheer energetics is over, we will witness a return to an appreciation of the ideals of minimalism. Maybe retro gaming paves the way to a brighter future.

The computer screen before me blinkingly invites me into a game that softens the heart and elates the brain. May the time come when a screen like this will enlighten the heart of each and every one of us. Ready?

READY.

## Conclusion: The Gateways to Religion

As we look back at the beginnings of this paper and the quote that spoke of “the flux from boy to man”, the permanent question of the fall, which has been lighting up the psyches of religious scholars for centuries now, can be evoked. This question is often supplemented with an image of a child exiting a state of prime virtue and entering the dark forest of adulthood. Videogames, however, as I have proposed, can help the child in us remain a child for life, which is exactly where the entry of these games into the realm of religiousness begins. For, a pivotal and penultimate<sup>58</sup> aim of religious thought

57 Whitehead 2011b.

58 Becoming a child is a means to an end on the spiritual path, but not an end in itself.

is to trace a way back, to that primordial state of mind devoid of the tragic defilements that pile up in the heads of grownups with no end in sight.

During his sermon on the Mount of Beatitudes, the Christ, that rebel against the reigning religious order, which was built on superficial rules and regulations, said that “except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). But Christianity is not the only religious doctrine that equates an enlightened state of mind and a childlike state of mind. There is Zen Buddhism, of course, as when Bashō says, “‘I do not like children’, for him who says this no flowers bloom”,<sup>59</sup> or when the famous parable invokes a child who “thought that a tree was just a tree and a mountain just a mountain”, an adult who “thought that a tree was not a tree and a mountain not a mountain”, and an enlightened one who knows that “a tree is simply a tree and a mountain simply a mountain”. And in the Talmud, Elijah’s “holy one, blessed be he, smiled and said: My children have triumphed over me; My children have triumphed over me” (Bava Metzia 59b:5) – is this not an inversion of the pyramid of life, with the children lifted to the top and the adults slumped to the bottom? Or, when Shinto theologians advocate for pursuance of the way to the fundamental source on the basis of the notion of *aru ga mama no aru*, that is, “existence in suchness”, a primal state dwelled in by infants, aren’t they also calling for restoration of a childlike consciousness?<sup>60</sup> In Hinduism, Upanishads contain references to children as the road worth following, as when it is stated that “the sage should desire to be with child-like nature, which is unattached, faultless” (Subala Upanishad 11:1), for “having mastered both Brahma-knowledge and childlikeness, the sage possesses the Self” (Annapurna Upanishad 4:38). In the Sufi tradition of Islam, children have also been occasionally looked upon as destinations on the religious road, as in poems of Hafiz, such as where he asserts that “every child has known God, not the God of names, not the God of don’ts, not the God who ever does Anything weird, but the God who knows only four words, and keeps repeating them, saying: ‘Come dance with Me, come dance’”.<sup>61</sup> And when Morrissey sang about “a punctured bicycle on a hillside desolate”,<sup>62</sup> around the time SKOOL DAZE was being made, wasn’t that the cry of a boy

59 Dumoulin 1963, 240.

60 Suzuki 1944, 105.

61 Mundahl 2008, 55.

62 “This Charming Man”, by The Smiths (*The Smiths*, Rough Trade, UK 1984).

who wishes to leave the Garden of Eden for the luster of limelight and a sign of darker things to come?

However, for this literal rejuvenation of the human spirit to occur, it may not be enough to play the videogames *per se*. Rather, it pays off to also understand the subliminal messages that the videogames feed the human consciousness with. One such elucidation of a line after line of subtext intrinsic to one particular videogame, namely SKOOL DAZE, was performed here, in a manner that was general in relevance, but also personal and confessional to the bone. It was concluded that creation is good, but so too, I have proposed, is the razing of reigning orders, paradigms and principles alike. This demolition of the establishment helped clear a way which has been followed to the end.

That road has proved to be a road back, to the Paradise Lost of a child's mind, shining with purity and innocence. Traced line by line, Eric's lines as it were, it has led us to a blinking cursor, to a symbol of new beginnings, of infinite possibilities, of life and science as play. There are no more words to say. Only a winking and infinity beyond it.

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# Reconfiguring Daoist Cultivation in a Video Game

## A Case Study of AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR

### Abstract

With AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR (GSQ Studio, CN 2019) as a case study, this article analyses how this video game reconfigures the practice of self-cultivation, which has deep roots in religious Daoism, and how it was inspired by online novels in a contemporary context. The game draws on Daoist worldviews, the five elements, and cultivation methods which can be found in the Daoist scriptures. However, the religious elements presented in the game are more aligned to reformed 20th century Daoism, while the game developers' interpretation of cultivation follows secular and nationalistic discourses from the 20th century onwards. Those facts collectively mark the distance between the game and pre-20th century cultivation tradition, which is underpinned by the abundant Daoist texts. In addition, cultivating transcendent novels, mainly distributed online, provide readers with some cultivation narrations which are relevant but alternative to the Daoist cultivation tradition. The game borrowed features from such online novels, so that the content of the game is in fact a contemporary reconfiguration of heterogeneous sources. The game's popularity and commercial success not only suggest that players accept such reconfiguration of cultivation, but also concede that the game somewhat satisfies the contemporary comprehension of cultivation tradition. Through the media of video games, Daoist cultivation tradition is stimulated but reconstructed in the contemporary context.

### Keywords

Chinese Indie Game, AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR, (Self-)Cultivating, Daoism, Game Studies

### Biography

Ye Yuan is a doctoral student at École Pratique des Hautes Études – PSL, Paris. Within the field of religious studies, he focuses on Daoism in terms of history, ritual, and idea, and he analyses the interaction between the religion and communal life. Trained in the discipline of anthropology (master's degree from SOAS, London), he brings anthropological and ethnographical insights into his studies on Daoism, in both historical and contemporary contexts. His interests also cover art, video games, Guqin, and painting.

## Introduction

Despite governmental restrictions on game licenses, the Chinese gaming industry is now the biggest in the world in terms of number of players as well as total revenue.<sup>1</sup> The games industry has increasingly taken content from religion and adapted it, showing that to some extent, religions, for example Daoism, are being re-understood and re-interpreted in the context of contemporary Chinese popular culture. *AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR* (了不起的修仙模拟器, 2019)<sup>2</sup> an independent game developed by the emerging GSQ Studio, arguably exemplifies the contemporary presentation of Daoist religion in video games. Unusually, it also has in its title the religious term “cultivation” (i.e. self-cultivation), originally *xiuxian* 修仙 in Chinese, a reference to an essential component of the Daoist religion that proposes that following certain techniques allows the human body and corporeal essence to be purified and then transformed to reach the immortal state. Thanks to the elaborate gameplay design, the players are introduced to an imaginative cultivation world in which the character-practitioners aim to acquire longevity and, eventually, divine immortality. From an initial funding of just RMB 100,000, GSQ Studio, founded in 2018 by three game developers, earned over RMB 10 million. Moreover, despite harsh criticism of the game on the Steam gaming platform immediately after its release, diligent efforts and intensive updates indicative of the commitment of GSQ Studio rescued popular perceptions of the game, which won a positive rating of over 87 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the studio is reportedly proud of the gameplay design of cultivation and stated that the cultivation demonstrated in the game is “authentic”.<sup>4</sup> Such a claim to “authenticity” deserves scrutiny by those who research Daoism and modern China. The extent to which *AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR* adopted and reconfigured the Daoist practice of cultivation is the main concern of this article.

The game digitalises the Daoist cultivation practice through reference to Daoist cosmology and terminology such as five elements and *qi*-energy, which are widely found in Daoist scriptures. However, even though GSQ Stu-

1 For a comparison of revenue in the global video game market since 2017, see Statista 2022. For a recent news report with observations on the Chinese gaming industry, see Mullin 2022.

2 General information for the game can be accessed at Steam 2022b.

3 Steam 2022a; Steam 2020.

4 Steam 2022a.

dio strives for “authenticity”, it is impossible for the three game developers to avoid the difficulties of understanding and interpreting Daoist cultivation tradition, for the significant reformation of Daoism in the 20th century left a hermeneutic rupture between modern Daoism and the classic form. The game developers largely followed the secular and nationalist discourses developed during the 20th century and beyond. With cultivation a popular genre of the contemporary online novel, the game creatively marries Daoist religious elements and literary imagination, thereby somewhat bridging the gap between cultivation tradition and a contemporary mindset. By doing so, the game involves itself in the reconfiguration of cultivation practices in the contemporary context. In order to explicate the religious terms, theories, and methodologies adopted in the article, the first section will review previous studies on religious Daoism and cultivation practice, with a strong focus on the religious transformation in the 20th century. The article will then introduce the gameplay design for cultivation and the principal content of the game, and will also explain how the game models that religious practice in quantitative terms. The third part of this article will analyse the in-game representation of religious Daoism and cultivation practice and how they are reconfigured in the contemporary context.

## Theoretical Approach and Methodology

Whilst the primary concern of this article is scholarly scrutiny of the video game AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR in light of its religious character, its foremost challenge is explanation of the term “(self-)cultivation” and its role in religious Daoism. In Chinese, the term *xiuxian* 修仙 literally translates as “cultivating transcendent”. *Xian*, described in early Chinese scriptures, is a kind of individual who has already overcome physical constraints and has ascended to a superhuman state.<sup>5</sup> These individuals are believed to have retreated from the lay world and to have lived as hermits on remote mountains and in caves, obtaining extraordinary longevity and the capability to perform certain miracles.<sup>6</sup> In terms of these legendary characters’ depiction in the Chinese religion, *xian* has been commonly translated “immortal” or “transcendent”, terms that highlight longevity and supremacy

5 Campany 2009, xiii–xiv; for the definition of *Xian*, see Miura 2008.

6 Miura 2008; Vervoorn 1990, 13; see also Schipper 1993, 164–165.

over the secular world respectively. As the latter term more effectively summarises the multifaceted character of *xian*, the article will use the term “transcendent” unless further explanation of the Chinese character *xian* is necessary. The process by which practitioners condition themselves to become transcendent physically and mentally is “(self-)cultivation”. The (self-)cultivation process, which can be dated to the middle of the fourth century BCE, involves techniques that include making an herbal potion, producing an alchemical elixir with mineral materials, and meditating to purify one’s spiritual essence and *qi*-energy within the physical body.<sup>7</sup> Since the creation of the Daoist religious institution in the early second century, the narrative of “transcendence” and the techniques of “(self-)cultivation” have been merged into a principal constituent of Daoism, with different techniques developed and emphasised in line with the socio-political and religious context over the next 1,800 years.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that cultivation is not a term exclusive to Daoism but is used also in a broader sense by Confucianism and Buddhism. In Confucianism it tends to refer to self-improvement and the moral pursuit in daily life,<sup>9</sup> while in Buddhism it relates to the series of means by which a Buddhist disciple reaches mind enlightenment and nirvana.<sup>10</sup> This article will only examine “(self-)cultivation” in Daoism. The prefix “self-” suggests that “cultivating transcendent” is practised individually, yet collective aspects are also worth noting: Daoist monasteries permit communal religious life and practitioners are not isolated from personal contact with their families, patrons, and clients.<sup>11</sup>

“Cultivating transcendent” has a religious character, but as the universalism of “religion” is questioned,<sup>12</sup> we must rethink the theoretical configuration of Chinese religion and engage the socio-political context of contemporary Daoism. With Durkheim’s sociological definition of religion as a single moral community that pivots on a unified system of beliefs, religion has come to be regarded as a distinctive social domain.<sup>13</sup> The Durkheimian

7 Roth 1996, 127–128. The idea of transcendence and divinization of the body with certain methods are also applied to politics in the antique period, see Puett 2002, 214–217; 242–243.

8 Penny 2000, 109–112; see also Campany 2009, 34–35.

9 On the different and shared character of cultivation across Daoism and Confucianism, see Kirkland 2008, 138–139; also Barrett, 2008.

10 Eichman, 2016, 70–72.

11 Kohn 2000.

12 Dumont 1970, 32; Asad 1983.

13 Durkheim 1995, 44.

definition resonated with sociologist C. K. Yang, who stressed that Chinese religions are diffused through communal life and quotidian affairs, and thus the ideas and organisation of religion must be analysed with reference to the social routine.<sup>14</sup> The interaction between religion and other factors in the social context must then be highlighted. While Max Weber claimed in his comparative studies of religions that religion impacts the social and economic mechanisms of a given society,<sup>15</sup> Talal Asad emphasised the presence of power and discourse for religion because the symbolic world constructed by religion is not separate from socio-political discourse.<sup>16</sup> The perspective suggested by Asad is frequently adopted in the study of Chinese religion since the 20th century, as religions in China have experienced intellectual challenges and institutional reformation that were intertwined with nationalism and modernisation discourses. From the early 20th century onwards, modern ideas imported from Japan and the West, especially ideas of rational science, clashed with Chinese traditional customs and religious rituals. The socio-political structure of the nation-state that had gradually emerged since 1910 called for an ideological adjustment of religion in terms of both doctrine and organisation.<sup>17</sup> Communist policy from the 1950s to the 1970s stifled religious activity in principle. In the midst of social upheaval and change, Chinese religions continued to emphasise their communion with science, their contribution to the social good, and their positive role in the construction of a Chinese national identity.<sup>18</sup> In the first half of the 20th century, self-cultivation was reinterpreted by Yingning Chen 陳撷寧, who was himself a cultivation practitioner, scholar, and promoter of Daoist reformation, as a defence against the ideological accusation of being “superstition”. Chen replaced the indecipherable cosmology underpinning the self-cultivation techniques with nutritional science and modern medicine, which to a significant extent disenchanting “cultivating transcendent” within the religious context of Daoism. Such disenchantment continued at the end of the 20th century – for example, ordained Daoist priest Chengyang Tian 田誠陽 attempted to erase the esoteric character of Daoist cultivation practices and to systematise those practices theoretically into a discipline accessible

14 C. K. Yang, 1961; Feuchtwang/Bruckermann 2016; Chau 2019; Schipper 1993; for cases studies see Freedman 1999; Dean 2009.

15 Weber 2002; Weber 1951, 196; 206.

16 Asad 1983.

17 Goossaert 2006; Goossaert/Palmer 2011, 127–130; Schipper 2002.

18 Goossaert 2008; Hsieh 2017.

to the public.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to the weakening of restrictions on religious activities in the 1980s, Daoist institutions such as the China Daoist Association and the Daoist Academy were gradually rejuvenated,<sup>20</sup> while Daoist cultivation practices returned to the everyday life of the masses during the Qigong fever 氣功熱 (Qigong re) over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the demonstration and instrumentalisation of *qi*-energy enjoyed nationwide popularity.<sup>21</sup> Contemporary Daoism is vibrant, but there is a clear rupture between the traditional organisational structure, transmission by teachers and disciples, and doctrinal thinking.<sup>22</sup>

With the rise of the Internet in China, especially in the 21st century, “cultivating transcendent” has become, as we noted, an online literary genre and has been increasingly adopted in video games, and accordingly, online novels and video games have begun to invite the audience to reimagine “cultivating transcendent” with fantastical and literary characters. The online novel is a type of literary work published mainly on online literary platforms and read by a large number of Internet users. For a number of reasons, including the nature of the literary market, platform profit, and authors’ personal interests, online novels are usually published in serial form, with a more popular language and a genre-driven plot proving attractive to readers. “Cultivating transcendent”, which is nowadays a popular genre of online novel, often envisions a hierarchical world of the transcendent in which the protagonist commits to cultivation practices and finally achieves divine immortality. Along with the cultivation process, the protagonist usually must deal with challenges from both themselves and their opponents. Longevity and miraculous power, which are two significant characteristics of the traditional Daoist state of transcendence, are still pursued by these protagonists in a fantasy world, and numerous terms from cultivation practices in relation to *qi*-energy and the body are employed in those online novels. However, elements related to transcendence in online novels (as well as in video games) should not be dismissed as replications of their religious counterparts in pre-20th century Daoism, for the 20th

19 For Chen and his interpretation of self-cultivation, see Liu 2009; Liu 2012; for Tian, see Ni 2020a, 758; for the reimagining of cultivation and literature, see Ni 2020b.

20 Goossaert/Palmer 2011, 323; for the rise and reformation of the Daoist temple, see Goossaert/Ling 2009, also Yang Der-ruey 2009; for Daoism’s obedience to the political discourse in the contemporary context, see Yang Der-ruey 2012.

21 Palmer 2008.

22 See Yang Der-ruey 2012.

century societal adaption from Daoism to nationalism and modern science discourse weakened and even abolished the religious worldview on which the cultivation practices rested. According to Zhang Ni, whose work was a precursor to the study of cultivating transcendent elements in the cyber world, the popularity of cultivating transcendent novels is a response to neo-liberalist contemporary ideas and a rethinking of modernist concepts such as religion, science, and superstition in a post-socialist and post-secular context.<sup>23</sup> In the literary genre, the protagonist starts from a low social class and finally obtains ultimate power and the highest ranking through cultivation practices, with the application of those cultivation terms made possible by the de-stigmatisation of Daoism. The use of these cultivation terms is intended not to reassert their original meaning in a Daoist religious context, but to create specific fantasy worlds in online novels and even, on some occasions, to embellish a so-called Chinese identity. Video games not only share contemporary settings with popular online novels, but also are inspired by well-known fantasy literature and their plots. However, video games are generically different from literature because of their interactivity and in light of the software development with which they are produced. Additionally, video games with cultivation elements have not yet been explored academically, and video games were not Zhang Ni's main concern. Cultivating transcendent video games merit academic attention, and such research will bolster comprehension of the representation of Daoism and relevant religious practices in contemporary contexts.

## The Cultivation Mechanisms

According to the developers, AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR is a simulation and management game integrating rogue-like characters, survival, role-play, and strategy elements.<sup>24</sup> This official description of the game does not capture the “cultivation” in the game's title, but “cultivation” undergirds the game. The imaginary in-game setting is full of cultivation practitioners, mysterious creatures, and *qi*-energy, and has a tranquil environment. The game begins on a randomly generated map, where the game

23 Ni 2020b.

24 See the “about the game” section on the Steam store page: <https://tinyurl.com/24hzmfvh> [accessed 31 August 2022].

player initially controls three character-practitioners with several abilities weighted unequally (in the basic mode). The game player is expected to manage the character-practitioner such that they will collect natural resources, settle down properly in the game world, survive periodical or occasional challenges, and, finally, become transcendent by completing the cultivation process.

Thanks to the continuous updates since 11 January 2019, when the early access version was available on the Steam platform, the game has been significantly expanded.<sup>25</sup> As well as the human character-practitioner, game players can now select an anthropomorphised animal which gains strength to participate in the game world. The cultivation practice is elaborately categorised into two kinds – spiritual and corporeal – and the developers have even designed numerous talismans, garments, precious weapons, and treasures which can collectively enhance the mysterious power of the character-practitioner. Bifurcated storylines and random events break through the limitations of a single-line narrative, and the ever-increasing designed architecture and landscapes amplify the imagination of the cultivation world for the game player. This content distinguishes AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR in terms of gaming experience and cultural traits, and it also enables game players to experience a digital cultivation world. Cultivation, once an esoteric tradition in Daoism, is simulated visually on the computer screen.

## Role and Ability

The very first step in the game is to generate the character-practitioners, generally three as default in classic mode. In the following section, only the human character-practitioner will be discussed, in order to aid the focus in content and the direction of the analysis. After being randomly generated, a character-practitioner takes its shape in the centre of the screen, next to two sections: basic information (left) and skills (right) (figure 1). The basic information section shows personal records and six qualities, with the latter, which heavily influence the character-practitioner's capabilities, illustrated with a radar chart (figure 1, left). The six qualities are:

25 The updates mentioned in this paragraph have been announced by the production team in the development log since 2019. For a concise summary, see Steam 2020. "Early access" is a game development strategy permitted by the Steam platform: the developer releases a demo on the platform for purchase while the game is still in development, to get feedback from players.



Fig. 1: The board with the basic information and skills of an in-game character.

**Potential (POT):** The character-practitioner’s training potential, which is related to the age and background of the character.

**Perception (PER):** The character-practitioner’s ability to explore and gather intelligence from the outside world, which affects the character-practitioner’s vision and efficiency.

**Constitution (CON):** The physical strength of the character-practitioner. This value affects lifespan, resistance to temperature, and efficiency of their manual labour.

**Charisma (CHA):** The ability to gain favour from other character-practitioners in social interactions in the game.

**Intelligence (INT):** The character-practitioner’s ability to think, and a value affecting the learning speed in the game.

**Luck (LUK):** This value affects the chances of a character-practitioner encountering a random event in the game.

On the right-hand side, there is a table measuring the skills of the character-practitioner (figure 1, right). The values of the skills depend on the six qualities visualised in the board of basic information. Furthermore, the level of skill will be upgraded if the character-practitioner shows commitment to a specific job in the game. The unbalanced values allow the player to assign jobs and tasks in the gameplaying according to the character’s talent. The twelve skills are categorised into three sections: labour, delicate (i. e., elaborate work), and cultivation.

**Labour:** the four skills in this section provide the initial efficiency of manual labour: “mining”, “farming”, “construction”, and “crafting” collectively affect the survival of the character-practitioner in the game.

**Delicate:** this section includes four components: “social”, “artisanry”, “cooking”, and “medicine”. The social ability affects the interaction between character-practitioners, and the values of artisanry, cooking, and medicine influence the quality of the artworks, aliments, and medicaments produced by the character-practitioners. The latter three skills contribute to self-cultivation because of the manufacturing of talisman and elixir.

**Cultivation:** this group consists of “battle”, “qi sense”, “magic”, and “magic crafting”, which are directly related to self-cultivation practices. The “battle” value indicates the performance in the battle against enemy or demonic creature. The “qi sense” affects the maximum *qi*-energy that will be consumed in self-cultivation. The “magic” ability determines the proficiency of artifact mastery, spells, and spiritual protection when a character-practitioner starts cultivation practices. Magical crafting measures the character-practitioner’s ability in alchemy and the crafting of spiritual items.

From the start, the capabilities of the character-practitioner are clearly labelled and quantified, although the implication of these indexes will be unclear to gamer players unfamiliar with self-cultivation and Daoist cosmology. However, the quantification of the character-practitioner’s abilities provides the game player with a clear reference sheet according to which the virtual roles and, accordingly, gameplaying strategy can be tailored. Self-cultivation, a famously esoteric religious practice here becomes a project that can be managed in light of the addition or subtraction of numbers; both the character-practitioner and the self-cultivation practice are considerably “rationalised” via quantitative principles, as will be discussed latter in the article.

## The Five Elements and the Fengshui System

The application of the five elements (or five phases) makes the game distinctive (figure 2). According to Chinese traditional cosmology, the taxonomy of five elements – fire, water, earth, metal, and wood – creates a universal principle for the classification of the nature of all things. Since 2nd–1st century BC, the five elements have formed a quinary taxonomy which has been widely applied to

	<b>Symbolic Colour in the Game</b>	<b>To Create</b>	<b>To Destruct</b>
<b>Metal</b>	Gold	Water	Wood
<b>Wood</b>	Green	Fire	Earth
<b>Water</b>	Blue	Wood	Fire
<b>Fire</b>	Red	Earth	Metal
<b>Earth</b>	Brown	Metal	Water

Table 1

astrology, political theory, medicine, and Daoism.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, the interaction between any two of the five natures is positively or negatively correlated. The positive correlation is called “to create” 生, whilst the negative correlation is “to destruct” 克, and those correlations are summarised in Table 1:

The game adopts the idea of five elements. In the game every material object has at least one of the five elements, and the main element defines the elemental nature of that object. For example, for a willow tree standing by a lake, the main element is wood, while the minor element is water and the elemental nature is also wood. The self-cultivation technique selected for the character-practitioners, which is called “law” in the game, is also characterised by one of the five elements. For example, the default “True Sun Refining Law” with which the character-practitioner starts the cultivation process is defined by the fire element in nature. Once a game player activates a certain installation in the game, the five-element feature of every object is visualised with a bar chart. In the character-practitioner’s individual board the game player can review the five-element feature of the character-practitioner’s cultivation technique. The idea of the five elements is transferred into statistics and image, in line with what the developers have done with the character-practitioner’s abilities and skills.

26 For astrology and politics, see Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 53; 62–63; Hendrichske 2000, 13–137; for medicine, see Engelhardt 2000, 89.

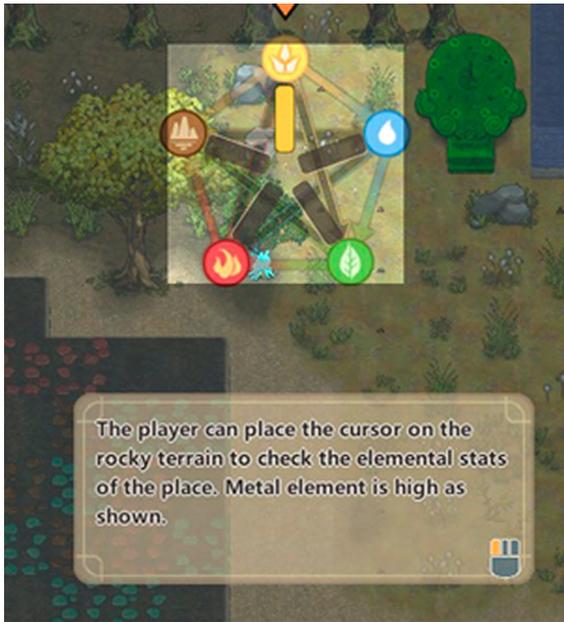


Fig. 2: An example of the five elements statistics in the game.

The correlation between the elements “to create” and “to destruct” is also applied in the game. Whether two objects affect each other positively or negatively depends on the elemental nature behind them: a water object positively affects a wood object because according to the elemental correlation, water creates wood; a water object negatively affects a fire object because of their destructive relations. The five-element mechanism in the game can be summarised as follows:

Object A causes a negative effect on object B, whose element is defined as being destructed by object A’s element; similarly, object A positively influences object C, whose element is considered to be created by object A’s element.

The elemental nature and correlation allow the game player to maximise the efficiency of cultivation. For example, with fire-nature “True Sun Refining Law”, the game player may construct a cultivation venue with wooden building materials for the character-practitioner or may simply make the character-practitioner practise in an arboreous landscape because the wood-nature environment has a beneficial effect for the fire-nature cultivation technique (figure 3).

The elemental nature of the object and the mutual effect among the elements support the designing of *fengshui* as part of the game. *Fengshui*, which is translated as “geomancy”, but literally means “wind and water”, is a series

of ideas and practices which evaluate and manage (generally to optimise) the *qi*-energy in the physical human environment.<sup>27</sup> A space with good *fengshui* is regarded as positive for health and fortune, and the harmonious co-existence of the five elements is indispensable for a favourable *fengshui* condition. The game player can optimise the residential *fengshui* environment in light of the five-element interactions in the game. For example, if the game player installs an iron bed (metal nature) in a bedroom surrounded by mud walls (earth nature), the *fengshui* of this room will automatically be reckoned by the system to be positive, as according to the five-element interactions, earth creates the metal. The character-practitioners favour *fengshui* conditions that are beneficial for their mood and cultivation practices, while the game player can play with the five-element interactions and *fengshui* in order to rationally accelerate the cultivation process of the character-practitioner.

## The Process of Cultivation

In the game, the cultivation process is made up of five sequential phases: “qi shaping”, “core shaping”, “golden core”, “primordial spirit”, and “demi god”. Before the “qi shaping” phase, the character-practitioner is a novice who has not yet begun the cultivation process, but the character-practitioner becomes transcendent once the “demi god” phase has been reached. In order to accomplish the cultivation process from “qi shaping” to “demi god”, the character-practitioner has to acquire sufficient cultivation points to progress phase by phase, which is functionally equivalent to a point and level-based mechanism of progression in a role-playing game. For example, a character-practitioner must gain 1,200 cultivation points to satisfy the “qi shaping” phase. Each phase of the cultivation process has several “limits”, normally at the middle and the end. The “limit” can be understood as an obstacle which the character-practitioner must diligently acquire extra cultivation points to overcome, which is in turn necessary in order to continue the cultivation progress. As figure 4 shows, if a character-practitioner chooses the default cultivation technique “True Sun Refining Law”, there are three limits in the “qi shaping” phase: “innocence”, “sympathy”, and “sensibility”, and the character-practitioner will be able to proceed to the next phase only if the “sensibility” limit has been overcome.

There are several methods for acquiring cultivation points. The principal method is to meditate, while the game player can also instruct the charac-

27 Feuchtwang 1974, 6–8.

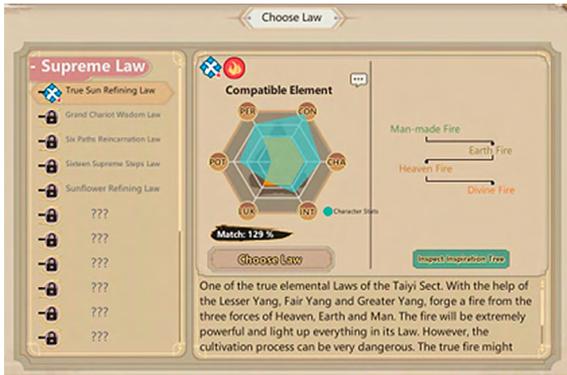


Fig. 3 The board of a Law.



Fig. 4: The cultivation board of an in-game character.

ter-practitioner to consume special items, such as elixir and medicine, to accumulate points. The efficiency in gaining cultivation points corresponds to the character-practitioner’s qualities and the five elements system, which we have already encountered. The character-practitioner whose “delicate” and “cultivation” skills are higher can produce special items of better quality and meditate more professionally, both of which can accelerate the accumulation of cultivation points. If the character-practitioner lives and cultivates in a place with good *fengshui*, cultivation points will increase more quickly (as shown in figure 4, as “element” in the top-right box).

## The Reconfiguration of Daoist Cultivation

The production team use the game’s cultivation mechanisms to systematise the cultivation practices in the game, an indication of the developers’ passion for the cultivation tradition and their efforts to create a world of the

transcendent for the game. Cultivating transcendent is intricately related to the character-practitioner's abilities, the randomly generated landscape, game player's strategy, etc., and a set of cultivation terms assist in forming the conceptual world of the religious practice. In addition to this in-game design, the cultivation atmosphere is deliberately maintained by the production team on Steam. For example, in the development log where the team announces game updates, the game players are named "friends of Dao". The team is appreciative of the game's overwhelmingly positive reviews, which show the developers' efforts are recognised by game players:

when we saw such comments as "the production team knows about Cultivation" and "this is the *real* Cultivation", we were really excited, and we felt that our painstaking efforts were not wasted.<sup>28</sup> [1]

As a video game player, I understand the joy of resonances between player and developer, but as a researcher of Daoism and modern Chinese history, I am wary of this statement about the "authenticity" of religious practices. To some extent, the production team agreed with the comment, namely, they too saw "real cultivation" as a goal. This raises the issue of the nature of "real cultivation" and encourages us to consider the extent to which the cultivation in the game is consistent with the religious tradition and whether that cultivation is has been reconstructed in light of the contemporary context. The following section will examine the "authenticity" of cultivation designed in the game.

## The De-emphasis of Religious Context

As suggested in AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR, cultivation practices consist of meditation and the consumption of an herbal and mineral potion, with the magical support of precious objects that are rich in *qi*-energy. The game design corresponds to cultivation instructions recorded in early Daoist scriptures dating back to the third and fourth centuries, for example *The Book of the Yellow Court*, to which we will shortly turn.<sup>29</sup> Cultivation practices in the Daoist tradition aim to transform the practitioner's body by purifying the postnatal *qi*-energy to coalesce with the atemporal energy, which

28 For Chinese original see Appendix 1; Steam 2022.

29 Schipper 1993, 132–133.

is the purest energy and omnipresent in the cosmos according to Daoist cosmology. Once the coalescence of energy is accomplished by practising meditation, the human body is empowered to obtain longevity and eventually become transcendent.<sup>30</sup> By meditating, the practitioner can cleanse all desire so that the heart and mind enjoy internal tranquillity, the fundamental process required to purify the contaminated postnatal *qi*-energy and the essence/spirit. At an early stage of religious Daoism, alchemist Ge Hong (283–343) spoke of the essential character of this practice:

The method of learning transcendent is to achieve tranquillity and indifference, to cleanse superfluous cravings, to look inward and listen back, and to live mindlessly.<sup>31</sup> [2]

Meditation is well refined and accompanied by several techniques in Daoist scriptures. According to *The Book of the Yellow Court* 黃庭經 (ca. 3rd–4th century), a practitioner should fast on certain days in order to calm the mind and body and then visualise the deities inhabiting their body in order to acquire divine assistance and power.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the practitioner is expected to pay homage to the divine agents in regular rituals. From the 10th century, meditation, also known also as “internal alchemy”, became increasingly influential with the rise of the Daoist School of Complete Perfection 全真. According to *Anthology of Central Harmony* 中和集 by Daochun Li 李道純 (late 13th–14th century), Completing Perfection aims to “perfect the essence 精 (*jing*), perfect the *qi*-energy 氣 (*qi*) and perfect the spirit 神 (*shen*)”.<sup>33</sup> This process is divided into three stages: refining essence into *qi*-energy 煉精化氣 (*lianjing huaqi*), refining *qi*-energy into spirit 煉氣化神 (*lianqi huashen*), and refining spirit and reverting to Emptiness 煉神化虛 (*lianshen huaxu*). However, the cultivation practice in the game erases any differentiation within Daoism and disconnects meditation from the Daoist context, thus removing the richness of the engagement with the deities and also conceptual understandings of the human body and mind. The produc-

30 Liu 2009, 161–162; Yamada 1989, 100–101.

31 For Chinese original see Appendix 2; Daoist Canon 2004, vol. 25, nos 1, 6.

32 For comprehensive studies of *The Book of Yellow Court*, see Robinet 1993, chap. 2; Verellen and Schipper 2004, vol.1, 92, 96; for the original scripture, see Daoist Canon 2004, vol. 23, nos 1, 2.

33 Daoist Canon 2004, vol. 27, nos 14, 279, 293; for explanation of meditation terms and techniques, see Despeux 2008, 562–563.

tion team's words make evident its indifference to Daoist deities and this reinterpretation:

In fact, putting aside the content of metaphysics, the spirit of the Golden Core is a ritual of removing the false and keeping the truth, and clarifying the mind...[to] cultivate truth 真 (zhen) in ourselves. Such pursuit has been advocated by Chinese nation since the ancient time, and we have been taught from childhood that this is the truth of the unity of knowledge and action.<sup>34</sup> [3]

The idea of “clarifying the mind” resonates with Ge Hong’s suggestion that meditation is a means “to cleanse superfluous cravings”, but several ruptures between the cultivation in the game and the Daoist tradition are worth noting. At the beginning of this statement, the production team draws a boundary against “the content of metaphysics”. In the original text, the Chinese term for “metaphysics” is “*Xuanxue*” 玄學, which means mysterious learning or superstitious knowledge. In the history of Daoism, *Xuanxue* refers to a 3rd century school of ideas in northern China, when thinkers became involved in philosophical discussions of Daoist concepts, such as Dao and Emptiness, whilst practising Daoist meditation.<sup>35</sup> In the contemporary Chinese context, *Xuanxue* is somewhat stigmatised, as it implies deviation from the reality and the idea of the mystical, such as religious worldviews and miracles. Therefore, by excluding *Xuanxue*, the production team make evident that they intended to explain Daoism neither from a philosophical point of view nor in terms of polytheism and cosmology. Even though the term “truth” 真 (zhen) in “cultivate truth in ourselves” is identical in terms of the Chinese character with “perfection” 真 (zhen) in Complete Perfection 全真 (Quanzhen) as defined by Daoist Daochun Li, the meanings are significantly different. While the production team emphasises the “truth of the self”, Complete Perfection Daoist Daochun Li gives the perfection of essence, *qi*-energy, and the spirit as the purpose of cultivation practice. In short, the production team de-emphasised the significance of “truth” in terms of cultivation and meditation.

The omission of Daoist polytheism also marks a difference between the in-game cultivation and the prototype in Daoist tradition. Lacking a

34 For Chinese original see Appendix 3; Steam 2022a.

35 Fung Yu-lan 1952-53, 2:168-179.

visualisation of Daoist deities, which is accented in Daoist scriptures such as *The Book of Yellow Court*, the video game separates cultivation practice from Daoism's polytheistic doctrine. The absence of that polytheistic context makes the game consistent with Yingning Chen's proposal that Daoist polytheism is irrelevant to cultivation and meditation, which is seen in terms of a transformation of Daoism in light of secularisation in the 20th century.<sup>36</sup> In his commentary on *The Book of the Yellow Court*, Chen used the terminology "visualisation of spirit" 存神 (cunshen), which requires the cultivation practitioner to concentrate on the practitioner's spirit, rather than on Daoist deities, for physical and spiritual benefits, and by doing so, he distinguished his meditation technique from the original version, which dates from the third and the fourth centuries:

"Visualisation of spirit" is different from "visualisation and imagination". "Visualisation and imagination" is ... to visualise and to imagine the clothes, crown, belt, appearance, action of hundreds of deities. Talking about "visualisation of spirit", it is to imagine nothing, rather it is to concentrate the spiritual light.<sup>37</sup> [4]

Furthermore, the production team accented the specifically Chinese character of Daoism and of cultivation practice, adopting a nationalist perspective. The Chinese nature of Daoist cultivation has been articulated with the construction of the nation-state since the early 20th century, because as a religion that emerged in China, Daoism represents inherently Chinese folk traditions. Daoism has therefore been used as the cultural basis for a Chinese identity that is under pressure from foreign influences.<sup>38</sup> The production team's nationalist discourse does not seek cultural understanding but rather declares national identity by proposing oversimplified contrasts between China and "the West":

The superheroes of western culture are basically born by chance, but our Cultivation is telling the most ordinary people to break through their own bottleneck step by step and change their lives against destiny. In western culture, people will ask God for help when encountering difficulties, but

36 Hsieh 2017; Liu 2009.

37 For Chinese original see Appendix 4; Hu/Wu 2006, 1:119; see also Liu 2009.

38 Hsieh 2017.

in our culture, we will face the obstruction of destiny, cultivate, and turn into immortals. In western culture, people always want to change the world, but in our culture, we want to be unity with the world.<sup>39</sup> [5]

## The Rationalisation of Cultivation

As the introduction to the game design above suggests, the in-game mechanisms for cultivating transcendent, for example the cultivation process, *fengshui*, and five elements, are mainly illustrated by data and images, suggesting a rationalisation of religious practice in the game. “Rationalisation” as used by Max Weber in his work on modernity is related to the “disenchantment” of the traditional – for instance, religion and custom – and its replacement by calculation aimed at the efficient management of society.<sup>40</sup> The quantification and visualisation of the in-game cultivation mean that religious practices that used to be esoteric and mysterious become instead understandable and predictable. The skills and features of the character-practitioner are all numbered, like the skill level in a role-playing game; the cultivation process is designed in light of cultivation points, accumulated in order to climb the five-step ladder of cultivation; the elemental nature of an in-game object is illustrated by a bar chart on which the ratio of five elements is quickly identified through symbolic colours. These data and charts allow game players to visualise the characteristics of their character-practitioner and the elemental nature of the various objects in the game and thus manage their character-practitioner’s cultivation, for example by enhancing the efficiency of the cultivation.

The rationalisation of cultivation practice in the game builds on Yingning Chen’s goal of reforming Daoist cultivation tradition in the 20th century. As Daoist scriptures and hagiography show, knowledge of cultivation is passed on esoterically between master and disciple, and instruction by a master is a prerequisite for practising cultivation. The transmission of scriptures and practices from master to disciple often involves a specific ritual and a mutual covenant overseen by Daoist deities.<sup>41</sup> The three phases of cultivation are illustrated in Daochun Li’s *Anthology of Central Harmony* (see figure 5).<sup>42</sup>

39 For Chinese original see Appendix 5; Steam 2022a.

40 Weber 2002, 26–28; see also Habermas 1985, 2.

41 See Mozina 2021, 2–4.

42 Daoist Canon [Zhonghua Daozang], vol. 27, no. 14, 279.

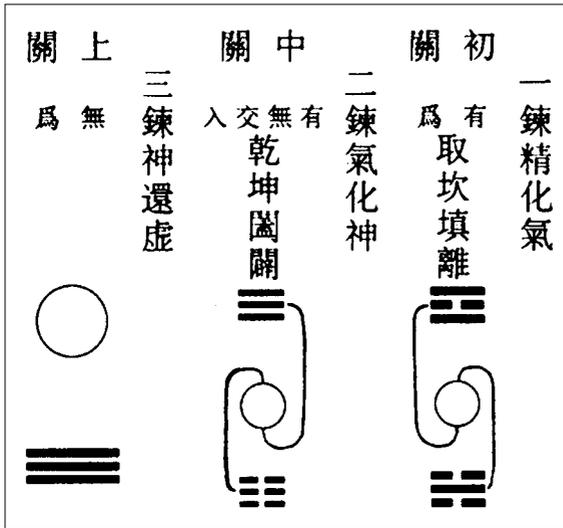


Fig. 5: The three cultivation phases and illustrations in *The Anthology of Central Harmony*.

Readers unacquainted with the symbolic meaning of the images, probably because they are not affiliated with Li’s Daoist sect, would be unlikely to find them helpful for understanding or guiding cultivation practices.

Yingning Chen attempted to remove this esoteric barrier by excluding Daoist deities from cultivation and also by publishing a great portion of cultivation knowledge publicly. Chen founded the semi-monthly journal *Yangshan* 揚善 (lit. ‘Promoting the Good’, 1933–1937) and the *Xianxue Yuebao* 仙學月報 (lit. *Monthly Journal of the Learning of the Transcendent*, 1939–1941), in which he wrote and published numerous articles regarding the methods and benefits of cultivation. According to Chen, cultivation practice is a planned and measurable series of acts that can be integrated with modern city life.<sup>43</sup> Practitioners are expected to quotidianly follow the cultivation plan, in which the duration of meditation gradually increases in a systematic way, reaching its full purpose for cultivation in five to ten years:

In order to succeed, we must work step by step, increasing our time [of meditation] day by day. If the environment is suitable, and working hard without cease, we will succeed in five years; if working leisurely with occasional interruptions, we will succeed in ten years ... The so-called five or

43 Hu/Wu 2006, 1:427.

ten years is based on calculation which is an accumulation ... Start with one hour, then add 20 seconds a day, then three days to one minute, then thirty days to ten minutes, then six months ... to 60 minutes, namely, [after six months] you add one more hour.<sup>44</sup> [6]

In Chen's perception, cultivation practice is not elusive but comprehensible, and the accomplishment of the cultivation process is attainable and calculable, albeit requiring an elaborative accumulation of effort. Therefore, in Chen's view, a practitioner's routine should be rationally managed for the purpose of cultivation, an approach echoed by the structure of the cultivation practice in the game.

## The Influence of Literature and Video Games

Although AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR highlights cultivation in its title, many settings in the game stray from Daoism and cultivation tradition, elements such as the video game's survival simulation mechanics and the in-game interactions with other martial arts disciplines. Those non-Daoist elements suggest a diversity of influences on the development of the game, which was confirmed by the game's developer in an interview:

Attracted by AI-powered "story generator" of RimWorld, (we) realised that this is a possible method to create a world ... Based on the understanding of classic martial-art novel *Legend of Shushan Swordsman* 蜀山劍俠傳 and the influential online literature *Cultivation Legend of a Mortal* 凡人修仙傳, we decided to create a *reliable* world of cultivation with principally the classical settings (of cultivating transcendent) and supplementarily (ideas from) the online novel.<sup>45</sup> [7]

The admiration of RIMWORLD (Ludeon Studios, CA 2018) reflected in the gameplay marks a difference between AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR and earlier video games interested in cultivation. RIMWORLD is a construction and management simulation video game officially released in 2018. In the 2D plan, game players, supervising from above, direct the in-game characters in dealing with the survival challenges. Most interestingly, the game

44 For Chinese original see Appendix 6; Hu/Wu 2006, 1:427.

45 For Chinese original see Appendix 7; The interview can be found at Fotuo 2022.

is generated by an AI storyteller, who estimates the game player's current situation and produces random in-game events, which makes the game's narrative irregular and challenging<sup>46</sup> According to its 98.28 per cent positive reviews and its high ranking on the top-sellers list on Steam, RIMWORLD is an outstanding example of its genre.<sup>47</sup> Its graphic design and the automatic AI storyteller were a good solution in light of game developer GSQ Studio's lack of personnel and financial means. Its similarity with RIMWORLD in terms of game graphics and user interface led AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR to be accused of plagiarism during the period of early access (see figures 6 and 7), even though the design of the 3D character was in fact inspired by earlier Chinese role-playing games. Since the late 1990s, the Chinese game market has contained martial art games with fantasy features: for example, SWORD HEROES' FATE 劍俠情緣 (Seasun, CN 1997-) and CHINESE PALADIN: SWORD AND FAIRY 仙劍奇俠傳 (Softstar, TW/CN 1995-) are famous Chinese role-playing game series. Both involve Daoist elements such as transcendence and priesthood. In fact, the three game developers of AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR are former employees of Seasun 西山居, the game development company responsible for the SWORD HEROES' FATE series. They resigned as a group and devoted themselves to their own divergent cultivation-themed project, although their professional experiences exemplify the interpersonal connections within the Chinese video game industry.<sup>48</sup>

The game development was considerably inspired by martial arts fiction and an online novel. As GSQ Studio's statement notes, *Legend of Shushan Swordsman* (1932–1948), in which various martial arts schools interact within an imagined society, marked the beginning of martial arts fiction as a literary genre, while *Cultivation Legend of a Mortal*, a widely read cultivating transcendent online novel, signifies the influence of contemporary literature.<sup>49</sup> These novels participate in the game world by providing references with which the players are familiar. For example, a prototype of the 'Shushan sect' 蜀山派 in the game, proficient in sword-related martial arts, is found in *Legend of Shushan Swordsman* and in other works that have enjoyed popularity since the 1980s. In the game, the practitioner must upskill through the hierarchical system of cultivation by overcoming challenges

46 For the introduction of the gameplay and AI-powered generation, see Wiltshire 2016.

47 Reference to the store page on Steam, <https://tinyurl.com/55e5jzay> [accessed 31 August 2022].

48 For the creation of the production team, see the interview in Chinese, Brother B. 2018.

49 Ni 2020a, 8.



Figs. 6 and 7: A comparison of graphics for AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR (above, 6) and RIMWORLD (below, 7).

and consuming a magical potion, a process common in online literature such as *Cultivation Legend of a Mortal*.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, GSQ Studio claimed that the authenticity of the cultivation world is sustained through reference to Daoist tradition and contemporary lit-

50 Ni 2020a, 9–10.

erature, implying that cultivating transcendent features in diverse narratives. In light of the cultural and practical ruptures with the Daoist cultivation tradition, those interested in cultivation might import elements from literature and video games in order to construct a logical and self-consistent world of cultivation. In the case of AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR, contemporary cultivation novels, which are mainly released online, satisfy this need. The novel enriches the content of the game, and at the same time it allows readers who are already familiar with the imagined world envisioned in the online novel to find pleasure and empathy in the game. In other words, the cultivation online novel has, through its influence and its considerable readership, merged into contemporary understandings of cultivation. The popular genre of cultivation literature is juxtaposed with Daoist cultivation traditions, which means that the contemporary interpretation of Daoist cultivation cannot rid itself of the influence of that literature, even though there are many differences between the two. The in-game cultivation is regarded as “authentic” by both game players and game developers not only because it contains reminders of Daoist cultivation before its institutional and doctrinal transformation in the 20th century, but also because it presents a contemporary reconfiguration of cultivation to which various factors, not just Daoist tradition, contribute.

## Conclusion

As the analysis in this article has shown, the statement that AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR “is real cultivation” is suspect; in fact the game satisfies only some players’ imagination and expectations of cultivation. The cultivation mechanisms in the game borrow techniques and ideas from the Daoist cultivation tradition which is recorded in the Daoist scriptures, but the interpretation and the representation of cultivation continues with concepts and discourses from the 20th century. The 20th century witnessed the institutional and conceptual transformation of Daoism according to modern ideologies imposed by secular polities. Cultivation in this period has therefore been reshaped, with the variation from the pre-modern model emphasised. Given the changes to the cultivation tradition and to the historical context, it is difficult to be certain that in-game cultivation practice is “authentic”, not least as the production team does not explicitly identify the game’s historical prototypes for its cultivation mechanics. Further, the in-game cultivation is actually a hybrid of Daoist cultivation tradition and cultivation

online novels and contains references to analogous games in the market. As a popular genre distributed via online platforms, cultivation novels offer contemporary readers a variety of imaginative cultivation worlds and in this way are integrated into Daoist cultivation. Instead of presenting a “real cultivation”, the gameplay experience satisfies the player’s idea of cultivation, especially for individuals who are already familiar with cultivating online novels. By analysing the game AMAZING CULTIVATION STIMULATOR, this article has demonstrated the significance of video games for the reconfiguration, through contemporary representation, of Daoist cultivation.

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## Appendix: Chinese Excerpts

- [1] 當我們看到‘製作組是懂修仙的’，‘這才是真正的修仙’這樣的評價，真的倍感振奮，也覺得認真考究的心血沒有白費。
- [2] 學仙之法，欲得恬愉淡泊，滌除嗜慾，內視反聽，屍居無心...
- [3] 其實拋開那些玄學的內容，結丹在精神上講的是去偽存真，明確心念的儀式。所謂修真，修的這個真，其實指的就是自我的真實，這樣的追求本身就是我們中華民族自古以來所提倡的東西，我們從小就被教育，知行合一便是這個道理。
- [4] 存神與存想不同，存想者...存想百神之衣裳、冠帶、形容、動作。.....若夫存神，則無所想，不過將神光凝聚於一點.....
- [5] 西方文化的超級英雄，基本都是機緣巧合而生，我們修仙卻在講最平凡的凡人一步步突破自身瓶頸，逆天改命。當西方文化講究遇到困難向諸神求救，我們修仙講面對天道的阻撓，渡劫成仙。當西方文化講改造世界，我們修仙講天人合一。
- [6] 若要成功，必須工夫一步緊似一步，逐日增加時間。設環境適宜，工夫急進，一日不斷，五年可成；若工夫緩進，偶有間斷，十年可成；.....所謂五年十年，其中有個計算，就是按每天逐漸增加之數積累上去，到某種程度為止，並非隨意虛擬一個數目以寬慰自心。最初從一個鐘頭做起，每天加二十秒鐘，三天加到一分鐘，三十天加到十分鐘，半年一百八十天，加到六十分鐘，即是加一小時。
- [7] 當時我們被《Rimworld》故事生成器這個設計模式所吸引，並意識到這是一種具備可行性的創造世界的方法。.....又因為對修仙題材的喜愛，基於對《蜀山劍俠傳》這樣的古典仙俠小說，還有《凡人修仙傳》這樣的經典網文的理解，所以我們決定要以古典設定為主網文為輔的方式創造一個可信的修仙世界。

# Paradise Lost – and Found Again

## METRO 2033, the Ghosts of the Past, Moral Choices, and Game Rewards

### Abstract

This article focuses on memories of the past and moral values in the video game METRO 2033: REDUX (4A Games / Deep Silver, UA/AT 2014). The game, situated in a post-apocalyptic Moscow and based on a book by the Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky, is focused on the adventures of Artyom, with whom the player identifies, in the metro system. On their journeys, players face different situations and decisions, to which they can choose how to react. Furthermore, in this dystopian world the player not only travels through different tunnels, but also encounters memories of a lost past and different belief systems. Unbeknownst to the gamer, almost every segment of this journey holds an invisible moral evaluation, which will grant the player “moral points” if passed. The balance of moral points then defines the possible endings of the game.

Drawing on approaches in the study of historical narratives in video games, this article analyses the romanticisation and criticism of the past shown in the game as well as the various categories and situations in which moral points are awarded, exploring how they are related to moral values and how they affect the gaming experience. In addition, characters with different belief systems are present both in the book and, to a limited extent, in the game, and this article will reflect on the representations and role of beliefs throughout the Metro series.

### Keywords

METRO 2033, Video Game Studies, Moral Values, Post-apocalyptic, Archaeogaming

### Biographies

**Sina Krottmaier** is a research assistant at the Centre for Information Modelling – Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Graz. She is interested in video game studies and in 3D modelling. Her research interests focus on the representation of the past and of different cultures, alternative timelines, and horror in video games. **Chiara Zuanni** is a tenure-track assistant professor in Digital Humanities, museology-focused, at the Centre for Information Modelling – Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Graz. Her research focuses on data practices and digital media in the heritage sector, on social media and digital cultures in memory institutions, and on the creation and mediation of knowledge in museums.

## Introduction

Video games often reproduce a lost past and reference different cultures and beliefs, which might in turn have an influence on the game experience. Within the field of cultural heritage, serious games are being developed within research projects or cultural organisations to enable different forms of engagement with the past and to disseminate – through a gaming format – specific knowledge. In parallel, archaeogaming<sup>1</sup> is an emerging field in which video games are studied for their representation of the past and their use of past technologies (as in retro-gaming) and are excavated to uncover layers of code and development decisions that influenced the construction and final rendering of the game story. Games can be analysed with reference to the programming and design of the final product, their inclusion of different storylines, and their reference to other cultural products, while gamers' cultures can also be studied through both qualitative and quantitative methods.

This article is a case study of the video game *METRO 2033: REDUX* (4A Games / Deep Silver, UA/AT 2014), which is set in a post-apocalyptic Moscow, whose remains fascinate and confuse the main characters. Rather than being set in the past, the game prefigures a rupture in history – a nuclear apocalypse – which a group of humans survive. Looking back at the imagined heritage of a pre-apocalypse society, mirroring its beliefs and factions, and conjuring with tropes of this past life, the game presents an original perspective on our habit of romanticising the past.

In this article we discuss how the pre-apocalypse times are romanticised and presented in the game, with a particular emphasis on beliefs and social organisations from the past, rather than representations of cultural heritage. Within this context, we focus particularly on the figure of Khan, a sort of spiritual guide through the tunnels of the Moscow underground. First, we present the game and then we briefly discuss the representation of past physical remains, beliefs, and social groups, before introducing the emblematic figure of Khan. In parallel, we note how the player has the possibility of getting rewards by making moral choices in different stages of the game, and how those ultimately influence the game narrative and its finale. We argue that visions of the past, moral choices, and gaming experiences are

1 Reinhard 2018.

closely connected in the video game, revealing how memories and empathy could contribute to making history – at least in the fictional world of the Metro series.

## METRO 2033: REDUX

METRO 2033: REDUX is a video game based on the first book of the Metro book series, by the Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky. The Metro series is a trilogy, consisting of the novels *Metro 2033*, *Metro 2034*, and *Metro 2035*, which Glukhovsky began publishing in 2002<sup>2</sup> (at first, self-published online; since 2005 published first by Eksmo and then by Popularnaja Literatura<sup>3</sup> and translated worldwide). All the books take place in the Moscow metro and are set in the 2030s. Following a global nuclear war in 2013, the city of Moscow was destroyed, and its underground tunnels became a shelter for the residents. Here, the surviving population developed its own social system, with its own factions and relationships. The society in the metro includes old ideologies (such as communism and nazism) and religious beliefs (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses), as well as new political and religious groups and also cults.

For the purposes of this article, we focus primarily on the first book in the series and its video game adaptation, as they share not only a dystopian world but also a narrative and main protagonist. The main character in Metro 2033 (book and game) is Artyom, a 24-year-old who lives in the metro station VDNKh. Following the discovery of the increased presence of the Dark Ones – a new species that evolved in the nuclear-contaminated external environment – in the underground, Artyom is tasked with heading to Polis, a conglomerate of closely related stations in the heart of the metro, to raise the alarm. Throughout his travel to the core of the Moscow metro, Artyom encounters different groups and explores the variegated society of the metro.

The video game adaption (as well as its sequels) was developed by the Ukrainian studio 4A Games, which approached Glukhovsky proposing an adaption of the book.<sup>4</sup> Glukhovsky was impressed by the studio's work and accepted,<sup>5</sup> becoming actively involved in translating the narrative to this

2 Krasnogorodskaya 2015; Severin 2018.

3 Schatte n. d.

4 McKeand 2018.

5 Garratt 2010.

different medium and paying particular attention to maintaining the consistency of the story and the meaning of the novel.<sup>6</sup> The original version of the game is no longer easily available and in this article, we refer to its remastered version, METRO 2033: REDUX, which is currently available in multiple stores. The main differences between the two versions of the game lie in graphic improvements and a limited restructuring of the levels.<sup>7</sup> However, the overarching narrative and game design have been maintained and thus the two versions are closely related to each other and to the book.

## The Past in METRO 2033: REDUX

Video games have often used the past, its remains and its beliefs and cultures, as a setting and source of inspiration for their narratives and designs. As Michał Mochocki notes, in recent years, “[t]he critical attention has shifted from factual (in)correctness to counterfactual play; from historical accuracy to perceived authenticity”.<sup>8</sup> As Aris Politopoulos and Angus Mol write, “video games are a crucial form of digital heritage because they can offer us *concepts* of the past, ways of thinking in, around, and about the past, as well as experiences of the past through play”.<sup>9</sup>

Archaeogaming has contributed to highlighting the uses of the archaeological past and archaeology as a discipline, and also raises questions of authenticity. In particular, “archaeogaming”, a term first proposed by Andrew Reinhard in 2013,<sup>10</sup> focuses on the study of archaeology in and of video games. Colleen Morgan emphasised how archaeologists research “the history and materiality of archaeological games as artifacts”,<sup>11</sup> including excavation of video games’ material remains, analysis of archaeological representations in video games, and participation in the creation of video games. Reinhard has identified five key areas of concern for archaeogaming researchers: (1) the study of “physical videogames as well as the metadata surrounding the games themselves”, (2) a focus on reception, i. e. “the study

6 Bitmop/Glukhovskiy 2010.

7 Kamen 2014.

8 Mochocki 2022, 840.

9 Politopoulos/Mol 2021, 90, italics in the original.

10 Reinhard 2013.

11 Morgan 2016.

of archaeology within videogames”, (3) “the application of archaeological methods to synthetic space”, (4) a focus on game design and how it affects players’ experiences and interactions, and (5) “the archaeology of game mechanics and the entanglement of code with players”.<sup>12</sup> This framework provides an useful lens for observing the multiple temporal dimensions evoked in *METRO 2033: REDUX* through references to Moscow’s monuments, socio-political groups, names, and stories. The perception and reception of the recent past and its monuments, observable in the *Metro 2033* book and related game, is compounded in the game by its moral point system, as will be discussed in a later section.

The use of the past in the series has been highlighted from different angles in the literature. Chris Bishop has explored the use of antiquity in the *Metro 2033* book and the corresponding game, noting its importance in both contexts, despite what he identifies as a switch in narrative focus, with the novel being “a didactic allegory of Russian politics” and the game a “Bildungsroman”.<sup>13</sup> He notices how Artyom is safest in the older metro stations, built under Stalin or completed shortly after his death, and encounters more risks in the stations built more recently. Furthermore, in the game we encounter the material remains of a pre-apocalypse world, mainly by exploring the library. Emerging from the underworld through Polis’ stations, Artyom explores the former National Library, where he finds numerous books displaying “History” on their cover. As Bishop concludes, “In the virtual world of the Metro games, safety lies in the stations that adhere closest to the classical aesthetic, and hope comes in the form of classical artifacts salvaged by a hero who bears the name of an ancient goddess. All this stands in marked contrast to the books that spawned these games.”<sup>14</sup>

This attention for a past that is not here anymore is actually evident from the beginning of the game, with postcards in Artyom’s room representing “a world that was – Egyptian pyramids, Rome, Venice”.<sup>15</sup> Still, underground there are also many remnants of a more recent past, albeit incompatible with the presumed timeline of the game (which sets the nuclear war in 2013), such as Soviet posters from the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> While Bishop emphasises the

12 Reinhard 2018, 3.

13 Bishop 2020, 312.

14 Bishop 2020, 322.

15 Bishop 2020, 325.

16 Bishop 2020, 317–318.

role of antiquity in METRO 2033 (4A Games / THQ / Deep Silver UA/US/AT 2010) and METRO 2033: REDUX, Griffiths suggests that “[t]he underground station names offer a visual connection to the preapocalyptic city yet prove to be no more than reminders of society’s loss”.<sup>17</sup> Mark Griffiths argues that the Metro series can be studied in relation to “the ideological volte-face, mutated remainders, and haunting vestiges produced by catastrophe as well as their impact on society”.<sup>18</sup>

The impact of the past on society is evident in the names and social groups organising and structuring the present of the metro system: while “Polis” as the central governing group at the core of the Metro universe and the corps of “Spartans” as a policing and security force are obvious references to ancient Greece, the references to past cultures do not stop at antiquity. The merchants’ community “Hansa” takes inspiration for its name from the late medieval Hanseatic League, similarly, the “Nazi” and the “Red Line” communities obviously refer to 20th century totalitarianisms. These memories are made explicit by one of the characters, who reminisces about the Second World War, saying (in the level *War*): “I was about to go through the front line between the nazis and the communists. I’ve heard they once fought another war and that the nazis lost.”

Moreover, existing religions are also referenced at length in the book, from remains of destroyed Orthodox churches to an encounter with Jehovah’s Witnesses, in parallel to the Luddite cult of the Great Worm (whose leader admits to the falsehood of the cult while being held captive). As Frank Bosman has highlighted, video games have a long history of drawing on religion, using “religious themes, languages, images, symbolisms and the like to construct instant recognizable lores, characters and/or narratives [...], but also to stimulate the player to contemplate existential notions [...] or invite them (sometimes even force them) to behave in a way traditionally associated with religion”.<sup>19</sup> In the METRO 2033: REDUX game, owing to the game dynamic, religions are discussed at less length than in the book, and the main spiritual encounter for Artyom is with Khan, who – in the style of Virgil with Dante – guides Artyom through the metro, leading him through a tunnel invaded by ghosts while offering mentorship on the beliefs and histories of the metro.

17 Griffiths 2013, 497.

18 Griffiths 2013, 483.

19 Bosman 2019, 1.

## Longing for Past Values in Games

In a Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) session in 2016, while summarising the content of the Metro series Glukhovsky highlighted its multiple layers:

it's also about the fact that we humans never learn from the mistakes of our past. And also about the fact we always see an enemy in strangers. And also about the importance of understanding one's mission in this world correctly. And also about the ways that grown-ups try to recruit the youngsters into their sects and ideologies before they can understand anything – and so they grow up indoctrinated.<sup>20</sup>

Although Griffiths notes that the novel “shows that the apocalypse does not solely reinforce past structures, but can break them down or offer alternatives”,<sup>21</sup> the criticism of past models is clear throughout.

The failure of the classical trope of *historia magistra vitae* and the risks of excessive indoctrination of new generations emerge in the game, although to a more limited extent than in the book. For example, towards the end of the game's third chapter, the player encounters a group of communists on their way to the frontline. An exchange between three characters takes place in front of the player:

CHARACTER 1: Hello, Sergey Sergeevich! I have a neighbourhood kid here, eager to fight! A true soldier to your cause.

CHARACTER 2: We're always looking for young people who embrace our communist ideals. Very well, son – you'll be issued a weapon and uniform immediately. Now, get on the train.

CHARACTER 3: Ideals' hah! What they really want are sheep who embrace death. Forward march – to the meat grinder! Sorry, I didn't mean to spoil your dreams of glory.

This first exchange aptly demonstrates how the enthusiasm of a young person, a “kid”, is welcomed by the army, but those same ideals are harshly criticised by another observer. Shortly after, two soldiers are seen talking to each other:

<sup>20</sup> Glukhovsky 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Griffiths 2013, 503.

CHARACTER 4: There's a black capsule in my ammo pouch... what is that, an antibiotic?

CHARACTER 5: No – it's cyanide, in case the enemy captures you.

CHARACTER 4: What?! But... God forbids suicide! I'd go straight to Hell!

CHARACTER 5: Listen, altar boy – a nazi prisoner is going to Hell anyway. Trust me – the pill is faster.

CHARACTER 4: I could never take my own life!

The dialogue among these soldiers moves from the understanding of an item in the military supplies (the cyanide pill) to religious opposition to suicide and ends in the mocking of the “altar boy”, thus showing in this instance a distrust of Christian ideals. Ideals are thus shown through passionate characters, accompanied by more cynical companions who demystify these doctrines, whether political or religious.

An exception to this situation is the character of Khan, who becomes Artyom's companion, supporting him in his travel from the metro station of Sukharevskaya to that of Turgenevskaya (corresponding to the end of the game level *Dry* and the level *Ghosts*). In an unusual fashion for a first-person shooter game – which is how its Steampage identifies METRO 2033:REDUX<sup>22</sup> – the level *Ghost* is slow paced, with almost no fighting involved. Instead, the player is supposed to carefully pass shadowy figures while listening to Khan. Khan explains that these are the ghosts of the metro, trapped for eternity in these tunnels and constantly reliving the last minutes before their deaths, which Khan describes as “a harsh but not undeserved atonement of our sins”, almost reminiscent of Virgil's explanation of the punishments Dante witnesses in Hell (the *contrappasso dantesco*). In the following level, *Cursed*, Khan helps the player again and leads him to a memorial site for fallen or missing station inhabitants. Khan describes the site as a “shrine to hope”, elaborating that “even in these times, we can't relinquish the things that make us human”, suggesting that remembrance of the dead is a core aspect of being human. Here the player has the chance to inspect the memorial site, accompanied by a soundscape that resembles a Gregorian choir. Furthermore, Khan not only supports the player during these levels and contributes to the narrative, but also acts as a mentor, suggesting that – even in this fragmented post-apocalyptic society – a more open-minded and tolerant course of action is possible. In particular, Khan comments on some

22 METRO 2033: REDUX 2014.

of the new physical phenomena provoked by the war, advising Artyom, “try to get a better understanding of things before you make your judgement”, encouraging him to not label negatively phenomena he cannot understand and to look at problems from another perspective. We will see in the next section the importance of this notion.

## Moral Decision-making in Video Games

METRO 2033:REDUX includes many references to the past, including past beliefs and political factions, as discussed above. In this context, the player encounters some of these ideologies and is called upon to make choices. Moral choices are not a novelty in games, and the potential of games for fostering moral reflections has been, for example, reviewed by Michael Heron and Pauline Belford.<sup>23</sup>

Video games have used moral decision-making systems to award “karma” points, prompting the player to take ethical decisions. Indeed, some of the games listed by the gaming community as including such features date back to the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> An early example, which assigns the role of god to the player, is BLACK & WHITE (Lionhead Studios, UK 1998–2001).<sup>25</sup> In this strategy game, the player can decide whether to be a benevolent god or a cruel god, and the game design (e. g. lighting, sound) changes accordingly, thus making evident the consequences of the decisions taken by the player, with visual clues signifying what the player becomes through their actions – a monster or a peaceful “glowing” god.<sup>26</sup>

The BioShock series, especially BIOSHOCK (2K Boston / 2K Australia, US/AU 2007) and BIOSHOCK 2 (2K Marin / 2K China / 2K Australia / Digital Extremes, US/CN/AU/CA 2010), also openly implements a morality system, in this case within a first-person shooter game. In BIOSHOCK, the player’s aim is to escape a violent underwater community. In doing so, they often encounter characters called “Little Sisters” (genetically modified young girls) and their guardians, “Big Daddys” (tall man in armoured diving suits). After successfully fighting the guardians, the player has the choice to either harvest the

23 Heron/Belford 2014.

24 See, for example, data in GiantBomb 2022.

25 Black & White 1998–2001.

26 BlackandWhiteWiki, Good 2011–2022; Evil 2011–2020.

chemical substance ADAM from the Little Sister, obtaining unique abilities but killing the Little Sister in the process, or spare her. These decisions play a crucial role in the gameplay, as they determine the end of the game: killing more than one Little Sister will automatically lead to a bad ending.<sup>27</sup> *BioSHOCK 2* builds on the same moral system, but extends it with decisions regarding ending or sparing the lives of three other non-player characters (NPCs) and the option of ending the player's own life.<sup>28</sup> These decisions, asking the player to decide on the young girls' fate, on NPCs' survival, and ultimately on their own life, pose a more evident moral dilemma than in *BLACK & WHITE* and have a direct impact on the game narrative.

Another typical example of the implementation of a moral system within a game is that of the role-playing series *Fallout*, which also features much more detailed decision-making mechanics in the gameplay. For example, in *FALLOUT 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, US 2008) players can gain positive or negative karma points based on their actions and conversations.<sup>29</sup> Players get negative karma points if they steal, lie, hurt a settlement's inhabitants, or act cannibalistically. Conversely, if they donate items, save innocent inhabitants, or fight bad people, they gain good karma points. The karma points impact the companions the players can aspire to be joined by and allow them to acquire specific honour titles ("karma titles").<sup>30</sup> *FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS* (Obsidian Entertainment, US 2010) adds a reputation system, through which players gain a good reputation within a faction if they complete quests, help other faction members, or fight a rival settlement. The reputation within a faction brings either, if positive, benefits or, if negative, the hostility of the faction members.<sup>31</sup> By taking moral decisions, the players do not only impact on the course of individual short sequences affecting *only* the end of the game, but also influence the entire course of the game.

A different example of a reputation system affected by moral decision-making can be found in the *GET FAMOUS* expansion pack of the simulation game *THE SIMS 4* (Maxis, US 2014).<sup>32</sup> The *Sims* series are simulation games, where players simulate real life and can make conscious decisions

27 BioShockWiki 2007–2022.

28 BioShock 2, 2012.

29 Fallout 3, 2008.

30 FalloutWiki, 2011–2022a.

31 FalloutWiki, 2010–2022; 2011–2022b.

32 Maxis 2014.

in establishing the actions of their Sim, for example, to donate money to charity or to cheat on one's partner.<sup>33</sup> However, what is particularly interesting is that most of these actions must be seen by other Sims if they are to influence a Sim's reputation; in turn, the reputation affects the interaction with other Sims.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the indie role-play game *UNDERTALE* (Toby Fox, US 2015) takes a different approach to morality decision-making.<sup>35</sup> In this game, the players take the role of a young boy named Frisk, who fell into a monstrous underground world and is now trying to find his way back up to the human realm. The game begins with a villain who tricks players into misinterpreting the functioning of the game, by suggesting that the aim is to defeat opponents in order to increase the player's *LV*, an abbreviation commonly interpreted as *level*. Although another NPC explains to the player that they have the option of talking to the opponents, the stats of typical role-play games – experience points (EXP) and level (LV) – lead players towards the defeat-your-opponents playstyle. Only much later in the game does the player learn that in this world *EXP* stands for *executional points* and *LV* or *LOVE* for *Level Of ViolencE* – the higher these values, the greater the number of opponents killed by a player. Based on these stats, the game has three possible endings: Neutral, (True) Pacifist, Genocide. The neutral ending can be achieved by only occasionally defeating (killing) monsters, which requires Frisk to leave the monster realm alone. Achieving this ending is also a prerequisite for a True Pacifist Ending, which happens after the player has played the game to a neutral ending and then, in the course of a second playthrough, spares every monster while befriending as many NPCs as possible: this ending results in Frisk leaving this world with his new friends. Conversely, the Genocide Ending not only requires the player to kill every monster, but also affects future playthroughs, making the achievement of a True Pacifist Ending impossible – unless the player does a hard reset of the game, which means deleting all the game files.<sup>36</sup> *UNDERTALE* therefore confronts the players with their “sins” even outside the game, as their bad decisions cannot be buried in a previous gameplay without additional steps.

33 Krista 2019.

34 Krista 2018.

35 Undertale 2015.

36 Pereira 2015; UndertaleWiki, Endings, 2015–2022.

## Moral Points in METRO 2033: REDUX

METRO 2033: REDUX is therefore part of a group of games using moral decision-making as a way, hidden or explicit, to influence game experience and outcomes. The game has a series of achievements which are visible and clearly defined. These are unlocked by performing certain actions, both negative and positive, and the player can hold them as a badge on their profile. For example, the *Tank* achievement requires the player to “kill 10 enemies in a row without taking any damage”, whereas the achievement *Rescue Ranger* is obtained when the player manages to “save a group of Reds from Fascist captivity”. There are indeed many different achievements awarded for the killing of enemies, based on the number of enemies killed (from “kill a librarian” to “kill 200 Mutants”), the method of execution (for example, “headshots from at least 30 metres’ distance”<sup>37</sup> or the type of weapon used). A smaller, but no less important, amount of achievements result from good deeds, with *Generous* awarded “for being generous to Metro dwellers and donating bullets when asked. You need to give a bullet to three different people: a boy, a man and a vagrant.”<sup>38</sup> Other examples of good deeds include completing levels without killing anyone (*Invisible man*, *Merciful*) and saving military-grade rounds (rather than using them to kill others).<sup>39</sup>

In parallel to the achievements system, METRO 2033:REDUX also has a hidden moral system – evaluating players’ actions throughout the game and scoring their “good” and “bad” deeds. Based on this score, the players have the opportunity to experience an alternate ending, which differs widely from the canonical ending of the book. Moral points are awarded in response to choices by the player, such as listening and opening a conversation with other characters, sparing other characters, exploring and positively interacting with the surroundings. For example, players can gain positive moral points if they donate bullets to other characters or listen to the stories and sorrows of other station residents. Sometimes the advantages are evident, and openness to dialogue and exploration affects the gameplay directly. For example, when first meeting Khan, the player has the possibility of staying and listening to him (positive) or ignoring him and running away (negative). Khan, as mentioned, has a mentoring role and prompts the player to reflect

37 Steam 2014.

38 MetroWiki, *Generous*, 2011–2019.

39 Steam 2014.

on the possibilities of a different, non-violent, behaviour: just by listening to Khan, the player not only gets moral points, but also has a direct advantage, in that Khan “is able to shield his companions from these dangers”.<sup>40</sup> In most cases, however, the benefits of choosing a peaceful course of actions are not revealed immediately. For example, the game encourages the player to kill as many enemies as possible in order to quickly free the way ahead and continue their quest – but, as Daniil Leiderman points out, the game also “problematizes this, albeit inconsistently: while it focuses on representing violence, it allows for stealthy alternatives too”.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, players lose moral points by interrupting discussions or being unnecessarily brutal. Also in this case, the result is not immediately evident. This ambiguity makes it challenging to know what might be a morally good decision in METRO 2033:REDUX, and thus the moral tests set up by 4A Games are “easy to fail”.<sup>42</sup>

If a player’s karma balance is negative, their only option is the canonical ending, witnessing the destruction of the Dark Ones in a new nuclear strike. If, conversely, a player accumulates enough positive karma points, they will have the possibility of altering the finale – by choosing to save the Dark Ones. As Leiderman notes, therefore, “Metro’s rhetoric operates on two levels: the day-to-day decisions of how to dispense ammunition (via altruism or gunshots), and the conclusion of either enacting atrocity or avoiding it.”<sup>43</sup> As Leiderman notes, this is an ending that only a committed player who consciously chooses to avoid the most natural gameplay will be able to achieve:

METRO 2033 promises the player agency and then drives them along a literal railroad track to a tragic, canonical conclusion to the plot, through a space symbolic of the violence of such authorial impositions. It also offers alternate endings, and thus the possibility of derailing this plot, but hides them behind game mechanics, making it so that only a committed player will realize that they can change the outcome of the narrative.<sup>44</sup>

The standard ending, in line with the narrative of the book, is represented by the achievement *If It’s Hostile, You Kill It*, which will allow the player to “[b]

40 Bishop 2020, 313.

41 Leiderman 2022, 50.

42 Leiderman 2022, 50.

43 Leiderman 2022, 55.

44 Leiderman 2022, 53.

ecome a true ranger”<sup>45</sup> (i. e. a guardian of the status quo). The novel concludes with Artyom understanding that the Dark Ones are not hostile and could actually assist humans in rebuilding life in the metro; however, he cannot do anything to stop the missiles being launched to destroy the Dark Ones’ main centre. Similarly, the canonical ending of the game sees Artyom witnessing the destruction of the Dark Ones. Here, a final monologue insinuates doubt about the value of this ending, with Artyom’s last words asking, “When we burned the Dark Ones from the face of the earth, was something lost as well?”<sup>46</sup>

The alternative ending, corresponding to the achievement *Enlightened*, is described as “find the truth”.<sup>47</sup> Here, Artyom wakes up and has the time to make a choice: he sees a Dark One repeating “we want peace” and can decide to stop the missile guidance system (and hence the destruction of the Dark Ones) or let the missiles be launched, leading to the Ranger ending. The player can therefore choose to spare the Dark Ones, with the implication that the two groups of population, underground and overground, can support each other in navigating life in and around the metro. This is a rare and difficult to achieve badge given that it alters the character of a first-person shooter game by asking the player to avoid killing anyone (which is virtually possible within the game) and choose a less violent approach. In this ending, the player is responsible “for following (or not following) the game’s enactment of the novel’s plot to the final atrocity”.<sup>48</sup>

## “Playing Nice”: Prompting Changes in Gamers’ Styles

Moral points are not unique to the METRO 2033: REDUX game, as discussed above. Indeed, according to the database maintained by GiantBomb,<sup>49</sup> more than 200 video games have this feature. Despite some criticism in the gaming community,<sup>50</sup> moral points are common in game development, also

45 Steam 2014.

46 MetroWiki, Endings 2011–2022.

47 Steam 2014.

48 Leiderman 2022, 51.

49 GiantBomb 2022.

50 e.g. Parker 2009, Birch 2014, and Madsen 2020 outline the problem of morality systems that focus on good and bad and argue that morality is a greyscale. Thus Moore 2012 criticises systems that “dictate what actions are morally right and what actions are morally wrong, leaving little room for meaningful player interpretation”.

because “[i]t seems like a good way for game designers to add variety and replayability to their games”.<sup>51</sup> As demonstrated by the examples discussed above, moral points can lead to different endings, encouraging players to play the game at least a second time.

In *METRO 2033: REDUX*, the moral system does indeed support two different finales, the canonical one and the alternate ending, in which the player can choose to not destroy the Dark Ones. To achieve both endings, players have to change their playstyle according to the hidden morality system for each playthrough. For instance, if players want to achieve the canonical ending, they will play the game mostly focusing on combat and shooting, while ignoring most of the stories the NPCs and the game world have to share. Conversely, if players want to unlock the alternate ending, they have to “play nice”, which includes not only acknowledging their surroundings in the game world and the NPCs, but also sparing enemies, which means moving away from the traditional gaming style of a shooter game.

Playing nice therefore involves a drastic change in the gameplay style and its pace for the player. As Leiderman points out, this shift involves encouraging players “first, towards stealth over violence (matching the intended rhetoric); and second, encouraging them to use their knife more (not matching the intended rhetoric)”.<sup>52</sup> First-person shooters typically engage the player in combat – mainly with ranged weapons like guns – usually against multiple enemies, and they are consequently fast-paced. Additionally, resource management also plays a significant role in a player’s survival in *METRO 2033:REDUX*, owing to the scarcity of healing items, gas mask filters, or ammunition. Accordingly, the game is not only a first-person shooter, but also includes components of the survival horror genre,<sup>53</sup> which adds another set of challenges the player has to overcome, in addition to armed opponents.

If players want to play nice, they have to act contrary to the common ways of solving these challenges (e. g. engaging in combat and saving resources) and avoid most of the achievements associated with the game, such as killing a given number of enemies. They have instead to listen to the stories and sorrows the people at the stations share, respond positively to NPCs begging for ammunition – which serves as a currency in the metro – or explore their surroundings. Thus, they need to prioritise generosity,

51 Moore 2012.

52 Leiderman 2022, 55.

53 *METRO 2033: REDUX* 2014; simalcrum/IGN 2012.

patience, and curiosity over valuable and important resources like gas mask filters or ammunition. This, in turn, can make it difficult to complete certain game sequences, because players may lack the necessary resources. However, the more players renounce the traditional gaming style of the genre, the more they are likely to gain moral points, and so unlock the alternative ending – which diverges from the traditional ending of a first-person shooter game. For instance, in the level *Dry*, a level full of enemy bandits, players are not allowed to kill a single enemy if they are to get moral points. Thus, players are forced to sneak through the whole level, which takes time and patience. The same rule applies to the level *Black Station*, where the player has to go through a station filled with nazi soldiers without killing anyone if they are to gain moral points and an achievement called *Merciful*. The prompt to avoid killing is not limited to human NPCs. For example, in the level *Dead City*, players can encounter a monster and its cubs near a stash of resources. This gives the player two possibilities – kill the monster, which will leave the cubs without a mother but also provide risk-free access to the stash, or spare it, which will mean the player either has a difficult time accessing the stash unnoticed or abandons the valuable resources altogether. Sparing the monster grants the player moral points. Players can also gain moral points if they actively listen to Khan's remarks regarding the metro being the only place left for the human soul after his death, or his remarks prompting them to engage with new phenomena such as the voices of ghosts in the pipes.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the level with Khan and his character is very important for achieving the alternate ending of the game.

Furthermore, a particularly interesting example is the level *Front Line*, where the player finds themselves in the midst of the war between the Reds and the nazis of the metro. Here, the player can gain multiple moral points. The achievement of some, however, excludes the achievement of others. For instance, in the course of the level players have the option to rescue three communist prisoners. In order to do so, they have to kill some of the nazis patrolling the area. However, a moral point and the achievement *Invisible Man* are granted for not killing anyone while traversing this level. Furthermore, not killing anyone also means rescuing the communist deserter from being killed by his former comrades by knocking them out, which results in another moral point.<sup>55</sup> In short, by not killing anyone, the player seals the

54 MetroWiki, Moral Points 2010–2022.

55 MetroWiki, Moral Points 2010–2022.

fate of the three captured soldiers. If the player wants to rescue the three soldiers, he has to kill. A moral dilemma enclosed in a quest for moral points.

In conclusion, players have to deviate from the typical fast, combat-oriented gaming style of first-person shooter games in order to play nice and consequently unlock the alternate ending. Moreover, by playing nice in certain levels, players also unlock achievements, which may even be the last they need to complete their achievement hunting, a “goal-oriented way of enjoying video games to 100%”.<sup>56</sup> In short, the game encourages the players in various ways to break the typical first-person shooter gameplay cycle of killing and to alter their playing style. Moral points have a key role in both encouraging these alternative playing styles and opening up the possibility of a different ending, in which the player can choose to save the Dark Ones.

## **From Past Beliefs to Moral Values in METRO 2033: REDUX**

This article has discussed the presence of elements from the past in the Metro world. In this fictional post-apocalyptic world, set in the future (in 2033), our present (or, better, the early 2010s) has already become “past” and is equally romanticised and fictionalised. The fictional nuclear apocalypse in 2013 has left the survivors living in a metro system in which older stations are safer and many memories of the classical world and of the communist period manifest themselves. However, the world in which Artyom moves across the metro system is also a dystopian future, which brings him into contact not only with physical remains of the past but also with many beliefs and ideologies that are still influencing social relationships and structures in the Metro world.

While the book is very clear about its criticism of ideologies and religious beliefs, the game also does not shy away from commenting on the risks and contradictions of these systems. As we have seen in the chat among young communist soldiers, the use of political beliefs to recruit young people or the prohibition of suicide in religion are both directly criticised. As Glukhovsky said in his Reddit AMA, the Metro series can be interpreted as being about the “indoctrination” of young people into belief systems.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> 100Pals 2015–2021.

<sup>57</sup> Glukhovsky 2016.

At the same time, we have discussed how the game breaks the traditional gameplay of first-person shooter games by implementing a moral system that force players to consider carefully their decisions and actions. In order to complete their quest for all achievements, players have to “play nice” and interact positively with the surroundings. By doing so, they will also gain moral points, achieving the possibility of changing the finale, thus saving the mysterious Dark Ones. As Glukhovsky, again, said, the series is “also about the fact we always see an enemy in strangers”.<sup>58</sup> There are the stereotypical enemies, such as the nazis, that the gamer should refrain from killing in order to reach the alternative ending. And there is an Other, the mysterious creature that prompts fear, and thus violence, in the Metro series, as well as – far too often – in our world. Here, the player can choose to reckon that this Other, the Dark Ones, is not a danger and could potentially be a peaceful neighbour, if not an ally. Moral points not only unlock another gaming style and a different ending, but they also prompt the player to reflect on the prejudices and violence between the different factions in the fictional Metro universe. However, these moral points are hidden; a player will first of all go through the game following the rules of first-person shooter games. As a result, the gameplay will be easier and more immediate for an experienced gamer, and the ending, culminating in the destruction of the Dark Ones’ settlement, would be considered usual for this type of game. But once a player uncovers the hidden moral system, they will want to play again, in order to unlock the alternative ending. As Leiderman mentions, this implicit invitation to replay the game proposes an “escape from cyclical history”.<sup>59</sup> Glukhovsky added that the series is also about humans’ failure to learn from the past<sup>60</sup>: in the game, though, we have the possibility of learning and changing, breaking the cycle of violence and indoctrination in which past values and ideologies have enclosed the metro system.

As is suggested in archaeogaming and historical games literature,<sup>61</sup> the use of the past in games enables exploration of alternative pasts and narratives. In the case of METRO 2033: REDUX, we have encountered different aspects of the past to which players could react, in turn triggering a moral

58 Glukhovsky 2016.

59 Leiderman 2022, 53.

60 Glukhovsky 2016.

61 e.g. Politopoulos/Mol 2021; Chapman/Foka/Westin 2016.

points system within the game. This moral system forces players to go beyond the traditional gameplay of first-person shooter games, engaging with the narratives and ideologies presented in the game. Alternative pasts and futures emerge from these interactions, with the game prompting reflection on the construction of heritage narratives and values. The past therefore is not used only as a reference for a romanticised period: in METRO 2033: REDUX there was never a paradise, and ideologies had contributed to its loss. By challenging the past and adhering to a new set of moral values, the player can uncover a more hopeful ending and get closer to paradise.

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**Open Section**



# The Devil as Doppelganger

## Instinctual Faith and the Exhausted Rant of Evil in LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (US 2015)

### Abstract

LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (Rodrigo García, US 2015) portrays the devil as Jesus's doppelganger, demonstrating the rivalry between good and evil as the two compete over the efficacy of Jesus's faith. With Jesus assessing himself as he responds to the devil, the film offers a self-reflexive evaluation of faith as it is challenged by skepticism. By analyzing the film using the idea of an evolutionary faith instinct, the article presents Jesus's trust in God as empowerment that allows him to endure elements of nature and find signs of divinity. The devil's eventual exhausted impatience and his loss of his wager with Jesus bolster the applicability of a faith instinct. Ultimately, the film is an opportunity for this rendition of Jesus to be articulated in terms of evolutionary discourse.

### Keywords

LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT, Devil, Jesus, Skepticism, Instinctual Faith, Doppelganger

### Biography

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## Introduction

Interpreting Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, scholar Leon C. Meggison<sup>1</sup> describes evolution as the survival not necessarily of the strongest but of "the one most responsive to change", with "change" understood as endur-

1 Meggison 1963, 4.

ance through the physical environment. Today, change in the physical environment can be observed in light of rapid revolutions in both technology and belief systems,<sup>2</sup> which run in parallel with the pitting of religion and evolutionary theory against each other.<sup>3</sup> Yet, religious belief systems do adjust to time and social needs, because, writes Andrea Fiala, “religion is an adaptable social phenomenon”, and its “evolution will continue”.<sup>4</sup>

Cultural notions of change are illustrated in a religious cinema depiction in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* (Rodrigo García, US 2015), in which Jesus outlasts the devil, both in terms of weathering the discomfort of nature’s elements and in winning their wager. The story focuses on a display of selfless service by Jesus while the devil, as his doppelganger, stalks, challenges, and discourages him. A parallel is evident between Jesus’s initially uncertain relationship with God, on one hand, and the relational dynamics of the family he helps, on the other, both relationships that “change”<sup>5</sup> for the better due to Jesus’s faith. The film is a timely expression of the combative relationship between faith and scientific reason. Jesus’s faith and diligence demonstrate religious piety, while the devil’s questioning and boredom with Jesus’s laborious worship demonstrate skepticism about religious belief, in line with contemporary atheist rhetoric<sup>6</sup> amid a shrinking religious population.<sup>7</sup>

## Faith Instinct as Public Issue and Cinematic Display

In the years preceding the release of *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, the idea of a *Faith Instinct*,<sup>8</sup> also described as a *Belief Instinct*,<sup>9</sup> entered into public debate on evolutionary theory. In seeking to illustrate the role of belief in divinity as part of the evolutionary process, the concept proposes that committed faith in God is tied to a survival instinct, evinced through “moral rules”<sup>10</sup>

2 Danaher/Saetra 2022.

3 Ruse 2016.

4 Fiala 2022, paragraph 1.

5 Meggison 1963.

6 Hitchens 2019; Harris 2004.

7 Pew Research Center, 2015.

8 Wade 2009.

9 Bering 2011.

10 Bering 2011.

that implant unyielding religious devotion in the individual.<sup>11</sup> Human life in the natural world generates pain, but “our minds gravitate toward God in the wake of misfortune”,<sup>12</sup> so at a time of increased belief that purpose and action are driven by greater forces, such as a deity.

Faith instinct theory comes from observing that people naturally fight for their own explanation of life’s origins and purposes, and in doing so they find a reason to fight and endure difficulty for purposes that, to them, are transcendent truths, such as theological beliefs. The outcome is manifest in an internal resolve that is an evolved and “patently organic... function of the brain.”<sup>13</sup> An example is Charles Peirce’s “humble argument” that “one’s instinctive faith in God” allows one to withstand arguments that God does not exist.<sup>14</sup> Borrowing from Thomas Aquinas’s ideas on “externalism”,<sup>15</sup> Gregory Stacey describes this utilitarian power of faith as a tool for navigating the natural world. In this study, I explore the faith instinct displayed in García’s film, which depicts Jesus in a mundane setting where he battles nature’s harsh elements. The film celebrates faith as overcoming both the natural elements and the devil’s ploys, proposing a manifestation of religious faith for an increasingly science-based public context.<sup>16</sup> The plot demonstrates Jesus as superior to his adversary because of the interlinking of his faith with the elements that he battles, which brings him victory.

In the film the natural world is the setting for Jesus’s growth. First, it threatens him, but then he receives God’s messages through it, and his faith instinct enables him to utilize the physical world to overcome its threat. In this study, I argue that the devil’s concession speech to Jesus illustrates the faith instinct outlasting doubt, with religious faith celebrated for its capacity to control elements of nature. I explore this idea through the dialogue between Jesus and the devil, with specific attention to the devil’s words to Jesus, illustrating how the two characters, as look-a-likes, portray the endurance of Jesus’s faith and the lazy, impatient, self-satisfying nature of the devil. Paralleling contemporary debates between faith and reason, symbolically the film shows Jesus at the service of a struggling family.

11 Wade 2009, 1.

12 Bering 2011, 6.

13 Bering 2011, 8.

14 Trammel 1972, 19.

15 Stacey 2021, 205.

16 Funk/Tyson/Kennedy/Johnson 2020.

Despite the film's sparse demonstration of Jesus as divine, his faith is evident in his emotional and physical endurance against exigencies that the devil exploits to implant doubt into his mind. Jesus's success comes at the cost of early confusion and tragedy, as his faith instinct is tested by the cruelty of the natural world, which is exacerbated by the devil's taunts and temptations as Jesus endures the bodily discomfort of fasting. During the climax, when the devil realizes that he has lost the contest, his angry expressions are juxtaposed with the composure of Jesus. Although the devil delivers two speeches about qualities that he declares he possesses, he is later shown to lack these qualities, creating a marked comparison with Jesus's patient waiting for signs of divinity. These two oration scenes are a pivot and climax respectively for the duality of the twin characters, and they lead to Jesus's ultimate victory.

## The Doppelganger as Cinematic Motif

The doppelganger is found as a theme from ancient Egypt to the Victorian era and has been given new prominence in recent years, especially as a cinematic motif.<sup>17</sup> Present in the work of psychiatrist Otto Rank,<sup>18</sup> the doppelganger was also taken up as a psychological theme by Sigmund Freud.<sup>19</sup> Jordan Peele's celebrated *Us* (<sup>US 2019</sup>) contains the contemporary doppelganger mythos, with the evil version of a self capturing "the specter of a human being",<sup>20</sup> suggesting the suppressed evil potential of the person whom the doppelganger mirrors.

Doppelgangers in film and literature challenge the protagonists, for example in works by Plautus and Shakespeare.<sup>21</sup> The idea of good and evil dualities is captured in popular culture narratives such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*<sup>22</sup> and *The Incredible Hulk*,<sup>23</sup> both of which portray dual personalities expressed in a singular body. Hypothesizing the enactment of the evil version, cinema has doppelgangers seeking to replace or influence

17 Little 2017.

18 Rank 2014.

19 Freud 1919.

20 Little 2017.

21 Bannon 1985.

22 Stevenson 1886.

23 Lee/Kirby 1962.

their more benevolent twins. Contemporary depictions pick up on a cinematic change over time, as doubles moved from being combined parts of a singular person, to become split and dueling embodiments.<sup>24</sup>

In his review of *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, William Blizek describes the evil versions of ourselves as being “not something outside of ourselves, but rather a part of ourselves that we must overcome”.<sup>25</sup> A more recent cinematic depiction of dueling oneself is found in *THE PRESTIGE* (Christopher Nolan, US 2006), which combines the doppelganger theme with mad science. Similar stories of evil versions of selves include *THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS* (Peter Jackson, US 2002), *BLACK SWAN* (Darren Aronofsky, US 2010), *OCULUS* (Michael Flanagan, US 2013), and *THE UNBORN* (David S. Goyer, US 2009), and personalities in conflict are found in *FIGHT CLUB* (David Fincher, US 1999) and *SPLIT* (M. Night Shyamalan, US 2016). Such dueling characters allow for polarized depictions of belief systems, with the “cinematic doppelganger”<sup>26</sup> a setting for competing values and beliefs.

The lead actor in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, Ewan McGregor, has played doppelganger-like characters on multiple occasions, for example in *THE ISLAND* (Michael Bay, US 2007), in which he plays both a human and a clone, and as twin brothers with opposite personalities in *FARGO* (US 2017). McGregor’s performance as *STAR WARS* (George Lucas, US 2002) character Obi Wan Kenobi was playfully interpreted as an artistic depiction of Jesus, with memes and fan art on T-shirts, prayer candles, and paintings humorously depicting McGregor being worshipped as Jesus.<sup>27</sup> By 2015, the year in which *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* was released, McGregor had already played a role in which he was seen, humorously, as the face of Jesus and had also appeared as dual-faced doppelgangers. McGregor’s performance history draws attention to the cinematic use of the doppelganger theme, which here is used in telling the story of the biblical confrontation between Jesus and the devil during his fast in the desert. This study considers how the film explores this “good and evil coexisting in the individual”<sup>28</sup> and how the faith instinct jettisons evil.

24 Mayer 2021; Chung 2015; Cameron 2016.

25 Blizek 2015, 2.

26 Eason 2019.

27 Jesus Obi Wan 2022.

28 Lawton 1981, 121.

## Rhetorical Interlude and Rhetorical Culmination as a Cinematic Structure

The study of interludes in cinema can capture rhetorical moments within the structure of a film's themes, character arcs, and historical and cultural contexts.<sup>29</sup> In these pivotal moments, characters hear and are influenced by addresses that then drive the final scenes.<sup>30</sup> Rhetorical moments in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* capture the duel between faith and doubt that is associated here with an evolutionary process of navigating through the elements. They also revisit, in a rhetorical culmination, the wager that has been placed, with the faith instinct victorious over any appeal to doubt. Both orations are given by the devil and are addressed to Jesus, but the cumulative effect of the devil's presence in the film is to expose how the faith instinct enables the discomforts of nature to be endured.

### A Struggling Jesus

The film begins with a focus on Jesus's body as it is subject to discomforts created by nature, illustrated as he grunts from the soreness of sleeping on the hard ground and rocks back and forth in the cold wind as he prays. His early scenes of loneliness set the stage for his battles and struggles with the devil, as he asks God for strength during his isolated fast. That need is echoed by his subsequent initial inability to resolve the problems faced by the family he spends most of the film attempting to help. A key demonstration of Jesus's endurance is provided by his resilience in maintaining his faith despite his unanswered prayers, which in turn empower the devil early on to challenge and taunt Jesus. Within the first few minutes of the film, Jesus prays out loud twice, pleading with God to speak to him: "Father, speak to me", and "Where are you?" (00:05:32–00:05:37), demonstrating his initial confusion but also his hope that his prayers will be answered. The very lack of dialogue early in the film and also Jesus's repeated running away from the devil set up the value of dialogue for the film once Jesus begins conversing with and battling the devil.

29 Yergensen 2007.

30 Yergensen/Church 2022.

Jesus's confidence in his mission grows as the film progresses through his fasting and increasing recognition of God's responsiveness. Up until his dream where he sees himself hovering above a cliff, Jesus struggles with and is at the will of the elements, culminating in his inability to stop the family's father from falling off a cliff. He prays, "Am I expected to just walk away? As if I'd never met these people? As if they meant nothing to me?" (01:19:17–01:19:25). Jesus's early uncertainty and his passivity at the end of the film illustrate his growing methodical faith instinct, an evolutionary advantage over his doppelganger.

## The Devil as a Worthy Opponent

While manifesting himself as the face of Jesus throughout most of the film, the devil also taunts, tempts, and discourages Jesus with trickery, discouraging words, sexual temptations, and nightmares, as well as appearing to have a hideous tail – common in depictions of the devil<sup>31</sup> – which frightens Jesus. The devil chooses to present himself as the mirror of Jesus. The two can be distinguished only by the comparison between Jesus's humility and kindness and the devil's bravado. The devil takes on Jesus's face and the two characters share the same bodily form, one of them representing a faith instinct while the other exhibits assertive doubt. A battle for the survival of the fittest is launched, amid Jesus's preparatory fasting before his entrance into Jerusalem.

The devil mocks and taunts Jesus's efforts. Predicting that Jesus will fail to help the family, the devil utilizes different voices and physical manifestations to confuse and frustrate him. In a drawn-out scene of temptation immediately following Jesus's dream of being chased by wolves, the devil appears to him as the family's mother, in a near naked display of sexual temptation. Although Jesus resists the devil's ploy to bring him to sin, the weight of sexual temptation leaves him troubled by the range of options from which the devil can draw in his efforts to thwart Jesus's resolve and faith. The devil's commitment to doubt is juxtaposed with Jesus's efforts to endure, adding weight to Jesus's burden.

31 Howell 2007.

## The Rhetorical Interlude

After the devil has been disappointed by seeing a comet shoot across the sky, the first sign of God communicating with Jesus, Jesus confronts the devil, at night and as they sit across from each other with a fire blazing between them. The twins stare at each other as the devil recites his history with and hate for God. He uses his knowledge of God against Jesus and suggests that Jesus will be unable to save humanity. The devil's monologue illustrates his impatience with God's arduous efforts to help humanity: "The mundaneness of your father's plan is bewildering to me. The same lives lived over and over and over again. Is there a plan?" (00:44:50–00:45:02). The devil's expression of doubt turns into an insistence on quick comfort: "It all has to turn into something... And what? That is my weakness. Curiosity" (00:45:04–00:45:13).

While attempting to illustrate the qualities of Jesus's stubborn but immovable faith as he waits for God's signs, the devil pronounces his own resolve: "I'll stay as long as it takes, forever, to witness the end", a daring declaration that suggests readiness for a fight with Jesus to the end (00:44:17–00:44:21). The devil asks, "These things he expects of you, do you think anyone will care? Men of a thousand years from now?", foreshadowing a twist at the end of the film related to contemporary sentiments toward religious faith (00:45:59–00:46:07).

To install doubt in Jesus, the devil must undo the faith instinct embedded in Jesus's fasting and searching for signs. In the opening scenes, as he battles the brutality of the elements, Jesus feels worthless and fearful. The devil seeks to define God as being without signs and miracles, and therefore as no more promising than the brutal world that Jesus has been battling. With this speech detailing his perception of God, the devil prepares Jesus for his ultimate lie: that he will be there for Jesus in the end.

As the devil outlines the tragic story of the family that Jesus is helping, the climax of the interlude is the devil's declaration that Jesus is the intervener in tragedy, or the person who can "take a hand" (00:49:18–00:49:19), redirecting trajectories in God's plan, which will fail without him. The devil is an inquisitor who seeks to challenge and resist, but ultimately succumbs to, the authority of Jesus's faith, an instinct amid the pain of mortality and its difficult physical conditions. Jesus asks about the conditions for victory over his twin, agreeing to battle the devil.

This interlude sets the stage for the rest of the film – Jesus battles his doppelganger over the fate of the family just as he also battles the natural world’s bodily pain and temptations while fasting. His resilience and faith instinct enable him to emerge from both struggles, and satisfied in his union with God, he decides to leave the desert and begin his ministry in Jerusalem.

## Material Evidence of Pleading Answered

As the film focuses on the brutality of the natural world, Jesus labors daily to build a house for the family. The natural world, immediately established in the film as the setting for his challenges, begins to present itself to Jesus in manifestations of his union with God, which causes the devil to squirm and adopt the fetal position. The devil’s dissatisfaction becomes Jesus’s transcendence. The devil’s losses are evidence of God’s presence, which bolsters Jesus’s faith and illustrates, in Darwinian terms, the probability of survival through a faith instinct.

In his final battle with the elements, specifically with gravity, Jesus finds his faith strengthened by the father’s abrupt worship of him after the father’s deadly fall. The dying father’s countenance is enraptured as he recognizes Jesus’s divinity, his adoration of Jesus evident in his tearful eyes and his mouth open in awe. He touches Jesus’s face while staring into his eyes. After looking up to the sky in wonderment, as if spoken to from heaven, the father looks directly at Jesus through tears as he dies – Jesus has become the magnetizing hero figure of the biblical account. The father had not previously known who Jesus was and had referred to him with the generic term of “holy man” (00:15:07–00:15:08), but now his responses solidify Jesus’s growing awareness of his own divinity.

Stunned by the father’s dying adoration, Jesus finds his dreams supporting his faith. Where earlier he had dreamt of drowning and being chased by wolves, accompanied by scenes of the devil’s attempts to confuse and tempt him, a dream in which he hovers above the ground on the cliff ledge puts Jesus into a contemplative mindset when he awakens. At the beginning of the film he had rocked painfully, but now he sits calmly, comforted by signs of his power over the elements against which he has been struggling. The shift in his dreams shows a harmony with the elements and serves as a beginning of his victory over and command of the devil; he is now ready to

face the daunting task of entering a “dirty and corrupt” city that will crucify him (00:13:35–00:13:36).

With Jesus’s confidence strengthened by further faith-confirming signs, in the final moments of his suffering on the cross a hummingbird approaches Jesus and hovers within inches of his face, joyously fluttering up and down and bringing a tear-filled stare from Jesus. This sign comforts Jesus, who intentionally drops his head and dies – God has been manifest again through the natural world and Jesus is allowed to die in peace. The scenes that bring confidence to Jesus involve signs from God, specifically the dying father’s changed behavior and adoration, the comet, his dream of having transcended the elements, and a comforting hummingbird in his final moments. The evolutionary battle that sets faith instinct against the lack thereof plays out among the elements of the natural world – the setting in which Darwin described the evolutionary process transpiring. The survival of the fittest has come to be, as Jesus’s newfound authority over the natural world has upheld his faith, bringing him success over his enemy.

## An Evolving Jesus

God’s responses to Jesus emerge over time through signs, and so too does Jesus’s confidence in his ability to minister in Jerusalem emerge over time. As observable signs from God increase, Jesus’s approach to the family changes, as does also his approach to handling the devil. Where initially he had been intimidated and shocked by the devil, which had caused him to flee from or ignore his doppelganger, at the end of the story Jesus commands the devil. Where the devil was initially confident and without worry, he becomes weakened, exhausted, and uncertain. The devil’s failures are the opposite of the faith instinct and give Jesus leverage against his evil doppelganger, with the wager of the interlude proving to support Jesus’s belief about God and the devil’s final speech conceding the devil has been outdone by Jesus.

With his confidence, resolution, and freedom from the devil serving as signs of his faith, Jesus mends the relationships within the family, telling the son that he is not selfish for wanting to leave the desert, and the boy laughs as he exclaims, “I’m not a bad son!” (00:36:30–00:36:31). Jesus comforts the family on multiple occasions by embracing and instructing them. He kisses them in a fatherly way, tenderly lays his hands on them in blessing, and abandons his previously timid persona as he holds the dying mother in an

extended scene, kissing her in a sign of compassion, as he had done previously in the father's final moments. In his new role as comforter, Jesus lifts the family's spirits, for he smiles at the son's riddles, engages in long conversations about life with the father, and laughs with the son during moments of levity. For this new Jesus, happiness has replaced fear.

In an illustration of the faith instinct, at no point in the film does Jesus hear God's voice or have a physical visit from God that gives him explicit direction or comfort, neither does he receive a heavenly vision. His confidence that he can master the elements and also his adversary is evident in symbolic moments: the comet in the sky, the evolution of his dreams from nightmares in which he was threatened by the elements to dreams in which he is empowered to use them, the dying father recognizing and worshipping Jesus, and the arrival of a closure-giving hummingbird while on the cross. Rather than finding explicit instructions, resolve, or answers in the desert, Jesus finds simply a desperate family. He progressively assists each of them, with the crowning moment his freeing the son from his parents' poverty in the barren desert after he has bestowed a blessing upon the boy. Jesus's own answers come from finding opportunities to minister and to use the natural elements to his own advantage, a survival-of-the-fittest instinct that empowers him to fix the family's troubles.

The film suggests that faith can withstand the badgering of skepticism if accompanied by patience, allowing skepticism to exhaust itself. Faith operates beyond reason. For Jesus, faith is measured in physical effect and demonstrated in signs. Jesus's finding his relationship with God aligns with the father's finding his relationship with his son, for as they learn to understand each other they move from testing each other to a devotion to each other. The resultant Jesus of *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* is assertive when facing evil. Both the rhetorical interlude and the rhetorical cumulation focus on endurance through the bodily experience of mortal appetites and fatigue. The explicit articulation of faith as illustrated by endurance suggests the value of religious faith as a drive to survive.

## The Rhetorical Culmination

At the end of the film, the devil's previously sly and smooth style of speaking is set aside as Jesus begins performing divine works, causing the devil to scream, "Who the hell do you think you are?" (01:27:52–01:27:54) The evil

doppelganger's true nature is capable of a more assertive and violent approach<sup>32</sup> that contradicts the devil's earlier calm and self-assured demeanor. The devil's desperation is fully on display when he begins arguing with Jesus about the fate of the mother, stating, "No! She's mine!" (01:26:30–01:26:31), thus insisting that Jesus not heal her from her painful sickness. Ignoring the devil, Jesus enters the tent of the mother and places his hands on her abdomen with the intention of healing her.

The devil attempts to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, but exhausted he tells Jesus he is unable to continue, putting an end to his attempt to place obstacles in Jesus's path. Victorious over his doppelganger, Jesus smiles on recognizing his enemy's limited staying power. In a final push for legitimacy, the devil aggressively offers Jesus one last empty promise, "I'll come to you in the end, and if you give me a sign. I'll let you down, and you can stay" (1:29:17–1:29:23), which proves in a subsequent scene to be a lie. The final look on the devil's face is one of uncertainty, while moments later, Jesus looks upon Jerusalem with determination. Empowered by his victory and proven faith, Jesus pushes forward, while the devil is shown in the end to be unsure whether to smile or frown, as his final uncomfortable chuckle and fallen face display his abandonment by Jesus. The survival of Jesus's trust in divinity captures the evolutionary potential of belief – he has looked for signs even as he has been prodded with skepticism; in a story that has played out in the natural world, faith has triumphed over disbelief, and signs have been sought and found despite that skeptical prodding.

Faith is shown to outlast skepticism. Contemporary skepticism does not have the endurance of faith's trust in what cannot be seen, as is ultimately demonstrated by the exhaustion of the weakened counterpart, who declares, "My feet hurt" (01:28:55–01:28:56). Jesus's journey to victory and readiness for ministry are displayed by his triumph over evil through greater patience and physical endurance. Following the interlude, as he sees signs of God accumulate, Jesus no longer fears or is confused by the devil, and he engages with his doppelganger at his own discretion. His transcendence over appetites, nature's pain, and the appeal to doubt in effect allow him to move beyond the representation of the evil doppelganger as an "extension"<sup>33</sup> of himself. Faith willingly leaves skepticism behind, driven by the assumption that signs will eventually emerge.

32 Burucúa/Kwiatkowski 2014.

33 Galeti 2011, 129.

## Implications

Halfway through the film the son gives Jesus a riddle, “How far can a man walk into the desert?” (00:56:40–00:56:43). Jesus finds comfort in the answer, knowing that his time in the desert is preparation for his future ministry in Jerusalem: “Only halfway. After that, he’s walking out” (00:56:46–00:56:48). “Halfway” through his painful tests in the desert, Jesus grows in strength after he meets, serves, ministers to, and provides closure for each member of the family.

Darwin describes the victorious species as rewarded with the opportunity to multiply, while losing means “not death to the unsuccessful competitor, but few or no offspring”.<sup>34</sup> In both the biblical story and his winning the hearts of the family in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, Jesus outlasts the devil and finds followers both in the family he serves in the film and in his disciples, as told in the biblical account (Matthew 4:20, KJV).<sup>35</sup> Although two of the family members die, the commitment to and faith in Jesus of all three, demonstrated at the end of the film, encapsulate Jesus’s victory. In illustrating a faith instinct, *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* frames religious faith as the capacity for bodily endurance and patient commitment.

After leaving the desert, Jesus is shown suffering on the cross, with the scene then transitioning to shots of his pierced side and the nail hole in his right hand. These brief images are then replaced by images of the emotional response of grief, as Jesus’s disciples sit somberly outside his tomb at dusk, heads lowered. This scene of discouragement recaptures the first evening of the film, when Jesus also sat at dusk, desperately praying to God to speak to him. In an unexpected turn, the “unusual”<sup>36</sup> final shot of the film is of contemporary tourists taking pictures of themselves on a cliff that overlooks the desert where Jesus’s faith instinct was confirmed, for it is the site of the father’s fall and subsequent recognition of Jesus’s divinity and where Jesus saw his transcending the elements as a sign from God. Where today humanity turns to technological comforts, in the ancient story, as told in Rodrigo García’s film, Jesus fasted.

With their 21st century tools such as cameras, contemporary tourists might struggle to value the story of Jesus fighting against the desert’s el-

34 Darwin 1859, 44.

35 Matthew 4:20, *King James Bible Online*, <https://tinyurl.com/39m738yx> [accessed 28 October 2022].

36 Blizek 2015, 4.

ements, echoing the devil's question during the interlude, "Do you think anyone will care? Men of a thousand years from now?" (00:45:59–00:46:07). The film's abrupt display of contemporary technological comforts coincides with the contemporary lessening of religiosity, which aligns in turn with the doppelganger's impatient need for bodily comfort. As the film celebrates Jesus's outlasting the devil in the desert, in key scenes the rhetoric-based separation of the faith instinct from its criticism is noteworthy.

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# Media Reviews



Lioba Behrendt

## Book Review

# Kristin Merle / Ilona Nord (eds.), Mediatisierung religiöser Kultur

**Praktisch-theologische Standortbestimmungen  
im interdisziplinären Kontext (Mediatization of  
Religious Culture. Practical Theological Assess-  
ments in an Interdisciplinary Context)**

Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2022,  
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The volume *Mediatisierung religiöser Kultur (Mediatization of Religious Culture)*, edited by Kristin Merle and Ilona Nord, is focused on media and religion from a practical-theological perspective. It is based on several years of research on the mediatization of religion undertaken within the framework of the subject group “Practical Theology”, part of the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie. The book analyzes and reflects on contemporary digitalization and mediatization processes in terms of their social and (practical-) theological relevance. The two editors assume the existence of a “cultural change” that embraces religion and religiosity. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, they understand religion and religiosity as part of culture, as a “web of meanings” (p. 10). An important aspect of this cultural change is digitalization, or mediatization, as the authors term it. Merle and Nord note that they focus primarily on the lived effects of the mediatization process.

To dive into this topic, this volume brings together 22 contributions in German and English from very different fields. It is organized into five sec-

tions, which illuminate the topic in light of approaches employed by cultural theory, communication science, media science, anthropology, ethics, empirical studies, and practical theology.

The first part is entitled “Understandings from the Perspective of Cultural Theory, Communication Science and Media Science”. Friedrich Krotz introduces the concept of mediatization from the perspective of communication and media studies, emphasizing the radical change in the media that is having ever-greater effect on everyday lives, society, and culture. He distinguishes between two transformations: of technical media and associated media services and of everyday life, culture, and society, which is a consequence of changed human communication. Krotz favours the term “mediatization” since it contains an aesthetic, social, and cultural dimension in addition to the technical one evident in “digitalization”. In his essay, Krotz highlights four research perspectives on mediatization: the central research perspective on current development, the historical perspective, the critical perspective, and the prognostic perspective. He notes the effects of change on both individual religiosity and religious institutions and considers the consequences for religion and religious studies as well as for practical theological research. The second contribution in this section, by Stefan Meier, looks at the concept of multimodality and explains a theory of sociosemantics. Meier advances questions that could be employed in multimodality analysis, testing them with posters advertising Kirchentag 2019, a church congress held in Dortmund.

The interview with Felix Stalder, professor for Digital Culture at the Zurich University of Arts, conducted by Kristin Merle in 2019 is particularly noteworthy. Stalder, who coined the term “Kultur der Digitalität” (culture of digitality), begins by explaining the difference between “Digitalisierung” (digitalization) and “Digitalität” (digitality) and proceeds then to consider changes to life under conditions of digitality. The interview makes evident that – according to Stalder – in the “culture of digitality” academic work is also changing. As the amount of material increases, tools are deployed to make it easier to handle this abundance, “the boundary between science and non-science” (p. 64) becomes blurred, and we experience a “politicization of science”. In this very readable article, the reader also learns why Stalder believes that scientists must become more involved in public discourse (p. 65) and what role he proposes religion might play in our current complex world.

In the second section, which takes up anthropological and ethical perspectives, Charles Ess examines how philosophical ethics might access the

phenomenon of religions, considering in particular digital religion, online death studies, media theory and existential media studies. Gotlind Ulshöfer examines media ethics in the digital age, while Klaas Huizing focusses on Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo Deus* (2017) and his interpretation of the phenomenon religion.

From this section I would like to highlight Amanda Lagerkvist's contribution, which engages with artificial intelligence. Lagerkvist seeks to examine the extent to which AI-driven abstract imaginings of the future are inevitable and explores "how such imaginings become living myths by looking at how technology is involved in broader appropriations of future form" (p. 92, all translations mine). Lagerkvist draws on the philosophy of Karl Jaspers and in particular his notion of "Grenzsituationen" (borderline situations). Lagerkvist calls for attention to be paid to digital borderline situations, for responsible action, and for methods that foster hope (p. 114). She identifies one method in the development of an existential ethic that includes AI designers in bearing responsibility for an inclusive and open future (p. 114).

A contribution by Felix Roleder on digitalization processes, especially with regard to phenomena in social networks, opens the third section, which presents empirical research. According to Roleder, religious and church life can be understood as a social network (p. 174), and he considers opportunities for network research in the online space. Ines Sura examines the connection between gaming and religious education by focusing on the implicit religiosity of gamers who come from deconfessionalized life contexts. She describes the computer game as "the most successful medium of the 21st century" (p. 196), biographically relevant for many young people and playing an important role in their lives with its "digital sections of the world" (p. 198). She presents the results of a qualitative interview study in which she interviewed 17 young people between the ages of 14 and 25 who consider themselves to belong to computer game culture, points to religious elements in computer games, and highlights opportunities for skill development through methods of "creative gaming". Ultimately, against this backdrop Sura appeals to religious educationists to give greater consideration to gaming and "game-based learning" and thereby aid religious education and digital empowerment.

Also in the third part, in their article "The Right to the Road. On Pilgrimage, Media and Churches in a Thirdspace Perspective" Birgitte Lerheim and Roger Jensen examine the interdependencies of media and current manifes-

tations of pilgrimage. In “Digitalisierungsprozesse im Religionsunterricht” (Digitalization Processes in Religious Instruction), Oliver Adam, Elke Wagner and Ilona Nord provide an interim report on the interdisciplinary and sociological research project Religious Education Laboratory digital (RELab digital). The goal of the project is “to develop a realistic understanding of the everyday practices of religious education teachers in the digitalized classroom” (p. 226). The authors examine how teachers can guide and organize lessons with digital media. They first describe the project and then present an exemplary case portrait, which they evaluate from the perspectives of the sociology of practice and the didactics of religion. The authors conclude with an exciting outlook on the next phases of the project.

In the fourth article in this section, “Robotik in der christlichen Religionspraxis” (Robotics in Christian Religious Practice), Ilona Nord and Charles Ess in cooperation with Jörn Hurtienne and Thomas Schlag consider the discourse on robotics and the first empirical research on robotics in the domain of religious communication. The authors point to current and future uses of robotics in the field of religions and specifically to issues surrounding authority, identity, community, ritual, and also the concept of religion itself (p. 230). They refer to their study on “BlessU2”, a blessing robot, and present an idea proposed by Gabriele Trovato, associate professor in Shibaura Institute of Technology (Tokyo), for the development of theomorphic robots. While Shinto and Buddhist religious practices can already include robotics in large temple complexes, the idea is provocative for Christian theologians and those working in the European context – especially with regard to the first commandment (p. 246). The authors elaborate their thoughts on Trovato’s theses, interrogate the concept of theomorphic robots, and formulate objections.

And in the final contribution in this section on empirical research, an article entitled “Investigating Media Appropriation. Photo Elicitation as a Tool for Collecting Data from the Media Repertoire”, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Hannah Grüenthal introduce “elicitation” as a method for generating data. They present their research project, which gives “insight into the role that media do play in the dynamic religious landscape” (p. 272).

The fourth section looks at subdisciplines of practical theology: Gerald Kretzschmar offers an overview of church digitalization initiatives and surveys their implications for church theory. Swantje Luthe encourages discussion related to pastoral care. Marcell Saß focuses on liturgy, and Wolfgang Beck explores homiletics. In Manfred Pirner’s contribution, entitled “Digital

Religion? Die Digitalisierung der Lebenswelt als theologische und religionspädagogische Herausforderung” (Digitalization of the Environment as a Theological and Religious Pedagogical Challenge), three possible definitions of the relationship between digitalization and religion are sketched: religion in digital media, digital media in religion, and digital media as religion (substitute) (p. 341). Ideas of mediatization are then used to broaden the approach to connections between digital media and religion, specifically in relation to theological, educational-theoretical, and religious-didactical elements of religious education. The article includes a ranked table of the most frequently downloaded apps on the topic of religion from the Google Play Store and examines the extent to which the smartphone can be a “life companion”.

The fifth and final section of the volume contains contributions on the significance of mediatization for (self-)understanding and tasks of practical theology. Christian Grethlein places the challenges of digitalization of the “communication of the gospel” in a practical-theological overall context. He identifies a threat in the economic orientation of search engines and the opportunity presented by the Internet for realizing the priesthood of all believers, by enabling communication free of hierarchy. Thomas Schlag follows on with a stimulating article, “Public God-Speech in Digital Society”, in which he problematizes digital forms of religious speech about God and their implications for practical theology.

Wilhelm Gräß’s contribution, “Die ‘Digitalisierung’ religiöser Kommunikation als Thema der Praktischen Theologie” (The ‘Digitalization’ of Religious Communication as a Topic of Practical Theology), is particularly noteworthy for its references to other articles in this volume and can be read as valuable commentary on the volume as a whole. Finally, in “Transformatives Wissen kreieren!” (Creating Transformative Knowledge), co-editor Kristin Merle points to structural changes in the public sphere and the tasks they present to practical theology.

The articles brought together for *Mediatisierung religiöser Kultur (Mediatization of Religious Culture)* are thought-provoking and full of insight into a highly topical field. The range of perspectives will attract in turn a range of scholars from different disciplines. Reading this excellent volume makes eminently clear that (practical) theology must deal with the phenomena of the “Kultur der Digitalität” (culture of digitality) in which we all inevitably find ourselves. As (practical) theologians, we must ask how as humans – alongside AI and robots – we can locate ourselves religiously in mediatized cul-

ture. As the editors note, theologians or practical theologians will continue to be called upon to explore fundamental issues such as how human beings are to understand their role in the world and how the inaccessible might be captured through symbolic representation. But, they astutely recognize, issues of digitalization or mediatization will enable them to turn anew to those issues, collaboratively and energetically and adopting the interdisciplinary perspective this book champions (p. 18).

Hannah Griese

# Song Review

## Little Simz, “Introvert”

Inflo, UK 2021

There’s a war, there’s a war  
The kingdom’s on fire, the blood of a young messiah  
I see sinners in a church, I see sinners in a church<sup>1</sup>

These are the opening lines on the track “Introvert” by the British rapper Little Simz<sup>2</sup>, the first song on her newest album, *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* (2021). This intro points immediately to the significance of religion in the song. The lyrics are accompanied by a imposing music video. Both are analysed in this review.

In particular in comparison with her previous album *Grey Area* (2019), distinct changes in terms of music style are evident in the more recent work. Where the former is rather sparse and minimalistic, the latter is far more opulent in sound: it employs fanfares, stirring drums as well as strings and choirs. It combines Rap, Hip-hop, Grime, Soul and Disco with influences from the African diaspora and Afrobeat, Soul and Jazz, Jamaican Reggae and Dub.<sup>3</sup>

The lines from the beginning of the song describe the dramatic state of the “kingdom”, or Great Britain. Little Simz reports the “death of a young messiah”, suggesting dying for a higher purpose, and speaks of “sinners in a church”, implying the existence of aberrant behaviour. She denounces corrupt states using explicitly religious language, thus creating a dramatic,

1 The lyrics are available at <https://tinyurl.com/2zh3v8nf> [accessed 24 November 2022].

2 Born in 1994 in Islington, north London, to Nigerian parents. Her full name is Simbiatu Ajikawo.

3 Gromann 2022; Fromm 2021; Pritchard 2021; Schubert 2021.

even apocalyptic, initial mood. The song is about both an outer war and an inner war. The artist constantly switches between observations of the outer world and, by diving into her inner world, her introversion. Her opening words, “There’s a war”, immediately indicate the problematic condition of both these worlds, which are at the same time separate and also deeply interlinked. The intermingling of these two settings is shown a few lines later, when Little Simz declares:

Sometimes I might be introvert  
There’s a war inside, I hear battle cries  
Mothers burying sons, young boys playing with guns  
The devil’s a liar, fulfil your wildest desires

Inner observations turn into outer ones. The devil here represents something clearly evil, a supernatural power, which emphasizes the disastrous conditions even more. The involvement of this religious figure introduces an evil agent acting in this world. This ongoing war between good and evil is also reflected in the line “The fight between the Yin and Yang’s a fight you’ll never win”. Here Little Simz uses a popular trope from Chinese philosophy. Employing these established references to different religious traditions, the artist stages a fight between opposing supernatural powers. The conflicts thus gain greater meaning, but they also then appear as destiny.

While suggesting a hyperbolic fight between good and evil, Little Simz neither loses sight of the everyday consequences of these conflicts nor denies the agency of humans. The lyrics reflect upon pain, illness and death, noting concrete grievances in society such as poverty and racism as well as a sense of being trapped, both in oneself and in unresolvable political circumstances. This provides the song with an explicit political dimension. In fact, it becomes accusatory when the artist critiques, with detail, the political condition of the world:

I’m not into politics but I know it’s dark times  
Parts of the world still living in Apartheid (there’s a war, there’s a war)  
[...]  
All we see is broken homes here and poverty  
Corrupt government officials, lies and atrocities  
How they talking on what’s threatening the economy  
Knocking down communities to re-up on properties

These descriptions of conflicts in the outer world merge with reflections about Little Simz's inner state, distinguishing and intermingling these two dimensions of the "war". The artist starts the second verse with the following proclamation:

I need a license to feel (can't feel)  
Internal wounds and I'm not tryna be healed (no I don't, no I don't, no)  
[...]  
Simz the artist or Simbi the person?  
To you I'm smiling but really I'm hurting

These words suggest a numbness and a pain deep inside. One can observe a rift between Little Simz's identity as an artist and the "true person", who smiles on the outside but is deeply hurt. These lines deal with suppressed feelings and the failure to heal. Later, the artist describes this inner disruption more concretely, with the outer fight between good and evil mirrored in herself:

At night I wonder if my tears will dry on their own  
Hoping I will fulfil Amy's purpose  
Angel said, "Don't let your ego be a disturbance"  
Inner demon said, "Motherfucker, you earned this"  
Like they strip you of everything you're deserving  
Realize there is a prison in us, we are conditioned as fuck

A feeling of being stuck or trapped is evident here. An angel and an inner demon argue, highlighting once more through religious references the fight between good and evil that is staged throughout the track.

However, the song is also about hope, trust and mutual support, about empowerment and the self. We see this aspect in these lines:

I'm a black woman and I'm a proud one  
We walk in blind faith not knowing the outcome  
But as long as we're unified, then we've already won

This ending of the second verse also seems to be the climax of the song, as if what has gone before has led up to this proud and hopeful exclamation. It is followed by the refrain, which clearly displays hope:

Find a way, I'll find a way  
The worlds not over  
I will make it, don't you cry  
In God we trust  
'Cause we're not alone

With an explicit reference to God, a trust is expressed that in the end good will prevail over evil. The contrast between the verses and this chorus is especially interesting. Unlike the verses, which consist of spoken words, the chorus is sung in a light, lovely melody. Performed twice in the song – in between the two verses and at the end – it disrupts the dark and dramatic picture provided by the rest of the piece. Therefore, in contrast to the apocalyptic initial mood, the listener is left with a hopeful spirit at the end.

The music video<sup>4</sup> combines several “storylines”, between which it changes quickly. Scenes that include the artist and a single dancer or groups of dancers in different settings are swapped for historical black-and-white news footage of civil rights protests. Close shots of several historical paintings are woven through the video, as well as scenes of young men fighting the police and old family footage. The fast moving between pictures from different storylines and between black-and-white (historical) footage and scenes in colour provides a sense of an entanglement of past and present and of dramatic events following close together, and it provides a multi-layered account of the life of a community. It hints at a fight that has already lasted a long time.

Three of these storylines are particularly interesting for this review. The first one shows Little Simz and a group of dancers in similar dress in the entry hall of the Natural History Museum in London. The impressive building, which resembles a cathedral (fig. 1), gives the impression that Little Simz is talking about something bigger than herself and will tell a great story. Especially interesting are several scenes in which the artist is shown in a position that resembles a Muslim prayer posture (fig. 2), with the suggestion that Little Simz is begging for something or even invoking a higher power. This reference to a religious practice on the visual level reiterates the inclusion of supernatural beings on the textual level, proposing their involvement in

4 LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, UK 2021), <https://tinyurl.com/yav9kjc> [accessed 9 November 2022]; 6:01 minutes, 3,072,226 views as of 23 November 2022.

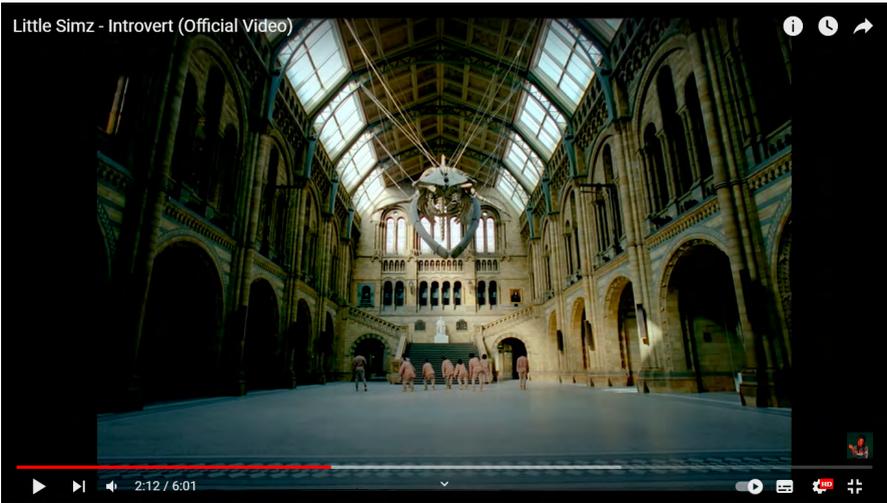


Fig. 1: Little Simz with dancers in the entry hall of Natural History Museum in London, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:02:12.

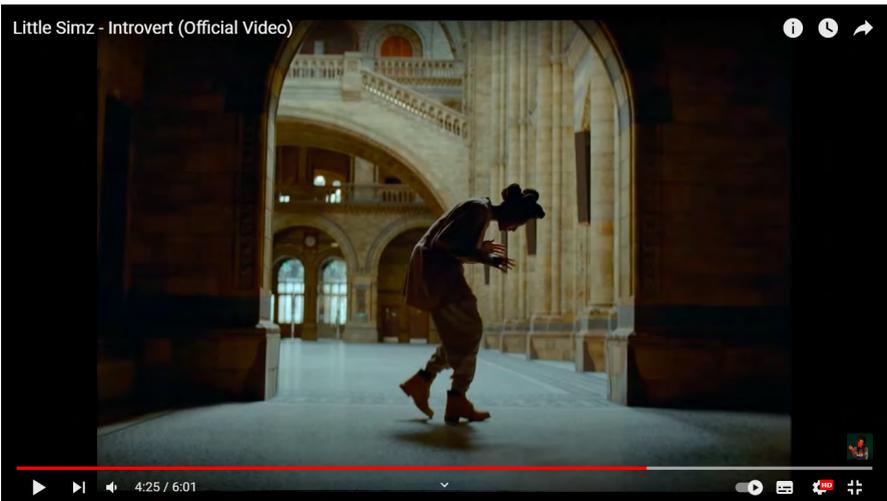


Fig. 2: Muslim prayer posture, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:04:25.

both the initiation and the resolution of conflicts. At the same time, however, only human action can be seen in the video. Throughout the song, a tension between human agency and supernatural agency is highlighted and maintained.

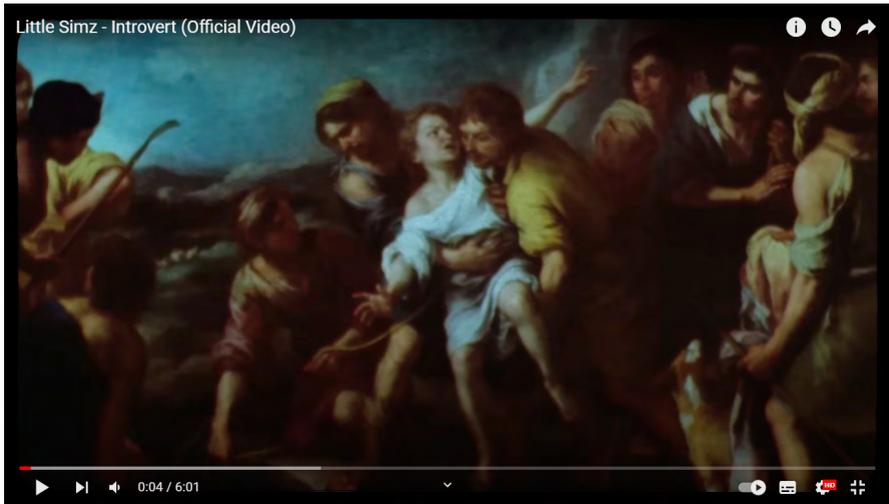


Fig. 3: Detail of the painting “Joseph and his brothers” by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:00:04.



Fig. 4: Detail of a baroque still life with dead animals, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:00:19.

Also revealing is the inclusion of sections of historical paintings, from ca. 17th–19th centuries. They show scenes from ancient mythology and the Bible, some are still-life paintings with dead animals, colonial scenes or scenes from the Napoleonic Wars; overall they thematise sacrifice and death, war

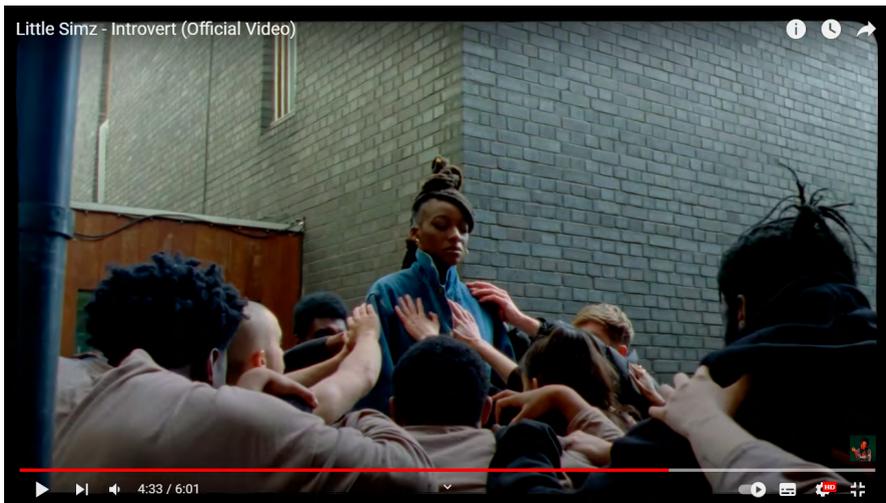


Fig. 5: Little Simz in the human circle, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:04:33.

and defeat, colonialism and slavery (fig. 3 and 4). Providing glimpses into another time and setting, sometimes with explicit reference to a supernatural sphere, these paintings disrupt the other storylines of the video, thereby transcending them. This embeds the story told by the video into a greater framework of historical events and emphasizes the continuity of grief and conflict throughout history. It opens up the song and video to interpretation in relation to both transcendence and issues related to race, which is highlighted in the video.

A third set of scenes shows either a Black man or Little Simz herself with closed eyes encircled by other people holding onto them, apparently giving them strength (fig. 5). These images depict cohesion and mutual support and correspond to the lines of the chorus. They contrast with the rest of the video in implicating unity in the solution to the problems discussed throughout the song. Although they do not form an explicit reference to a religious tradition, a spiritual dimension can certainly be detected here, as this strong (and also concluding) image points to the ideal of unity as a means of empowerment and identity.

Throughout the video, the switching between the threatening and the hopeful reiterates the contrast between the verses and the chorus of the song. This once more emphasizes the struggle between good and evil, which is explicitly sustained by religious references.

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

# Film Festival Review

## Venice Film Festival 2022

### There Is No Alternative to Family

The family played a leading role at the 79th Venice International Film Festival – in the main competition, in the session *Orizzonti* and in films out of competition. In a wide corpus of films released in 2022, this fundamental element of society is cross-examined, with exploration of facets of familial interconnections on the edge of – and sometimes beyond – collapse. During lockdown, the family was often the only place one could dwell with less rules and regulations. The experience of this reality may explain why this topic has attracted such huge attention in contemporary movie production. In films from all over the world, the family is presented as a mandatory metaphor for human coexistence. There are, however, very different ideas of what a family is, should be or must be. From portraits of the family as a cohesive unit to the depiction of the familial cell as a place of annihilation, the works presented at the Venice Biennale cover many questions and debates. The films discussed here explore families in terms of blossoming gardens or cold, grey dehumanising prisons – the range of shades, perspectives, styles and topics dealing with family is broad and controversial.

### The Family as a Laboratory for Existential Challenge

A crazy cosmos of familial aspirations is staged in *WHITE NOISE* (Noah Baumbach, US/UK 2022), a brilliant apocalyptic black comedy. Professor Jack Gladney (Adam Driver), an expert in National Socialism, floats his wife and four children through a difficult time caused by a mysterious cloud menacing the whole region. The cloud can be read as symbolic of an approaching (ecological?) disaster threatening everyday life, where love, death and all the challenges of a complex patchwork family are experienced. With its vivid and monumental style, *BARDO*, *FALSA CRÓNICA DE UNAS CUANTAS VERDADES* (*BARDO*,

FALSE CHRONICLE OF A HANDFUL OF TRUTHS, Alejandro Iñárritu, MX 2022) examines the self-reflection of a journalist in personal crisis. Across almost three hours, the film explores intimate dreams, achievements at work and the fears of a successful documentarist whose life is divided between Mexico and the United States. The story of Silverio Gama (Daniel Giménez Cacho) unfolds within his cheerful family, a common ground in which love and loss, birth and death, success and failure are addressed. The surreal style blurs the outlines of the individual, familial and national histories that are interwoven through this epic narration that labours to find an end. The family as a place fostering courage and social engagement is depicted in ARGENTINA, 1985 (Santiago Mitre, AR/US 2022), a cinematic reinterpretation of the courageous prosecutor Julio César Strassera and his team in their fight for justice for all the victims of the military junta. The protagonist, skilfully acted by Ricardo Darín, challenges the still very influential military and prepares a case against the junta, although this puts his life in danger. The destructive force of arbitrary political violence has scattered families who have never stopped fighting for justice, organising protest movements like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Strassera is highly motivated by the suffering of grandmothers, mothers and family members, and he is unconditionally supported by his wife, son and daughter, who share his commitment to justice and the risks of this endeavour. The film explores families as places of solidarity but also as where values of supremacy and toxic ideas about social hierarchies are transmitted.

In these works, family is a societal island of solidarity and endurance. A place of debate, controversy, and irony but also of unconditional affection, family is staged as a solid background against which protagonists can be themselves.

## Collapsing Families

In L'IMMENSITÀ (Emanuele Criolese, IT/FR 2022), mother-of-two Clara Borghetti (played by Penélope Cruz) could enjoy a cosy bourgeois life if she adapted to the values of an Italian family in the 1970s, educating her children according to the dictates of the social class she belongs to – and not according to their individual personalities – assuming her role of a betrayed wife with composure and filling her life with the emptiness that her position and gender require. The film's style is characterised by bright colours and chromatic

contrasts that highlight all the more the greyness of the emotional environment the characters are trapped in. In another film with Penélope Cruz, *EN LOS MÁRGENES* (*ON THE FRINGE*, Juan Diego Botto, ES/UK 2022), families are confronted with the implosion of the mortgage loan system in Spain. The film interrelates different kinds of family dealing with the crisis: Azucena (Cruz), a mother of a boy, tries to defend her home alone, for her partner is very passive; an older widow commits suicide to avoid her son's having to shoulder her debts; and a passionate social worker fails to keep together his newly reassembled family. The political and financial organisation of society ruins all types of families represented in the film, with solidarity only possible among those existing beyond subsistence. In *THE WHALE* (Darren Aronofsky, US 2022) – awarded a prize by the Interfilm-Jury – familial collapse has already happened. The film accompanies the protagonist, Charlie (Brendan Fraser), during his last days. Beginning with Monday and ending on Friday, the time structure echoes the passion of Christ. Charlie collapses within his extremely obese body, having failed to cope with the death of his male partner or to find a way to relate to his daughter and his former wife. The film takes place entirely within Charlie's house, where his body has trapped him.

Although they differ in many ways, these movies address family as a fragile, disruptive, isolating system in which single members are alone in their desperate attempt to stay alive.

## Reconstructing a Whole from Fragments

*LES ENFANTS DES AUTRES* (*OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN*, Rebecca Zlotowski, FR 2022) deals with Rebecca (Virginie Efira), who falls in love with Ali (Roschdy Zem), and with his small daughter, Leila. Rebecca's affection for Leila is scrutinized by her mother, Alice. Leila has ambivalent feelings towards the three adults who love her. In the end, Ali gives his former family another chance, and Rebecca dedicates herself to her middle-school pupils. This unpretentious story is told with sensitive images of everyday life in a fictional Paris where religious and cultural differences do not matter. Still, the tensions in this complex, fragmented familial network cannot be resolved, with the characters unable to escape conflicts of loyalty. In *ARU OTOKO* (*A MAN*, Kei Ishikawa, JP 2022), Rie (Sakura Ando) has just divorced after the death from illness of one of her two children. In her village, she meets a stranger, Daisuke (Masataka Kubota), who soon settles down and finds a job as a

tree-feller. Rie and Daisuke marry, and he adopts her small boy. All three find happiness and affection within this new family. Suddenly, however, Daisuke dies in an accident, and Rie discovers that her husband was not the person he pretended to be. Addressing questions of identity and truth, this minimalist and delicate film contrasts social expectations and conventions with lived emotions and love. A further Japanese work, *RABU RAIFU* (*LOVE LIFE*, Kôji Fukada, JP/FR 2022), explores the microcosmos of a newly married couple. The protagonist, Taeko (Fumino Kimura), is challenged by the sudden death of her son and the reappearance of his biological father in a poor mental and physical condition. In this film, family is a labyrinth of relationships and loyalties, of happiness and traumatic events and of intergenerational challenges. A boardgame plays a central role in the story, and in terms of style, it becomes a metaphor for family life.

In these movies, families are staged as fragmented entities, networks of different destinies that briefly cross and are soon divided again. Children are essential members of these transitory communities. They drive the development of the adults, confront them with the fragility of life, the desire for certitude and the need for sincere feelings.

## The Perfect Family as a Dystopian Community

*DON'T WORRY DARLING* (Olivia Wilde, US 2022) presents the American dream of the ideal family in the 1950s, with attractive and stylish housewives completely committed to making their busy husbands happy. They live in Victory, an experimental luxury city that turns out to be a dystopian place produced by technology and extreme mental control. Victory offers security and wellbeing in a segregated location without self-determination, as an alternative for a few exquisite people wishing to escape stress and competition in contemporary urban society. Contradictory ideas of partnership and family are also found in *SICCITÀ* (Paolo Virzì, IT 2022). This drama with elements of science fiction portrays Rome during a severe drought. The film scrutinises the chaos that arises in familial relationships under the pressure of the climate crisis: the same characters appear in different familial constellations, trying to cope with water shortages, epidemics and social and individual disintegration. The Holy Family cross the desert-like riverbed of the Tiber in a dystopian Rome. Some people pray, others offer rescue courses on social media, and some fight the crisis, while a few continue to

enjoy life as if nothing has happened. The film adopts an ironic gaze on societal microcosms led by a desire for excitement, success, and consumerism. The two films, with, on one hand, a dystopian family where gender roles and power structures are very simple and, on the other, clear and various familial constellations in the last days of the Eternal City, offer insights into the family as the emotional place that humans inhabit.

In these films, the family appears as an idealised community with such individual and collective expectations that it is fragile and unrealistic as well as unbearable.

## **Navigating Relationships between Parents and Children**

Several films navigate the complexity of the relationships of parents and children in various constellations, considering biological and social forms of parenthood. In the feature film *VERA* (Tizza Covi / Rainer Frimmel, AT 2022) the main character, Vera Gemma, plays herself: as the daughter of a movie star, she reflects on her relationship with her famous father and the consequences of his glamorous life for her. By chance she gets involved with a family living on the margins of contemporary society. She becomes a kind of godmother to a boy who has lost his mother, is neglected by his father and is looked after by a busy grandmother. This new maternal role provides the protagonist, who is sick of exclusive parties and occasional lovers, with a fulfilling role and an existential orientation. The kindness and gratitude of the destitute family proves to be a fatal trap. A further film is also named for its protagonist. In *MONICA* (Andrea Pallaoro, IT/US 2022), having had no contact with her family for a long time, a transgender woman comes back to care for her unwell and confused mother, who is dying. The film addresses gender identity within the close ties of a conservative family and the pain of being ignored and excluded. The most recent work by Paul Schrader, *MASTER GARDENER* (US 2022), depicts an intricate network of relationships in a wider family encompassing three generations as well as employees responsible for the historical garden of the estate where they all live. Gardening serves as powerful symbol of both the fragility of human relationships and the effects of love in a world dominated by precarious and extreme positions like fascism, drug addiction, and neglect. It is an optimistic, positive movie, very much in contrast to *THE SON* (Florian Zeller, UK/FR 2022), which addresses mental health issues in adolescence. Nicolas (Zen McGrath) moves to the

home of his father, who, after divorcing his mother, lives with his new partner and their new-born child. Blaming his former wife for being too soft with this challenging teenager, Peter (Hugh Jackmann), the father, is confident that his resolute attitude will help this impenetrable son become successful at school and popular with his peers, allowing him to discover true happiness. Nobody in this articulate family system realises how severe Nicolas' condition is. The film explores expectations in intergenerational relationships and the dilemmas of parents facing the decline of their child. *SAINT OMER* (Alice Diop, FR 2022) stages a different drama: a mother who kills her daughter. In this film, we follow Rama (Kayije Kagame), a successful writer, in the courtroom in Saint Omer, a village in Northern France. Rama, happily married and pregnant, wishes to understand an inscrutable young woman who has drowned her child at sea. The trial, presented from Rama's perspective, confronts both court and cinema audiences with an intricate hypothesis, incomprehensible motives, and the impossibility of identifying with the unfathomable accused mother. The thin line between trauma, marginalisation, madness and sorcery is explored in this quiet and formally very strong drama.

These films, albeit very diverse in style and plot, portray the relationship between adults and children as a realm of the uncontrollable. Educational ideals may be well conceived, expectations reshaped and affection sincere, but coming of age remains a challenge that can end in fulfilment or tragedy.

## **Violent Families and the “Tree of Poison”**

Some films depict family as a cradle of violence, possibly as a result of an inhospitable environment. *ATHENA* (Romain Gavras, FR 2022), which provides an impressive depiction of the banlieue in Marseille, explores violence on many levels: in a North African family, within a neighbourhood marked by poverty and social segregation, within the French state and in global terrorism. The film examines the glorification of violence as the only way of achieving social and political recognition, staging the performance and the consequences of destruction in a straightforward, distressing style. *AUTO-BIOGRAPHY* (Makbul Mubarak, ID/FR/DE/PL/SG/PH/QA 2022) tells the story of Rakib (Kevin Ardilova), a boy who lives alone and takes care of a mansion belonging to a general in a rural Indonesian region. One day, the general comes back home to run for political office. He treats Rakib, whose family

has served the general's family for generations, like a son, teaching the teenager how to become a man of power. Rakib undergoes a ravaging initiation into corruption, humiliation, cruelty and brutal violence, which allows him to follow in the general's footsteps. In this film, becoming an adult means choosing between being killed or killing. An insight into extreme forms of familial violence is provided by *TI MANGIO IL CUORE* (Pippo Mezzapesa, IT 2022), a gangster film shot in black and white. In a rural village in southern Italy, the son of a mafia boss falls in love with the wife of his father's enemy. This love initiates a spiral of violence that kills almost all male members of the rival families. The hatred fuelling this bloody feud emanates from a matriarch, defined as the "tree of poison". The film is particularly disturbing because it presents atrocity in line with all the genre's stereotypes with a neat and unabashed photography. The documentary *THE MATCHMAKER* (Benedetta Argentieri, IT 2022) and the feature film *A NOÍVA* (*THE BRIDE*, Sérgio Tréfaut, PT 2022) address the same unresolved question: why did young women abandon their comfortable lives in Europe for the Islamic State in Syria, marrying fighters and soon becoming single mothers? Notwithstanding the different cinematic styles, both works unfold a contrast between the families these young widows have created and the middleclass families they come from. Neither the interviews with Tooba Gondal, an active recruiter of female jihadists on the Internet, in *THE MATCHMAKER*, nor the fictional depiction of a pregnant teenager and jihadist's widow in a prison camp in Iraq in *A NOÍVA* provides access to the girls' desire to start a family and raise children in the midst of violence and unceasing destruction.

Overall, the link between family and violence in these films is depicted as inescapable destiny, even if it arises from a personal choice. The familial setting is soaked with abusive attitudes and coercion to be part of the worst that human beings are capable of. The cinematic approach traps the viewer in an abyss of violence with no hope of escape.

## Family as a Metaphor

In the Iranian drama *SHAB, DAKHELI, DIVAR* (*BEYOND THE WALL*, Vahid Jalilvand, IR 2022), a former police officer is a prisoner, his complete isolation in the barren walls of the bunker-like place emphasised by his blindness. The film overlaps the prison with a private flat in an intricate building, where a stranded mother suddenly appears. She begs the blind prisoner to help her

find her lost child. All the characters are at the mercy of the power that keeps them in captivity. The film depicts a fabricated family poised between desire for freedom, oppression and trauma. This wonderfully made work is self-reflective, with a camera the only object in the prison. The film can be read as a metaphorical rendering of the role of film and the arts in contemporary Iran. It provides audiences with an impressive and moving insight into how it feels to live under a dictatorial, totalitarian regime.

## Family as an Inescapable Human Condition

In a cross-reading of the films discussed in this review, family appears as an inescapable dimension of the human condition, as an overwhelming constraint and an inevitable destiny. Most of the movies were shot indoors, in rooms to which the audience must find its way via narrow corridors, doors, walls and staircases. Families are presented as crucial social units: the family mostly encompasses mother, father and children according to a heterosexual model. The cinematic families of 2022 are sometimes presented as realistic communities, sometimes as an image of living together. Overall, they are largely claustrophobic scenes of conflict, destruction and violence, and only in a few cases are they places of self-reflection and liberation. This cross-reading of selected films from the Biennale suggests that there is no alternative to family: for better or for worse, the intricate familial microcosmos is where filmic life unfolds in 2022.

### Filmography

A NOÍVA (THE BRIDE, Sérgio Tréfaut, PT 2022).

ARGENTINA, 1985 (Santiago Mitre, AR/US 2022).

ARU OTOKO (A MAN, Kei Ishikawa, JP 2022).

ATHENA (Romain Gavras, FR 2022).

AUTOBIOGRAPHY (Makbul Mubarak, ID/FR/DE/PL/SG/PH/QA 2022).

BARDO, FALSA CRÓNICA DE UNAS CUANTAS VERDADES (BARDO, FALSE CHRONICLE OF A HANDFUL OF TRUTHS, Alejandro Iñárritu, MX 2022).

DON'T WORRY DARLING (Olivia Wilde, US 2022).

EN LOS MÁRGENES (ON THE FRINGE, Juan Diego Botto, ES/UK 2022).

LES ENFANTS DES AUTRES (OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN, Rebecca Zlotowski, FR 2022).

L'IMMENSITÀ (Emanuele Criolese, IT/FR 2022).

MASTER GARDENER (Paul Schrader, US 2022).

MONICA (Andrea Pallaoro, IT/US 2022).

RABU RAIFU (LOVE LIFE, Kôji Fukada, JP/FR 2022).  
SAINT OMER (Alice Diop, FR 2022).  
SHAB, DAKHELI, DIVAR (BEYOND THE WALL, Vahid Jalilvand, IR 2022).  
SICCITÀ (Paolo Virzì, IT 2022).  
TI MANGIO IL CUORE (Pippo Mezzapesa, IT 2022).  
THE MATCHMAKER (Benedetta Argentieri, IT 2022).  
THE SON (Florian Zeller, UK/FR 2022).  
THE WHALE (Darren Aronofsky, US 2022).  
VERA (Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel, AT 2022).  
WHITE NOISE (Noah Baumbach, US/UK 2022).

## Book Review

# Alvin Eng Hui Lim, *Digital Spirits in Religion and Media*

## Possession and Performance

Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, 222 pages, ISBN: 978-0-367-58663-8

Religious traditions are deeply affected by the digital revolution. Particularly since the emergence of the internet, but even before that, religious actors and movements have been aware of new possibilities that are both an opportunity and a threat. Their approaches differ greatly: while many traditional religions were rather hesitant to jump on the digital bandwagon, other religions, particularly smaller and newer ones, were often at the forefront in adopting new technologies. Something of an east-west divide existed in this regard: examples show that religious traditions in various Asian countries were often more innovative than those in the West, be it in order to promote their content more intensively, or as a result of an earlier acquaintance with the digital world.

This study by Alvin Eng Hui Lim, which is based on his doctoral thesis, provides four case studies within the multifaceted religious landscape of Singapore, one of Asia's most multicultural and, consequently, multireligious cities, where different religious traditions meet. The monograph develops its own approach to examining these new developments and their impact. It is more than just a book on "digital spirits" (in contrast to non-digital ones), as the title might suggest, for it provides a fresh new theoretical model for how we might address such phenomena. The author's doctoral thesis was written in Theatre Studies, which automatically brings a specific perspective. Above all, we find an overall focus on the performative

aspect of the spiritual practices that are carefully described in the chapters and on the crucial merging of “being spiritual” and “being digital”. To a certain extent, Lim looks to supplement, even overcome, well-trodden paths when it comes to such research into the relationship between religion and digitization: where the transformative possibilities of the new media and/or the reception of new media technologies have often been a focus, Lim’s approach to the relationship between spirituality and mediality is based on what he terms “performative practices”.

An important reference point throughout the book is Bruno Latour’s interpretative take on religion that focuses on agencies that “make people do things” and includes all kinds of divinities, spirits and voices. The specificity of religious acts is thus upheld and protected. Frequent reference is also made to Jacques Derrida, “whose spirit haunts this book” (p. 7), although the author sometimes struggles to apply that theoretical model for his rather practically orientated descriptions. A number of other, mostly French, philosophers, intellectuals and media-theoreticians make more frequent appearances throughout the book, such as Georges Bataille, Paul Ricœur or Jean Baudrillard (which suggests a very Francophile approach to its subject).

The four case studies are taken from differing religious contexts (and Singapore provided a large range from which to choose), most of them with a Daoist background, though. The first major example, covered in chapters 2 and 3, provides insight into specific East Asian traditions of spiritual mediumship by introducing a spirit medium of the Daoist Monkey God, who works together with an assistant. Lim had full access to the relevant material, which included recorded sessions, and portrays the work of the medium for a local Daoist community. Insight into contemporary Daoist practices from a largely insider perspective is provided by the spirit medium’s highly individual consultations. This reviewer was not convinced that the author’s case required, however, the great detail of this meticulous description.

The next case study, presented in chapter 4, deals with changes to the Nine Emperor Gods Festival (*Jiu huangye dan*), an important religious festival with Daoist roots that is mostly celebrated by Chinese communities in South-East Asia around the end of September or the beginning of October (corresponding to the first nine days of the ninth month in the Chinese moon calendar system). The event is also known as the Vegetarian Festival, particularly in Thailand, where it became a tourist sensation in the last decades as a result of the colorful processions through the streets and special (vegetarian) food offered on this occasion. Lim focusses on the transforma-

tions caused by recent technological changes and the growing importance of advertising across all media channels, but he looks also at changes in the ritual practice itself: The spirit mediums and other actors who play a crucial role in the whole festival adapted their behavior in light of the presence of cameras and other filming devices, which is in line with the main thesis of the book, concerning the influence of new technologies on the performative aspects of rituals.

An uncommon case is presented in chapter 5, which addresses a distressing instance of attempted group suicide via internet mobilization that caused a media uproar in Singapore and beyond. In August 2008, the then 16-year-old Ku Witaya, who proclaimed himself a Daoist medium, convinced his younger brother and a group of six boys that they had to commit suicide to become “slayers” bound for the upcoming World War III. Eventually, two of the group executed the plan, namely Ku Witaya and his brother, while the others decided not to follow their example. This event is particularly revealing for the connection to the Daoist spirit mediumship tradition which forms a background to the events. In his study, Lim reimagines the digital world that was created by the actors: it was a merger of religious beliefs, on-line game imagination (with its many cross-references to religious terminology and/or practices) and other aspects of a virtual worldview that created a closed and claustrophobic space. Lim uses the extreme example explored in this chapter to develop his concept of a merger between religious traditions, namely spirit mediumship, and the digital world (here with the inclusion of the overlapping gaming world), setting in parallel respective concepts such as “becoming a medium” in the traditional religious sense of the word and “becoming an avatar”, that is “creating an avatar”, in the cyberworld. In addition to the authors Lim refers to, who include Richard Page, Jesper Juul, Patricia Lange, Jean Baudrillard and, naturally, Jacques Derrida, his approach would have benefitted from a closer look at material that has been published around the Heaven’s Gate mass suicide in 1997, a movement that also had a strong interest in the (emergent) Internet and new means of propagating content. The mechanisms in the group, the manipulative actions of the leader and the dire consequences of some of his assumptions might have shed additional light on the tragic events around Ku Witaya.

All the case studies presented so far have referred to the far-ranging and multifaceted Daoist tradition, specifically in terms of its concretization in various lived religious contexts. It is only in the final case study that another religion comes into focus, namely Christianity. This chapter exam-

ines Christian evangelistic media programs (for the Christian community in Singapore) and their use of performative techniques. Interestingly, the author himself is a member of a Christian denomination, and, indeed, he describes his own involvement in the establishment of an additional digital offering within one church (as director, in effect, for a Christmas show). That personal affinity may be significant for his concern with providers of evangelical Christianity who are rivals when it comes to the recruitment of new followers. The author does adopt a critical position when he points to modes of interaction generated by new media, and he also makes clear that the use of digital media might have unexpected consequences: reaching a wider audience comes with greater vulnerability, for a stronger media presence can provoke harsher criticism. In this regard, the position of the author opens up new perspectives, which might also have benefitted the Daoist practitioner context of the previous case studies.

All the case studies are summarized in a concluding chapter, which again takes Jacques Derrida as its most significant theoretical guide, in particular his idea of *différance* (its importance for the study only becomes clear in this last section; the reader would have benefitted from an earlier introduction). As is often the case, the theoretical musings only partially reflect the content of the case studies (and vice versa), but the author does certainly seek to provide his own take on performance theory. His rather universalistic approach to the interpretation of the importance of a “medium” could usefully be elaborated.

With its twofold structure, the monograph is of value both for theoreticians of (new) media techniques (particularly for those with a penchant for the French poststructuralist intellectual and philosophical tradition) and for those interested in aspects of the contemporary religious history of South-East Asia. From a religious studies perspective, the approach is enlivened by the framing of the thesis through theatre studies. Its focus on lived experience and its meticulous description serve as an ideal guide through the hands-on engagement with the various examples. This overall focus on practice comes somewhat at the expense of the religious traditions themselves, or, in other words, in some instances the reader would have benefitted from clearer contextualization of the aspects being described. Nevertheless, the study provides fresh insight on both the theoretical and empirical levels.