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Dragon Age: Inquisition: A Christian Message in a Postsecular World

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This article deals with the religious, specifically Christian, message in the video game “Dragon Age: Inquisition,” released in 2014 by BioWare. In order to understand the specifics of this game, the article includes a detailed analysis of the conventional ways that religion, gods, and believers are presented in computer role-playing games (RPGs), the genre to which “Dragon Age: Inquisition” belongs. The study pays special attention to the way “Dragon Age: Inquisition” utilizes a common set of narrative techniques and game mechanics often present in the games of this genre. While borrowing many of them, the developers change them in small but significant ways. In doing so they manage to create a unique approach to the representation of religion that is shaped profoundly by secular ideology, which dominates the genre. This allows us to call “Dragon Age: Inquisition” a postsecular video game that adapts many traditional Christian narratives and conflicts to a new and unaccustomed medium.

Keywords: game studies, phenomenological hermeneutics, procedural rhetoric, Dragon Age, RPG, Christianity, video games.

THIS article examines the religious, specifically Christian, motifs contained in the game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) from the BioWare studio. While seeking to reimagine classic plot elements of fantasy RPGs, the game’s developers also fully reveal their inherent, historically religious meanings. The game’s ludic elements, such as its rules, supplement these narrative motifs. In regard to the representation of religion, harmony exists between narrative and ludic elements of the video game, and makes possible discussion of *Dragon Age* as a complete, postsecular Christian message.

Methodology

Mikhail Fiadotau provided an excellent description of a possible approach to interpreting the religious content of a video game in the article “Phenomenological Hermeneutics as a Bridge between Video Games and Religious Aesthetics,” included in the collection *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (Fiadotau 2017). This approach, in turn, builds upon the previous work of Veli-Matti Kurhulahti, the famous game studies specialist, and, more broadly, on the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics as described by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

With respect to video games, this approach entails that the researcher focus on the interaction between the narrative and “ludic” (that is, existing at the level of the rules) aspects of the game. Do these elements exist in parallel to each other, as in the case of mobile puzzle games, in which the narrative advances exclusively in non-interactive screens, or are they interconnected? Also important are which elements of the game receive more attention and effort from the developers. Finally, the particularly important question in the context of this article is whether a contradiction exists between the narrative and the game mechanics, or whether they complement each other. This article will try to demonstrate that in the case of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the ludic aspects, in particular the dialogue system and some aspects of the combat mechanics, complement the narrative, enabling the game to produce a coherent message that can be considered “Christian.”

This article introduces the idea of a “Christian video game,” drawing upon the concept of “resonance” presented in the works of Adam Chapman (Chapman 2016, 35). Chapman, who dealt with the representation of real historical events in video games, meant by this term a situation in which events on the screen resemble or resonate with something outside the video game. This concept, in turn, makes possible the application of insights from semiotics, especially Roland Barthes’s concepts of “sign” and “recognition,” to the analysis of video games.

In using the concept “Christian video game,” I do not mean that BioWare intentionally incorporated a Christian narrative into its project or conceived of the game as a vehicle for preaching, but rather that many elements of its game resonate with a specific understanding of Christianity. Of course, as with any interpretation, this view of the game remains subjective. But I will try to show that *Dragon Age:*

Inquisition contains numerous elements or, in Barthes's terminology, signs that are historically associated with explicitly religious fantasy works, primarily the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

This article will also draw upon the concept of a "fantastic milieu," first introduced by Danielle Kirby (Kirby 2013, 2–3). It is a hypothetical collection of ideas, plots, stock character types, and other elements of the text that unites all works in fantastic genres. The "milieu" exists at the intersection of specific texts, a shared cultural background, and specific fan culture shaped by earlier texts, which in turn informs the perception of familiar elements that appear in new works.

It is important to emphasize that, although in principle the "milieu" runs through almost all types of fantastic genres, whose motifs flow freely from one to the other, it is not homogeneous. For example, computer RPGs in the fantasy genre have long had their own set of recognizable elements, although historically these elements were associated with literature and movies of the same style. It should be stressed that among the elements of the milieu that are specific to video games some can be called ludonarrative, that is, they involve a consistent link between a specific plot element and game mechanics. Character classes serve as a typical example of these elements. The RPG "fantastic milieu" also contains strictly narrative details that require varied ludic incarnations, such as the portrayals of distinct fantasy races. Finally, there are a small number of purely ludic elements of the milieu that through specific technical choices, such as the isometric position of the camera, create in the fans the sense that they are playing an RPG. Games that include numerous details not previously present in their segment of the "fantastic milieu" acquire a reputation for being original or even "authorial," such as *Tyranny* or *Kenshi*, whereas games entirely confined to their sector of the "milieu" are described as banal or classic, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is interesting in this context as an example of a third approach, at least in its depiction of religion. BioWare did not introduce new elements into the "milieu," but rather reinvented a series of well-established ones. One can call the studio's approach "remythologization." BioWare employs many of the plotlines, susceptible to religious interpretation, that *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* originally introduced to the "fantastic milieu." While these plotlines lost the connection with their original meaning, they remained popular elements of the "fantastic milieu." The studio uses these elements but alters them, restoring to them their original potential for religious interpretation. This is what

makes *Dragon Age: Inquisition* an interesting object of analysis and distinguishes it from other games of the same genre.

Although some of the elements under consideration also appeared in previous installments of the series, this article will focus specifically on *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, as the game in which religious motifs are most clearly present. In the next part of the article, I will give a brief description of the game itself, its plot, its fictional universe, and its basic game mechanics. Then I will analyze a range of key elements of the representation of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. I seek to demonstrate how each of them is incorporated into the existing RPG tradition and how they nevertheless retain their uniqueness. Particular attention will be paid to the way in which these specific distinctions develop as they reveal great similarity among the ideas embedded in *Dragon Age* and the stories and ethics that traditionally resonate with Christianity.

The Characteristics of the Game

Dragon Age: Inquisition, the third installment of the *Dragon Age* series (launched in 2009), was released in 2014 for personal computers and several consoles. Its creator, the studio BioWare, has been associated with the RPG genre since the late 1990s, when it released the extremely popular and influential *Baldur's Gate* series. Despite criticism from some fans of the genre, *Dragon Age* was commercially successful and garnered positive reviews from the gaming press.

The action of all three installments of the series takes place in a world called Thedas, a fantasy universe populated by representatives of four “races”: humans, elves, dwarves, and qunari giants. The first three groups are based on characters introduced in Tolkien’s works and are well known to all fantasy enthusiasts. This clearly demonstrates the extent to which *Dragon Age* relies on the established canons of the genre. Each installment of the series tells the story of a new hero, highlighting different regions of Thedas. The series achieves continuity between the parts by focusing on the intertwining global cataclysms that shake this fictional world. Specifically, in the third part of the game, the main character takes control of the Inquisition — a religious organization trying to stop an array of conflicts and disasters that threaten the stability of this imaginary world.

With respect to game mechanics, one can consider *Dragon Age* a traditional RPG. The player creates a character, who explores the world, fights opponents, and completes quests that advance the cen-

tral plot as well as other auxiliary tasks. An important element of the game is the search for companions — characters who accompany the hero and help in battle. Each of these characters has its own backstory; and the protagonist can establish friendly, and on occasion romantic, relationships with them.

In practice, the gameplay is organized around battles, in which the player commands the main character and several companions, and around dialogues in which the player chooses one response from several possible options. Within these dialogues, which affect the game's world, choices can be made that reflect the moral or political preferences of the hero and the player controlling the character. In this case, it seems accurate to speak of two separate actors because often players make decisions based on what their hero would do, not on their own preferences. In doing so, they act in accordance with the character and the biography, which they invented for their character, based on the options offered by the developers.

In addition to these traditional elements of the genre, control over the Inquisition has been added: the player must send agents to areas where his or her character cannot go, manage resources, and form alliances with political factions. This last element deserves special mention because it is one of the few examples of a player in a video game actively running a religious organization. Still, in general, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* may be called a classic computer role-playing fantasy game.

The Protagonist

I will give attention first to the religious dimension of the main character. This must be considered through the motif of the hero's role as a "chosen one" and a "unique" individual, demonstrated by the character's possession of special properties and qualities that the average person in the game lacks. This plot is widespread in the fantasy genre and in popular culture in general: typical examples of "chosen" protagonists are Harry Potter and Neo from the Matrix trilogy. Yet, surprisingly, within the RPG genre, the theme of being a chosen one was absent for some time.

In the early RPGs of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, the main character acted as an "intermediary" between the player and the fictional world. The developers assumed that the player should introduce the protagonist's traits, since developer interference would only distract from immersion in the fictional world. For example, in the *Ulti-*

ma series, the main character was a *tabula rasa* that could be altered as the player wished.

One can date the appearance of the “chosen” protagonist in computer RPGs roughly from the game *Fallout 2* in 1998, in which the main character was explicitly called the Chosen One. And in the fantasy RPG genre, the main credit belongs to *Planescape: Torment*, released a year later in 1999. It was in this game that the protagonist, Nameless, possessed not only the characteristics with which the player endowed the hero, but also other traits and a backstory created by the developers. Of course, the player still wielded considerable control over the fate of Nameless, choosing the path of the hero’s evolution and making decisions in the dialogues that permitted the player to specify any portrayal of the character. But Nameless always retained numerous characteristics inscribed in the fabric of the fictional world that the player could not annul and override at will, and around which the plot of the game was constructed.

After *Planescape: Torment*, the “chosen one” motif quickly gained popularity in the fantasy RPG genre. In the vast majority of subsequent games, main characters are exceptional not only because of their ability to fight evil, but also because of their possession of unique characteristics. At the same time, the motif of the chosen one acquired patently religious significance as most chosen protagonists could be described as religious characters. They appeared as the reincarnation of an ancient prophet (*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, *Arcanum: of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*), as descendants of a deity (*Baldur’s Gate*), as those chosen by higher powers (*Divinity: Original Sin*), or as those who simply possessed a special connection with the religious sphere (*Jade Empire*, *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*).

The status of the main character as a chosen one, assigned at the narrative level, can be reinforced at the ludic level by giving the character unique abilities and attributes. Thus, the Nerevarine in *The Elder Scrolls II: Morrowind* receives immunity to all diseases, and the Descendant of Baal in *Baldur’s Gate 2: Shadows of Amn* turns into an incarnation of the deity. Most often, these abilities appear at the later stages of the story, when the player has become sufficiently familiar with the basic rules to assess the significance of the changes and to experience, on both the narrative and ludic levels, the protagonist’s nature as a chosen one.

It must be emphasized that in most games, the “entry” into the plot occurs very abruptly. As a rule, the hero initially leads a pasto-

ral or, at least, markedly ordinary life, which changes in an instant after the invasion of hostile forces. This occurs most vividly in the game *Neverwinter Nights 2*, which begins with a village holiday and continues with an attack on the village, the target of which is the protagonist. The plots in the series *Baldur's Gate*, *Arcanum*, and *Jade Empire* are similarly developed. All share the common motif of the sudden destruction of life for reasons unknown to the hero. Protagonists, thus, begin their journeys by trying to learn the truth about their nature. As a result, they usually determine rather quickly that they have been chosen by destiny and that their ordinary life was either a lie that concealed their potential or a means of preparing them for subsequent trials.

If one considers that the truth about the main character often has a religious significance, these games offer a kind of retelling of the Gnostic myth, as interpreted in Erik Davis' analysis of the Gnostic elements in modern culture. The "divine" hero, a descendant of the gods, a reincarnation of ancient heroes, or a promised messiah lives in thrall to ordinary life, unaware of his or her nature until chance reveals the truth. The hero then undertakes a journey designed to provide more knowledge of this nature and, consequently, accepts his or her fate, becoming what he or she was destined to be from the very beginning.

At first glance, one sees a similar formula in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The main character embarks on a journey as one of many delegates to a Conclave designed to end the military conflict between the mages and the Templars — radical religious fanatics who believe that people possessing magic should be tightly controlled. The Conclave is destroyed by an explosion, however, in which all its participants perish except for the main character, who receives the ability to close the "Breaches" — portals between the ordinary world and the "Fade," the world of spirits from which demons infiltrate. The inhabitants of Thedas associate the protagonist's power and survival with the intervention of Andraste, the legendary prophetess, whose "Herald" they proclaim the hero to be.

But upon close examination, it becomes evident that BioWare turns the usual formula upside down. The hero's playing ability is not a confirmation of his or her true nature, but a central attribute that determines the attitude of the inhabitants of Thedas toward the hero.¹ The protagonist, under the player's control, closes the "Breach" for the

1. As in many RPGs, at the beginning of the game, the player can choose the character's class, gender, and race.

first time at approximately the fifth minute of the game. This act also becomes the reason the protagonist is proclaimed the Herald of Andraste. Thereafter, the hero uses these powers repeatedly, almost routinely, throughout the game as new “Breaches” occur around the world. The ability itself, rather than, for example, the narrative exposition of a prophecy, makes the hero a “chosen one.”

Moreover, while trying to ascertain what happened to the protagonist and what the nature of the newly acquired powers is, the main character learns that he or she is not a chosen one in the traditional sense. Andraste was not involved in the rescue, at least not directly, and nothing in the protagonist’s life to that point had prepared him or her to receive the gift. The period before the Conclave was not a lie that had concealed from the hero a pre-existing, if not yet actualized, destiny. The hero’s abilities prove to be not a “reward” for establishing the truth; on the contrary, they are a fact to which the main character, the player, and other inhabitants of the fictional universe give their own interpretations, including religious ones. This departure from a narrative of the only possible truth places *Dragon Age: Inquisition* in stark contrast to games with a “Gnostic” plot model.

One can, however, compare the story of the Herald to the story of Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*. Although Tolkien reflected often about fate and destiny, ultimately it was important to the author to emphasize that Frodo was not the Messiah but a mere mortal, confronted for specific reasons with a difficult moral choice. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbit’s position as a chosen one was not paramount; what was of upmost importance was the pragmatic fact that it was Frodo and no one else who possessed the Ring and controlled its fate. *Dragon Age* offers a similar picture. Like Frodo, the Herald was not destined for greatness, but was obliged to live with certain gifts for good or for ill. The investigation of the character’s own nature does not provide clear answers about the Herald’s place in the world, but it forces the protagonist and the player to decide for themselves how exactly to interpret and use this power. The game itself reinforces this by making the Herald’s abilities extremely obvious and relatively easy to use, hence the character’s uniqueness becomes not simply a narrative-reported fact, but something self-evident to the player.

God

This alternate approach to the depiction of the main character in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is reinforced by a different approach to the

portrayal of the gods. As in many fantasy universes, Thedas has several different religious traditions. Elves worship their own pantheon of deities, dwarves profess the cult of their ancestors, and qunari refuse to worship the gods, preferring the philosophical teachings of the Qun. But in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the religion of the humans — the so-called Chantry — receives special attention. This is a monotheistic teaching, whose followers worship the “Maker,” an all-powerful deity who purportedly created the world. The aesthetics and some elements of the ethics of the Chantry clearly draw upon representations of medieval Western European Christianity widespread in popular culture.

The very presence of a monotheistic doctrine is the first notable difference in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. As a rule, fantasy RPGs assume the existence of higher forces. Gods, spirits, and demons often interfere directly in the lives of ordinary mortals, interact with them, give direct orders, and even appear in the flesh among ordinary believers. Under these conditions, the question of monotheism is somewhat meaningless. The only scenario somewhat close to monotheism occurs in games in which one god aggressively forbids the worship of others and uses all its powers to induce the worship of itself, as in the game *Gothic*. Although this plotline, especially at the visual level, derives inspiration from images of religious persecution and forced conversion, the aesthetic similarity masks a fundamentally different meaning. The deity here appears as a ruler, seeking to expand its own territory by force and cunning. Moreover, games usually reveal such divine pretenses as unworthy and expose the gods themselves as tyrants and deceivers, whose plans the main character ruins. The plot of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and of *Gothic* develops around such a confrontation between god and hero, and in other games, for example, *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn*, similar conflicts exist in the side quests a character must perform.

Direct conflict between protagonist and god is only a special case, itself part of a broader fantasy trend — the indissoluble connection between the gods and death that is present in the vast majority of fantasy RPGs. The player must save deities from destruction (*Divinity: Original Sin 2*, *Jade Empire*), contend with the consequences of their death (*Baldur's Gate*), destroy them (*Gothic*), or discover that the very idea of their immortality is a fraud (*Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*). The mortality of the gods motif pervades the genre, contrasting their “false” claim of eternal life to the “true” immortality of the main character.

The approach to the mortality of divinities can be divided into two separate modes, which, in a broader sense, characterize the two main approaches to the depiction of religion in RPGs in general. One mode continues the “Gnostic” logic mentioned above. In games following this approach, such as *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the player does not simply discover that his or her character is divine but exposes those who claim to be celestial beings as cheaters and criminals. In some games, this investigation ends in a direct confrontation between the “true” and “false” savior (*Gothic*), while in others, the player demonstrates his or her superiority by saving deities or their followers (*Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*). In such games, the mortality of the deities is problematic and is portrayed as further evidence that they do not deserve worship and are not “true” gods.

A simpler approach, which for the present purpose may be called “pagan,” does not problematize the mortality of deities at all. This mortality serves as part of the logic found throughout the fictional universe — any being has enemies and allies, and any being can perish should it meet a worthy opponent. Of course, the killing of a deity requires special actions, such as a quest for unique weapons, but in the end, the gods in this approach do not differ from other characters. This makes it possible, among other things, to withhold any moral appraisal of their claim of divine status, as they obviously do not possess omnipotence. In some games, such as *Jade Empire*, the gods even appear as “damsels in distress,” defenseless figures in need of rescue.

The reason video games so often introduce the motif of the “death of the gods” finds explanation in the theory of Tomasz Majkowski, who proposed viewing the video game from the perspective of Bakhtin’s “carnival culture” (Majkowski 2015). Majkowski indicated the importance of the figure of the “carnival king” in particular — the unrighteous, temporary ruler of the carnival, who must be humiliated and destroyed by the end of the holiday. Such, undoubtedly, are the “bosses,” the unique, powerful opponents with whom the hero must battle at the end of the game. The gods serve as a fitting basis for the “carnival kings,” precisely because the concept of a god is associated with something powerful and invincible.

Moreover, the similarity between a video game and a carnival often implies that there can be no invulnerable or truly all-powerful characters in the game, and that those who pretend to be invincible must be ridiculed and humiliated. Accordingly, when introducing a deity into the game, the developers assume that the god will either be defeated by the player as a full-fledged “carnival king,” will prove to be power-

less and in need of outside help, or will perish, ending its own “normal” time before the start of the game and starting the “carnival” period, when the player will have to play.

The way *Dragon Age: Inquisition* resolves this situation is quite simple: the game leaves the Maker as an off-stage character. Strictly speaking, by the end of the game, it is unknown whether the Maker exists at all. The protagonist may initially hold various religious views, depending on the character’s race and the player’s preferences, yet regardless of those views, the game’s plot will force the hero to get involved in disputes and conflicts related to the Chantry. Various events may also make the hero strengthen his or her views, but the game gives no definitive answer as to whether there is a creator or on how the deity is connected to the events taking place. Consequently, the developers manage to steer clear of the death of a god or a confrontation with one, and even more importantly, they introduce a motif that is extremely rare in video games, that of religious faith.

Faith

Faith is a phenomenon featured surprisingly rarely in fantasy RPGs, if one considers how often stories and characters related to religion appear in the genre. This is partly due to the above-mentioned characteristics of the representation of deities. Given that their existence is an indisputable fact, discussions of faith often give way to a choice of loyalty. A typical example of this occurs in the game *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*, the plot of which is structured around death and the afterlife (“Wall of the Faithless”). This wall in the world of the dead imprisons the souls of atheists, people who did not worship any god during their lives. But as the game progresses, the player understands that it is not so much the convinced materialists who deserve this fate, but rather those characters who were too proud to acknowledge the supremacy of anyone, including a deity.

It seems, however, that these typical attributes of fictional worlds are not the only reason for the absence of the theme of faith. Rather, the specific characteristics of the gods and the absence of faith flow from the dominance of secular ideology in fantasy RPGs. At first glance, this statement may seem strange, as the plotlines of many games center around deities, prophecies, and messianic figures. But here it is necessary to consider two observations. First, secularism is not atheism (Kosmin 2007). The ideal of a secular society is not a society without religion, but one in which religion functions in a separate sphere and does not af-

fect political and social life. Second, according to Barthes and other representatives of the semiotic school, an artistic work sets out an ideology not through explicit statements but through the normalization (or, in Barthes's terms, naturalization) of a particular picture of the world and its corresponding ethics (Bart [Barthes] 1996, 255).

The problem of the depiction of Muslims in video games clearly exemplifies this. This medium has long received criticism for its overt anti-Islamic nature. One can find this criticism in articles such as Vít Šisler's "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games" (Šisler 2008) or in Kathrin Trattner's "Critical Discourse Analysis: Studying Religion and Hegemony in Video Games" (Trattner 2017). Yet, the researchers focused not on the absence of Muslims from video games, but on the clear ideological message their portrayal contains — they invariably serve as antagonists, bolstering the widespread stereotype that Islam turns people into murderers.

One can observe something similar with portrayals of religion in general. Although the developers formally introduce a plethora of religious actors, a game's plots and individual tasks make it clear that in a normal situation, religion belongs in a separate closed sphere, from which it influences neither political nor social life. The most graphic example of this is the "Gnostic" approach to the representation of deities, in which gods who claim immortality and try to establish a theocracy are invariably presented as deceivers whom the real hero defeats to restore a right and just world. In this restored world, the deities "know their place" and do not try to claim excessive power. At the same time, the main character, although divine, opts neither to take the place of the defeated "false gods" nor to claim power, but returns to ordinary life within the restored secular world order. Though the opportunity to "attain divinity" is possible in these games, it is clearly marked as an ethically evil decision that will turn the character into a tyrant.

In games that follow the "pagan" approach to the mortality of deities, one sees a different, even simpler view of the problem. Because the gods in these games always answer prayers, it is possible to reduce all religious life in fantasy RPGs to definite, controllable, measurable results. In games such as *Baldur's Gate*, temples are not a place of contact between humans and higher powers nor even a center for the dissemination of certain views, but a place for the provision of certain services. The player's character visits the temple when he or she has practical needs and leaves having received all that was needed. One can compare this approach to real, historical paganism, which explains the choice of term.

But “pagan” religions in video games differ from real paganism. In the market economy prevailing in most video game universes, exclusively financial relationships connect priests with the people around them. Priests, however, lack the opportunity to convert the provision of “divine” services into political influence or moral authority, examples of which have occurred throughout history. Those who try to do this by refusing to heal non-believers, for example, or by subjugating a community through the use of divine powers are portrayed as antagonists, or at the very least as misguided people, whom the main character wins over or kills. In these circumstances, religious faith is not simply excluded, which could be explained by the peculiar structure of fictional worlds in which the existence of gods cannot be questioned, but stigmatized. In many video games the only characters guided by religious dogmas are aggressive fanatics who try to kill or convert anyone they meet, while ethical, positive characters demonstrate a secular worldview and an instrumental approach to religion.²

In a typical example of the absence of the faith motif, characters among the player’s companions often position themselves as adherents of a religion, but they rarely use the ethics of their religion as a guide for action, typically perform rituals only to obtain a practical result, and hardly speak of their faith. In *Planescape: Torment* and *Baldur’s Gate 2*, conversations between the main character and companions about their lives, feelings, and principles are an important part of the game, but these dialogues hardly ever touch on religious issues. Moreover, when this happens, the respective characters often appear in a comical role. For example, the priest Virgil, from *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, is unable even to quote the central prophecy of the Church without errors.

Here it is appropriate to recall the concept of “procedural rhetoric” proposed by Ian Bogost (Bogost 2007). Bogost argued that video games invariably contain a kind of ideology and can convince players of its rightness not only through the plot or visual elements, but also through certain rules and restrictions. When playing a video game, a player encounters various situations, and the game offers a set of options to resolve them. The combination of these options also serves as a guide to specific views. Moreover, the game evaluates which possible actions are valid and which are not: a player who defies the logic of the game, therefore, risks losing and having to begin again.

2. For more detail see Moyzhes 2018.

But Bogost also notes that when analyzing how game rules impact beliefs and value systems, it is important to consider not only how things included in the game are depicted, but also those things the developers excluded. Thus, in most military shooters, even those that claim to be realistic, civilians are entirely absent. The player's character operates in empty cities, in which, besides the protagonist, there are only allies and enemies, and non-combatants appear only in cut-scenes, if at all. This fits into traditional militaristic rhetoric, which portrays war as a controlled and ultimately ordered exercise. Accordingly, civilian casualties prove not an inevitable consequence of the conflict itself, but the result of a conscious decision by one of the parties to disregard their safety.

These "utterances" occur exclusively at the level of the rules, and, moreover, through the absence rather than the presence of specific mechanics in the game. This echoes the ideas of another researcher in the field of game studies, Gonzalo Frasca. Frasca argues that most video games are simulations, and that their ideology manifests itself through the elements the games exclude from the simulation, thus declaring them inconsequential (Frasca 2003). In the case of religion, faith is one such element. Religion is portrayed as something that should either not draw attention to itself, or should serve in practice a socially useful function, for example, to heal and protect those in need. Under such conditions, the difference between distinct teachings are effectively aesthetic. Affiliation with a religion is depicted as the personal choice of the believer, which may reflect his or her character, formed under the influence of other factors, but does not affect behavior, at least in the public sphere.

Thus, in video games, the gods who follow rules applicable to all characters and respect the choice of mortals to move from one temple to another reinforce the secular structure of society. And those who begin to convert people aggressively to their teachings or otherwise encroach upon a secular sphere, such as politics, are therefore portrayed as antagonists whom the main character opposes. Thus, protagonists find themselves the guardians of the established world order, and religion proves a kind of "liminal sphere," the presence of which in everyday life should be strictly controlled. In many games, the entire plot amounts effectively to the restoration of a secular situation in the world, which radical believers, seeking to impose their own views on others, had threatened, as in the game *The Witcher*.³

3. See the corresponding article in this issue of the journal.

It is important to emphasize that in this article the discussion of ideology in video games, whether militarism or secularism, does not imply that the developers intentionally embedded certain ideas in their product. Obviously, the key reason for the lack of civilians in shooters is financial: creating them would necessitate spectacular expenditures of money and time. Similarly, the simulation of religious faith and experiences would require more dialogues at the least and perhaps the creation of new game mechanics capable of describing a character's spiritual life.

Then again, given technology, all these tasks are possible. I will return to Frasca's argument about the exclusion of something from a simulation being an ideological act: in considering something unnecessary and having allocated resources to develop another segment of the game in detail, a developer is guided by a specific vision of the final product. And this product, in turn, arises from the developer's world view, that is, ultimately it is ideologically determined. But it is important to stress that this article, in accordance with the methodology of phenomenological hermeneutics, focuses not on the intentions of the authors, but specifically on how their work may be read.

This leads to the question of what is unique about the representation of faith in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. One can find numerous differences on a purely narrative level. The plot of this game revolves around the premise that religion can and even should play a significant role in people's lives. The Inquisition, a religious organization, founded by the main character and his or her companions, aims not only to reform the Chantry, but also to interfere in politics and to prevent wars and global catastrophes. Thus, the player ignores the genre's traditional boundaries that separate the religious sphere from the secular.

The portrayals of specific characters, primarily the companions and advisers of the "Herald of Andraste," further reinforce this intermixing of the two spheres. These characters are much more open about their religion than characters in other games: they speak of their own religious views, perform religious rituals, and look to the teachings of the Chantry for guidance when making decisions. The game even contains a form of reflection on secular and ecclesiastical views of faith. The protagonist's extremely religious counselor, Cassandra Pentaghast, may tell the hero that one companion, Varric, in fact shares the teachings of Andraste but does not feel the need to speak of it.

In addition to these narrative distinctions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, there are also ludic elements that depict faith. This is possible

thanks to the different approaches it takes to the main character and deities that I described in previous sections. BioWare places players amid uncertainty without giving them complete information about either the status of their character or the reality of the creator deity. Instead, it forces the protagonist (and therefore the player) to make the relevant judgments on his or her own. During the game, companions approach the main character to ask his or her opinion on certain issues. In particular, they inquire whether the hero believes in the Maker and whether the hero considers him or herself to be the “Herald of Andraste.” The player has a choice of different options from the strictly religious to the atheistic. And through such simple, but surprisingly unique mechanics, he or she obtains the opportunity to reveal his or her own faith or lack thereof. It must be emphasized that these questions have a real effect on the game-world: followers of the main character and sometimes entire kingdoms and organizations react to the answers given, both on the narrative and ludic levels, providing assistance to the Inquisition or hindering its operations.

Thus, the game gives the player the opportunity to simulate an act of faith by asserting the existence of a deity without any indication of which answer would be correct. At the same time, the game demonstrates how the social context, among other things, shapes such assertions: political considerations, personal sympathies, and momentary desires can influence them. It is these mechanics that make it possible to say that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* offers one of the most profound simulations of religious faith to be found in modern commercial video games.

The Central Myth

The importance of faith and monotheism in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* suggest that this game is much closer to the Abrahamic religions than are most projects in the same genre. With this in mind, one must focus on the elements of the game that specifically resemble Christianity. It is clear that the comparison in this case will not be between the game and a hypothetical “real Christianity,” but between the semiotic signs used to create the image of the Chantry in the game and widespread cultural representations of Christianity. The question of how close these representations are to reality, as well as exactly how they were formed, remains beyond the scope of this article. It should be noted straightway that all the elements of this section lie in the sphere of narrative and aesthetics. The game has no specifically pro-Christian

game mechanics, although given the corresponding aesthetic markings it makes sense to consider the mechanics and problems of faith in the game that refer specifically to Christianity.

The similarity of the “Cult of the Maker” to Christianity hinges on the depiction of the Chantry and, specifically, its central myth. In the representation of the Chantry, for its part, one can distinguish aesthetic and narrative components. The former are the more obvious. Visually, temples clearly evoke the appearance of Western European churches. The long robes of the clergy; the distinctive architecture of cathedrals, echoing the Gothic tradition; and the stained glass are all well-established “signs” of medieval Catholicism. Terminological choices evoke Christianity even more clearly: soldiers sworn to protect the Chantry are called Templars, large gatherings are Conclaves, and so forth. It should be emphasized that these elements are quite common in RPGs. The aesthetics of the medieval Church are often used to denote a religion as familiar and “normal.” Other aesthetic choices serve the opposite effect, signaling to the player that the character has fallen into a strange, exotic place.

Narrative signs merit more attention — conventional plots, conflicts, and character portrayals that resonate with many players’ ideas of Christianity. One such sign is the issue of gender. All clergy in the Chantry are women, which at first glance makes it an inversion of real-world Christianity. But from the perspective of Kirby’s “fantastic milieu” theory, the motif of gender restrictions seems more significant than its substance. Priestesses in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* play a role usually performed by male priests and do not correspond to New Age and Wicca stereotypes of priestesses, prevalent in the fantastic milieu. It is noteworthy that prohibitions of any kind, especially ones so problematic from the perspective of real-world politics, often serve to identify enemy organizations in fantasy RPGs. This, in turn, fits into a skeptical attitude toward any rituals that do not serve a pragmatic purpose. But in the case of the Chantry, the ban on male clergy is not considered a sign of restriction. This is perhaps partly done to “balance” the plot: women’s superiority in the Chantry is “balanced” by men’s dominance in other areas, in accordance with the neo-medievalist paradigm of the genre. But in any case, the remarkable fact remains that in this case the game offers an example of a ritual ban lacking strictly negative connotations.

Another sign reminiscent of Christianity is hierarchy and the motif of the struggle for power. This is also not unique to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*: organized religions in RPGs are often constructed around

a complex, multi-tiered official hierarchy inspired by Catholicism. In some cases, as in the game *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, for example, this may contradict other elements, such as the visual aesthetic, which in *Elder Scrolls III* is inspired by the Far East. The distinctiveness of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* lies in the close attention this game pays to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, explaining to the player in detail exactly how the organization is structured and how promotion occurs within it, presenting it as a social and political process. This makes possible the introduction of another characteristic plotline that resonates in popular culture with the image of Christianity — the story of the election of the head of the Church, or in this case the Chantry. The explosion at the Conclave, with which the game begins, takes the life of the leader of the Chantry — the Divine Justinia — among others. As a result, the question of who will become the new spiritual leader of Thedas and how this leader will reform the Chantry becomes an important supplementary plotline.

Finally, the third sign showing that popular conceptions of Christianity serve as the basis for the Chantry of Thedas is the struggle between the Chantry and the mages. Echoing the image of a “witch hunt,” popular in twentieth-century culture, this sign is also common in fantasy RPGs. The image of a crowd led by priests trying to kill a “heretic” or “sorceress” appears in many video games, for example, in *Baldur’s Gate II*, in which the main character must literally snatch a companion out of the fire. But *Dragon Age: Inquisition* differs in that it does not include this sign simply to reinforce that a certain organization is hostile; rather the game analyzes the issue in detail, presenting the conflict between the mages and the radical-Templars as a problem inherent in the very essence of the doctrine of the Chantry, which the player must somehow solve. And although the developers obviously implied that the side of the mages deserves more sympathy, they leave the choice to the discretion of the player, seeking to highlight that each side is motivated by its own views. The struggle occurs not between the Chantry and reason, but between different interpretations of the same teaching.

The game contains a host of other signs that also refer to the Church, but their detailed enumeration would be superfluous. Enough has been written to recognize that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* contains elements that draw upon the popular image of Christianity, not Islam, Judaism, or an abstract “monotheistic religion in general.” Such a detailed analysis of the given signs is intended to serve still another pur-

pose — to identify a general strategy for the treatment of these signs, which this study proposes to call remythologization.

Each of the elements presented here is widely known in popular culture and occupies an important place in the “fantastic milieu.” They came to that milieu, in turn, from the literature of the nineteenth century, in which these elements appeared as part of the interpretation, representation, and critique of Christianity. Over time, these images lost their direct connection to real religion and became recognizable, convenient symbols that authors and development teams used as they saw fit. But BioWare builds a single narrative about a specific religious organization out of individual elements of the fantastic milieu, and thus partially restores the context in which they originated. This forms a closer connection between this game and Christianity — in contrast to other projects in which the link is mediated by culture, namely, by the “fantastic milieu.” I call this process of partially restoring the original religious meanings to the elements of the fantastic milieu “remythologization.”

One observes a similar picture in the central myth of the Chantry. From conversations with characters, text screens, and other in-game texts, the player can learn that, according to legends, the Maker once existed in harmony with the world, but that the rulers of the state of Tevinter, the empire of the mages, decided to take the deity’s powers for themselves. They infiltrated the god’s dwelling place, the Golden City, causing the angry god to turn away from the world, while the lords of Tevinter themselves turned into so-called “creatures of darkness” — monsters that have since threatened the entire civilization. The world existed for many centuries without the attention of its creator, until a prophetess named Andraste appealed to the deity with a song so beautiful and sincere that the Maker believed that all was not lost for Thedas. The Maker took Andraste as a Bride and through the prophetess explained to the nations exactly how they should live so that the creator deity could fully return. Later, Andraste dies when the prophetess’ mortal husband, Maferath, bribed by the enemies of the prophetess, betrayed Andraste, but the disciples of Andraste continued the prophetess’ work, which led to the emergence of the Chantry.

The parallels between the separate elements of this myth and the central themes of Christianity are obvious. It is important to emphasize once again that the developers of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* did not pioneer these ideas. Thus, the motif of an ancient empire that perished because of the ambition of its rulers is present in numerous RPGs. In part this has a purely pragmatic cause. Daniel Vella notes that ruins

serve as a type of space much in demand in video games (Vella 2011), and that the story of the downfall of an ancient civilization can become an excellent narrative rationale for their inclusion. Similarly, representations of prophets and their death at the hands of traitors, as well as the motif of the departure of deities from the world and their return, have long been present in the fantastic milieu.

The distinctiveness of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, however, lies not in the inclusion of new elements in the fantastic milieu, but the recombination of old ones. By reuniting separate plotlines that had lost their interconnection in the fantastic milieu, the developers offered their own reading of the foundational Christian narratives: the story of the fall and redemption. In this sense, the story of Andraste and the Maker may be compared to the works of C.S. Lewis, as yet another retelling biblical stories in other realities that make the central themes and conflicts more salient and vivid.

The Chantry

The last aspect of the representation of religion that merits attention is the player's direction of the Inquisition, a religious organization that advocates for Chantry reform and for its more active participation in politics. In this part of the game, players encounter various problems that they assign to their subordinates to resolve. These problems can range from a political crisis or complex negotiations to organizing the procurement of food and building materials.

The existence of game mechanics that enable a player to control a dominion or organization that would complement the hero's own adventures is not new. In the game *Neverwinter Nights 2*, the protagonist is appointed commandant of the fortress and compelled to look after its development and defense. This was preceded in turn by similar game mechanics in *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* and even older games.

Dragon Age: Inquisition differs from other games, however. For one thing, there is a quantitative difference: the management of one's own organization is not an incidental mechanism in one chapter. Rather, the player begins to lead the Inquisition from the very beginning of the game and continues to plan operations and distribute the organization's resources until the finale. This allows developers to build a clear connection between the personal decisions and adventures of the hero and his or her companions and the broad socio-political context of the fictional universe. Besides this quantitative distinction, there is

also a qualitative one that consists of the characteristics of the organization the player directs. The Inquisition is a religious association. The presence of political goals within it allows it to recruit characters to the Inquisition who do not worship Andraste and the Maker, but who share specific aspirations, thus removing the complicated issue of conversion. Yet, the group is still strongly associated with a specific fictional religion. Players must make decisions about how their followers relate to the religious conflict between Templars and mages and which candidate to promote for the position of head of the Chantry.

The religious aspect of the Inquisition may also prove problematic. Thus, it is often possible to conclude negotiations by invoking the authority of the “Herald of Andraste.” At the same time, many political complications stem from the dissatisfaction among conservative circles in the Chantry at the emergence of the new organization. It must be stressed that the game does not make fundamental distinctions between religious and non-religious issues. All these are simply the challenges that arise in the path of the protagonist, who serves simultaneously as a religious and secular leader. In choosing how to resolve these issues, a player can rely on his or her character’s religious beliefs as well as on political pragmatics or any other factors.

As mentioned above, the main characters of many RPGs are religious figures: incarnations of the gods, chosen ones, or reincarnations of ancient prophets. The plot, however, rarely depicts the social and political significance of this status. As a rule, developers avoid this in three ways. The protagonist may receive information along the way that renders meaningless the very foundations of the religion in question. Another similar approach entails the protagonist’s voluntary renunciation of his or her high position for a simpler life, most often continuing to roam the world in search of adventures. Finally, in the third and rarest approach, the main character acquires sacred status and plans to act upon it. But this only occurs at the very end of the game, which leaves the political consequences of the decision outside the game’s plot. Tellingly, developers usually find this approach ethically dubious.

All this fits into the general ideology of conservatism and secularism that dominates the genre. The hero’s task is not to change the world but to restore the demolished boundaries between religious and secular spaces. To this end, the protagonist uses any means, including divine powers, but after completing the mission these powers lose both meaning and allure. The protagonist opposes religious actors changing the world, and thus ought not participate in it. It is in-

interesting to note that in many games of other genres that touch on the topic of religion, the same situation persists. Moreover, one can find some among them that also allow the player to assume the leadership of a fictional religious organization — for example, *Cultist Simulator* — but usually the same strict opposition of the “secular” and “religious” spheres remains in these games, too; it is just shown from a different perspective. In such cases, the player’s task becomes not to restore the established order but to change it, however, religion is still portrayed as something wholly separate from ordinary everyday life and its problems.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is different, in that this game abandons the naturalized ideology of secularism. Political, social, ethical, and religious factors are so intermixed that it can be difficult to draw a boundary between them. Using both narrative and ludic means, the developers show that religion is intertwined with all spheres of life. And the player’s task is not to “contain” religion, keeping it separate from the other spheres, but to use the powers the hero has discovered to achieve his or her goals. This is the most striking postsecularist narrative built into *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Conclusion

This article deliberately set aside the question of historical or biographical reasons for the uniqueness of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*; rather, its purpose was to demonstrate how this game may be viewed as a postsecular Christian message. At the same time, the study pursued two objectives: on the one hand, to analyze the genetic relationship between the depiction of religion in this game and its depiction in earlier RPGs, and, on the other hand, to pay attention to seemingly insignificant details and changes in-game mechanics and narrative, which make the depiction of religion and religious life in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* unique in its genre.

Instead of a “Gnostic” plot about a hero discovering his or her true nature, one sees the story of a spiritual quest. Instead of knowledge of a plethora of gods, one finds a simulation of acts of faith and unbelief. Instead of a hero standing guard over the borders between the spiritual and secular worlds — religion is woven into the fabric of society, politics, and economics. This is what makes *Dragon Age: Inquisition* a postsecular work, unique in a deeply secular genre. Its specific allusions made at the level of both narrative and game mechanics make possible comparison to Christianity.

It must be stressed that nothing said here makes *Dragon Age: Inquisition* a better or worse game than others. But an example of an alternative view, a different approach to the representation of religion, is important. And it is especially important to emphasize that the developers were able to produce their unique statement by drawing upon the same tools as their predecessors. This suggests that the potential of video games as a medium for discussion and even debate about religion is far from exhausted.

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