Role-Playing the (non-)Religious Other

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INTRODUCTION
Our contemporary digital games are filled with religion. Players battle Templars through the ages (*Assassins Creed* series [Ubisoft, 2007–]); fight for the Chantry (*Dragon Age: Inquisition* [BioWare, 2014]), and against the alien Church of Unitology (*Dead Space* [Visceral, 2008]). Players may summon and commune with gods from various pantheons – from angels to Greek gods and the 'fictional' Aedra of Tamriel (e.g., *Shin Megami Tensei* series [Atlus, 1992–]; *Age of Mythology* [Ensemble, 2002]; e.g., *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [Bethesda, 2011]). Indeed, across genres and platforms, it has previously been assessed that games' virtual worlds are suffused with such religious and spiritual narratives, cosmologies, narratives, symbols and rituals (Krzywinska, 2006; Aupers, 2007; Campbell et al., 2014). Given the fact that most of such studies are based on textual content analysis (e.g., Šisler 2008; Trattner, 2016; Bosman, 2016), which analyze in-game representations of religion; the question remains:

How and why, if at all, do players relate to religious content while playing such games?

To address this question we took on the approach developed in cultural (media) studies, i.e. focusing on the process of "encoding/decoding" and consumer practices of "textual poaching" (cf. Hall, 1980; Jenkins, 2015). We adopt this perspective in studying religious meaning-making in games for two reasons. First of all: dominant representation-based studies in the field hold on to an approach that is more suitable with static or non-interactive (mass)media. Looking at representations in games is particularly problematic because it disregards the medium-specificity of digital game-play: players are not simply passive consumers but actively "reconfigure" games (Raessens, 2005) through the act of role-playing (partly) as their avatar (e.g., Rehak, 2003; Klevjer, 2007).

Secondly, representation-based research neglects the specificity, divergence of and differences between individual players. Players' accounts of meaning-making are variable, often resulting in mutually exclusive understandings of the same video game. Specifically in the case of religion, we hold, players from different religious backgrounds understand in-game religious meanings in vastly different ways (e.g., Aupers & Schaap, 2016).

The research question, then, becomes specifically: in what ways do players with different (non-)religious identities play with the digital (role-play) identities provided by the characters and worlds of video games? In order to answer this question, we resorted to qualitative semi-structured interviews (N=20). A general call was put out on different video game forums to arrive at a set of theoretically selected Christian, Muslim, Hindu and different religiously non-identifying (atheist, agnostic, etc.) video game players. By interviewing them regarding their (non-)religious backgrounds, the religious content and characters of the games they played; and the connections they experienced between the two, we were able to formulate a number of conclusions.

Our research indicates that, rather than alienating themselves from religious 'others,' players frequently have meaningful experiences role-playing as the religious other. This activity of role-playing the 'Other,' so we demonstrate in our analysis, has three implications. Firstly, they come to familiarize themselves with religious worldviews and practices that they could not normally access, such as the mosque-filled streets and Islamic calls to prayer of *Assassin's Creed*. Secondly, they came to distance themselves from their own (non)religious worldviews as a particular construction, rather than a natural and taken-for-granted reality. This process we conceptualize as "de-familiarization" (cf. Shklovsky, 1991). Thirdly, players suggested that their avatars allowed them to experience and temporarily believe what they could otherwise not. Religious players freely switched between worldviews that are otherwise in major disagreement with their beliefs; while also frequently reflecting on the assumed atheism of video game characters. In two cases, players underwent drastic de-conversions due to the roles they played. Meanwhile, religious 'nones' reported on the queerness and (re-)enchantment of a world with the certainties of rituals and gods. In all, players reported understanding and sympathy for the roles and worldviews they were brought to identify with, prompting one agnostic player to sum up: "What if I'm wrong? Is this how others in the real world use religion?"

Based on our study, we argue that (role-)playing in video games motivates a form of religious relativization that destabilizes the 'absolute truth' claims of many religions (cf. Berger, 1969); while fostering a general inclusiveness towards religious Others by allowing players to bracket their own worldviews, in order to temporarily adopt the 'absolute' truths of others' worldviews.

OPTIONAL BIO
Lars de Wildt is an assistant lecturer and PhD Candidate at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. He is broadly interested in play and worldview, and his PhD focuses on the way players, games and developers relate to religious content. Lars teaches at KU Leuven, is a board member for DiGRA Belgium and for the Press Start Journal.

Stef Aupers is a Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. He published widely on religion, spirituality and conspiracy theories in modern

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