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Vander I. Corliss

Trinity College, vander.corliss@gmail.com

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**GAMING WITH GOD:
A CASE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN VIDEO GAMES**

Vander I. Corliss
Department of Religion
Senior Thesis
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Introduction

Jesus Laughed Too: Religion in the Entertainment Industry

The role of the entertainment industry in everyday life has changed significantly over the last century. Just the definition of what entertainment is has changed considerably. It (entertainment) still lacks a clear definition, and is often defined as that which is not art, usually by virtue of its being a commercial product designed for mass consumption.¹ Going by this definition it is hard to imagine a world without movies, TV shows, sporting events, and other forms of entertainment that have become a central part of life throughout the world. This is especially true in America where all different kinds of American entertainment are exported to countries all around the world. An article in Fortune magazine stated that, “American movies, music, television programming, and home video generated an annual trade surplus of some \$8 billion in 1990.”² Remember that this statistic is for exported entertainment and not for revenue generated by entertainment in America. This multi-billion dollar giant has become a central part of our lives not only as a distraction from everyday life but also as a guiding force. “Public discourse about the role and influence of entertainment has been a consistent feature of 20th century American life.”³ Criticism of the entertainment industry ranges from coarse language, violence, and sexual content to the portrayal of religion and/or religious institutions. Whether it is in movies, music, or television there is always some group that is striking out at the industry. For something that is so omnipresent in society, we keep it

¹ William Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (Downes Grove, InterVarsity Press), 22.

² John Huey, “America’s Hottest Export: Pop Culture,” *Fortune*, December 31, 1990, pp 55-60.

³ Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*, 13.

at an arm's length unsure of what to make of it and wary about the influence it could have.

Wherever you turn you run into some form of entertainment media that is informing your decisions or influencing how you act. It is no secret that Oprah Winfrey has a large influence around the world with her TV show, magazine, and book club. Thousands of people hang on her every word and suggestion ready to try anything she recommends to her audience. It almost resembles a cult in how fanatically some people follow Oprah. Many TV shows and movies have fanatical followings including *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, *LOST*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *The Warriors*, *The Evil Dead*, and *Donnie Darko* just to name a few. A whole genre of films has even been created in order to classify these films, cult classics. The word cult has several meanings ranging from a system of religious worship to a group bound together by veneration of the same thing. Given these definitions is it no surprise that religion and entertainment are so intertwined yet so far apart? They exist together like magnets, sometimes attracting and at other times repelling each other. The relationship that religion and entertainment have is one of give and take. In today's world however entertainment seems to be sinking into our lives more than ever before. With advances in technology there is no person that does not experience some form of entertainment in their everyday life. But when entertainment becomes so omnipresent and even omnipotent, is it something that we want influencing the youth of tomorrow?

In the world of today "youth culture and entertainment became significant influences on the behavior of the young."⁴ The youth is one of the main reasons why the

⁴ Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*, 25.

entertainment industry faces so much criticism. Parents are concerned that their children will be affected by what they see in entertainment media whether it be violence, sex, or any number of other topics. This is the main reason that religious organizations became involved in the fight against the entertainment industry. “The more powerful entertainment became as a force in American life, the greater the fear in the religious community, and especially among more conservative groups, of its potential as an instrument of evil.”⁵ The struggle against the entertainment industry became one of good against evil with religion standing firm against the onslaught of the entertainment industry. Religious groups focused on violence and sex especially in movies as being gratuitous and detrimental to society. It went against everything that the church and Bible taught and for that reason it had to be confronted. An example of this was in the early 1980s, “*Gremlins*, *The Karate Kid*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* drew criticism for scenes containing violence. Consumer and religious groups demanded a revamping of Hollywood’s rating system and the PG-13 rating was created.”⁶ This is just one example of religion getting involved and making a difference in the entertainment industry. Movies were most often singled out for criticism because of their accessibility to the masses. They are a form of entertainment where almost anything goes. From the ultra-violent to the overtly sexual, every year new movies come out that push the boundaries. One of the best examples of this is when *The Passion of the Christ* came out back in 2004. The controversies surrounding this film existed before its release and continued long after it was in theaters. People fell on both sides of the film with many claiming that the film was anti-Semitic and should be condemned or that it was too

⁵ Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*, 41.

⁶ Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*, 14.

violent and needed to be censored. Others still praised the film for what it depicted and some churches even scheduled trips for their congregations to attend the movie. Religion and entertainment walk a fine line together and on the rare occasion that they mix together there is always contention on both sides. New forms of entertainment media give rise to new problems and questions over how religion should intermingle with them. But when this new media allows you to immerse yourself in the experience and control how the story unfolds, this creates a whole new dimension.

Video games are the new medium through which entertainment reaches the masses. Although they have only been around since the 1940s they already have a large following. “According to a 2003 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 70 percent of college students reported playing video games at least once in a while, and 65 percent reported being regular or occasional game players.”⁷ Something that gives you the same experience as going to a movie but with the added bonus of being able to interact with the virtual world can be more influential than just sitting and watching something. “This godlike control over the narrative defines the attraction of gaming for many people.”⁸ Video games require the player to use critical thinking, reflexes, and often personal choices in order to play and eventually win the game. Newer games bring peoples’ own morals into play applying them to “real-life” situations. Today’s technology enables video games to seem extremely realistic and as technology continues to evolve so will video games. With this more complex technology comes the need for more complex storylines. These can contain any number of themes and often times

⁷ Chris Hansen, “From *Tekken* to *Kill Bill*: The Future of Narrative Storytelling?,” in *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Game with God*, ed. Craig Detweiler. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 20.

⁸ Hansen, “From *Tekken* to *Kill Bill*,” 19.

religion is used in them for a variety of reasons ranging. Religion can be a major plot device or a simple aside that helps advance the game. Either way religion is making its way into the newest form of entertainment. Because video games are a new form of entertainment, little research has been put towards examining the role of religion in them. But the role of religion in video games is something that needs to be studied because of the influence that they, and the entertainment industry in general, have on society today.

Chapter 1

What Would Jesus Play?

When video games first hit the commercial market in the 1970s, it signaled the start of a new age for entertainment media. The traditional games that people had been playing up till then faced a new competitor. Initial video game systems were limited to arcade cabinets. Former pinball arcades became video arcades, the new hangout spots for teenagers and young adults. It was not until consoles became available for purchase that video games came into the family home and were enjoyed by everyone. Early in its history video games were simple and received little criticism. This was mostly due to a limitation with the technology that was used to create and play games. You could not really do much with just 8 pixels so there was not a lot of criticism. Video games were seen as replacements or at least competition for board games and brought the whole family together in much the same way except that instead of being gathered around a game board the family was together in front of a television set. Newer generation consoles starting with the Atari in 1972 all the way up to the PS3 and Xbox 360, in 2006 and 2005 respectively, changed the video game world once again. The new technology in them enabled developers to create anything they could imagine. It is with these new games that we begin to see the influence that video games have on society. This influence is backed by the criticism that comes to bear on a lot of video games, much in the same way that movies did. Games were charged with corrupting the minds of children with scenes and acts of violence, sex, and foul language. Pervasive violence is one of the things that video games are most cited for and many studies have been conducted on the topic. But is violence in video games any different from violence in

other forms of entertainment media such as television and movies? “Awful things happen. Violent behavior by youth is nothing new and it happens all over the world. And every decade there has been some new scapegoat for it. Radio, comic books, television, movies, and rock-n-roll have all taken their turn standing where video games and rap music stand today in the mind of those who insist on finding something to blame for their problems.”⁹ When something terrible happens, especially if a kid does it, people immediately bring out their own theories as to why a child would act in this way. Violence as a result of playing violent video games has been at the forefront of many studies, protests, and other movements against the video game industry. At the head of one of these movements is Senator Joe Lieberman, a Democrat from Connecticut.

On April 20, 1999 in Littleton, Colorado two students went to school with weapons killing and wounding about a dozen students. It was found out that the two students were avid fans of violent Hollywood movies and video games and this is when Sen. Lieberman stepped up. Lieberman spearheaded a nationwide movement for video “ratings and labeling,” including an “Appeal to Hollywood” signed by two former US Presidents.¹⁰ Lieberman is one among a handful of US Senators who are firmly against violence in the entertainment industry. He charges video games with corrupting America and his efforts in 1999 were not his first; in fact, Lieberman had helped in the creation of the same rating and labeling scheme four years earlier in 1995.¹¹ How much had his efforts paid off if four years later the worst school shooting at the time was committed? Games like *Mortal Kombat* (1992) made their way from arcade cabinets to home

⁹ Hannon, Colleen, “The Blame Game,” *Gamers with Jobs* (2007).

¹⁰ Don Phau and Scott Thompson, “‘Nintendo Joe’ Saved Killer Game Producers,” *Executive Intelligence Review* (2002)

¹¹ Phau and Thompson, “‘Nintendo Joe’”

consoles making violent video games available to everyone. Lieberman believed that a system for rating games needed to be created and put forth the legislation, which was approved. This led to the eventual creation of the rating system known as the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), which was approved by Congress and became the de facto rater of video games in the United States. The ESRB's mission statement states that they are there,

To empower consumers, especially parents, with the ability to make informed decisions about the computer and video games they choose for their families through the assignment of age and content ratings, and to hold the computer and video game industry accountable for responsible marketing practices.¹²

The main themes that factor into how a game is rated by the ESRB are violence, sexuality, language, gambling, alcohol, tobacco and drug use.¹³ While this system works great there is also one drawback to it and also Joe Lieberman's efforts. Violent video games are currently the most popular type of game on the market. The ESRB rating system is printed right on the front of the packaging signaling to everyone that this game contains "bad stuff" and is therefore more desirable. Ask any kid what kind of game they want to play nowadays and they will respond with one that contains violence in some way, shape, or form. In January 2011 an article on IGN lists the Top Ten Combined Platform Sales for 2010,¹⁴ out of these 10 games 5 of them are rated "M for Mature" by

¹² "About ESRB." Entertainment Software Rating Board, accessed on March 15, 2011, <http://www.esrb.org/about/index.jsp>.

¹³ "About ESRB"

¹⁴ "The Bestselling Games of 2010," IGN Entertainment, accessed on March 15, 2011, <http://xbox360.ign.com/articles/110/1107064p1.html>.

the ESRB. All of this legislation and ratings however mean nothing unless they are backed by evidence that violence in video games causes violence in the real world. One such study conducted by the Technische Universität in Darmstadt, Germany found some interesting results. It found that after playing violent video games the data showed that “the violent video games primed aggressive concepts...Furthermore, positive concepts were primed by the violent video games as well.”¹⁵ The information that the study found about violent games and aggressive concepts is nothing new; there have been dozens of studies proving this and the results are all the same. What is interesting is that they found that positive concepts were readied too. This may cause problems for all of the theories that purport violent video games to be intrinsically negative. No matter what one study might say the multitudes of angry parents and politicians will not cease until their side of the argument is seen as the correct one. So now we understand that video games have faced a lot of criticism for corrupting the youth of America. But how do the masses respond when the topic of religion is introduced into the video game industry? The answer is not as simple as one thinks.

Religion and the video game industry walk a thin line together in much the same way that religion does with the entertainment industry as a whole. Video game developers fall on both sides of the line, some ready and willing to put religion in or make a religious game, while others shy away from the topic and create simple representation of religion. Peter Molyneux, a legend in the video game industry (*Black & White* and the *Fable* series done with Lionhead Studios and the *Populous* series with Bullfrog Productions are just a few of the games that he has worked on) says that, “There

¹⁵ Bosche, Wolfgang. “Violent Video Games Prime Both Aggressive and Positive Cognitions,” *Journal of Media Psychology* 22, (2010): 144.

cannot be a hotter potato than this potato. Religion is one of those things where if you're specific about it you're going to get yourself into a mountain of trouble. You have to be very very careful.”¹⁶ Molyneux is no stranger to using religion in his video games. In *Black and White*, the player takes on the role of a god who rules over the people of a fictitious land, able to freely punish or reward them. The *Fable* series differs in that the player plays as a young boy on a quest to save the kingdom from impending doom. There are two “churches” – one good and one evil – that exist in the game world but they are comical interpretations and have no real bearing on the main game. However he is quick to point out a difference between faith and organized religion. “If you look at what *Assassin's Creed* or a lot of Japanese games do, I think they're talking about how Man has corrupted a pure and simple message, ‘Be nice. Someone loves you, God loves you.’”¹⁷ Most games that seem to favor this message that Molyneux is talking about jump across the line between commentary and offense, but how long will they be able to do so before someone takes action? Games that feature religion more subtly fly under the radar longer and may not attract as much attention as a game that flaunts it such as *Dante's Inferno*. However there has not been much noise about religion in video games, unlike violence and other topics. For all the “bad” things that video games contain there are as many if not more “good” things. The U.S. military, law enforcement and other public departments use video games for training and simulations. Video games are also used in some schools to aid in the teaching of new materials. “We resist the temptation to baptize gaming as inherently good or evil, attempting to bring nuance to an emerging

¹⁶ Murdoch, Julian, “God’s PR Problem: The Role of Religion in Videogames,” GameSpy. Accessed on March 16, 2011.

<http://www.gamespy.com/articles/105/1059455p1.html>.

¹⁷ Murdoch, “God’s PR Problem.”

phenomenon.”¹⁸ Gaming has become part of everyday culture and since it is still evolving it is hard to see where it will go and how it will influence society. The people that played *Pong* and *Space Invaders* in the 1970s are completely different from those that play *Counter Strike* or *Starcraft* today. Religion in video games is just another stop on the road of video game evolution and shows how games reflect the world around them. There have been plenty of upset parents calling in about evolution or creationism being taught in schools because of their religious beliefs, but when it comes to video games and religion there is only silence. Peter Molyneux goes on to say that, “Clearly God, the divine as a concept, plays a huge role in modern gaming. Virtually every fantasy role-playing game...explicitly includes the divine in the form of priests calling down healing prayers or smiting evil foes.”¹⁹ Even in other genres of games such as first person shooters, real-time strategy games, action-adventure, and simulation games all have elements of religion in them. As mentioned by Molyneux earlier there is a difference between faith and organized religion in video games. The idea of faith in one form or another is present in most games on the market today, while the subject of organized religion has a smaller presence. Just as the technology restrictions in early gaming prohibited violence from being shown to a high degree, David Thomas a reviewer for the *Denver Post* says, “The immersive, increasingly hyper-real experience of games triggers a whole set of questions on faith, purpose, and ultimately, truth.”²⁰

Surprisingly though within all of the games that contain elements of religion the popular

¹⁸ Craig Detweiler, edits., *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 12.

¹⁹ Murdoch, “God’s PR Problem.”

²⁰ Loftus, Tom, “God in the Console,” MSNBC. Accessed on March 17, 2011. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3078392>.

ones at least are “secular” games. These “secular” games have no religious affiliation at all yet contain religion in one form or another. Contrary to these are religious games that are predominantly Christian based, and usually take inspiration from Bible stories. These religious games are mostly developed and released by small independent companies.

“While some Christian games remain focused on edutainment or tacking on a Bible-related story to a popular arcade classic, a small number of developers are at the forefront of a new trend in Christian game development: sophisticated game play, bigger budgets, and a less overt message.”²¹ An example of this new era of Christian gaming would be the *Left Behind* series. It is a strategy game based on the popular book series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins about a group of humans who are left on earth after the Rapture. Their mission is to unite the survivors and fight the forces of the Devil that roam the earth. So there is a violent element along with the Christian element. Games like *Left Behind* contain a religious message but at the same time offer a fun playing experience. If other developers can create more games like this then there will be more of a market for religious games.

The thing is that “people tend to take religion extremely personally and therefore have more opportunity to be offended”²² says, CEO of id Software Todd Hollenshead. But we cannot place all of the blame for the lack of religious games on the big name publishers. The smaller developers that do produce religious games lack the funding or reputation to get their games into the mainstream market. On the other hand the church too has proved to be less than giving with their support of religious game and the industry

²¹ Loftus, “God in the Console.”

²² Morris, Chris, “The Greatest Story Never Played,” CNN Money. Accessed on March 17, 2011.
http://money.cnn.com/2005/07/06/commentary/game_over/column_gaming/index.html

in general. “Embracing the medium is the way [for churches] to get across and deliver the message they want to,” said Bill Roper, CEO of Flagship Games. “They’ve done that with music. They’ve done that with books. They’ve done that with movies. I don’t think they’ve done that with games yet.”²³ The church has been using various forms of entertainment for years trying to spread their message to the masses. That is why a video game seems perfect because it provides the same experience as a movie but with a level of interactivity that immerses you within it. Since modern video games are still a relatively new addition to the entertainment industry maybe religious organizations are just waiting for the right moment. If they are waiting they should wait no more because video games are one of the most popular forms of entertainment and are accessible to a wider audience than books, music, or movies. Creating the story of the games is another aspect that developers spend a lot of time on and can be tricky. “Making games based on stories from the Bible, Torah, Koran or any religious scripture is a tricky affair, since many religious tales have little to do with the skills of man. So by having a player’s choices affect the outcome of those stories, are you pushing aside a higher power?”²⁴ If you try to make a game based on these religious texts most of the stories that you could make a game out of contain little conflict and therefore a limited frame of game play. No one wants to play a game without conflict in it because without conflict there is not drama. There is nothing to draw a person into the game and keep him there while having a good time. Games published by giants in the industry tend to shy away from overtly religious themes and instead focus on injecting titles with a moral element. When executed well morality can bring an entirely new dimension to the game, but when done

²³ Morris, “The Greatest Story Never Played.”

²⁴ Morris, “The Greatest Story Never Played.”

wrong it can seem heavy-handed and defeat the experience. Examples of morality being used correctly are often seen in action adventure type games. Some of these games present the player with a moral choice such as, save yourself and the town will fall or save the town and risk injury to yourself. Depending on what the player decides to do, the outcome of the game will change. People may fear you because you let a town perish or they might revere and worship you because of your selfless sacrifice. Games like *Fallout 3*, the *Knights of the Old Republic* games, and the *Mass Effect* series implement a morality system well and the player has to seriously consider their choices because whatever they do, some doors will open and some will close. However, developers need to be careful about the implementation of a morality system and its effect on gameplay. Richard Garriot, CEO of NCSOFT North America says that, “Putting parables into gameplay in an interactive way makes the storylines much more interesting and more compelling to play. The issue is: They are just really hard to do. If all you’re going to do is commentary about morality, that would be technically very easy, but very boring and it would detract from the products.”²⁵

While the main goal of video game developers is to create a game that is beautiful and fun to play they also need to make a profit. If the game play is subpar then reviews of the game will be negative which will result in poor sales. Game reviews play a big role in whether or not someone will purchase a game. New IPs or intellectual properties require good press in order to make a dent in the established market. IPs that have been around for a while such as *Halo*, any of the *Super Mario* games, or the *Call of Duty* series already have a loyal fan base and it often does not matter what a review might say.

²⁵ Morris, “The Greatest Story Never Played.”

There are some websites like guide2games.org that are Christian game review websites. This website looks at all kinds of video games and rates them with a Christian sense of mind since “although game companies provide a simple rating system, it is not based around a Christian worldview.”²⁶ Their ratings focus on “objectionable content” that can appear in games and the final rating is calculated on how much of this content there is. More traditional ratings categories such as game play and visuals are also discussed but play a small role in comparison to violence, language, and spirituality. Guide2games also does not just look at “religious” games but also at “secular” games enabling parents to decide what name brand games to purchase and which to avoid if they are worried about their child being corrupted. We will return to [guide2games](http://guide2games.org) later on when we discuss specific games.

So far we have considered what industry experts and professionals think about the subject of religion in video games. What does the average gamer think about all this? Do they see it simply as a game or as something that will sway your morals and values?

The term gamer refers to someone who plays video games more than the average person. When home consoles came on the market they provided a more accessible way for people to play games. No longer did you have to save up your quarters and go to the arcade in order to play video games, you could enjoy it all from the comfort of your own home. This changed the way that games and gamers interacted and influenced each other. Daniel White Hodge conducted a study where he interviewed 35 gamers in order to “discuss how theology shows up in video games and provides deeper meaning for a

²⁶ Guide2games.org

generation immersed in media culture.”²⁷ Media culture does not just pertain to video games but also television, movies, and of course the Internet. When thinking about the religious texts from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam the one thing that they all have in common is stories. Parables, a narrative, and stories are all present in these books and are also the groundwork for developing a video game. Without a story you cannot even begin to build a game much like a movie, book, show, or most other forms of entertainment media. Hodge found that “ninety five percent of all the gamers I interacted with commented on how much a good story line matters. Narratives, allegories, and fables are essential to the gaming experience.”²⁸ The story of a game sets how one will approach the game and play it and there are several recurring stories in gaming that are theological. These include the narratives of the quest, companionship, social problems, judgment day, post-apocalyptic, heroism, and victory. You could take almost any video game and see at least two of these themes represented. For example looking at the game *Super Mario Bros.* the hero of this game is Mario the story revolves around him and he is the main protagonist. His companion throughout the game is his brother Luigi who helps him complete his quest. Mario’s quest is to rescue Princess Peach who has been kidnapped by Bowser. Because of her kidnapping social problems have arisen in the Mushroom Kingdom such as Bowser’s minions oppressing the citizens. The ultimate victory comes when Mario defeats Bowser and saves Princess Peach. These themes all exist in the main religious texts and especially in the life of Christ. One theologian Veli-Matti Karkkainen states that in games “the story of Christ is not read from a distance by

²⁷ Daniel White Hodge, “Role Playing: Toward a Theology for Gamers,” in *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*, ed. Craig Detweiler. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 163.

²⁸ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 164.

an objective researcher, but from inside the community of participation in the narrative of Christ.”²⁹ A gamer is not simply reading about Christ and trying to analyze his life but is instead interacting with different aspects of Christ’s life. Engaging in narrative allows gamers to experience God in an entirely new way and if they want to are allowed to “find God” on their own terms within the story of the game outside the confines of traditional organized religion. “Many gamers find spiritual and theological meaning in metanarratives within games such as *Halo 3*, which allow them to play games where they are the hero or heroine, save the world from holocaust/disaster, and explore new worlds, therefore allowing them to find connection with spiritual elements.”³⁰ This point of view, while true, also brings up one of the many stereotypes about gamers in that they are loners. Most people think that gamers live with their parents, play games alone in the dark, and shun contact with the outside world. While the majority of early video games were only playable by one player and there are still some stalwart holdouts of single-player only today, multiplayer games are becoming the norm and bring with them a community. “Community is everything for gamers. Gamers “hang” with those with whom they feel a connection and whom they deem as “one of us.”³¹ Multiplayer video games today connect people from all over the world for the sole purpose of playing a game together. A house of worship such as a church or synagogue brings people of the same faith together to participate in religious ceremonies and be with God. Online gaming brings people together to participate and communicate together in the game world, whether it is as simple as killing the enemy team or questing through the *World of*

²⁹ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 216-17.

³⁰ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 165.

³¹ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 165.

Warcraft, online gaming brings people together in different ways. “Games aren’t a place where you are expected to cling to a belief in something that can’t be seen or proven,” says James Wyatt of Wizards of the Coast. “Fantasy has this ability to open our eyes to the enchantment of our world, and to view real things with more wonder.”³² We now know what some gamers and developers think about the role of religion in multiplayer gaming to be specific. Now we turn our gaze to several examples of video games with religion in them and examine how it is portrayed, what ramifications if any exist, and how they can influence peoples morals and/or values.

³² Murdoch, “God’s PR Problem.”

Chapter 2

The Church of Master Chief

Released in November of 2001 alongside Microsoft's new game console Xbox, Bungie's *Halo: Combat Evolved* broke sales records, changed the genre of first person shooters, and embedded itself in gaming history. Microsoft actually acquired the studio that developed *Halo*, Bungie, so it could have exclusive publishing rights to it.³³ Every *Halo* game that has been released so far has been on the Microsoft Xbox or Microsoft Xbox 360 first because of Microsoft buying Bungie Studios. Games have also been ported to PC and Mac platforms several years after the original release, but Playstation and Wii fans have been left by the roadside. The *Halo* series has spawned several sequels, books, comics, short films, and a fan base millions strong. As of November 9, 2005 *Halo: Combat Evolved* had sold over five million copies worldwide.³⁴ It is one of the most successful games of all time and has made a big impact not only in the gaming world but has had a wider cultural impact as well "*Halo* has been described as a series that "has reinvented a genre that didn't know it needed to be reinvented," with aspects of the main trilogy being duplicated in other FPS (First Person Shooter) games multiple times."³⁵ *Halo* takes place in the 26th century and puts you in the shoes of Master Chief, a genetically and cybernetically enhanced human as part of a super soldier program known as the SPARTAN-II program. You are the last surviving SPARTAN and it is up to you to defeat the alien race known as the Covenant and learn the secrets of the

³³ "Microsoft to Acquire Bungie Software," Microsoft. June 19, 2000. Accessed April 8, 2011. <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2000/Jun00/BungiePR.msp>

³⁴ "Halo 2: One Year Later". Bungie.net. November 9, 2005. Retrieved April 8, 2011. <http://www.bungie.net/News/content.aspx?type=topnews&cid=7139>

³⁵ D'Marcus Beatty, "Halo Influence on the Gaming Industry," cheatcc.com. Retrieved April 8, 2011. <http://www.cheatcc.com/extra/haloinfluenceonthegamingindustry2.html>.

mysterious ring-world Halo. “Battles rage on foot, in vehicles, inside, and outdoors with a vast array of Human and Covenant weaponry – an experience positively packed with combat.”³⁶ *Halo* is a first person shooter game meaning that you play from a first person perspective and the main way of interacting within the game is shooting/gunplay. The sequels to *Halo* -- *Halo 2* and *Halo 3* -- continue the story with Master Chief continuing to fight the Covenant, protect humanity, and learn more about the Halo rings. All of the *Halo* games have received praise from game reviewers. Even the Christian game-rating site Guide2games.com gave the game an overall 4 out of 5, although a 2 out of 5 Christian rating. But how can a game that has you shooting and killing aliens have any religious content in it? To find out we need to look at the characters and story more closely.

Most religious references in the *Halo* series are related to the alien race the Covenant. Even their name, the Covenant, has a religious relation, as the Holy Covenant is the number of agreements between God and man in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The Covenant are unified by a religion that focuses on the worship of an ancient race of beings called the Forerunners. According to the Covenant, the Forerunners discovered a way to transcend the physical world and become divine beings by building and activating seven huge ring-shaped devices called Halos which the Covenant call “sacred rings.” There are three political and religious leaders of the Covenant and they are called the Prophets. Specifically they are known as the Prophet of Truth, Prophet of Mercy, and the Prophet of Regret. These Covenant Prophets can be plausibly compared to the prophets found in the Bible. In the Bible, prophets are people who have been contacted by God

³⁶ “Halo: Combat Evolved”. Halo.Xbox.com. Retrieved April 8, 2011.
<http://halo.xbox.com/en-us/intel/titles/halocombatevolved/>

and their purpose is to serve as an intermediary between humanity and the divine. Prophets deliver the message or knowledge that God gives them to the people and this is called a prophecy. One difference between the two types of prophets is that the Covenant ones are political leaders as well. Prophets in the Bible are only messengers and do not take on any civic leadership roles. The Covenant Prophets believe and preach to the rest of the Covenant that they are the chosen inheritors of the Forerunners' legacy. This means that their ultimate goal is to activate the seven rings in order to achieve the same enlightenment that the Forerunners did. The Covenant refers to this mission as "The Great Journey" and will stop at nothing to complete the journey even if it means eradicating humanity. The way that the Covenant goes about working towards achieving their journey is much like the Christian Crusades. The purpose of the Crusades during the Middle Ages was to reclaim the Holy Land from the Muslims who occupied it and the Pope sanctioned all of the Crusades.³⁷ Later on though, the goal of the Crusades was expanded to stop Muslim conquests to extend their borders. What the Covenant Prophets do not know about the Halo rings in the first game is that when activated they will destroy all sentient life in the universe to prevent the Flood from spreading. The Flood are a parasitic alien race that infect any living thing they come in contact with turning them into more Flood. Because of their parasitic nature their only way to kill them is to wipe out their food supply which in effect means destroying all life in the galaxy. This is why the Forerunners built the rings and why the Forerunners are no longer around. The truth becomes evident to Master Chief in *Halo* when his Artificial Intelligence partner Cortana tells him that, "You have no idea how this ring works, do you? Why the

³⁷ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Oxford History of the Crusades* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Forerunners built it? Halo doesn't kill Flood - it kills their food. Humans, Covenant, whatever; we're all equally edible. The only way to stop the Flood is to starve them to death and that's exactly what Halo is designed to do - wipe the galaxy clean of all sentient life.”³⁸ In *Halo 2* some of the Covenant learn the truth about the rings and are labeled heretics by the Prophets.

This small group of Covenant becomes a larger movement that the Prophets try and stop because they do not want the rest of the Covenant learning it and then panicking because this would undermine their power and authority. The leader of this separatist movement is led by Sesa ‘Refumee and they learned the truth from a Monitor, which is a highly advanced artificial intelligence construct whose main purpose is to maintain and service the Halo rings. Monitors are called Oracles by the Covenant because the Forerunners created them and have an immense knowledge of the Forerunners and the Halo rings. ‘Refumee tries to warn the Arbiter, a high ranking Covenant warrior, of the danger of the rings, “Ask the Oracle about Halo...how they (the Prophets) would sacrifice us all for nothing!”³⁹ The Prophets know the truth about the rings but do not care because they blindly believe that they will achieve divinity as the Forerunners did when in actuality they were wiped out by the Flood. Probably the greatest lie that the Prophets tell the Covenant is that humans are evil, heretics and need to be killed. Humans are actually the “Reclaimers” of the Forerunners and they are the ones who are in charge of activating the Halo rings. According to the Forerunner doctrines killing humans would be a heresy but the Prophets lie to the rest of the Covenant in order to keep

³⁸ *Halo: Combat Evolved*, Xbox Video Game, Bungie Software, 2001; Bellevue, Washington: Microsoft Game Studios.

³⁹ *Halo 2*, Xbox Video Game, Bungie Software. 2004; Bellevue, Washington: Microsoft Game Studios.

their religion intact. In *Halo: Combat Evolved*, activating the first Halo ring becomes the main quest of the game before the truth is revealed to Master Chief and the player. The Prophets are actually false prophets because of their deception of the Covenant. “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that brought them, and bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” (2 Peter 2:1). In *Halo 2* ‘Refumee says, “Our Prophets are false! Open your eyes my brothers! They would use the faith of our forefathers to ruin us all.”⁴⁰ His accusations of the Prophets lying and twisting the Covenant religion to their own means is true but with only so many troops who defect with him, his rebellion is quickly silenced. Some people might look at the *Halo* series and think that it was purposefully made with a pro- and/or anti- religious message. With all of the religious references and with the player fighting against a religiously governed race it is easy to see where all the criticism comes from. But Marty O’Donnell, the in-house musical composer at Bungie Studios, says otherwise. “Nobody other than those of us within Bungie who are Christian are in any way trying to sneak in some sort of pro-Christian evangelical kind of message. At the same time, nobody here is trying to overtly make or even subtly trying to be against religion or Christianity or anything else.”⁴¹ If some people misconstrue the meaning of the characters and events in *Halo* then that is their own opinion. The developer had no intention of their work being seen this way. This is one of the problems that developers and publishers face when creating/releasing a game. They have to look at the game from different viewpoints and

⁴⁰ *Halo 2*

⁴¹ Lisa Swain, “*Myst and Halo: A Conversation with Rand Miller and Marty O’Donnell*,” in *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*, ed. Craig Detweiler, 91-107. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 101-102.

perspectives to analyze the content of their game and how it can be interpreted. Some publishers and developers might change things around if they think it might offend some people. Others will leave it in even if that means that their game will get a higher rating, because it is the way the game was meant to be experienced and played. This does not only apply to religion but violence, language, and sexual content, basically anything that can be labeled as “objectionable.” There is also no current rating by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) for religious content so games that do contain it can walk safely knowing that their ESRB rating will not be based on religious content.

Continuing the ongoing story of Master Chief vs. the Covenant, in *Halo 3* the Prophet of Truth makes his way to Earth in order to begin the “Great Journey” or activation of the Halo rings. To do this he needs to travel to the Ark, a Forerunner structure that is buried under the city of New Mombasa. It turns out that this structure is actually a teleporter that leads to the true Ark, a massive structure in space capable of activating all of the rings at once. Besides being a control center, the Ark also acts as a safe haven from the rings once they are activated. Here we can draw allusion to Noah’s Ark and even the Ark of the Covenant (no pun intended). The story of Noah’s Ark is in Genesis 6-9 in the Bible and relates the story of how God contacted Noah and told him to build the Ark. God told Noah that “I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you.” (Genesis 6:17-19). The flood that God will bring is the Flood that are contained

within the Halo rings and the pulse that will kill all living things in order to stop the Flood. Noah and his family are the Forerunners who build the Ark as a safe house for the chosen to survive in. Also if we look at the Covenant that God made with man, one of the first covenants is that “Never again shall a flood destroy all.” The Covenant are determined to activate the rings which, even if the Covenant do not know it, would destroy all of the Flood, thus having the Covenant stop the Flood. Now the Ark of the Covenant was built by Moses to hold the tablets that the Ten Commandments were written on. This is described in Exodus 25:16, “Then put in the ark the tablets of the covenant law which I will give you.” When the Philistines capture it they experience plagues of rats and tumors as written in 1 Samuel 6. It has the “power” to inflict plagues on countries much like the Forerunner Ark is able to release the plague of the Flood upon the galaxy. It is easy to point out these references and analyze them but we have to remember that as mentioned before the makers of *Halo* had no intention of spreading a religious/anti-religious message. Until now our focus has been aimed at how the Covenant and Forerunners are rife with religious references. Let us turn our gaze to the main character in the series, Master Chief.

John-117 or Master Chief is the main protagonist in the *Halo* series and the character that the player controls. As mentioned in the previous section, there are several themes in video games that relate to theology. In relation to *Halo* and Master Chief specifically, we can ascribe the narratives of quest, social problems, judgment day, heroism, and victory. The main quest of *Halo* is to save the galaxy from destruction by the Covenant, which plays into another aspect of the narrative: that of judgment day. *Halo 3* especially places the player on Earth in what could be its final days. “Since many

major religions have theological teachings about “final days” and the end of the world, it is not surprising that we find this type of schema within video games.”⁴² Many other popular video games contain eschatological scenarios including *Gears of War*, *Fallout 3*, *Half-Life*, and the *Resident Evil* series. This is not only because these scenarios provide for an interesting story but because gamers like to play them as well. Movies that contain an end of the world situation do well at the box office and the same can be said for video games with the same story line. Video games are interactive movies and in the same way that you would enjoy and feel good about the world being saved in a movie, actually being the one who saves it in a video game imparts a unique feeling. “Players take on qualities of strength, valor, and love, characteristics that connect back to their core identity and the symbolic superstructure within both the game and real life. *Halo 3* offers a chance to say, “Yeah, I’m good, I just beat this game, and saved lives while doing it!””⁴³ If you have an eschatological scenario in a game then it is a sure bet that you will have heroism and victory in it as well. Master Chief embodies the classical hero figure fighting against unimaginable odds for the survival of mankind. He is brave and selfless, caring about the safety of others first and himself second. No reward is expected for what he does, it is simply part of his job. A hero as described by the Encyclopedia of Religion is “a person who possesses powers superior to those of ordinary men and who displays them courageously, at the risk of his own life but to the advantage and benefit of others.”⁴⁴ Heroes were thought to have parents that were gods or goddesses or that he had been infused with some divine favor which enables him to perform heroic deeds. He

⁴² Hodge, “Role Playing,” 167.

⁴³ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 165.

⁴⁴ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), s.v. “Heroes.”

often bridged the gap between the gods and mortals. As an enhanced human Master Chief is more than human but not a god. He is classified as a superhuman and using the definition of a hero, he fits in quite well. “They fought for and protected the community in battle...they served as models of conduct.”⁴⁵ In the Bible there is the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. David defeats the Philistine champion Goliath and the Philistine forces scatter. There is no doubt that Master Chief fights for the survival of humanity and as a figurehead for the human forces. The Encyclopedia of Religion also says that heroes do not die a natural death, but are transported alive to Heaven.⁴⁶ 2 Kings 2:11 states that when Elijah and Elisha were walking together “a chariot of fire and horses appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.” At the end of *Halo 3* Master Chief does not necessarily die but he enters a stasis chamber. This “freezes” him in time to preserve his body and he is effectively dead until someone wakes him up. Right before the game ends the last line that Master Chief speaks is, “Wake me, when you need me.”⁴⁷ God says that he will raise up David when it is time for the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel in Jeremiah 30:9. Just as God will raise David from the dead when he is needed, Master Chief will be revived the next time humanity is threatened. The conflict between the forces of good and evil is mentioned in every faith in one form or another. Victory over the forces of evil is considered to be the ultimate victory and this comes to fruition in *Halo 3*. “These games in essence, become a type of *protoevangelium* for victory, the ultimate “good news.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Heroes.”

⁴⁶ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Heroes.”

⁴⁷ *Halo 3*, Xbox Video Game, Bungie Software. 2007; Bellevue, Washington: Microsoft Game Studios.

⁴⁸ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 169.

Master Chief kills the Prophet of Truth in order to prevent the Halo rings from being activated and is able to kill the Flood, saving the human race and the rest of the galaxy.

As we shall see, John-117 can be seen as a Christ figure because of the characteristics that he has and what he does and what he stands for. He “works” to save mankind and defeats the enemies that believe humanity needs to be destroyed. Although he does not have godly powers like Jesus did, he is something more than human. When the Arbiter is learning about the Prophets’ deception, Master Chief is the one who “converts” him into believing the truth. One could say that the Arbiter then becomes a disciple to John-117 because he follows him on his quest to stop the Prophets. Partly due to this some churches across the U.S. are using *Halo* and the figure of Master Chief as tools to reach the younger male audience and get them engaged in the church. Some Christian church youth groups in the United States have *Halo* nights where kids will go to the church and play *Halo 3* before discussing Scripture or other youth group activities. Even though the game carries an M-rating for violence and language, churches that have cautioned against violence in the entertainment industry are holding *Halo* nights. “Far from being defensive, church leaders who support *Halo* - despite its “thou shalt not kill” credo – celebrate it as a modern and sometimes singularly effective tool.”⁴⁹ Younger kids do not want to go to church and sit through a whole service. Using *Halo* is a way to bring them into the church and once they are there they will stay for the religious message.

As we have already discussed there are plenty of religious references in the *Halo* games but some pastors and parents are opposed to using *Halo* because of its graphic

⁴⁹ Matt Richtel, “Thou Shalt Not Kill, Except in a Popular Video Game at Church,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/us/07halo.html>.

violence. “Some parents, religious ethicists and pastors say that Halo may succeed at attracting youths, but that it could have a corroding influence. In providing Halo, churches are permitting access to adult-themed material that young people cannot buy on their own.”⁵⁰ This is true since the ESRB rating of M requires the buyer to be 18 or older. But does the inherent message in *Halo* help to redeem the violence? It seems a little childish to say that the violence in the game will not affect people in real life since so many studies have been done saying otherwise. During an interview with the composer for the *Halo* games the interviewer found it “interesting that Christians are willing to entertain in their games things that they wouldn’t necessarily entertain in a straight film. That’s hopeful in a way because it gets them to engage a world in a more descriptive manner instead of prescriptive manner.”⁵¹ This is a really interesting point because it is plausible to imagine that because of the interactivity that video games provide, Christians would be more upset about video game than movies. Maybe the acceptability of Halo in certain Christian contexts is due to the fact that video games are “animated” as opposed to visually real-life movie violence. Movies still have that sense of realism that video games do not. Although as technology improves video games are becoming more hyper-real, which will probably raise more questions further down the road about violence in games. But for gamers, especially Christian gamers, this raises questions like is it appropriate to view violence as fun? Should we feel guilty about shooting people even within a game? A lot of gamers see violence in video games as just another part of life. One Christian gamer says, “We all take part in violence every day...If we follow the mandate of Christ in Matthew where he says if we talk about

⁵⁰ Richtel, “Thou Shalt Not Kill.”

⁵¹ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 102.

people then we murder them...We all do that, we sarcastically respond to someone we don't like, we snub others, we talk about those we hate, and ultimately, we love violent movies when the "hero" kicks everyone's ass in the end."⁵² He goes on to say that, "Violence is all around, the games just reflect back what is going on in our society today." While the reasoning here is not fully sound it cannot be discounted. At the same time, the evidence of violence influencing people's actions is present and true. So making sense of violence in video games is a thin line. But if one looks past the violence and focus instead on the storyline, fruitful discussion can arise out of it. Jane Dratz of the teen outrage mission Dare 2 Share, says, "*Halo* is all about saving the galaxy from an invading force of aliens. Saving the world is Jesus' mission and message."⁵³ With what we have looked at previously when it comes to *Halo* and religion, one can certainly draw conclusions between Master Chief and Jesus. But are young boys able to effectively pick up on all of the religious references within the game? Maybe a different type of game would be easier for a younger audience to interpret. We have studied how an FPS set in a science-fiction world can have religion in it, but what about a game that has some actual history in it. Is that easier to interpret and/or more influential with its religious message?

⁵² Hodge, "Role Playing," 168.

⁵³ Stephen Foley, "Christians adopt a different kind of 'Halo' to draw in teenagers," *The Independent*, October 8, 2007, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/christians-adopt-a-different-kind-of-halo-to-draw-in-teenagers-394463.html>.

Chapter 3

The Assassination of Religious Authority

The *Assassin's Creed* series of games first appeared on the market in 2007. They were developed by Ubisoft Montreal and published by Ubisoft. As of February 2011 the latest release, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, has sold 6.5 million copies.⁵⁴ The series has also gained numerous positive reviews and has won several awards in the video game industry. It is classified as a historical science-fiction video game and can also be classified as a third-person action-adventure game. The main story arc of the series revolves around a bartender named Desmond Miles who is captured by Abstergo Industries, a major corporation in the near future. Using a machine called the Animus, Desmond is forced to relive the memories of his ancestors, who were all assassins, in order to recover artifacts called "The Pieces of Eden," for Abstergo. The understory to the main plotline is that Abstergo is actually run by the Templars and they have been in conflict with the Assassins for centuries. Both sides have been fighting to control the Pieces of Eden because they are all imbued with different powers. The Templars and Assassins also believe that the Pieces of Eden are responsible for many historical tales and miracles. In the first *Assassin's Creed* the gamer mainly plays as the assassin Altair who lived during the Crusader era. The second game transports the gamer to Renaissance Italy where he takes on the role of Ezio Auditore, another Assassin progenitor. To retrieve the Pieces of Eden you have to gain information by assassinating certain people. Assassination targets are mostly actual historical figures, of course the

⁵⁴ "Ubisoft Reports Third-Quarter 2010-11 Sales." Ubisoft. February 14, 2011. Accessed April 9, 2011.

developers had to alter how they died and the chronology of their lives. One of the most interesting things that the *Assassin's Creed* games have done is combine history with gaming. "*Assassin's Creed* has proven that historical games don't need to be literary or intellectually worthy. The games are smart and engaging, they pique your curiosity about the Templars and nobles of the Renaissance, but they don't shove it down your throat."⁵⁵

Many of the most successful games today are based in the future, fantasy worlds, or alternate historical periods. Games like *Fallout 3*, *Gears of War*, *Elder Scrolls 4*, and *Dragon Age: Origins* all take place in time periods and places that are not our own.

Creating your own mythological realm is much easier to do and work with when creating a game. "In a WW2 shooter, you're not into the intricacies of wartime European politics or the nuances of Nazism, you're just hacking through a town whilst soldiers shout 'Mein Leben!' around you. It's just a peg to hang the action off."⁵⁶ The sad thing about this is that video games are the perfect medium to explore historical fiction. While a historical fiction or even historical documentary movie can show us what it was like to live in that period, we cannot get a true sense how it felt to be there. The interactivity of video games lets people not only see but live in previous ages. The creative developer for *Assassin's Creed*, Patrice Desilets says that, "We feel that it is only by dealing with real subjects that are relevant to people's everyday lives that games will reach the next level

⁵⁵ Keith Stuart, "Assassin's Creed and the appropriation of history," Guardian News, last modified November 19, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2010/nov/19/assassin-s-creed-brotherhood-history>.

⁵⁶ Stuart, "Appropriation of History."

as an entertainment medium.”⁵⁷ While there are many games that are based in mythical worlds and times, more and more historical games are making an appearance on the market. *Red Dead Redemption* for instance takes the player back to the Wild West and places them in the boots of a criminal looking for redemption. The *Total War* series has released games ranging from Medieval times to the Roman Empire to Napoleon. What games like these have done is mix gaming elements with historical elements to create the perfect hybrid of both. “Historical elements can enhance a game's atmosphere on many levels, provided the period being referenced excites the audience, and that those historical elements are integral to the fabric of the game play,”⁵⁸ says Charles Cecil, founder of Revolution Software. This enables the player to be immersed in the authenticity of the game and time period that the game is representing. When this is done correctly it helps to build a heightened sense of drama that draws the player in. However when poorly executed the history can feel like an add-on that the game could do without. “What we've seen over the last five years is titles that have succeeded by merging period detail with the seemingly universal adolescent pre-occupations of science fiction and fantasy.”⁵⁹ *Fallout 3* (2008) blends a 1950's world with modern weaponry and a nuclear post-apocalyptic setting. *Bioshock* (2007) takes art-deco architecture and an alternate 1960's setting and marries it with biological augmentation.

The *Assassin's Creed* franchise is no different, framing the historical game play parts with a science fiction story. Although the sections that take place in the future are

⁵⁷ Tenacious Moses, “Exclusive Assassin's Creed Q&A,” GamePro, last modified November 1, 2006, <http://www.gamepro.com/article/news/85121/exclusive-assassins-creed-q-a/>.

⁵⁸ Stuart, “Appropriation of History.”

⁵⁹ Stuart, “Appropriation of History.”

brief and have fairly bland game play. But where it differs from these other games is that it takes a historical setting, a particular historical time, a set of known historical characters, and molds them all seamlessly into one singular game experience. When dealing with history you inevitably meet religion in one form or another. So how do *Assassin's Creed* and its sequels tackle the topic of religion?

When you start the game up, one of the first things that you will see is a screen with the disclaimer: "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."⁶⁰ This is the first game that has had a disclaimer stating that the development team's religious faiths and beliefs are out in the open. *Assassin's Creed* acknowledges God in a real and serious manner instead of trying to dodge the topic like many other game developers have. During one of the first interactive parts of the game, you are faced with the task of recovering an artifact from the Ark of the Covenant that is currently in the hands of the Templars. You take control of Altair a Muslim assassin during the Crusades. There was an order of assassins in the Ismaili Shi'a sect of Islam. "The Assassins (known also as Ismaili-Nizari) survived two centuries (1090-1275)...their purpose was to fulfill or purify Islam, a community whose political and religious institutions were inseparable."⁶¹ . There is not a lot of literature written by the assassins around so most of the accounts that remain are from people outside of the order. They did not simply kill people just to kill people; they did everything with a purpose. "The assassins seriously threatened the governments of several states, especially those of the

⁶⁰ *Assassin's Creed*, Xbox 360 Video Game, Ubisoft Montreal, 2007; Montreal, Canada: Ubisoft.

⁶¹ David C. Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 78 No. 3 (1984): 664.

Turkish Seljuk Empire in Persia and Syria.”⁶² Much like in the game, because of what they did, the assassins had to live in isolated mountain fortresses. Because of what they wanted to do they could not live in an existing Islamic state. “Therefore they had to establish their own state: a league of scattered mountain fortresses or city-states.”⁶³ The assassins in the game are Muslim but it is not overly advertised, except for the hatred of the Templars that they harbor. Historically the Templars were one of the largest Western Christian military orders.⁶⁴ They were officially endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church and played a major role in the Crusades. They were known for their distinctive white mantles with a red cross and were among the most skilled fighting units of the Crusades. In *Assassin’s Creed* they are not only present in the memories of Altair but they have also managed to survive into the year 2012 where the other part of the game takes place. In 2012 the Knights Templar have evolved into a mega-corporation and continue their war with the assassins to control the Pieces of Eden. Having the Templars present in both parts of the game provides for an interesting plotline where at first you are helping them but once you escape their capture in 2012 your goal becomes to stop them. The parts of the game that take place in the “present” do not advance the storyline much and there is little you can do except walk around and talk to a few of the main characters. Instead of working against the game though it works with it as Dan Pinchbeck, an experimental game designer and lecturer at Portsmouth University says,

But what's interesting is then it becomes the core IP of the franchise. Now, maybe this was in there from the start, but the genius of the dual timeline

⁶² Rapoport, “Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions,” 664.

⁶³ Rapoport, “Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions,” 666.

⁶⁴ Malcom Barber, *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

from a marketing point of view is that you have a consistent fiction, of Desmond and Lucy and the modern Assassins bookending the actual story, which is then a historical fiction you can pick up and put down in any time period you like – AC renaissance, AC industrial revolution... And of course it gives you license to do whatever you want in the actual historical world that doesn't technically fit, or isn't historically accurate, because you can just go 'Animus!' at any point.⁶⁵

Hence the game jumps from the Crusades to the Italian Renaissance in the two main games. The framing story of Desmond and Lucy serves as a side dish to the main course. In both of them the player has significantly more interaction with the Templars in the historical segments of the game. Some Templars in the first game appear in heavy armor and wearing their traditional white mantle with a red cross. These Templars are usually hidden in the cities and are harder to kill than the regular guards and enemies that you come across. The nine main Templars in the game are the targets that Altair is sent to assassinate. At first he does not know of the Templar connection but as he assassinates them he learns more and more about them. The threads start to unravel when he kills his first target Tamir, a black market merchant. “Ah, but he thinks I act alone. I am but a piece. A man with a part to play. You'll come to know the others soon enough. They won't take kindly to what you've done.”⁶⁶ Compared to their historical counterparts the Templars in *Assassin's Creed* are both Christian and Muslim. They fight on both sides of the Crusades but secretly work to obtain the Pieces of Eden. One of the places that Altair travels to in order to assassinate his targets is the holy city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is

⁶⁵ Stuart, “Appropriation of History.”

⁶⁶ *Assassin's Creed*.

considered holy ground by all 3 monotheistic faiths and was the main reason why the Crusades originally were preached. You can explore the entire city, fight the Muslim guards, and assassinate any targets that are in the city. We have previously discussed the issue of violence in video games and if it is inescapable in today's world. But what about killing people in the holy city of Jerusalem? We are faced with the dilemma that it is a video game but at the same time it depicts an idealized, semi-real sacred site. In the Islamic faith it is forbidden to have any representation of the prophet Muhammad. When a Dutch newspaper ran 12 cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammad, the controversy was one of the big issues in 2005. If portraying Muhammad is a taboo in Islam, what can be said about the digital recreation of a holy city? Jerusalem is considered to be the holiest city in Christianity and Judaism and is also considered sacred by Islam. So is it wrong to recreate Jerusalem as an assassin's killing ground? This is one topic that has not received a lot of attention by the media or religious groups. Maybe it is because the Jerusalem that is in *Assassin's Creed* was the site of much violence and bloodshed. So the game is just portraying history and there is no harm, no foul because whatever happened is history and you cannot change that. *Assassin's Creed 2* jumps the timeline up to 15th century Italy and brings more religion into the mix.

Assassin's Creed 2 places you in control of Ezio Auditore, a nobleman who becomes an assassin after his father and brothers are killed by a traitor within their family. Ezio travels to locations all over Italy including Florence, Venice, Forli, and the Tuscan countryside. Game play remains similar to that of the first game with the addition of some new weapon and fighting moves. The only real religious institution in the game is the Roman Catholic Church. When presented with the creed of the assassins one can

see that it is in direct opposition to the organized religion of the church. “Nothing is true, everything is permitted” is the assassin’s creed and by the end of the game it becomes clear that the true heroes are not those that claim the truth but are actually those who live in obscurity and seek freedom. The assassin’s creed is directly related to the Shi’ite doctrine of taqiya. “Taqiya in Shi’ite Islam is the practice of concealing one’s belief and foregoing ordinary religious duties when under threat of injury.”⁶⁷ From this definition we are presented with something that an assassin does quite often, he conceals himself. Since the assassins in the first game are also Muslim, it is easy to attribute taqiya to their creed. As an assassin you have to remain out of sight altogether or blend in with the people around you. If you are Muslim you are required to pray at set times during the day and observe other religious customs but you must not stick out from the crowd. By using taqiya one is able to go about their “business” without having to abide by any religious customs. An assassin is certainly under threat from death or injury if discovered so they have a justified reason to use taqiya. “It is hard to convey in English the term’s meaning of self-protection in the face of danger to oneself or, by extension and depending upon the circumstances, to one’s fellow Muslims.”⁶⁸ Taqiya can be used for the good of an individual person or a community. The entire community of assassins is at risk if even one of them is captured so it is for the better of the whole that one might forego their religious duties. This makes it seem like something that the assassins have to do lest the Templars kill them. Which is true but this paints the Templars as evil men trying to destroy a community because of their faith. So the assassins become the good

⁶⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. “taqiya,”
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/583227/taqiyyah>.

⁶⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. “taqiya.”

guys and the church and Templars are the bad guys. The Templars remain as the main antagonists in the second game and actual historical figures are used within the storyline again. This time however the main Templar is Rodrigo Borgia, who had Ezio's family killed because he knew that they were assassins and eventually becomes the pope. The Borgia family is also the centerpiece for a television show being produced by Showtime, which stars Jeremy Irons as Rodrigo Borgia. This show follows Rodrigo as he becomes Pope Alexander the VI and his life during the papacy. In real life Borgia did become the pope and his family was well known because his uncle became pope. Rodrigo studied under his uncle and served several other popes before being elected himself, which let him acquire a lot of administrative knowledge, influence, and wealth. This real history plays well with the fiction of *Assassin's Creed* as the Templars in the game have significant influence in both timelines. The climax of *Assassin's Creed 2* is one that could have attracted a lot of controversy. First of all you sneak into the Vatican and then into the Sistine Chapel where you assassinate the pope as he recites the liturgy. Rodrigo Borgia, Ezio's greatest enemy, becomes the most powerful man in Italy. Killing the pope is "one of the most memorable and disturbing video game moments,"⁶⁹ says Richard Clark, a Christian gamer. Certainly the climax of every video game is something to be remembered but the situation that the player is put in has deeper meaning for a religious person. Clark goes on to say, "I am a devout Christian and I cannot help but experience *Assassin's Creed 2* within the context of my own belief system."⁷⁰ The average gamer might take the task of assassinating the Pope, simply as part of the gameplay and then

⁶⁹ Richard Clark, "Assassin's Creed 2: Shot Through the Heart," Christ and Pop Culture, last modified January 28, 2010. <http://www.christandpopculture.com/featured/assassins-creed-2-shot-through-the-heart/>.

⁷⁰ Clark, "Assassin's Creed 2: Shot Through the Heart."

dismiss it. For Christian gamers like Richard though, this event raises some concerns. Even though Borgia is a Templar and stands in direct opposition to the assassins in the game, he is still the leader of the Catholic Church. Both in the game and historically he held this position but the game uses him as a prop to teach a lesson within the game. “The game points to him and every other powerful spiritual leader and declares unequivocal villainy.”⁷¹ Borgia and the other Templars are simply after the power that the Pieces of Eden imbue and care little for the Bible or God. During the final battle with Borgia he reveals that he only took the position of pope because it enabled him to gain access to the hidden vault beneath the Vatican where he believes that “God” lives or at least the power of God. Ezio kills Borgia and enters the vault where another secret is revealed. A hologram of a humanoid woman appears calling herself Minerva and she explains straight to Desmond who she is and what happened. She and others of her kind were an advanced race that lived on Earth, created humans and lived on Earth together. There were more humans than “gods” and they betrayed them and started a war. Eventually the Earth burned and “all that was left was ash.” So Minerva and the other “gods” rebuilt Earth and strove to make sure that it would never happen again. The gods were few and dying so they became legends and myths, but the temples that they built still stood and when found and activated the Earth could be saved. This revelation in the game completely rewrites the Creation Story in the Bible and undermines many of the church’s tenets about creation and false gods. The great debate between evolution and creation has been one of the hottest topics in the world for many years. *Assassin’s Creed* takes neither side and falls in the middle saying that humans were created by an alien

⁷¹ Clark, “Shot Through the Heart.”

race. It takes one of the most fundamental Christian beliefs and warps it into something completely different while at the same time Borgia and basically the entire Church are labeled as false prophets. In the world of *Assassin's Creed* the religious institutions and their leaders do so much harm that they need to be stopped. Because of all of this there have been several movements to boycott the game and many people have spoken out that the game is offensive.

On one forum the user ChocNut takes offense that the Pope is the main nemesis in *Assassin's Creed 2* and that a lot of other Christians who buy the game might be offended because this fact was not highlighted.⁷² Most of the replies to this post point out how this is not offensive because historically the Borgias and many other highly placed men in the church were corrupt. This is true and many of the popes during this time period used the papacy more as a political office than a religious one. The game is simply taking historical facts and changing them so that they fit well into the story. Another user simply says, "It's a game, it's not based on any fact at all it's about Assassins and Templars. This stuff is always going to offend someone."⁷³ Religion is an interesting topic because people take it so personally and this leads to people being offended by a lot of things because they take it as a personal offence. This makes it hard for game developers who want to make a game like *Assassin's Creed* because even with the disclaimer at the beginning of the game, they cannot make a game that will be fun to play and at the same time not offend anyone. Other people believe that the first *Assassin's Creed* is a pro-Muslim game. Looking at the game from an outsider's point of view one

⁷² "*Assassin's Creed 2* may be offensive to Christians (Spoilers)," last modified December 20, 2009,

http://www.eurogamer.net/forum_thread_posts.php?thread_id=170188.

⁷³ "*Assassin's Creed 2* may be offensive to Christians."

can see why these accusations are made. The player controls a Muslim assassin whose job is to kill Christian Templars in order to prevent them from obtaining the Pieces of Eden. Without full knowledge of the game's story and without playing the game, people make wild assumptions about it. In the game you assassinate Christians and Muslims. The game is also a work of fiction with historical events used as plot devices. This is all from a Christian's perspective, what would the reaction of a Muslim be if they played this game? They might think that it is pro-Christian because of all the messages within the game. Pieces of Eden, Templars, Jerusalem any of these themes can be seen as pro-Christianity or pro-Muslim depending on how you look at them. One has to remember that this is a work of fiction and just like a movie it is up to the buyer to decide whether or not they want to buy it and their opinion is their own. The developers in no way meant to make a game that leaned on way or another. More complaints come from a poster on the Catholic Answers forum calls for a ban and recall of both *Assassin's Creed* games. Mikecrook states, "Our faith is being smeared and dragged through the mud in the guise of childish entertainment. This game and its creators Ubisoft Montreal have openly defamed the Church and must be recalled and banned. I have posted some of the insidious messages preached by the game."⁷⁴ Since this forum is a Catholic, many of the users are Catholic and many replies have been in favor of demanding a recall. Still we encounter people who accuse the original poster and others like him of being hypersensitive. "Please refrain from believing that your beliefs are somehow under siege

⁷⁴ "Asking for ban and recall of *Assassin's Creed II*," last modified January 27, 2011, <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?s=492b4515cbd7f357b963662e6e7333f8&t=399528>

every single time a popular game featuring a religion-connected storyline is released.”⁷⁵ Again, the original poster can be called hypersensitive but he is also very clearly religious and is personally offended by the games; certainly a not unexpected reaction. It is hard to interpret what the poster truly feels because we are only reading his words and not seeing his reaction to the games. Nothing has been released in the formal public media demanding a recall; almost all of the movements against the *Assassin's Creed* franchise have been relegated to online fora.

The rise of the Internet has given people a new outlet on which to protest and complain about anything and everything. There are clearly people concerned with religious content in video games, but they are confined to the Internet and are usually very religious themselves. In the case of *Assassin's Creed* they are concerned with the violence against churchmen and how the Church is portrayed in the game. When looking at the violence in the game, “Christians in general need to take a closer look at violence as it relates to their own theology.”⁷⁶ The Bible is full of violence from the Egyptians persecuting the people of Israel, David defeating Goliath, and the Battle of Jericho just to name a few. But when there is violence in a video game that their child could play, they sound the alarm and start complaining about it. *Assassin's Creed* contains violence against people in the church but during the Crusades much worse things were done to Muslims and during the Renaissance in Italy many churchmen were corrupt. These are historical facts and the game is simply commenting on them using the freedom of speech that developers are privy to. Violence in the Bible raises important questions, “including: Can a God who condones killing children in the Bible do the same in contemporary

⁷⁵ “Asking for band and recall of *Assassin's Creed II*.”

⁷⁶ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 169.

times? How can God allow such violence to occur? Can we grow closer to God despite (or even through) the violence in the video game?”⁷⁷ These questions raise even more questions about the presence of God and religion in video games. The answers to them do not come easily and cannot only be answered by gamers. Theologians and other professionals need to look at and study them. Lastly is the portrayal of the Church in a video game any different from that of a history book? Historically the church has done many things that are not seen favorably today, but it is history and fact. Nothing can be done about them and even today the church has been involved in several issues. Freedom of speech gives developers the right to do whatever they like in a game. With a historical game such as the *Assassin's Creed* games, as mentioned before, developers are using history as a foundation on which to build the story of the game. Some changes are made but these are small liberties that make the game unique and stand out from the rest of the crowd. You cannot fault a game studio or publisher for trying to get the most they can out of a game. This is what makes the entertainment industry distinct, no subject matter is off-limits and there will always be some audience that will be interested in whatever is being created.

⁷⁷ Hodge, “Role Playing,” 169.

Conclusion

God in the World and in the Console

Entertainment in America and around the world has become one of the most profitable sectors today. Movies make hundreds of millions of dollars, television shows can have an audience of several million each week, and the Internet is an essential part of life for most of the world. The presence of religion in entertainment media has been a constant topic of debate for years. Arguments fall on both sides of the line, some saying that religion in the entertainment industry is wrong and others saying that they are protected by freedom of speech. Video games are a relatively young form of entertainment media and although new are quickly becoming one of the most popular. Interactive entertainment became a \$50 billion business, with consumers spending more on video games than movies or much each month.⁷⁸ It was only a matter of time before religion began appearing in video games as it did in the other major forms of entertainment media. Looking back at earlier video games from the 70s and 80s, we can see some evidence of religion and/or religious references present. Religion has been in games in one form or another since the beginning and with technology and consumer trends today, has become even more prominent. Gamers are attracted to games that feature deep storylines and developers often use religion, religious references, or narratives that can be applied theologically in order to create a meaningful story. “Games rarely venture into overly religious territory. Those that do, often mix their sources across cultural lines.”⁷⁹ Religion is the one topic that game companies shy away from

⁷⁸ Detweiler, *Halos and Avatars*, 9.

⁷⁹ Detweiler, *Halos and Avatars*, 4.

using as the main story line. It can create more problems than it solves because of its sensitive nature and the personal connection that people have with religion. Religious references in games draw little attention from critics and often do better market wise. Games like *Fallout 3* and *Bioshock* are rife with religious references and are two of the best selling and highest rated games in the past ten years. Are we seeing more religion in video games because of what is going on in the world today? “Video games are a pervasive cultural form that both reflects and constructs the contemporary cultural imagination.”⁸⁰ If this statement is true then we are seeing more religion in games because of current events in the world. On the other hand, the rise of religion in video games could be a result of developers needing to create more compelling plots. We cannot be 100% sure either way, simply because no formal work has been done regarding the subject of religion in video games. Countless studies have been done on the effects of violence in video games and how it affects people but the realm of religion remains untouched. The purpose of this paper has been to present the case that religion in video games is a topic that needs to be studied because video games are a pervasive cultural form.

Looking at video games as a whole, there is a wide range of type and styles of games. There are first person shooters (FPS) where the player controls a single character from a first person point of view. Real time strategy (RTS) games give the player control over a vast army from a top down perspective. Action adventure games can be played from a first or third person perspective and the player is accompanied by a small group of

⁸⁰ Kutter Callaway, “Wii are Inspired: The Transformation of Home Video Gaming Consoles (and Us),” in *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*, ed. Craig Detweiler. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 76.

characters. These are just a few of the types of games that exist and all of them contain some sort of religious reference. From the shaman and priest characters in the RTS *Warcraft 3* to the moral choices one has to make in action adventure games like the *Mass Effect* series, religion has been firmly entrenched within the video game industry. The video game industry is quickly surpassing other entertainment staples such as movies. “Reports of diminishing box office attendance for the film industry are juxtaposed with a burgeoning video gaming industry; game sales alone rose to \$1.33 billion in February 2008.”⁸¹ So with a rapidly growing industry that is as pervasive as video games, why isn’t more work being done to study them? Video games are quickly becoming a worldwide phenomenon and religion is also prevalent across the globe.

It was inevitable that religion and video games would start to interact with one another and when they did it opened up a whole new world for gaming. As stated earlier religion is used in video games as a narrative tool or plot device. The narrative is what drives the game and is one of the main attractions to gamers. If the Covenant in *Halo* were not motivated by their religion to destroy humanity and activate the Halo rings, they would just be another generic alien race trying to invade Earth and *Halo* would have been just another video game. Without the narrative elements of heroism, ultimate victory, and quest Master Chief would be a nameless nobody. The core story and gameplay would suffer from a lack of these theological narratives. In the *Assassin’s Creed* games, they would not be able to be called historical games without the inclusion of the Islamic assassins and Christian Templars. *Assassin’s Creed* is unique because of its status as a historical game; it intertwines history and fiction creating an alternate history in the game

⁸¹ Hansen, “From *Tekken* to *Kill Bill*,” 20.

world. Much like with *Halo* the entire story revolves around the struggle between the Templars and Assassins linked by religion, so without it the game goes nowhere.

Religion and video games have formed a special relationship. Video games are relying more and more on religion in order to create new and interesting stories, while as of yet, video games have had no negative effects on religion. This relationship and its effects on both sides is what needs to be studied. Both of these things are constantly changing and as long as they continue to coexist, they will feed off of each other. That is why it is important to study the correlation between religion and video games.

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