The narrative and the interactive: a critical theology of video games

Celia Jane Pontin

PhD in Theology and Religious Studies

University of Kent

May 2019

Contents

Summary 1

1. Studying video games - the theological gameworld so far 2
2. 'Just a game': narrative and video games 28
3. Avoidance and divine encounter: responses to video games 56
4. Radiation and fresh water: use of scripture in video games 84
5. Jesus-noir: Christ-figures in video games 111
6. Karl Barth and the undead: apocalyptic themes in video games 153
7. Torture porn and the Passion: violence in video games 187
8. The princess is in another castle! Future directions 217

Bibliography 231

Summary

Despite the prominence of video games as a form of new media, little structured research into its theological potential exists in comparison to related media such as film. This thesis asks whether video games can contribute to the dialogue between theology and new media, and whether existing analytical frameworks can be used to find the areas of most potential. To answer this question from a text-based point of view, it focuses on links between film and games to justify an appropriation of film methodologies. The methodologies are applied first to religious and theological reactions to games, and then to a range of elements in which theological narratives might be located: scriptural references, characterisation, religious themes, and broader content. Drawing on a wide range of sources from the field of religion and film, the thesis examines the theological potential of games and explores the intersection between these media types to develop a new framework for future study.

The chief outcome of this work is that games can provide fruitful opportunities for dialogue with theology, both in terms of asking questions relating to theological issues and suggesting answers or shedding light on questions posed by religion. Second, it establishes that analytical methods from one area of religion and popular culture can be applied successfully to another, if care is taken to recognise the unique features of each and modify the approach accordingly. The ultimate outcome is a suggested framework for further study of games, which builds upon the approaches and conclusions from throughout the thesis and provides a way for others to think systematically about games and their contributions. These outcomes are significant for acknowledging the space for dialogue within gaming, as part of popular culture, and continuing the existing work on religion and film by extending it into the realm of games.

1. Studying video games - the theological gameworld so far

From the highest-grossing AAA titles to tiny indie offerings, games are everywhere and take every imaginable form. As a still-nascent medium, though, games may be treated as cultural light-weights, with little thought given to their potential for academic theological analysis; as Gareth Schott puts it, "Games are rarely acknowledged as containing implicit meaning, and the player is certainly not adjudged to be uncovering or pulling out meaning from game texts."[1]

My contention is that, just like other media, games have something to contribute to theology – if we look for it correctly. How to do this is an important question, and the aim of this thesis is to uncover and test a possible answer by looking at methods that have been fruitful in other, related, areas and exploring how they apply to games. The exploration does not aim to cover every type of approach that could be taken, but instead analyses a set of techniques that aim to set helpful foundations for future study by looking at some key areas: religious reactions to games, the use of scripture, the depiction of Christ-figures, the incorporation of broader religious themes, and the theological potential of non-religious imagery (in this case, violence).

In the last few decades video games have become the popular cultural experiences of many. Gordon Lynch calls for ongoing "theological and cultural criticism of the everyday;"[2] video games are now absolutely part of the everyday, and a valid subject for theological consideration. However, although there are several scholars[3] considering newer forms of media (of which video games are a part), there are relatively few doing the same for games specifically. Kevin Schut and Craig Detweiler have explored how Christians can understand games and the way they complement faith in a practical, day-to-day morality approach for practicing believers, but have given less consideration to how theology and games might have the potential to begin a dialogue that can reveal questions and answers about wider themes in academia.

However, before we dive into virtual worlds, it is important to consider three key elements. First, why is it legitimate to look to new media for theology? Second, what methods are already being used to do this, and where are they rooted? Finally, what analytical questions are raised by video games? This chapter maps out recent work on religion and new media, with examples both general and specific, and examines scholars looking at the role that games can play. This leads us

[1] Gareth Schott, *Violent Games: Rules, realism, and effect* 38

[2] Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology And Popular Culture* 192

[3] See Campbell, Wagner, and Hall, below

onto the next chapter, where we consider the place of narratives in games and begin to identify tools for examining them.

Sacred and secular

Underpinning the potential for video games to be a compelling and fruitful resource is their place in popular culture, which, as a whole, allows for reflection and analysis of religion and theology. The study of the interplay between religion and popular culture has been undertaken by several scholars, who have concluded that the distinction between the sacred and secular is not a clear line, and that each borrows from the other. Elaine Graham, for instance, states that

> As institutional religion recedes, and its narratives and norms no longer furnish ordinary people with moral or existential bearings, so popular culture moves into the vacated space, offering alternative archetypes, myths, heroic figures or soteriologies to form the stories we live by.[4]

Gordon Lynch writes that "the study of popular culture enables the scholar to transcend popular culture and reflect upon wider issues of religion's role in society," including "how popular culture becomes a resource through which people can reflect and discuss with others their own views and practices."[5]

In discussing the secularisation of society, Conrad Ostwalt asserts that, far from it being a one-way process of secular cultural forms displacing religion, it is much more flexible and reciprocal; the first way he sees secularisation occurring, which is less relevant for this discussion, is when religious institutions adopt forms of secular media to help disseminate their message.[6] Ostwalt gives the examples of film and television, but Daniel Radosh has explored several other ways - from music and romance literature to wrestling and religious museums - in which this process can be seen.[7] The more salient part of Ostwalt's work is his second way of viewing secularisation, which takes the form of religious content and ideals appearing in secular media.[8] He writes:

> With the loss of prerogative, religious concerns find expression in other cultural form so that cultural products perceived to be secular can carry authentic and meaningful religious content and deal with sacred concerns... secular and popular culture might contain more authentic belief than official religious theologies,

[4] Elaine Graham "What We Make of the World: the Turn to 'Culture' in Theology and the Study of Religion" in *Between Sacred and Profane* ed. Gordon Lynch 68

[5] Gordon Lynch "Why Study Popular Culture" in *Understanding*, 20

[6] Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples* 7

[7] Daniel Radosh, *Rapture Ready!*

[8] Ostwalt, op. cit. 7

> because it is in the popular culture that one can encounter belief and values apart from and free from paternalistic religious doctrine and dogma.[9]

For Ostwalt, religious and sacred content within popular culture is not just legitimate in its own right, it is potentially more valuable than beliefs espoused from 'official' sources. Freed from dogma, media can portray or convey authentic, personal reflections on sacred content without the constant constraint of adhering to a specific set of institutional beliefs.

Stewart Hoover also largely locates genuine religious content with media, sharing Ostwalt's suspicion of the theory of "religion's retreat to the margins and particulars [and] its overall decline."[10] Rather, he considers that

> religion instead remains vibrant, though in a radically changed form. It remains 'vital', at the same time that its form, location, and practices of meaning-making no longer occupy the traditional spaces.[11]

Hoover's concept of religion acting through non-traditional outlets leads him to suggest that "there is reason to suspect that what we once thought of as entirely 'secular' media have the capacity to provide [spiritual] resources, and in fact increasingly do so"[12] and, more strikingly, that

> media and religion have come together in fundamental ways. They occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity. Today, it is probably better to think of them as related than to think of them as separate.[13]

Like Ostwalt, Hoover sees within media a legitimate space for religious expression and learning, despite its secular nature. Ostensibly secular media can contribute to the pursuit of the same things sought by the religious, since they both comment on the modes of experience highlighted by Hoover. As such, media could seek to provide answers that may previously have been considered to lie only within the purview of religious content. While some may have seen religion fade from the public collective consciousness, others, like Hoover and Ostwalt, have instead seen it permeate into secular cultural artefacts to the extent that popular media can be used to answer and engage with theological questions.

Following this line of exploration, Hoover and Ostwalt suggest that it is entirely reasonable (and desirable) to look for expressions and portrayals of religious and sacred ideals in popular culture

---

[9] ibid. 7

[10] Stewart M Hoover, *Religion In The Media Age*, 72

[11] ibid. 72

[12] ibid. 75

[13] ibid. 9 and 14

and new media. Neither looks specifically at games, but as games are an inexorable part of popular culture, they form part of the new media structure that the two scholars explore. It is therefore legitimate to inquire about the potential for games to hold the same promise of meaningful sacred content as the other, more well-established forms of media that are already subject to scholarly attention. As with other forms of popular culture, games have the potential to explore a religious space and provide stories and structures with which to support players' reflections upon their ideas of the sacred. The object of this thesis is to examine games and interrogate their form and content to determine whether this form of media contains aspects that allow players to explore concepts that have their place within religion, such as salvation and morality.

Existing approaches

As noted above, there has been considerable theological exploration of the content of some types of media, and throughout this thesis we will draw on this in search of methodologies compatible with video games. While there is little work on theology and video games, the key contributions to the field so far should be outlined to provide context for future chapters. Below is a deliberately brief overview of this work, and we will return to salient aspects of them in more depth throughout the study.

The first is Craig Detweiler 's edited collection of essays, *Halos and Avatars*. The book spans a wide range of themes, including interviews with gamers and developers, and a chapter on the experiential potential of the Nintendo Wii. The essays take a confessional perspective, with most contributors reflecting upon the application of games to religious practice; in his introduction, Detweiler states "We want to talk about God as experienced and revealed in, around, and through video games."[14]

The first section, including material from Rachel Wagner and Heidi Campbell (see below) examines "the tensions between the games' story and technique."[15] It covers the similarities (and differences) between games and film, to which we will return in the next chapter, and considers the theological ramifications of games and other new media. The second section deals with "creative questions"[16] for designers and the clever features of games that balance narrative and the interactivity, including interviews with designers. The third section looks at less concrete qualities, diving into the "virtual selves inherent in interactive entertainment."[17] As outlined

[14] Craig Detweiler, "Introduction" in *Halos and Avatars* 9

[15] ibid. 12

[16] ibid. 13

[17] ibid. 14

below, this thesis takes a textual approach, but this more ethnographically-focussed section nonetheless provides an interesting perspective on religious engagement with games.

The second specific volume dedicated to games is Kevin Schut's *Of Games & God*. Subtitled "A Christian Exploration of Video Games," it takes a confessional approach, considering several aspects of games from a Christian perspective and exploring how they might contribute to a Christian life. Schut establishes the nature of games as machine-like concepts with the potential for narrative (similar to the below discussion, in which his view will be explored further) and then proceeds to look at elements such as violence, morality, social games and even the games industry itself. In an early chapter he asserts that "video games are a site where we create meaning,"[18] and goes on to conclude that "video games can be just as much a part of God's kingdom as anything else, if only we have eyes to see."[19]

Schut's approach is open-minded, considering a wide variety of video games. His general method is to consider the key questions arising from each element he explores – Can violence be a beneficial quality in a game? Does video game addiction exist? – and looking at the case to be made for each side before establishing his view. These explorations are illustrated with brief case studies of video games, which demonstrate how games reflect the theological attributes that Schut is looking for. For example, in the chapter on violence (examined in a later chapter), Schut looks to those who are expressly anti-violence and those who are Christian militants, as well as those using First Person Shooter (FPS) games as part of ministry, before drawing a conclusion in the space between these positions.[20] Throughout his discussion, Schut refers to games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Halo*, and even *Pac-Man*, illustrating his questions and main points with references to how violence is shown (or, indeed, not shown) in each. The approach taken here typifies Schut's method of interrogating the medium to determine what messages it can contain and what this means for practicing Christians.

Detweiler and Schut have presented their material as a tool for Christians; each is clearly written from this perspective. Many links are made to the spiritual lives of worshippers and the authors' views on how games can be a constructive part of an active and authentic faith. While both books (and Schut's in particular) touch upon wider considerations about the role that games can play in dialogue with traditional theology, such as Schut's chapter on how games can teach morality, it is not the primary focus. This thesis, then, looks to build on Schut and Detweiler's work and go

[18] Kevin Schut, *Of Games and God* 26

[19] ibid. 177

[20] ibid. 61

further by offering a critical, rather than confessional, analysis of the potential for games and theology to speak to and learn from each other.

One last publication on this specific area is William Sims Bainbridge's *eGods*. This takes a very different approach to *Halos and Avatars* and *Of Games and God*, in that it primarily focuses on the presence of in-game religions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, rather than the more narrative- or concept-driven explorations of Detweiler et al and Schut. However, as with the other two authors, Bainbridge clearly sees a distinct role for video games in discussions of faith, asserting that

> pious believers today would be shocked if told their God was not very different from an elf's image on a computer monitor. Yet much may be gained by thinking from that admittedly radical perspective.[21]

Bainbridge describes the basis of his approach as a theoretical tradition from the sociology of religion (named "*exchange theory, social cognition theory, rational choice theory*, or the *New Paradigm* of the sociology of religion"[22]), as part of which he examined in-game religions to interrogate their content in relation to nine distinct areas that each have a dedicated chapter: deities, souls, priests, shrines, magic, morality, cults, death, and quests. Bainbridge's interaction is incredibly exhaustive; he spent hundreds (sometimes thousands) of hours in 41 different games, doing 'reconnaissance' and seeking certain elements to illustrate his findings.[23] Like Schut, Bainbridge considers the question of conservative Christian scepticism towards video games, but his approach is far more in-depth and looks at data demonstrating a broadly negative correlation between church attendance and frequency of internet use and gaming.

Although Bainbridge's work is a fascinating look at the representation of fictional faiths (and versions of real religions), our focus is more aligned with Schut and Detweiler; we will consider the wider depictions of broader religious themes, rather than the reflections of 'real' religious elements in virtual belief systems, and Bainbridge's work is of limited direct relevance. Nonetheless, it is an important addition to the field, as it considers how religion is handled as part of the gameworld.

While not focused on video games specifically, wider work on new media includes material on games, such as Rachel Wagner's *Godwired* and her contribution to *Halos and Avatars*, which explore in part the interactivity of video games. In *Halos and Avatars*, Wagner provides a summary of her position on games and narrative. She considers four concepts that contribute to

[21] William Sims Bainbridge, *eGods* 4

[22] ibid. 15

[23] ibid. 19-20

understanding the role of games in theology: narrative, immersion, reflexivity, and play. In relation to narrative, Wagner asserts that the 'fidelity' often attached to Christian narrative (i.e. the belief that there is a single, correct version of events) makes film more suitable for exploring Christian themes because of its "fixed trajectory;"[24] we will return to this point later. Another aspect that Wagner considers and that we will pick up in a further chapter is immersion. She views the identification that we have with film characters as passive (as they are simply observed) and with game characters as active (because we participate in their actions).[25] For her, film is more suitable for understanding the person of Jesus because "most Christians believe that Jesus is qualitatively different from us in meaningful ways and therefore beyond the possibility of intimate identification through immersion."[26] Reflexivity is a broader concept, looking at the difference between our emotional reactions to the inherent immutability of film and the plasticity of video games.[27] Finally, looking at the concept of 'play', Wagner defines it as "experimentation and innovation in response to a rigid system or structure,"[28] and suggests that in this way theology is a form of play, and so too are media based on religious stories or themes (such as *The Passion of the Christ).* Wagner then briefly examines a range of games that feature Jesus or Jesus-imagery - from 'religious' games like *Bible Champions* to the potentially offensive *Christ Killa* - with the aim of exploring the challenges of portraying Jesus in a video game. She concludes that "watching a film and playing a video game remain fundamentally different" and that "Games are not suitable for portrayal of the passion of Jesus,"[29] subjects examined further in Chapters 2 and 5.

These themes are explored more broadly in *Godwired*, which examines the interaction between religious practice and digital modern media. Wagner's study encompasses more than video games, but she does reference them directly. In two chapters on the intersection between games and narrativity, she expands on the material covered above and reflects further on the role of interactivity in theological analysis of games. Moving on, she looks at the potential for virtual reality to connect us to the transcendent and for new media to help shape our religious selves; this work is less relevant to this thesis, but by looking at the power of technology to enable our religious identities Wagner nonetheless emphasises the potential of new media to make a significant contribution to theology. Wagner also looks at specific themes arising in new media -

[24] Rachel Wagner "The Play is the Thing" in *Halos* 49

[25] ibid. 50

[26] ibid. 51

[27] ibid. 53

[28] ibid. 54

[29] ibid. 62

violence and apocalypse; we will return in more detail to Wagner's work in this area further on in the study.

General approaches

Although there are relatively few pieces of work in this specific area, others in related fields can be of use; we will briefly consider wider work on the study of theology and popular culture, including film specifically and new media more generally. Of chief concern is the range of approaches taken to cross disciplines and bridge the gap between religion and media, since these will prove useful in developing an approach to interrogating games for their theological potential.

Christ and Culture

H. Richard Niebuhr's seminal analysis of culture and Christian faith, *Christ and Culture,* categorises the broad positions taken by Christians on how, or if, they should integrate with culture. In a later chapter, we discuss the ways in which Christian groups have reacted to games and will return to Niebuhr's work to establish how this very new form of media fits into a framework that considerably predates it.

1. *Christ against Culture*

This attitude is characterised by the belief that culture is the antithesis of Christian expression, and should therefore not be engaged with. Niebuhr understands the motivation behind this view to be the belief that

> The counterpart of loyalty to Christ and the brothers is the rejection of cultural society; a clear line of separation is drawn between the brotherhood of the children of God and the world.[30]

Niebuhr notes Tertullian's view that theatre, contemporary games and music are "ministers of sin,"[31] and Lynch summarises by saying that those who adopt this approach tend "to emphasize an either/or choice between following Christ or engaging in contemporary culture."[32] it is therefore likely that Christians sharing this viewpoint would not seek to establish a dialogue with any form of popular culture, including games.

Clive Marsh frames this position by saying that, for such believers,

> There is no way in which culture, or a consideration of any aspect of culture, could deliver theology its subject matter. It would not be possible to conclude

[30] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* 47-8

[31] ibid. 55

[32] Lynch *Understanding* 99-100

> that talk from God is contained within any words about God which are gleaned from human culture.[33]

In other words, even at its highest calling culture can only be descriptive about God, never revelatory. Therefore, there is no theological benefit to be gained from it, because its origin in humanity means that it cannot tell us anything new or valuable about God; if it tells us anything, it is only ever what the author thinks of God. As such, secular culture is rejected because it does not contribute to furthering the Kingdom of God, and no dialogue is possible because there is no conceptual understanding of how culture could have anything to contribute.

2. *Christ of Culture*

Niebuhr's opening description of this attitude is that, among those typifying this type of belief about Christ, there is

> no great tension between church and the world… On the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person; on the other hand they understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization.[34]

For what Niebuhr terms 'cultural Christians', no separation is needed between Christ and 'the world' because He is entirely entwined with the aims of human culture. Christ did not set out to be separate from the world, but to be part of it and to engage with cultural matters; in this regard Niebuhr points to Jesus' involvement with contemporary issues such as "the laws of his society" and "the political parties of his nation and time."[35] In Marsh's words, "God-talk is thus extracted from culture on the understanding that God is to be discerned equally in and outside religious traditions."[36] Cultural Christians understand it as another form of Christian expression because the point of culture and the ideals of Christ are fundamentally the same thing. As such, Christianity is assimilated into culture, and understood to be part of striving towards an ideal society.

For Marsh, however, intertwining Christ and culture provides a barrier to dialogue. His concern is that Christianity then ceases to have any weight of its own and becomes subsumed into all other

---

[33] Clive Marsh "Film and Theologies of Culture" in *Explorations in Theology and Film* ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz 25

[34] Niebuhr op. cit. 83

[35] ibid. 105

[36] Marsh op. cit. 25

human endeavours; therefore, it is no longer able to speak to anything particularly meaningful. Marsh states that

> The submergence of Christian theology into culture means, for film, that any use of Christian imagery, however ironic, indifferent, or inconsistent, would count as a contribution to Christian theology. The basis for a dialog between theology and film would be hard to locate, for Christian theology itself has become a collection of textual references without a dialectical (and thus prophetic) edge.[37]

Cultural Christians may technically allow for dialogue in a way that others do not, but their approach broadens it to the point where the distinction between culture and theology no longer exists and can therefore no longer produce anything of meaning. This view is shared by Lynch, who considers that placing Christ as an inherent part of culture means that neither aspect can be independently critical of the other; a key concern for fostering the opportunity for dialogue.[38]

Middle ways

Niebuhr's last three positions occupy spaces in the ground between the first two. In Marsh's view, it is these three that represent the most potential for dialogue, as they neither allow Christianity to vastly outweigh the contribution of film, nor place them on the same level to make the distinction meaningless. He writes:

> film is allowed to contribute with its own integrity to Christian theology, but Christian theology brings its own agenda. Christian theology cannot, however, simply quarry film for good illustrative material. It looks for confirmations of its own content, but also expects to be challenged and even radically questioned in the process. For this to happen, theology and culture must be understood as in dialog: existing in a critical, dialectical relationship.[39]

3. *Christ above Culture*

Niebuhr offers three different models for understanding the relationship between culture and religion. The first is termed a "synthesis of the New Testament and the demands of life in the world,"[40] because its proponents aim to gather together facets of Christianity and of secular culture without the binary choice of the original, more extreme positions. Instead, the values of culture are understood as important for developing one's self - man needs to be 'good' according to cultural standards before he can also be 'good' spiritually and culture is therefore a kind of "preliminary training"[41] for spiritual development. Niebuhr's first approach saw Christ as the

[37] ibid. 26-7

[38] Lynch op. cit. 101

[39] Marsh op. cit. 27

[40] op. cit. 128

[41] ibid. 128

antithesis of culture, his second viewed Christ as a part of human endeavour, but this third model presents Christ as "the completion of human culture,"[42] according to Lynch.

While acknowledging that this synthetic approach appeals in its unity, Niebuhr cautions against a facet of the model. His concern is that the nature of culture shifts with history, and that the cultural standards on which, for instance, Thomas Aquinas' understanding of Christ was founded are not wholly shared today.[43] As such, to 'complete' human culture with Christ might require building faith on shifting sands. Nonetheless, Niebuhr leaves the possibility that someone may find a way to illustrate this model with less subjectivity.

One example of this attitude from video games is Schut's call for Christians to use video games as a tool for evangelism - not by creating Christian video games (see below), but by entering secular culture and encountering opportunities within it. He writes

> [Jesus] called his followers to likewise transform the world around them, not as superior, know-it-all, do-gooders, but as humble people ready to love, listen, and play games alongside everyone else... we are to plant love, whether it be in our everyday world or that of *World of Warcraft*."[44]

Schut exemplifies how culture can provide a foundation for religious encounter and growing in faith. By taking positive actions with secular spaces, believers use the prevailing culture as a way of developing themselves spiritually and, potentially, helping others to do the same. Christ is still the goal and is not replaced or rejected by this use of culture, but instead uses it to encourage Christians and reach out to new people.

4. Christ and Culture in paradox

Niebuhr describes the second dialogical approach as a form of dualist thinking[45] - like the third model, it eschews rejecting culture or seeing Christ as another cultural artefact, but does not share the synthesist view that engagement with culture is part of spiritual development. Instead, it is as an aspect of life set apart from Christ, but one that nonetheless requires engagement.

The key difference between the synthetic and dualist approaches is that, while synthesists may understand man's reasoning to be corrupted, they are of the view that this can be corrected

[42] Lynch op. cit. 100

[43] Niebuhr op. cit. 145

[44] Schut op. cit. 12

[45] Niebuhr op. cit. 149

through the teachings of Christ[46]. Dualists, on the other hand, see "corruption and degradation in all man's work,"[47] with no real distinction between the actions of the most devout and evil among us.[48] This is best summarised by Niebuhr's statement that

> Where the synthesist rejoices in the rational content of law and social institutions, the dualist, with the skepticism of the Sophist and positivist, calls attention to the lust for power and the will of the strong which rationalizes itself in all these social arrangements.[49]

The dualist suspicion of culture initially appears very much like the Christ Against Culture position explored above. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two positions, in that "the dualist knows that he belongs to that culture and cannot get out of it, that God indeed sustains him in it and by it."[50] Two facets of life, Christ and Culture, are both engaged with, but held together in paradox, in the knowledge that they oppose each other but cannot be separated from human existence. Thus, the dualist does not reject culture, but also does not regard it as sharing in the qualities specific to encounters with God.

Within the modern study of theology and popular culture, there are differing views on the role of the 'Paradox' model when it comes to dialogue. Lynch states that dialogue is impossible within this space because it treats religion and culture as entirely "separate and autonomous parts of human life."[51] Any meaningful conversation between the two would be impossible because there is no way in which they deal with the same concepts and, therefore, no mutual reference point to form the basis of such a discussion.

However, Marsh considers his method of analysing theology and popular culture bears most similarity to this model. His view is that

> Christian theology overreaches itself when it simply offers an "answer" to any question which culture poses. For culture is, in any case, diverse and complex. Films, books, fine art offer a range of ways of formulating such life-questions and their answers. But Christian theology undersells itself when it simply welcomes uncritically all that culture offers. A mutually critical dialog has to occur.[52]

For Marsh, locating Christ and culture in separate spheres of human experience proves to be less divisive than for Lynch, and is not a barrier to dialogue between them. Rather, the differences in

[46] ibid. 152

[47] ibid. 152

[48] ibid. 152

[49] ibid. 156

[50] ibid. 156

[51] Lynch op. cit. 100

[52] Marsh op. cit. 27

scope lead to a conversation that allows both sides to contribute their own take on what Marsh terms 'life-questions'. Theology should not leap in with answers to challenges raised by culture, but culture should not assume uncritical acceptance. Such dialogue is possible because, while both sides are distinct facets of life, they both touch upon the mutual concern of Marsh's 'life-questions':

> Any aspect of human culture - including film - which explores in however slight a fashion such themes as "the human condition," the nature of reality, or how people should live is addressing subject-matter of concern to Christian theology, and about which Christian theology has things to say.[53]

5. *Christ the transformer of Culture*

Niebuhr's final model is the idea that Christ works through and uplifts culture. He says that "what distinguishes conversionists from dualists is their more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture"[54] because, while they still hold Christ and culture to be separate, they do not see quite the same degree of corruption in culture itself. Rather, they see man's failings as "a perverted good, not evil; or it is evil as perversion, and not as badness of being. The problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation."[55] In this model, therefore, culture can be transformed through Christ and does not contain the inherent corruption of the previous model.

Giving specific examples of this attitude in history, Niebuhr states that

> Christ is the transformer of culture for Augustine in the sense that he redirects, reinvigorates, and regenerates that life of man, expressed in all human works, which in present actuality is the perverted and corrupted exercise of a fundamentally good nature.[56]

For those like Augustine, culture is a part of man's output: a failed attempt at something 'good'. Christ can overcome this failure, which arises from man's inability fully to live up to ideals of 'goodness', and the corruption inherent within this, rather than from any sense of evil-doing (which is the attitude of those avoiding culture).

For Lynch, in this attitude "the truth embodied in Christ thus becomes a resource with which contemporary forms of culture can be critiqued and challenged in the hope that they may be

[53] ibid. 27

[54] Niebuhr op. cit. 191

[55] ibid. 194

[56] ibid. 209

transformed."[57] Unlike the previous model, the conversionist approach is the one within which Lynch sees potential for dialogue; by holding Christ and culture in the same sphere of human experience, this approach leaves room for the transformative power of Christ and, thus, for dialogue. For such thinkers, the dialogue process can be part of transformation; lifting popular culture by using it as a conversation partner with religion.

Another approach to this model comes largely from evangelical Christianity, where cultural forms are co-opted for religious purposes. There is a large industry producing music, children's television and even video games, all from a Christian viewpoint. The result is that forms invented by 'culture' are uplifted to a specifically Christian purpose and used for education and evangelism. In the case of video games, this could include interactive Bible stories[58] or the *Left Behind* PC game in which the Lord's Army battles agents of evil at the end of the world. The material itself is no longer merely 'of the world', and its purpose becomes the same as any other traditional spiritual study tool - to support a faith-based worldview - rather than reflecting prevailing societal values. This is, as demonstrated by Lynch's view, not the only way to use Niebuhr's fifth model (and, indeed, represents an extreme example), but is adopted by everyday people, not just scholars.

There are, however, limitations to the usefulness of Niebuhr's model for constructing our analytical methodology. Although it encapsulates Christian attitudes toward culture, as well as the rationales behind these approaches, it does not map neatly to the work of theologians. As Lynch notes, "it is of limited use... in helping us to think in detail about how a dialogue between theological norms and popular culture might be conducted,"[59] largely because there is much to be expanded on in terms of *how* theology might be done; Niebuhr's categories encompass a range of potential approaches to dialogue. Moreover, our exploration of theology and popular culture is intended to be critical, rather than confessional, which does not lend itself well to Niebuhr's categories. Nonetheless, Niebuhr's work provides a useful framework for categorising Christian responses to popular culture, which is a necessary part of determining the potential space for dialogue, and is something that we will return to in a later chapter.

Furthermore, there are disagreements among scholars as to the dialogical value of some of Niebuhr's categories, even within the approaches that leave space for dialogue between faith and culture. For instance, Lynch considers that dialogue can only exist in Niebuhr's third and fifth approaches, as the others either decry all culture as deeply flawed and therefore not to be

[57] Lynch op. cit. 100

[58] Such as *BibleKids 3D*; see Eryn Sun "Interactive Bible App Teaches Kids Fun Lessons, Leaves Theology to Parents" *The Christian Post*

[59] Lynch op. cit. 101

engaged with, place Christ as an inherent part of culture where dialogue therefore cannot be independently critical, or treat the two as entirely separate and unmixable[60]. In contrast, 'Christ above Culture' and 'Christ the Transformer of Culture' "see theological reflection as making a constructive contribution to interpreting and critiquing cultural values and practices."[61] Marsh, on the other hand, sees all three of Niebuhr's latter categories as demonstrating "possible dialogical or dialectical relationships with culture... in which a distinction and a unity is simultaneously maintained in some way."[62] To understand further the potential for dialogue within Niebuhr's models, it is helpful to compare with a much more recent attempt to categorise take-up of new media by religious groups.

When Religion Meets New Media

A far more recent, and critically-focused, look at the approach that religion (more generally, rather than just Christianity) has taken to new media is detailed by Heidi Campbell. Here, Campbell looks at a variety of case studies to understand the different ways in which religious traditions have embraced (or rejected) forms of technological change and the impact on believers. This includes an examination of Muslim use of phone applications to facilitate prayer, and an exploration of the rise of the 'Kosher cell phone' in orthodox Jewish communities. However, the most relevant part of Campbell's work is her categorisation of the approaches taken by religious groups in adopting technology, which she labels 'accept and appropriate', 'reject and resist', and 'reconfigure and innovate'.[63]

Accept and appropriate

This is typified by utilising technology to further faith activities. Campbell uses the example of a Baptist missionary adopting computer and printer technology to help production and distribution of evangelising materials in the Congo. [64] This adoption of technology recognises the potential for new media to strengthen the activities of faith groups and individual believers, and puts it to work for just such a purpose. Campbell includes within this category other tools for spreading the Gospel digitally, like the 'PodBible' project, which makes freely available audio recordings of Bible passages. [65]

[60] ibid. 101

[61] ibid. 101

[62] Marsh op. cit. 24

[63] Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, chapter 5

[64] ibid. 114-115

[65] ibid. 116

It is not the media itself that leads to God. Rather, the religious reflection that can be facilitated *by* the conversation can do so. As such, this holds the secular and religious in balance, acknowledging the different roles that they play but allowing them to interact in a supportive, holistic sense. This recognition of the different roles played by culture and religion shares similarities with Niebuhr's 'paradox' model; such Christians have accepted the place that modern technology occupies in daily life and, while not using it as a means of worship or understanding, recognise it as a tool. Using a printer to publish leaflets is not an adoption of new media as a source of understanding or religious interpretation, but is instead the neutral use of a cultural artefact that recognises its material value, while not ascribing any religious significance. Using podcasts for Bible recordings keeps media and religion distinct, but allows them to work together and build on each other in a way that Marsh would recognise as having theological value.

Reject and resist

This category offers a different angle to 'accept and appropriate', by describing approaches that are inherently mistrustful of new media's potential to bring harm and temptation to faith adherents. While this group may stop short of complete avoidance, the suspicion of technology's ability to connect believers to forbidden or unhelpful material means a radical approach to adopting it is necessary, and it is seen neither as a neutral tool (like the printer example) or as a legitimate means of furthering religious encounter. Here, Campbell's illustration is the reluctance of some ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities to approve the use of internet applications. Concerns around the ability to access secular material (including pornography) have been balanced against the benefits for using the internet to run businesses within the community, leading to providers offering a range of options for users. [66] The most conservative options include email-only access, whereas others offer filtering solutions "primarily aimed at religious users seeking to find options for internet use that is in line with their desire to avoid problematic moral content in their homes," [67] some of which may even be officially approved by religious leaders. [68]

This concern echoes the 'against' model outlined above; it espouses the rejection of potentially contaminating cultural products. Here, the internet is not seen as a platform for content, some of which may be positive and some negative, but as a temptation because of the secular and anti-religious material that *could* be accessed (even if the user had no intention of doing so). However, it also shares similarities with the 'transformer' model, because the Orthodox communities described above have found a way to blend their religious sensibilities with technology to enable

[66] ibid. 117-122

[67] ibid. 120

[68] ibid. 120

that technology to function in a way that they deem appropriate. Clearly, it is not 'Christ' doing the transforming here, but the broader point about religious ideals 'purifying' culture is evident.

Reconfigure and innovate

Campbell's third category exemplifies a more in-depth acceptance of new media by presenting approaches that carefully consider its ramifications on faith and implement technology accordingly. [69] There are two examples here - the Anglican Church's virtual church in the online world of *Second Life*, and Muslim innovation of mobile technology to assist in prayer and worship. The first highlights a certain degree of caution and exploration of potential conflicts in adopting technology - the founder being concerned about "how his offline parish might relate to or perceive this new venture" [70] - leading to what Campbell terms "the reconfiguration of the relationship between the technology and the community." [71] This is not such a wholesale revision of the technology itself (as with the above example), but instead a form of dialogue between the two forms of media to determine the value of each, to each.

By contrast, the example from Islam is less about reconfiguration of existing technology and more about creating new services for religious users that utilise existing technological platforms, such as smartphone applications. Campbell describes various applications developed by Muslim programmers to enhance and support religious life - prayer time calculators, tools to orient towards Mecca, applications to teach proper preparations for prayer and recitation of suras, and ways for Muslims to donate to charity. [72] These examples don't treat the technology with suspicion, and neither do they embrace the existing secular uses for it, but use it as a basis on which to build a religious tool. In both examples, media is used to reach a religious encounter (more so than above) because it equips that technology with the means by which to do so. The existence of a church in *Second Life* does not uplift the whole platform (to do so would be to alter the game as a whole) but it provides room for players to encounter and participate in the Christian life through the technology that gives life to the game.

This approach bears some resemblance to Niebuhr's 'above' model, because it uses technology as a way to develop self and faith. Unlike the transformation category, technology here is used to support faith and meet believers or questers where they are culturally, rather than replacing their use of media. The digital church examples in particular allow for technology to lead to Christ or religious encounter by becoming a path to worship; this is different to Christ being the

[69] ibid. 122-133

[70] ibid. 123

[71] ibid. 124

[72] ibid. 127-130

'completion' of culture, so it does not fit entirely within Niebuhr's category, but it carries the same theme of allowing culture to reach the point where it can form a fulsome part of religious activity. It does not just contribute questions and answers (as with Marsh's interpretation of the 'paradox' model), but is an active part of faith.

As is clear from the above, Campbell's categories do not fit neatly into Niebuhr's - they overlap his models, and go further or less far than some of his typologies. Grounded in real-world examples of actual engagement with modern technology, they provide nuance to Niebuhr's categories and explore how contemporary expressions of faith fit within an older methodology. Building on this, Campbell's categories are primarily helpful in two key ways. First, in conjunction with Niebuhr's typology, they can assist us in understanding religious reactions to new media. It is straightforward to see a link between the 'reject and resist' attitude and 'Christ against Culture - not just because both potentially lead to a rejection of new media, but because the root of this rejection is suspicion and concern for the secular content that those with this attitude fear to be morally problematic. In positioning Christ against culture, believers must radically alter the place that technology and new media have in their lives, whether by creating Kosher internet services or by sticking to a cultural diet of 'Christian' video games. At the other end of the spectrum, the wholesale adoption of technology as a tool for religious encounter speaks to the idea of culture being a legitimate part of Christian faith - an internet connection becomes a way to worship with those around the globe. Even when not adopted as part of faith itself, technology can make contributions; a PC and printer are no longer *just* a PC and printer; they become powerful apparatus for spreading the Gospel and supporting the faith of those without access to resources that Christians from more developed countries might take for granted. Further on, this study will consider in more detail reactions to video games, and the depth of understanding to be gained from looking at these reactions in light of Campbell and Niebuhr's work together will be very useful.

Second, the above categories may help us to more fully appreciate the background of some content produced on a religious basis and, in so doing, explore which of Niebuhr's categories might most sum up the creator's attitude to new media. Most of the game examples we will consider are mainstream, secular productions where this consideration would not be relevant, but *Left Behind* was explicitly created with an evangelical approach. As previously noted, this is a game where Christian forces battle evil after the Rapture - the goal is to convert neutral characters to Christianity by performing "coercive personal evangelism" [73] on them. A superficial consideration of this game would result in the simple assumption that it is a piece of Christian pop

[73] Mark Hayse "Ultima IV: Simulating the Religious Quest" in *Halos* 43

culture for a specific market, which might be welcomed by conservative denominations. In that light, it is hard to trace back to the motivations behind the game's existence and the way in which culture is being used (beyond, of course, the certainty that there is no outright rejection or full welcoming of secular culture). However, by using Campbell's three descriptors and determining which is the best fit, we can uncover more about the developers' attitudes.

Left Behind*: evangelical interactions with video game culture*

First, we can consider whether *Left Behind* constitutes acceptance and appropriation of the technology. Its existence clearly requires this to some extent, in that some acceptance of the video game medium must have occurred for it to be made in the first place, and it relies heavily on the progress and design conventions made widespread by secular games. However, if we think about the accept/appropriate model as one that treats technology as a 'tool' or as a conduit, rather than holding its own value, then a video game in this model would look more like a memory game for learning Bible verses, or a 'stations of the cross' walkthrough (which Wagner analyses in *Godwired* and *Halos and Avatars*). *Left Behind* is not of this ilk; it is not used as a tool but as a Christian-cultural pastime.

We might then question whether, since the game could effectively replace its secular equivalents, it demonstrates a rejection of and resistance to technology that provides a gateway to profane culture. As a heavily-modified version of the medium, it bears considerable similarities to the Kosher internet example and could be seen as seeking to prevent players accessing secular content and, indeed, using the game to warn against attempts to engage with it (since rock music converts people to the devil). The technology of secular games is transformed into a piece of content that is intended (whether it succeeds is discussed later in this study) to support faith and act in lieu of wholly secular equivalents; by including evangelical Christian themes, it transforms a 'dangerous' secular media into an acceptable pastime, while tacitly rejecting secular games by usurping their place on a child's computer.

Unlike the Second Life church (of the reconfiguration model) *Left Behind* does not occupy and use a part of secular culture to facilitate worship and community, it actively subsumes it to provide children with a 'safe' form of the product, rejecting the secular content rather than working with it. The virtual church, on the other hand, immerses itself in secular culture to build on it and to seek people where they are within secular space. This latter is a form of engagement with secular culture that is comfortable with its uses and strengths, rather than one that is overwhelmingly suspicious.

Applying Campbell's categories to a case study brings out the nuances between Niebuhr's categories. While resistance to new media is in some ways related to the wish to stay separate

from the secular world as reflected in 'Christ against culture', Campbell's examination of rejectionist attitudes shows us that stepping away from secular culture does not entail relinquishing of new media in a wider sense; sometimes, rejection instead leads to 'transformation'. Christian music and video games are examples of cultural forms so heavily amended that they are no longer a clear part of secular cultural space, but they still make use of secular technology. Pop-style music, for instance, is acceptable as a type of media once it is sanitised of problematic content. Similarly, the ultra-orthodox Jewish community were able to adopt the internet as a tool for religious learning because they could filter out the elements of the actual accessible content that caused concern about the technology. As such, and as demonstrated by Campbell's discussion of that case study, there is space to see a conversation between new media and religious expression.

Finally, a last helpful reflection on Campbell's work is to consider it through the lens of Hoover's questions regarding the effects of cultural objects on those who 'seek' spiritual truth on their own terms:

> The difference is in how he *negotiates* his relationships to these [culturally specific symbols, resources, practices, and relationships]. Does he see them to be *determinative* of his beliefs and actions, or does he consider them to be *resources* to his own construction of meaning and identity? [74]

While Hoover is discussing believers who have effectively turned their back on the authority of religious communities, within this question is a potential insight to how Campbell's categories function. In the first instance, it is potentially the case that those rejecting new media are concerned that the secular or otherwise morally problematic content that is (or can be) delivered therein will adversely affect and shape their beliefs and, therefore, their actions. The ability of the internet to deliver pornography into the home at the click of a mouse should not in itself be a cause for concern (since it is very easy *not* to summon this content), but the potentiality of the medium allows for a determinative route to open that, for some, offers an unacceptable risk. On the other hand, some communities see secular technology and culture as a tool for furthering their faith identities. Campbell's example is of a relatively benign use of technology, but later in this study we will look at groups using clearly secular media as a way of interrogating faith (an approach we will share when using games to question theology). In the middle, sit those who are cognisant of potential wholesale adoption of popular culture, but are nonetheless happy to use it as a resource if carefully negotiated with and adapted for a religious purpose.

[74] Hoover op. cit. 73

Categorising our approach

Examining the intersection and interplay between theology and popular culture is well-established. However, due to the relative nascency of video games as a developed medium and the novelty of their establishment as a thoughtful and meaningful contributor to popular culture, there is a dearth of studies looking specifically and systematically at games. The examples above show the most notable contributions, both in terms of video games and new media more generally. However, while these studies make some creative, striking, and well-founded observations about theology and games, the field lacks an overarching assessment of which methodologies are suited to theological analysis of video games. The aim of this thesis, then, is to take the first steps toward a theology of games by beginning to test, evaluate, and synthesise a variety of methodologies that exist in related fields. The next chapter will consider the question of how appropriate it is to examine the narratives of interactive media, a necessary step before commencing a methodological exploration, but before we can do this it is important to draw out the parameters of this study, given the wide range of approaches that could be taken.

Robert Johnston identifies three ways in which theology is 'done' with film; this high-level typology is helpful for classifying the intended approach of this study:

Theological reflection

This approach uses film as a tool for reflection and covers a range of differing methods. On one side, Johnston describes how Martin and Ostwalt (to whose work we shall return later) "looked for traditional theological concepts within cinema such as redemption, hope, and grace [and] put a film into conversation with similar themes found within religion." [75] Another side has Brian Godowa's call to expose "existential, postmodern, or neo-Darwinian perspectives" [76] within film. Johnston considers that neither typify this approach, however, with Martin and Ostwalt's method resulting in too descriptive a conclusion, and Godowa's being too strongly influenced by the dogma of his theological views to fully appreciate the message of a film. [77]

Instead, Johnston sees the approach best espoused by those that bring more balance, such as Marsh's "dialogical method that allows film to contribute with its own integrity to Christian theology, while also bringing its own agenda to the interchange;" [78] another piece of work that we will examine later. The strength of this approach is that it does not allow either religion or film too

[75] Robert K Johnston 'Theological Approaches' in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden, 315

[76] ibid. 316

[77] ibid. 316

[78] ibid. 316

much sway in the conversation; by doing this, it avoids the potential for dialogue to fall merely into description by 'matching' themes in film and religion but not allowing theology to comment on film, and the potential for it to become a one-sided critique of film by religion, without hearing what message the film may have to communicate. While these key examples are based on discussion of religious themes, Johnston notes that similar approaches can be taken when considering textual similarities and comparing film content to material such as the Apostles' Creed. [79]

Practical know-how

Johnston's second category covers methods that find practical uses for film in terms of witnessing and reflecting on faith. It shares similarities with theological reflection, in that film is used to look at the situations and messages raised by the content. However, rather than producing a dialogue, the aim here is to allow Christians to reflect on themselves and their actions through the film. Johnston states

> we need to first experience the film. We can then explore what we have seen and how it connects with our lives, let it provoke our theological reflection, and then respond, suggesting how we might live out the consequences of the dialogue in which we have been engaged. [80]

This, then, is a confessional application of some of the methods employed during broader theological reflection, and thus shares similarities with some of the work covered in *Halos and Avatars*. Work that Johnston notes as employing this approach include Malone and Pacatte's series that links the lectionary with Hollywood films to provide followers with a resource to undertake this kind of conversation. [81]

Finding God

Johnston's last category draws together work that details how film can be a tool for conversion, including scholars' accounts of how they came to Christianity through the prompting of a movie. Among the examples given, Johnston's favoured piece is Detweiler's *Into the Dark*, which examines how audience members have heard the voice of God through popular film. [82] However, Johnston notes that this area is more typified by the work of Catholic scholars' "focus on film's sacramental possibilities to mediate the presence of God" [83] and, in particular, Greeley's view that

[79] ibid. 316-317

[80] ibid. 318

[81] ibid. 319

[82] ibid. 319

[83] ibid. 319

"it is not ideas alone, but a sacramental sense of awe and wonder that should be seen as significant." [84]

In our exploration, our approach most closely correlates with the 'theological reflection' category outlined by Johnston. In part this is because the other two approaches are highly confessional in nature, either requiring reflection on active faith or on the testimony of the presence of God within films - our aim here is to look at games through a critical theological lens, including a consideration of how far the approaches used by Ostwalt, Martin and Marsh (among others) would be useful for studying games. This will be explored in much more detail in due course, but for now it is useful to be able broadly to fit those intentions into one of Johnston's categories, thereby providing context.

Describing our approach

By locating our intended approach within Johnston's categories, we have already begun to describe how we intend to look at the potential theological content of games. To this end, some approaches to the study of theology and popular culture that are practical for a critical exploration are collated and outlined by Lynch and are of use in describing more definitely the method we intend to pursue. Lynch describes these approaches specifically in the context of drawing out the range of dialogical options with Niebuhr's typology, and they therefore extend well into broader work that looks at the potential for dialogue between religion and new cultural forms.

The first is helpful to those trying to establish which examples of popular culture complement or detract from a faithful life. Lynch outlines an 'applicationist' method, in which "popular culture is then evaluated positively or negatively to the extent that it fits with" [85] an already defined religious worldview; this only accepts texts that do not incorporate elements that are in themselves theologically or morally problematic and is described as the "least dialogical" [86] approach. A more open approach, although still relatively conservative, attempts to use religious tradition to answer questions asked by pop culture texts[87] - this is termed a 'correlationist' method and still assumes a distinct superiority for the ability of religious tradition to provide the answers requested by popular culture. However, it does allow culture to "set the focus" [88] (since it

[84] ibid. 319

[85] Lynch *Understanding* 101

[86] ibid.102

[87] ibid.102

[88] ibid.102

is the source of the questions and the starting point for the conversation) and play a part in interpreting the answers.

The third method is one that most closely fits the questioning approaches already seen in work from Schut, Detweiler, and several of the other scholars noted above, as it requires questioning and answers from both theology and popular culture. Termed 'revised correlational', Lynch repeats Don Browning's description that

> Christian theology becomes a critical dialogue between the implicit questions and explicit answers of the Christian classics and the explicit questions and implicit answers of contemporary cultural experiences and practices. [89]

Religious tradition may still have a monopoly on clear answers, and it retains some of the correlational method's focus on culture having the questions that lead the dialogue, but pop culture in this approach suggests answers of its own and recognises that theology may have questions to ask, rather than just answer. This method brings a far more balanced approach to the theology of popular culture than the above examples and allows for deeper dialogue as a result. This form of dialogue is the end goal of our consideration of the potential for video games to speak with theology, both in asking questions and in forming answers; throughout this thesis we will identify and adapt methods from other fields that allow for such a conversation to take place. Rather than raising questions through video games and interrogating theology for the answers, as would be required by a solely correlationist approach, we will consider how games can highlight concepts that ask questions of theology, but also what they suggest in answer to what theology may leave unclarified or even unanswered. This is congruent with the approach to using films for methodological reflection that Johnston identifies as preferable, as explored above.

Further to this, we will broadly be using a text-based, narrative approach, but making occasional deviations to comment on games where other aspects clearly hold some interest for our consideration. While other studies may use an author-focused methodology to look at how the medium belies the intentions or background of the author, for most of the games we will explore this is not the most appropriate method. Auteur approaches rely on having access to information about the intentions of the author and, indeed, there being the concept of 'an author'. For video games, not only is there a lack of information about the motivations of the developers, they are often the result of a consensus by several people. There are some small auteur studies (such as interviews in *Halos and Avatars*) and, where relevant, we will draw on these to provide further insight, but they are uncommon. Lynch notes that "text-based approaches will be important in situations where it is difficult to gain much knowledge about the author of a particular texts" and

[89] Browning in Lynch *Understanding* 103

"for analyzing texts for which it is very difficult to identify clearly the influence of specific authors," [90] both of which are the case for most video games.

Another approach, albeit one that we are not taking up, is the ethnographic methodology used, amongst others, by Stewart Hoover in examining how religion functions in an age where new media is so prevalent. He asserts that "audience reception research within the culturalist tradition shows great promise to further our understandings at this point in time." [91] In part, Hoover's view is that this approach allows for the consideration of personal, everyday use of media and how this relates to religion, [92] and because he considers that we should "first be concerned with how [relations between religion and new media] are experienced, consumed, expressed, and negotiated in the lives of individuals." [93] This is a core strength of an ethnographic approach, in that it allows researchers to explore the direct ways in which media is being actively used by believers. Nonetheless, this does not negate the value of considering the potential for the texts to be understood on their own merits in relation to theology, and therefore provide a complementary approach to audience-based work. As with the auteur method, there is some ethnographic theological research into video games, and we will touch upon it where relevant.

In taking up a text-based approach, we should still acknowledge that the audience may not interpret the film or game in the same way as proposed. In examining depictions of Christ-figures in *film noir* (covered in a later chapter), Christopher Deacy acknowledges that not all audience members may appreciate the Christ-like nature of characters such as Charlie or interpret the film in the same way, and that "even among audience members who share a particular religious sensibility there will be no consensus of opinion as to how to interpret even an overtly religious film." [94] Not every person watching a movie or playing a game will interpret the narrative and actions in the same manner, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that even the most carefully crafted Christology or opportunity for dialogue will be lost on a significant proportion of its intended audience. However, for Deacy this is not a stumbling block, noting that

> Whether or not an actual film audience will come to formulate a correlation between the protagonist in a *film noir* and the figure of Jesus Christ, humiliated and enduring immense physical suffering on the Cross, it is the inherently human experience that the protagonist undergoes, and which has the capacity to

[90] Lynch op. cit. 136

[91] Hoover op. cit. 19

[92] ibid. 19

[93] ibid. 20

[94] Christopher Deacy *Screen Christologies* 12

> resonate with the lives and experiences of the *audience members*, that enable such films to be read in theological terms. [95]

Similarly, Deacy considers that "Although *Mean Streets* bears witness to a number of discernibly, even explicitly, Roman Catholic motifs on redemption, it is, then the *universality* and innately *human* dimension to the film that makes a theological reading so pertinent." [96] In other words, we can read the film theologically not because of the Catholic ideology presented so clearly, but because the character of Charlie lays bare the nature of humanity. Therefore, even if an audience does not recognise the person of Christ within a specific character, or notice wider themes of salvation and redemption, it does not follow that the entire concept of redemption itself will be lost on them because the humanity necessary for authentic figures of redemption is the quality which makes them resonate for audiences. Moreover, our exploration searches for the *potential* for dialogue, and this is not negated by a lack of universalisability for the audience's interpretation.

To use a text-based approach on video games, we must be cognisant of the medium's characteristics - the way narratives are framed, the role of interactivity, and difference between a player and a viewer. To utilise methodologies from other media, our primary focus will be on the narratives of games, as this is where the biggest overlap in characteristics with other forms of new media can be found. However, it is important to acknowledge that, as an interactive form of entertainment, games offer a different experience to films, books, and other narrative-driven pastimes. We must therefore look at the suitability of drawing these parallels, and what these high-level differences can tell us about the interplay between theology and video games. In the next chapter, we examine why the exploration of video game narratives is considered controversial by some, and the approach we will take in the remainder of the study. We will then analyse the intersection between game and film, to provide further insight into how to treat the study of games.

[95] ibid. 10

[96] ibid. 112

2. 'Just a game': narrative and video games

In relation to film, Jolyon Mitchell justifies an analysis of narratives by stating that the narratives of popular cultural objects such as films, news and television "whether realistic, historical or fantasy-based reflect a great deal about the storytellers themselves as well as the worlds from which they emerge."[1] However, although the value of narratives in and of themselves is not contentious in the field of film and religious studies, that is not the case for some video game scholars.

The bulk of this thesis examines the theological potential of video games as cultural texts, and will therefore focus on games narratives. Even when looking at more structural elements, such as player choice, our exploration will still fundamentally be tied to the story that the game weaves. However, it is important to acknowledge that the debate surrounding the academic analysis of narratives in games is sufficiently weighty to demand that this decision is thoroughly justified. This chapter aims to do that, while linking the debate to theological approaches to interpreting new media and identifying ways in which an analysis of methodologies can contribute to theological discussion. Having explored the narrative potential of games and outlined how we intend to treat the narrative content of them, we will go on to consider how games relate to film and how we might use existing film resources and methodologies to begin our focus on games.

Analysing narratives

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith and Susana Pajares Tosca state that

> A lot of the scholarly discussion around narrative and video games deals with the perceived difficulties of combining a playing experience that feels free with the necessary constraints of narrative structure: in other words, the problem of letting players act freely while ensuring that their action produce an interesting story.[2]

The three scholars also provide a helpful summary of 'narrative', which will help to frame the following discussion:

> *Narrative* can be defined as a succession of events... When we talk of stories, plots or narratives in video games, we are referring to a scripted succession of events that the player has to perform in a specific order.[3]

The field of computer game studies is divided over whether studying game narratives is a valid approach to understanding games, to the extent that some notable contributors (such as Markku Eskelinen) refuse even to acknowledge the validity of the participation of some others. The

[1] Jolyon Mitchell "Questioning Media and Religion" in *Sacred and Profane* ed Lynch, 45

[2] Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games* 174

[3] ibid. 172

controversial subject of this debate is the matter of whether one can (or should) focus on the presence of narratives within games. Ludologists argue that narrative theory can never be applied to games because games are defined by their interactivity, to which constrictive narratives are antithetical. On the other hand, narratologists consider that games are such a close relation to other forms of storytelling that they can or should be treated in the same manner as literature or film. Neither of these stances completely addresses the criticisms of the other, but before we consider how this affects the potential for dialogue with theology we must first look at the specific arguments in this debate.

Ludologists

Eskelinen is firmly of the opinion that narratology is an intrusion of other disciplines (such as literature) into the field of video games - calling this type of interdisciplinary work "intrusions and colonisations from the already organized scholarly tribes."[4] He sees ludologists as the rightful inhabitants who should stand their ground against invasions from other fields. Eskelinen claims that "it should be self-evident that we can't apply print narratology, hypertext theory, film or theater and drama studies directly to computer games, but it isn't"[5] and that those who know their narratology would not attempt to apply it to game studies. His evidence for this claim lies chiefly in the distinction that a narrative effectively requires both plot *and* narrator to be "a sequence of events recounted"[6] (his definition of narrative) - games lack a narrator, and are therefore not narrative media.

Developing this point further, Eskelinen explains that there is a fundamental difference between the way we approach games as players and literature or film as readers/viewers:

> In art, we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret, whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation.[7]

This is echoed by Stuart Moulthrop, who takes Eskelinen's point and clarifies further that "In games the primary cognitive activity is not interpretation but *configuration*, the capacity to transform certain aspects of the virtual environment."[8] We examine and manipulate aspects of film, literature and drama in order to interpret and understand them - we match lines of poetry with events from a poet's life to understand their meaning, we look at the canon of a director's

[4] Markku Eskelinen "Towards Computer Game Studies" in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, *First Person* 36

[5] ibid. 36

[6] ibid. 37

[7] ibid. 38

[8] Stuart Moulthrop "From Work to Play: Molecular Culture in the Time of Deadly Games" in *First Person*, 60

work to find the most likely motivation for his characters, or we look for recurring themes throughout a series of books to understand its overall message. With games, however, we cannot begin to interact with them until we understand how, which requires interpretation of your situation - you can't progress in *Portal* unless you have correctly interpreted the end goal, the mechanics of the game, and the limitations of your actions.

However, this is not true for all games - the reality is far more complicated than that. Eskelinen does refer to the above explanation as a generalisation; we should be keenly aware that there are outliers and that these should be considered on their own merits. There are some games, such as *Bioshock*, where some of the plot can only be fully understood through analysing messages that the player must make an effort to find. To some extent, interpretation of the game precedes configuring our approach to it - the player must understand where they are and the limits of their abilities before they can figure out how to reach a hidden recording (which may include abstract logical thought). Nonetheless, the game has *also* built in the necessity to match the content of the hidden messages with other elements of the gameworld to understand what befell the city of Rapture. Marcus Schulzke notes that "*Bioshock* raises many deep challenges which encourage players to reflect on their experiences of the gameworld,"[9] a task that is only possible when players configure (interact with and examine) the game before they can begin to interpret it more fully. Therefore, while the overall gameplay elements require the interpretation-configuration that Eskelinen describes, there are also parts that reverse this and need the configuration-interpretation model of traditional narrative forms. To this end, Moulthrop's clarification provides greater accuracy - it is fair to say that configuration is the primary aspect of *Bioshock* gameplay (since without it information requiring interpretation can't be discovered), rather than that the configuration-interpretation model is the hallmark of games. It may be the primary task for players, but there is still room for other types of cognition and interpretation can sometimes come before configuration.

Espen Aarseth concedes that narrative is undeniably present in the adventure gaming genre, but states that this has weakened the gameplay to the point where

> this genre is really only one and the same game, the same rule system repeated over and over with variable cultural conventions and increasingly better technology... Adventure games seldom, if at all, contain good stories[10]

[9] Marcus Schulzke "Translation Between Forms of Interactivity: How to Build the Better Adaptation" in *Game on Hollywood!* ed. Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers, 79

[10] Espen Aarseth "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" in *First Person* 51

For him, this demonstrates how focusing on narrative over gameplay leads to substandard narratives and disappointing gameplay, with the elements conflicting and opposing one another.[11] Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith and Tosca undermine this point when they describe the video game adaption of *Blade Runner* as "[belonging] to the genre of adventure games... arguably the genre where story is most important"[12] before going on to state that "nowadays there is no popular genre that doesn't use some sort of explicit fictional framework... Narrative is so pervasive that there are video games based on nothing more than a tangential connection to stories in other media."[13] In other words, adventure games may be the archetypal narrative genre, but the prevalence of narratives has now spread to others. Were the focus on narratives in gaming so damaging to gameplay as Aarseth asserts, it is doubtful that it could possibly have spread so far or that movie tie-in games would be so popular. As Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith and Tosca note, the *Star Wars Episode I: Racer* pod-racing game would still have the same gameplay but be far less popular if it were not *Star Wars* themed (and, therefore, contains a loose *Star Wars* narrative structure and content).[14]

Indeed, the biggest problem with Aarseth's approach is summed up in his response to Moulthrop's comments on his work. Countering Aarseth's contention that the presence of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* does not affect the gameplay, Moulthrop notes that this is technically true, but

> It seems unlikely, though, that *Mr Bean: Tomb Raider* would sell nearly as well to its primary audience... While one may look past or through the avatar body during play, the significance of games as cultural forms goes beyond the player's time in the loop.[15]

Aareth's response notes that the significance of the character goes beyond her appearance "But that doesn't mean it tells us much, if anything, about the gameplay, does it?"[16] He therefore appears concerned with only those aspects of games that directly impact gameplay. For him, it does not matter which character is being controlled, the motivations for their actions, or the appearance of the world around them; all that matters is the mechanics. It is therefore little wonder that he cannot see a place for narratives to be considered, regardless of what they might bring to the wider gameplay experience.

---

[11] ibid. 51

[12] Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, op. cit. 170

[13] ibid. 170

[14] ibid. 173

[15] Moulthrop "From Stuart Moulthop's Online Response" in *First Person*, 48

[16] Aarseth "Aarseth Responds" in *First Person*, 49

Considering the above, what do ludologist considerations of game studies look like when we try to examine the potential for theological engagements? While Wagner is not, by the very fact that she looks at the religious content of games, a ludologist, parts of *Godwired* explore the conflict between theology and interactivity in a way that is very redolent of Eskelinen and Aarseth's concerns about narrativism. First, Wagner illustrates the debate by drawing parallels between the ludology/narratology debate and the different ways in which Christians interpret the Bible. She sees more liberal views of Biblical interpretation as akin to ludologist thinking - such Christians would see the Bible as "not a singular story but a sort of emergent discourse"[17] and

> agree that the Bible presents us with [a specific, fixed] series of events, but he would emphasize that *people* organized it that way and that we, as readers, can contextualize and even ignore certain components of the story as *we* decide what the book can teach us about God.[18]

This bears similarities to Eskelinen's interpretation-configuration model, in that this view of the Bible requires an interpretation of its context and place in history and culture, before configuration of personal faith in the context of its meaning can be commenced. The other attitude to this is a more fundamentalist stance, which Wagner describes as a view that

> the sequence of events in the received biblical texts is presumably the only way that God *wanted* us to read it. Thus, [they] tend to read the Hebrew Bible (or as they would call it, the Old Testament) as predictive of events in the new[19]

and that the Bible delivers a fixed, linear story.[20] Here, Christians follow a configuration-interpretation model, by configuring the text to understand it as a predictive, linear narrative (in the understanding of God's intention for it to be read as such) and the text itself interpreted from this point of view. By drawing these parallels, Wagner helps to shed further light on the debate, demonstrating that even the discussions surrounding video games can, in and of themselves, provide useful tools for theology.

Regarding gameplay itself, Wagner highlights an instance where interactivity and narrative could produce conflict unless carefully managed, and where the nature of the game-story needs adapting to prevent problematic theological content. She describes a children's game called *Bible Champions: The Resurrection*, which allows players to wander around Jerusalem finding "renditions of stories from the gospels,"[21] and notes that "there is interactivity here, to be sure,

[17] Wagner *Godwired* 31

[18] ibid. 31

[19] ibid. 31

[20] ibid. 31

[21] ibid. 40

but the rules of the game allow only certain things to be changed. The avatar... has no power to change the unfolding of Jesus' fate."[22] It is easy to see how a 'Bible game' allowing players to save Jesus from the crucifixion, or otherwise alter key components of the Passion, could be theologically problematic, especially when aimed at children. To avoid this, the narrative elements dealing with the events of Jesus' death are fixed points in the game, rather than part of gameplay. This highlights particularly well the conflict that Aarseth sees between gameplay and narrative - that an undue focus on narrative (in this instance, the necessity to keep the narrative shaped in a particular way) leads to less satisfying play (in this case, the removal of interactivity from this aspect of the game).

However, Wagner also charts a way in which interactivity could, to some extent, provide theological reflection in its own right. Describing works of interactive fiction that allow various degrees of 'play' with the story of Jesus, she states

> One could argue that Midrash, similarly, is a product of narrative that in some way becomes part of the new text that emerges through the experience When seen in this way, Midrashic activity is remarkably game-like, and the Bible is much like a narrative "space" to be encountered.[23]

This is redolent of movies such as *The Life of Brian* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which play with the story of the Passion. While some may consider them heretical or blasphemous[24], others view them as valuable tools for reflecting on the life of Christ and the nature of the crucifixion and resurrection. It is therefore potentially the case that, for those who find such play acceptable, there could be similar considerably value in 'Biblical' games that allow a wide degree of interactivity and plot manipulation.

Another theologian who looked at this issue is Schut, who points out that

> One of the big differences between other media and video games is that video games are participatory machines... With games, however, the player *must* get involved or nothing happens. And what the player does changes the passage of the game. Even the most limited games allow the player to fail, meaning the game won't progress until the player gets good enough.[25]

---

[22] ibid. 40

[23] ibid. 43

[24] For instance, the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which experimented with portraying Jesus as doubting and therefore 'played' with the accepted narrative of His death, was described as "morally offensive" and going to see it as an "act of blasphemy" by Catholic organisations upon release.
John Dart "Church Declares 'Last Temptation' Morally Offensive" *LA Times*

[25] Schut, op cit. 21

Schut therefore considers games to be "part machine, part communicator"[26] because this makes room for their ability to present different circumstances and possibilities depending on player input and the rules of the system, while retaining the sense that they have narrative potential in some, albeit limited, respects. However, what sets Schut apart from the game studies ludologist is his contention that "Just because we can't boil down a cultural text to a single, overarching message doesn't mean we have a failure to communicate."[27] While Schut acknowledges the difficulties with games as a narrative form of media and warns of the implications of interactivity, he does not consider there to be a lack of cultural value beyond gameplay.

Narratologists

A key proponent from the other side of the debate is Janet Murray, whose book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* concluded that

> [the computer] is first and foremost a representational medium, a means for modeling the world that adds its own potent properties to the traditional media it has assimilated so quickly. As the most powerful representational medium yet invented, it should be put to the highest tasks of society... we should hasten to place this new compositional tool as firmly as possible in the hands of the story-tellers.[28]

Throughout this work, she posits narrative content as the ultimate end to which cyber technologies should be put, stating that

> If digital art reaches the same level of expressiveness as [print or film], we will no longer concern ourselves with how we are receiving the information. We will only think about what truth it has told us about our lives.[29]

Given her focus on the use of computers and technology as narrative media, it is unsurprising that she has drawn considerable criticism from Aarseth and Eskelinen.

One of Murray's points that conflicts most with the ludologist perspective concerns her view that 'immersion' is a key part of interactive 'cyberdrama' (as she terms digital storytelling in its many forms).[30] While Aarseth and Eskelinen worry that a focus on narrative interrupts and affects gameplay, Murray has the opposite concern when she writes about the game *Myst* (which

[26] ibid. 23

[27] ibid. 23

[28] Janet Murray, *Hamlet On The Holodeck: The Future of Narrative In Cyberspace* 284

[29] ibid. 26

[30] ibid. Chapter 4

Aarseth notes has "a haunting and beautiful gameworld" but "boring and derivative gameplay"[31]), stating

> one of the limitations of the graphically immersive world of *Myst* is that it is dramatically static. Nothing happens of its own accord as the player wanders around in search of puzzles to solve... this intense immersion in visiting the place comes at the cost of a diminished immersion in an unfolding story.[32]

Both scholars admire the scenery and lament other aspects of the game, but for wildly different reasons. Aarseth is concerned that focus on the gameworld disrupts gameplay, which, as his primary factor concerning the value of a game, is a big problem. Murray, however, seems more discomforted by the beauty of the gameworld diminishing the narrative - to have the type of world and gameplay that *Myst* embodies, the narrative must suffer because it becomes less immersive. As such, it becomes clear that 'immersion' for Murray is not just about the game itself (as it would be for Aarseth and Eskelinen), but about the degree to which the player's focus is held by the narrative. However, this is a weakness of Murray's approach in this work - she leans heavily towards the idea of games as story-tellers, without due consideration of their other features. While Aarseth's contention that the character of Lara Croft does not have some impact on gameplay is unconvincing, so too is Murray's view that the lessening immersion in narrative is necessarily a 'cost' to immersion in the gameworld.

Nonetheless, Murray counters the potential assertion - hinted at in Aarseth's point about adventure games - that game narratives are bland and derivative, and therefore not worth studying. Referring to a study of Russian folk tales, Murray explains that such tales can be distilled into specific elements, which would be put together in several combinations and patterns. She states that the conclusion of the study was that "satisfying stories can be generated by substituting and rearranging formulaic units according to rules as precise as a mathematical formula."[33] She goes on to link this to game stories, writing that

> Games that do provide narrative variety often do so through a simple substitution system. Just as one "magic helper" can replace another in a Russian fairy tale, so too can one hero replace another in a fighting game.[34]

Therefore, the challenge levelled at game narratives - that they are unsuitable as stories to be examined academically because they are superficial and easily substituted - is either not specific to games (and we should treat other narratives in the same way) or rings untrue. Murray does

[31] Aarseth 'Genre Trouble', 51

[32] Murray, op. cit. 109

[33] ibid. 197

[34] ibid. 198

note that “games do not allow substitution of thematic plot elements (e.g. a heroic labour instead of a struggle with a villain),”[35] but allows that this may exist in future as game technology develops. Given that she was writing on this subject in 1997, it is therefore understandable that the advent of procedurally shifting games such as *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: 2 Souls* and the sort of choices available to players in *Fable II* & *III* did not feature specifically in her argument. These games all, to a greater or lesser degree, allow the player to determine what tasks they will do, how they will approach them, and whether they play heroes or villains. As such, they bear out Murray’s prediction that games would allow substitution of thematic elements, akin to Russian folk tales.

From a different area of study altogether, game designer Marc LeBlanc encourages new game developers to create drama and tension in their creations by acknowledging the links between fields.[36] He states that “The advent of digital games has brought games and stories closer together than ever before” and that “the power of games as a story vehicle is hardly a new idea,”[37] explaining that it goes back to Ancient Egypt. However, LeBlanc goes beyond just including the narrative in gameplay; rather he explains a way a problem for narratologists: how can a medium in which the 'reader' interferes be truly narrativist? For LeBlanc the game designers

> are not the authors of the events of the game; we cannot craft the game's drama directly, the way a storyteller scripts a story. Our task is more indirect. We cannot *create* drama; we can only create the circumstances from which drama will *emerge.*[38]

In other words, games are so closely related to story that we can use narrative ideas to study them, although in creation they require a different thought process and development by the relevant 'author'.

Developing this, LeBlanc describe the key elements of game design as mechanics (the rules and equipment of a game), dynamics (the events that occur within the game) and aesthetics (a game’s emotional content).[39] He clearly places importance on this latter aspect, which can self-evidently be carried by the narrative or (as previously explored) the gameworld, by saying “For players, the purpose of playing is the enjoy the game’s aesthetic content. As game designers, our objective is

[35] ibid. 198

[36] Marc LeBlanc “Tools for Creating Dramatic Game Dynamics” in *The Game Design Reader* ed. Salen & Zimmerman 439

[37] ibid. 439

[38] ibid. 440

[39] ibid. 440-441

to *create* that content."[40] This provides a neat counterpoint to Aarseth's contention that the identity of Lara Croft does not affect the gameplay of *Tomb Raider*. The identity of the character as a serious archaeologist, as opposed to a clownish buffoon, impacts on the player's interpretation of the dynamics of the game - the same events might unfold, but they would be understood completely differently if the character context was altered. While the gameplay dynamics are unaffected, LeBlanc makes clear that there is far more to a game than this alone - hence his call for designers to help shape the aesthetic player response.

Finally, also giving an answer to a problem concerning narratives in games, Nick Montfort considers that narrative and gameplay are inextricably linked, while also offering the view that they are not the only points of concern when defining new media.[41] A major problem that faces narratologists is that not all games have narratives embedded into the game – some purely deal with puzzles, arbitrary skills or sports matches (such as *Tetris*, *QWOP* or *FIFA*). Montfort says of Interactive Fiction (IF) that "Even IF that clearly has puzzle-solving as its only pleasure – works that make fortune cookies seem florid – produce narratives as a result of sessions of interaction"[42] explaining that you can parse in-game actions as players' physical actions to produce a story of something that happens. In other words, a game with no plot or storyline has its narrative in the story built up by a player's actions - I can describe the actions I take when playing a game of Tetris and give narrative life to my successes and failures, like sports pundits might do when discussing a football team's performance. For Montfort, "[IF] is a potential narrative that may contain game elements,"[43] and from this we can understand that game mechanics and narrative potential could meaningfully coexist.

In *Halos & Avatars*, Chris Hansen takes a narratologist view of this approach, stating that "While I can appreciate the formal aspects of game design, for the average user, the story still reigns supreme."[44] Like Wagner, Hansen uses the debate to explore the different approaches people can take to understanding religion, and notes that "Video gaming's' multiple-path narratives style matches a pluralistic impulse"[45] accepting of different paths to the same outcome. Hansen is not entirely positive about this influence, seeing the best outcome as "belief in the singular truth of

[40] ibid. 441

[41] Nick Montfort "Interactive Fiction as "Story," "Game," "Storygame," "Novel," "World," "Literature," "Puzzle," "Problem," "Riddle," and "Machine"" in *First Person*, 310-311

[42] ibid. 311

[43] ibid. 312

[44] Chris Hansen 'From Tekken to Kill Bill: the future of narrative storytelling?" in *Halos* 21

[45] ibid. 30

the Bible"[46] but with more tolerance for other views, but it is another example of how the potential for theological dialogue is within more than just the narrative message of games - it lies also within their actual structure and within the debates around how that structure should be understood.

Hansen also states, however, that designers should use chronologically-linear storytelling methods because

> Unlike film, video games struggle to tell a story in a convincingly nonlinear fashion. Gamers can only make sense of their roles in a game if they understand what happens directly after their actions.[47]

This underestimates designers' ability to create effective non-linear storylines and of gamers to interpret them. The 2016 winner of Bafta awards for game innovation and for mobile gaming was *Her Story*[48] - a game in which players search a police database for video clips from interviews and piece together the story of a murder. The player is presented with many clips, all out of order, and must use visual and verbal clues to figure out the wider plot. Another well-received game that plays with the concept of time and order is *Beyond: 2 Souls* in which the player controls a character at various points in her life, never sequentially. While true disassociation between input and output would make a game very difficult to follow, by then it would no longer really be a game (if input-output is a key part of game structure). As such, there is absolutely a place for non-linearity in the study of game narratives.

Ludo-narratology (or narra-ludology)

As explored above, there are potential problems with both sides of the debate; consideration of those espousing a more moderate view is therefore essential. J Yellowlees Douglas, for example, states that

> Looking to either narratology or to games for our understanding of interactives will offer only a highly limited return, since we're looking at, essentially, a still-developing range of genres in a new medium. Just as film is more than the sum of image, mise-en-scene, sound, and narrative, interactives can be both more than the sum of game or narrative.[49]

A particularly clear example of this approach comes from Henry Jenkins, who speaks to

[46] ibid. 31

[47] ibid. 26

[48] "Games in 2016" Bafta Awards Database

[49] J Yellowlees Douglas "Response to Eskelinen" in *First Person* 37

> a middle ground position between the Ludologists and the Narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium - examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility.[50]

As a result of presenting this work, Jenkins states that he was "falsely (in my opinion) identified as a Narratologist,"[51] but he does assert that "One gets rid of narrative as a framework for thinking about games only at one's own risk."[52]

Broadly, Jenkins posits that designers can learn from comparative perspectives, and he outlines five points of likely common grounds between the two sides of the debate: not all games tell stories; many games have narrative aspirations; narrative analysis need not be prescriptive; the experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story; if some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media do.[53] He dismisses the extreme ludologist perspective, saying that they are "prematurely dismissing the use value of narrative for understanding their desired object of study,"[54] explaining that this could be because current discussion about narrative uses too narrow a model of classical linear storytelling and limited understanding of narration. For Jenkins, the way that narrative and story can be present in a game is comparable to how a Disney theme-park ride can evoke the atmosphere of a film or story[55]. He describes games as more like "spatial stories"[56]; the plot does not fit tightly together like a jigsaw but has broader goals and conflicts in which a story can emerge through the player's interaction with the game. Finally, in an assertion that negates Aarseth and Murray's concerns about the conflict between narrative and gameplay, Jenkins states that there needs to be a balance between player freedom and constrictive storyline so that one does not place undue restrictions upon the other.

Diane Carr also recognises the connectedness of the two ideologies. She uses the example of *Baldur's Gate* to examine the place of narrative within games, but does not place undue emphasis on whether this should be the main focus, saying:

> Computer games, even those that contain substantial amounts of storytelling, do not reside comfortably within existing models of narrative. It would be nonsensical to disregard the parts of Baldur's Gate that make it a game in order to have it conform to a model of narrative structure. On the other hand, it would be counter-productive to ignore the game's narrative qualities, in order to have it

[50] Henry Jenkins "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" in *The Game Design Reader* 672

[51] ibid. 670

[52] Ibid. 672

[53] ibid. 672-3

[54] ibid. 673

[55] ibid. 676

[56] ibid. 675

> obey a preconception about what games (and hence the study of games) should be about.[57]

For Carr, both elements need to be considered – while narratives in stories "strongly resemble" traditional story-telling, there is also a need for the player to make some choices during the game. Game and story limit each other and can be understood in separate elements, but Carr states that "in practice the two are interwoven."[58]

Carr's approach, therefore, is to separate out the different aspects of *Baldur's Gate*. Some elements, such as the preformed backstories of characters and the locations of key quest targets "are arranged in time and space, prior to their being communicated to the player. These elements conform to, or at least strongly resemble, conventional narration."[59] More nuanced is the game's running commentary on the player's actions, which Carr notes diverges from traditional narrative, but "the player is not designing these events with a free hand. All the acts and happenings are shaped by their content; by the games, its physics and rules."[60] Games can therefore represent a broadly traditional form of narrative, and one that shifts slightly from this basis - a narrative that has some freedom for the individual but retains its roots in the same kind of prescriptive control as a novel. Developing this, Carr posits that when a player is told of events within the game (such as being recounted a character's story), the game becomes akin to a narrator and the player a reader. However, when "the player instigates and orchestrates events, or determines a character's traits... they assume a position close to that of the implied author."[61]

Here, Carr has developed a nuanced look at the role that narrative plays in games - rather than just stating that it is or is not present in *Baldur's Gate*, she defines types of scenarios in which narrative or gameplay comes closer to the fore. By doing so, she partly addresses Eskelinen's concerns about game time and narrative time[62], since these can be split out and examined separately. This avoids the fallacy that all parts of a game must be treated in the same way, and therefore allows a considered study of separate parts that have different elements and possibilities.

[57] Diane Carr, *Computer Games* 38

[58] ibid. 44

[59] Ibid. 39

[60] ibid. 39

[61] ibid. 41

[62] ibid. 44

Further to Murray's view in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and *First Person*, on her personal website she later outlined a broader view of the debate, stating that, contrary to the opinion of ludologists like Aarseth and Eskelinen,

> no one has been interested in making the argument that there is no difference between games and stories or that games are merely a subset of stories. Those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other.[63]

As such, Murray effectively sees the debate as closed - there should be no argument because neither side is continuing to claim that theirs is the only valid approach. Rather, each can find in both games and stories elements that hold their specific interest, but that does not entail the entire absence of the other. This is a much more nuanced approach than the idea that games cannot ever be narrative forms just because abstract puzzle games are one genre amongst many. Her view is that the ludologists saw a 'threat' that never existed, as those concerned with narratives never claimed that games were *just* stories.[64] This is echoed somewhat from the ludologist side by Moulthrop, who notes that

> Limiting the definition of games to systems with simple distinctions between winning and losing could restrict this study to zero-sum antagonism, a domain that seems every bit as constrained and potentially obscuring as narrative.[65]

While Moulthrop, as with the other ludologists, does not believe that narratology is an appropriate means entirely with which to study games, neither is he happy with Eskenlinen's view of the 'winning' being the ultimate object.[66] Rather, he looks to avoid either extreme to prevent study being hampered unduly by dogmatic adherence to one or the other.

Returning to Schut, while he is clear that "stories are optional for games"[67] he agrees with Jenkins that "poor narrative doesn't mean video games can't or shouldn't have stories; it just means these will be different narratives from those of books, TV shows, and film."[68] Nonetheless, as explored above he is of the view that games are tools for communication, and looks for a way in which all games, even those without the 'optional' narrative, can communicate with players. His conclusion is that this is achieved through the alternate reality 'worlds' of games - from the needs

[63] Murray "The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology" *Inventing the Medium.com*

[64] ibid.

[65] Moulthrop op. cit. 66

[66] ibid. 66

[67] Schut op. cit. 24

[68] ibid. 24

of characters in *The Sims* to the border-expanding cultural monuments in *Civilization V*.[69] Schut sees this as communicating the same sorts of messages as books like *Lord of the Rings*, noting that they may not have the same direct, clear moral message as Aesop's fables, but that they do "communicate heroism, the qualities of good and evil, the piercing quality of beauty and so on. Video-game stories can do many of the same things."[70] Ultimately, Schut's point is that video games might use stories, but even when they don't they still have the potential to communicate the same concepts.[71]

Finally, we should note that scholars working in the field of popular culture more broadly also acknowledge the usefulness of narratives, while cautioning against focusing on them to the exclusion of forms unique to the medium. Jeffery H Mahan writes that although studies of narrative can produce useful and erudite work, "at their worst they can provide intricate readings that show little awareness of how actual viewers make sense of and interact with the material."[72] He counsels researchers to gain an awareness and appreciation of the way that media is used and functions, and to "gather the appropriate tools"[73] of those whose specialise in those fields.

A way forward

Like Jenkins, Carr and, latterly, Murray, I remain unconvinced that the extremes of narratology or ludology are academically defensible; we must be careful to acknowledge the presence and influence of game mechanics on narrative (and therefore avoid an interdisciplinary approach that would ignore these aspects entirely) but must also recognise that the narrative features of games are a valid part of their appeal and structure. It is impossible to deny the distinct complexities of the gaming medium, and the potential for the mechanics of gameplay to bring a unique bent to the study of religion and popular culture, but to divorce this from a study of narrative would be short-sighted and leave some integral parts of games unexplored. Before commencing our exploration, we must therefore consider how to locate an approach that balances between them.

In doing this, it will be helpful to categorise games in terms of their narrative content. As Jenkins stated, "not all games tell stories,"[74] and within this they are told to different degrees. Wagner also considers the variety of story-types, writing

[69] ibid. 25

[70] ibid. 25

[71] Ibid. 25-6

[72] Jeffrey H. Mahan 'Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture' in *Sacred and Profane* 56

[73] ibid. 55

[74] Jenkins op. cit. 672

> Whereas some stories are tightly scripted and deny us a role in shaping outcomes, others function more loosely as imaginative fodder inviting cooperative meaning-making. Such stories are less like cathartic rituals and more like interactive systems of engagement.[75]

In this context, I propose four broad categories to help us describe the types of narrative used in games:

Abstract

In abstract games, there are no stories or narratives embedded in the game itself. This category includes puzzle games, like *Tetris*, sports simulations such as *Wii Sports*, or arena/group fighting games without storylines, such as *Defence of the Ancients*. This 'embedding' is an important distinction, as even the most abstract and plotless of games will still have a kind of 'player-story' as outlined by Montfort above – a story of the game played, rather than the plot inside the gameworld. Jenkins also notes that games like *Tetris* "might well express something of the frenzied pace of modern life, just as modern dances might, without being a story;"[76] these types of games may not have their own plot, but they can still carry a player-story or an intrinsic message.

Linear

These games have an embedded, intrinsic storyline that must be followed to complete the game. There will be no real change in experience from person to person, except in the details of how fast missions are concluded, how many attempts are made, and how many lives are lost. This would include many platform games, such as *Sonic*, puzzle-solving stories like *Portal* and even mission-based adventure games like *Assassin's Creed*. It could also include those sports or racing games that have a 'campaign' or tournament mode. There will be room for some minor points of divergence, such as the introduction of Chaos Emeralds into the *Sonic* plots at different times depending on player skill (or effort) in the Special Stages. The 'player-story' will be different, but not the narrative of the game itself.

In *Interactive Storytelling*, Andrew Glassner proposes some categorisations of game narratives that bear similarities to this type of game, including a 'rail ride', in which players

> go through the game experiences in the order that was determined by the game's designers... except for relatively minor choices, the sequence of events that you encounter whilst playing the game is fixed.[77]

---

[75] Wagner *Godwired* 49

[76] Jenkins op. cit. 687

[77] Andrew S Glassner, *Interactive Storytelling* 22

This type of narrative structure might also be encompassed by his 'static' model - a story that is the same for everyone who reads it. While the clearest example of this is a novel (where the words remain the same for every reader)[78], a looser interpretation could be applied to games such as the Super Mario series, where the levels present the same challenges and players must all take the same general path. Marcus Schulzke notes that such games

> give players little control over the game narrative, aside from the power to advance through the game and earn achievements. Nevertheless, linear games produce interactivity through mechanisms like reward systems and reflexivity [the mutual influence of the player on the game and the game on the player].[79]

As such, these games provide a fairly strict narrative, but still have the interactive elements that set games apart from other media.

Divergent

Games that are divergent provide a choice within the storyline but still follow set variations. This could incorporate different endings for similar overall storylines (*Bioshock*) or a choice of good or bad characterisation (*Fable*), including games that appear to have narrative choices but which all lead to the same conclusion (*The Walking Dead*). The choices and paths a player takes could be very simple, like *Fable II*'s three options for saving the world, or extremely complicated, like choosing fates for four interlocking characters in the murder-mystery *Heavy Rain*. This broadly reflects Glassner's 'riding the current' model, in which he describes a much larger degree of flexibility than the previous category, but with an overall control by the designer.[80] *Heavy Rain* is the type of game that takes 'riding the current' to an extreme, and comes the closest to providing the sort of plot manipulation that Murray predicted - the player has a very wide degree of choice and the plot will unfold according to those choices, meaning that there are several ways in which to complete the game and varying versions of the plot. Nonetheless, these ways are still set, and it is not possible to finish the game in any way other than those foreseen and pre-programmed by the designers.

Labyrinthine

These are the games where the plot is either practically endless, such as the seemingly infinite quests of *World of Warcraft,* or is what Aarseth might term a "story-generating system"[81] - games like *The Sims* or *Minecraft* that are almost completely open and allow for players to create any

[78] ibid. 21

[79] Schulzke op. cit. 76

[80] Glassner op. cit 22-23

[81] Aarseth "Genre Trouble" 50

narrative they would wish with the characters and resources available. There may be different goals prescribed, like a Sim having a long-term aspiration to fulfil, or they may be personal, such as creating a perfect replica of Canterbury Cathedral in *Minecraft*. This is also potentially the sort of game or system that Mateas and Stern are referring to when they talk about 'emergent narratives', which are "concerned with providing a rich framework within which individual players can construct their own narratives, or groups of players can engage in the shared social construction of narrative."[82] Glassner's 'stage sets' category encompasses these narratives, describing a world in which "there's no ongoing, authored narrative"[83] but just a place for players to develop their own, and where there may be some structured quests, but these are not a mandatory part of gameplay.

Interestingly, Schulzke combines abstract and labyrinthine games (and, arguably, divergent ones too) into a category of 'nonlinear games' that include "everything from sports games to sandbox games."[84] In doing so, he notes that such games

> incorporate reward systems and reflexivity, but go even further in giving players the ability to affect the game world. These games generally have some structure and clear goals, such as winning the championship in sports games or completing the main quests in an open world, but they allow players to reach goals through different routes.[85]

Schulzke nods towards the differences between the divergent *Fallout* games and open world styles like *Second Life*, but does not delve far into what separates these narrative models.[86] I have made deeper distinctions because, for the purposes of this exploration, it is helpful to note the difference in potential narratives between these types - abstract games contain very little in the way of constructing traditional narratives, but games like *Second Life* allow us to play out stories. Moreover, noting the other space that exists between linear and labyrinthine (what I have termed 'divergent') allows for a more nuanced conversation about what these games allow players to do and the balance given between narrative and interactivity.

It is important to separate games into categories because the nature of the medium means that there is no one fixed way of talking about a narrative. It would be meaningless to say "narratives in games can carry a message" without qualifying it by saying that this can only be so in games that contain either their own story or enough stimulus for the player to build their own. By

---

[82] Mateas & Stern, "Interaction and Narrative" in *The Game Design Reader* 644

[83] Glassner op. cit. 23

[84] Schulzke op. cit. 76

[85] ibid. 76

[86] ibid. 77

categorising games, it allows us the freedom to discuss them more accurately, much like distinguishing between R.L. Stine and James Joyce when analysing written stories - the two styles are so dissimilar as to require entirely different tools for analysis.

Perhaps in some instances the narrative is a piece of artistic frippery that *can* be featured in a game but without doing anything to enhance it or define it, but that is very different to this being the case in every game. Andrew McAlpine describes the position of Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman on the place of elements such as narrative, saying that "[if] a game were to emphasize these artistic elements at the expense of basic competitive forms, "a game would lose its 'gameness' and become some other activity,""[87] much like Aarseth's (and Murray's) criticisms of *Myst*. In their eyes, this is because a game is primarily defined by their "formal systems of rules and goals"[88] with everything else coming second. However, they also acknowledge that the dramatic and artistic elements of graphics, character and story serve to help engage the player. These elements may not define games, but that does not mean that they are purposeless. After all, who would play a game that lacked engagement? If, as we have seen Moulthrop point out, the characters matter, then it is not too much of a stretch to assume that a story can be integral to people *wanting* to play the game.

One question we might ask then, is what the purpose of a narrative might be. It may serve to engage a player, but storytelling goes deeper than this, and any medium carrying a narrative has the capacity to carry a message. If, as Aarseth contends "Computer games, with scarcely forty years of history, represent a mere last few seconds in the long evolutionary history of storytelling,"[89] then it must surely follow that games are able to take up this history and convey the messages of traditional storytelling media. In fact, some games have been created with this concept in mind, a notable example being the original *Bioshock* title, which will be explored in more depth in future chapters. The player controls the protagonist who finds himself in the ruins of an underwater city where genetic manipulation has made it possible for every citizen to become extraordinary. However, this very possibility corrupted the city and the inhabitants turned on each other. *Bioshock* was conceived by the developers as an antithesis to Ayn Rand's objectivist theories of the heroism of selfishness propounded in the epic *Atlas Shrugged*[90]. It exists because of its narrative, and therefore cannot be defined without it. In line with Jenkin's assertion that narrative need not be prescriptive, the narrative in Bioshock is not forced upon the player through frequent 'movie style' cutscenes or mandatory speeches by other characters, but is

[87] Andrew McAlpine "Poets, Posers, and Guitar Heroes" in *Halos* 130

[88] ibid. 129

[89] Aarseth op. cit. 46

[90] Chris Remo "Ken Levine on BioShock: The Spoiler Interview" *Shacknews*

revealed as part of gameplay and detailed further in bonus material that players need to seek out for themselves[91]. While not traditional linear storytelling (and it would be for the worse if it were), this is still a form of narrative and a game reliant on players understanding the narrative elements presented to them. This does not hold true for all games, of course, particularly within the abstract and labyrinthine categories, but the very fact that it is true for some means that it cannot readily be ignored. As integral and well-executed as *Bioshock*'s narrative is, however, it is important to remember that this is one of the best examples. Not all games contain this kind of narrative and, for those games, it may not be appropriate for this kind of exposition to be the primary form of study.

We must also turn to the game developers themselves. Developer of such successful games as *Quake* and *Doom* (which are not renowned for their complex and subtle narrative qualities) John Carmack reportedly said that "Story in a game is like a story in a porn movie. It's expected to be there, but it's not that important."[92] For developers and critics like Carmack there is a grudging recognition that games will need a plot to 'hook' players and to explain the context for the action. Beyond this, though, it is the gameplay that matters for Carmack – how finely balanced the difficulty curve is, how well executed the enemy is, how advanced the AI has become. The story is a filler, occupying no more than a slight thought for the developers. Other developers, however, feel differently. Speaking in an interview published in *Halos & Avatars* Marty O'Donnell (composer and member of Bungie studios) said of Carmack's assertion "that this is something that we [at Bungie] completely disagree with." The studio disagrees because in their eyes a focus on narrative is a pioneering thing to do. For them stories can have the powerful messages of other media and are eminently suitable for delivering them. As developers

> what it means to actually tell a compelling story or to engage people's minds in a way that potentially can make them have a change of mind or thought or heart or something after they've played the game as before they're played the game[93]

is something that O'Donnell feels a lot of the industry is actively trying to do.

This is certainly supported by the players themselves. Daniel White Hodge interviewed thirty-five gamers and 95% of them "commented on how much a good storyline matters."[94] He also states that "the top reason that gamers [in his interviews] buy and delve into games is story."[95] As part of his interviews White Hodge discovered that the 'veteran' gamers consider narrative to be "far

[91] ibid. and Chris Faylor and Nick Breckon "GDC 08: Ken Levine on Storytelling in Games" *Shacknews*

[92] Lewis Pulsipher *Game Design* 202

[93] Lisa Swain, "Myst and Halo: A Conversation with Marty O'Donnell and Rand Miller" in *Halos* 95

[94] Daniel White Hodge "Role Playing: Toward a Theology for Gamers" in *Halos* 164

[95] ibid. 164

and away the most important aspect of gaming"[96] and when considered alongside the abstract nature of older games it becomes apparent that gaming has evolved since its inception. When interactivity was novel the mechanic of a game may have been enough to be satisfying, but as technology moved on we began to take this element for granted and started searching for something deeper within new media – similar to early cinema's experiments with shots of oncoming trains made purely for novelty before the demand for real stories and intrigue came along.[97] If the players buying the games consider story to be significant, then Carmack's statement can no longer be justified. However, there is one final element to consider; while a focus on the story element may be desirable for the players, it may not always be as possible as we imagine. Robyn Miller, one of the designers of the seminal *Myst* title, apparently found the development process frustrating because, as Aarseth puts it, "he felt the game format in conflict with storytelling and character development. And there was this annoying intervening person, the player, to put up with."[98] Perhaps what is needed is to strike a balance between a meaningful story and knowing when to let the gameplay be the focus.

This is the crux of the matter – it is very difficult to posit a convincing argument on either side of the debate and perhaps this is for a reason. Games are not films or literature, no matter how many themes they might share, but at the same time they are not irrelevant to storytelling media; neither element can be ignored. As Carr notes above, it would be unwise to focus on narrative over gameplay or gameplay over narrative when developing any game other than those with abstract non-narratives. Perhaps a misplaced focus on narratology is what gave Miller such a hard time in the development of *Myst*, whereas focus on gameplay in a genre that appears to be outside of the abstract category might serve to alienate some of the established player communities and create games that feel empty or shallow. That is not to say that there is room for narrative in every game, and it would be inadvisable to attempt to shoehorn a plot into *Tetris* or *Minecraft*. However, a great many games have at least the semblance of a story with many using their stories as a selling point. For those games that have narratives it is important to examine them and recognise the place that they hold in this new media. For those that do not it is equally important to consider them as fully formed games that are not lacking through omission of a plot. Games can be games, but they can also be storytelling and story-generating, and this needs to be recognised and the narratives examined when they occur. For the remainder of this study, I will be examining the narratives in those games that contain them. This is not with the aim of convincing anyone that this narrative is all that matters, but as a study into how games can

[96] ibid. 165

[97] Robert K Johnston *Reel Spirituality 2nd ed*. 41-42

[98] Aarseth, op. cit. 51

reflect our values it is entirely appropriate to take narrative as a relevant element to study. However, where game mechanics supplement (or even contradict) the message of a narrative then this will be factored in.

As explored in the first chapter, the field of critical theology and video games is a nascent one, and it therefore lacks established tools for analysis. As a starting point, I therefore intend to use methodologies and case studies from more developed areas of study, adjusting them where necessary to account for the differences outlined above. My primary source for these approaches will be the field of theology and film, first because it is well-established and has several scholars on which to draw, and second because (as explored below) film shares many characteristics with video games. To draw out these similarities and to consider how best to deal with any significant differences, it is necessary to look at the two media in more detail before we go on to analyse the content of games.

Games and film - shared and separate characteristics

Games provide a spectrum of narrative spaces, whether simple binary models that diverge only slightly before plunging back towards a fixed conclusion, or 'sandbox' worlds where there is no end goal and a completely player-created narrative. Films, on the other hand, may have DVD release extras, such as deleted scenes, director's cuts and alternate endings, but whichever version of the film you watch, it is physically immutable. This is a key point of difference between the two media, and one we must keep sight of throughout this discussion, while recognising that not everything about film relates to fixed narrative, and not everything about gaming relies on open choice. Just as critics of the film and theology field, such as Melanie Wright and Jolyon Mitchell, note that it is not appropriate simply to transpose literary methodologies onto film (as these do not account for the audio-visual components),[99] so too must we recognise that not all aspects of film will map neatly onto video games and that we must take these into account when using film methodologies. It is the aspects of potential convergence between these forms - in the context of their differences - that we will now explore further before examining in the next chapter whether religious approaches to films find their counterparts in gaming.

Why film?

In the wide array of media forms in popular culture, film is arguably video games' closest cousin. In the preface to their key collection of essays on the intersection between the two media, Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers note that Hollywood has "mined the video game industry since at least the 1970s for both stories and story-telling modes, creating movies that

[99] Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz *Theology and Film: Challenging the sacred/secular divide* 8-9

involve gaming as part of the plot."[100] Meanwhile, we see many examples of shifts between the two: video games of popular films such as *The Lion King* and *Toy Story* in the 1990s and broader, film-universe derived epic games like *Lord of the Rings: Shadow of Mordor* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*; and films based on games, from *Hitman* and *Assassin's Creed* to *World of Warcraft* and even *Doom*.

The similarities between game and film come from their shared use of a set of characteristics. Both are entirely audio-visual, with rich histories of sound design, music, character acting, and visual display. Watch a game cutscene, and you would be hard-pressed to tell the difference from a CGI film; this sets them apart from other media like literature or music, which have very different experiences. Even theatre, which is an audio-visual narrative experience, lacks the pre-recorded take-home elements that film and video games share. Beyond this key similarity there are smaller, but nonetheless significant, ties between the two. Both are longer-form, usually designed to develop characters and stories over the course of hours (sometimes hundreds, in the case of games like *World of Warcraft*). Those games that are shorter, or played in short levels, are usually far less narratively focussed; it is the longer, more story-driven games that have much in common with film. Both media have within them a range of genres - in film this relates primarily to the themes (horror, rom-com, action) and sometimes to the visual style of the movie, and games build on these content genres by having gameplay categorisations as well (first person shooter, platform, online role playing). This nods to the shared content between the two media - similar narrative themes - but also the difference in the degree to which each is interacted with, which we explore further below.

Nonetheless, as explored earlier in the chapter, video games have a significant element that sets them apart as a unique medium - they are intensely and specifically interactive, which is something not accounted for by film methodologies. Therefore, before we attempt to use these approaches to study games, it is important to consider more fully these similarities and, more importantly, the differences, so that we can understand the limitations and boundaries of applying the study of one medium to another. To this end, Marcus Schulzke's work on the challenges of adaptations between game and film casts a particularly bright light on the differences and similarities embodied within these two narrative forms.

Adaptation, divergence, and convergence

First, noting the ostensible gulf created by the interactive nature of gaming, Schulzke outlines the view held by some that "The record of adaptive failures, in both directions, seems to indicate that

[100] Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers "Introduction: Manifest Narrativity - Video Games, Movies, and Art and Adaptation" in *Game on Hollywood!* 10

games are so vastly different from books and movies that successful adaptation may be impossible."[101] To a large extent, this is attributed to the assumption that "games are an interactive form of entertainment, while the experience of movies and books is passive,"[102] and it is straightforward to see why this opinion could be held - the ability to play with the story of a game through the use of choice mechanics or open exploration formats seems worlds apart from the fixed form of a film, and the interactivity that defines in no small part the very nature of the gaming medium does not appear to lend itself well to comparisons with a static way of telling stories. Where, for instance, is the scope to compare the choice of who to leave behind made anew in every playthrough of *Left 4 Dead 2*'s 'The Sacrifice' challenge, when a film version[103] would leave the audience watching the same person die each time?

Nonetheless, Schulzke challenges this position, pointing out that movies and books are

> by no means static artefacts: these media encourage audiences to imaginatively fill in missing information, to judge the characters and their motives, and to discover the meaning of the texts."[104]

He acknowledges that interpretation is "less visible"[105] a form of interaction as manipulating the actions of a character in a game, but it is still a form of interaction that allows each audience member to filter the unfolding plot through their interpretation of the narrative and, particularly in films relying on a sense of mystery or uncertainty, draw conclusions about what might be around the corner. Films such as *Memento*, require this to a particularly high degree. Indeed, Carl Plantinga views *Memento* as a 'puzzle' film that relies "on the spectator's interest in deciphering the contours of a fictional world made obscure by various narrational strategies"[106] to diminish negative audience emotions that would otherwise result from the tragedy that unfolds. For instance, the sympathetic tone of Natalie's first scenes shows her in a positive light and in any other film the sudden revelation that she is nasty and manipulative would be perceived as jarring and unbelievable. However, the novel chronology of the film, which requires us to configure the scenes and actively try to interpret the plot, provides sufficient distance from this shift in tone to dilute the shock and accept more easily Natalie's changing behaviour. While highly concentrated in such an extreme example, the backwards narrative of *Memento* highlights clearly the continuous interaction-through-interpretation that films require.

---

[101] Schulzke, op. cit. 71

[102] ibid. 71

[103] Such as the death of Will Smith's character at the end of *I Am Legend*

[104] Schulzke op. cit. 71

[105] ibid. 71

[106] Carl Plantinga *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* 171

To an extent, this is the level of interactivity that some games contain; not everything is about fighting, shooting, and jumping through primary-coloured worlds - some games are heavily dependent on the player's analysis and interpretation of event. In a game like *Her Story*, the player uncovers a narrative contained in splintered fragments of police interviews with one woman - the clips range from 5 seconds to around a minute, and the player only hears and sees the woman's side of the interview. By using careful search terms to explore the video database, the player must thread together the narrative of what happened to the woman. Critic Michael Thomsen described it as "a beautiful amalgam of the cinema and video game formats. It wouldn't work as a linear film;"[107] indeed, it shares with *Memento* that disorienting sense of disordered chronology and the need to scour each scene for clues to link fractured narratives together. A player's success in 'completing' the game (which requires merely agreeing that you understand what has happened) will depend largely on their ability to interpret the scenes and find within them clues to the woman's past. To all games, we bring our different ideas of how the character should proceed and what actions should take place; to a film, as Schulzke implies above, we bring our experiences, our biases, and our understanding of the world to our judgement of the characters. Both entail an interpretation of what unfolds before us, whether it be an instruction to configure the gameworld or the need to understand the intention behind the mise en scene or direction. Indeed, while film cannot, by its nature, involve the specific forms of configuration entailed in playing a game, gameplay can involve the interpretive aspects used to examine film and other narratives. As such, we can expect some methods used to look at the interpretation of meaning in film to apply to games containing suitable narrative material.

We must, however, keep in mind that there are still significant differences within the medium. Schulzke continues by noting that the differences between the interpretative interactivity of film and the participatory interactivity of games "sheds light on the possible problems and possibilities of adaptation across media."[108] He concludes that such adaptations should ensure they allow for the type of interactivity inherent in the target media; films made from games should ensure sufficient depth of character to enable interpretive viewing to take place,[109] whereas successful games of popular film franchise do more than retell a story - they elaborate upon the world of the film and allow the player to immerse themselves in it in an actively interactive way.[110] Looking at the attributes of successful adaptations between the two media helps us to understand more

[107] Michael Thomsen, "'Her Story' review: A game about an unsolved crime that reveals the best the medium has to offer" in *Washington Post*

[108] Schulzke op. cit. 72

[109] ibid. 82

[110] ibid. 81

about their similarities and differences; by learning what should stay the same and what should change, we can understand the differing strengths of each medium.

This is a point made by others writing in *Game On, Hollywood!*. Ben Bunting attributes the loyalty and adherence to the restrictions of their own media types to the relative success of the film adaptation of the game *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time,* stating:

> The movie recognises that it is a film - and only a film; it embraces and limits itself to the conventions and boundaries of that medium... the *SoT* film does not attempt to reproduce the experience of being a player in a game... Rather, it stays true to its medium, transposing what it can from its source material and excising the rest, never losing sight of the fact that it is a piece of static exposition created for an agency-less audience and not an interactive gameworld.[111]

The film's success depends on recognising the specific features of this medium and incorporating only those elements of the original material that fit within the expectations and limitations of the new form it needs to take. By doing this, the audience is not given a passive facsimile of the type of active interactivity they would get from the original game, but instead receive a piece of narrative more suitably structured for the fixed nature of film. The importance of recognising the different nature of the media between which a narrative is being transposed is not limited to films and games; in writing about adaptations from literature to cinema, Shelley Cobb notes that "Scholars have called repeatedly for a move away from a criterion of faithfulness because of its limitation as a mode of criticism and its implied prioritizing of the literary over the cinematic, a hierarchy that allows little room for the popular novel adaptation."[112]

Looking at a literature-to-game adaptation, Denise Ayo praises the controversial game version of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (titled *Dante's Inferno*), for all its alterations to and deviations from the original. The game replaces Dante's poetic imaginings with gruesome (and literally depicted) images of the circles of Hell, in which the battles for the eponymous hero's soul are entirely un-allegorical. Dante fights his way through waves of twisted creatures and disturbing landscapes in a bid to intercede for his lost love. As Ayo puts it "readers familiar with *The Divine Comedy* openly wondered when Dante became a scythe-wielding badass and Beatrice a scantily-clad damsel in distress."[113] Nonetheless, in line with Schulzke and Bunting's assertions about efficacious adaptations between media, the game works because it takes the broad elements of Dante's work (the journey through the circles of Hell, each with their specific characteristics and

[111] Ben S. Bunting "Game-to-Film Adaptation and How Prince of Persia: Sands of Time Negotiates the Difference Between Player and Audience" in *Game On* 58-59

[112] Shelley Cobb, "Adaptable Bridget Generic Intertextuality and Postfeminism in Bridget Jones's Diary," in *Authorship in Film Adaptation*, ed. Jack Boozer 281

[113] Denise A. Ayo "When Did Dante Become a Scythe-Wielding Badass?" in *Game On* 101

inhabitants) and ties it to the type of interactivity needed within the genre (in this instance, the ability to impale Death on his own enormous scythe). Ayo describes this as the "result of an elaborate, successful remediation through the lens of the current cultural moment."[114] *Dante's Inferno* may not be a classic retelling of the original poetry, but this is unnecessary to transmute from literature to game; what is important is that the key components of the medium are recognised and embraced in themselves, rather than compared only to the main characteristics of the original work.

These essays all comment on how narrative material can be converted between games and other media, and in doing so demonstrate the similarities and differences between media. Having already considered why it is possible to analyse the narrative content of games, Schulzke, Bunting and Ayo identify where we must take care when applying methods from other media; the elements necessary for successfully adapting narratives give insight into what is likely to be helpful or not when borrowing methodologies and approaches from other areas in theology. They provide a concrete warning of a point already mentioned - that for all games' ability to carry narrative content with interpretive potential, they must be understood and treated on their own terms as separate media. We should look not just to what the interpretive possibilities are, but to what is suggested by the configurative-interactive aspects of gaming. This means it is possible to borrow from and draw on methodologies from film studies to examine video games, but we must be cautious not to use approaches that focus on aspects of film media not shared in games or ignore more active elements of gameplay that do not have a direct counterpart in film.

Towards a critical study of video games

Building on the principles visited in this chapter - text-based, narrative-focused, and media-sensitive - the remainder of this thesis will explore the theological potential of video games, using existing methodologies from the study of religion and film, and finish by suggesting ways to take this field forward. Deacy states that

> It may be a little over-ambitious to suggest that films can or should facilitate a systematic theology, but I do not think it is inconceivable or wide of the mark to see films as being suitable–and equal–dialogue partners with theology, which can give rise to very weighty and prodigious theological questions,[115]

and the aim of this thesis is to test whether this might be true of games by systematically examining methodologies from the study of film. This consideration will be constructed gradually,

[114] ibid. 102

[115] Chris Deacy "Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?" *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*

focussing first on Christian responses to games (from the abrasive to the welcoming) and charting where on this spectrum this approach is located. We will then analyse specific elements from games to locate theological content and patterns, and to find where games might contribute to theological questions; to do so, we will use methodologies from a range of scholars studying film. We will explore whether games and theology can contribute to each other's understanding by interrogating case-study narratives, taking into account the impact of the games' mechanics and space for interactivity to look for the ramifications of interpretation and alternate choices. We will consider to what extent these approaches are successful and, where less convincing, what this in itself can tell us. In doing so, this study will not only establish whether video games have a place in the analysis of theology and new media, but will also contribute to work on the intersection between games and film, and the exploration of the narrative content of games.

3. Avoidance and divine encounter: responses to video games

In the previous chapter we considered the potential for methodologies from other, narrative-rich forms, to be used to explore the relationship between theology and video games. Having established that, as long as care is taken to recognise the unique qualities of the gaming medium, this approach is likely to prove fruitful, we must now turn our focus on using it.

Systematising Christian responses to video games

Rather than looking specifically at the content of films and games, this first exploration seeks to categorise the responses made to popular culture by Christians and theologians; the aim is to locate the sought-for dialogue within a wider framework of ideas about the role that media can play, before going on to consider the actual content of such media. There is a great deal of variety in the attitudes with which religious adherents and theologians have approached criticism of video games. Conservative Christian groups, such as Focus on the Family's *Plugged In* site, offer reviews to guide the Christian gamer to the 'right' kind of game to buy – denouncing *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s depictions of violence as "all the possible social evils [the developers] could come up with."[1] On the other end of the spectrum, sites such as *Gamechurch* offer *Tomb Raider* in a list of ten games that "Jesus would love"[2] and use video games as a mission opportunity. Somewhere between lie the churches that offer *Halo* games nights to attract young people, saying that as fishers of men "teens are our fish... so we've become creative in baiting our hooks."[3] Shanny Luft notes that some of the reactions can be surprising; given the degree to which 'Christian' alternatives to popular culture have led to a view of "evangelical culture as independent and distinct from secular culture, a perspective that obscures the significant overlaps and interactions between evangelical and secular cultures."[4] He goes on to explain that

> Christian gaming is not wholly distinct from secular gaming... Thinking about Christians as gamers invites consideration of ways that evangelical video game enthusiasts reflect the practices and tastes of the broader gaming community,[5]

and as part of this exploration we will consider responses that include take-up of secular gaming by evangelical Christian groups.

---

[1] Bob Hoose "Grand Theft Auto IV Game Review" *Plugged In*

[2] "Ten 2013 Games Jesus Loves (and why)" *Gamechurch*

[3] Matt Richtel "Thou Shalt Not Kill, Except in a Popular Video Game at Church" *New York Times*

[4] Shanny Luft, "Seven: Hardcore Christian Gamers- How Religion Shapes Evangelical Play," in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve 157

[5] ibid. 157-158

So, what might these types of responses to gaming look like and, with such a range of reactions, how do we understand the reasons behind them? This next section examines suggestions that some scholars have made about the possibility (or not) of shared space between video games and theological thought, and uses the structure proposed by Robert K Johnston in *Reel Spirituality* – a spectrum ranging from complete avoidance of the medium on religious grounds, to a position advocating that media can perform the function of genuine religious experience.

Johnston's spectrum takes into account the range of theological responses that Christians have made towards film since it became a common form of entertainment, categorising them into avoidance, caution, dialogue, appropriate and divine encounter.[6] Johnston notes how attitudes have broadly "developed more or less chronologically over the last eighty-five years"[7] which speaks to the potential for video games also to gain more established ground and positive reactions from Christian and academic communities alike as time passes. Johnston is keen to point out that, as with any typology, no critic will fit perfectly within any of these categories.[8] In particular, there is potential for the categories to blend into each other - there is no solid dividing line between (for example) those avoiding morally problematic films and those exercising a great degree of caution when considering what to watch. Broadly, Johnston describes the spectrum as a range of 'starting points' for criticism – those who consider avoidance or caution tend to start with their own beliefs about morality and choose their entertainment to fit, whereas those open to a divine encounter through film start with the movie to determine what it can teach them about morality.[9]

This framework has the advantage of covering a wide range of views whilst being nuanced enough to distinguish between the specifics of related, but differing, approaches to religious film critique. It also deals effectively with the issue of how we understand responses to different elements when some critics feel that there is inherent conflict, and others see only harmony and alliance. The typology refers more to confessional theology, whereas this piece of work intends to adopt a critical approach, but still provides a robust structure and rationale for examining responses to games. Using the same outline as Johnston, but including responses from academic theology, I will examine the range of approaches taken in this field. Rather than just recount examples to illustrate the category, I intend to consider their strengths as theological reflections and what they can tell us about ways to approach the rest of the study. For instance, rather than just considering those who think that Christian belief is threatened by video games, I will be looking at scholars

[6] Johnston op. cit. 55

[7] ibid. 55

[8] ibid. 56

[9] ibid. 56

who have suggested that the medium is incompatible with developing and understanding mainstream theology, or with general principles of Christianity. At the other end of the spectrum, rather than only considering whether, on a personal basis, a video game can bring one closer to the divine, I will be examining whether video games might inform players about theology so that they might in some way develop their own.

Johnston's spectrum strikes somewhat of a balance between Niebuhr and Campbell's typologies; it is more modern than Niebuhr's, and is therefore likely to reflect contemporary attitudes to a greater degree, whilst providing a more delineated and nuanced division than Campbell's. Nonetheless, there is significant congruence between these three ways of exploring engagement with modern media, and we must be conscious not to consider any of these in a vacuum. Therefore, having already considered how Niebuhr and Campbell's work fits together, we will continue to take that approach and look for common ground between the methods of classification. Johnston himself is clear that there are parallels between his model and Niebuhr's, stating that "One might, in fact see [it] as an application of Niebuhr's classic typology to the medium of film, film being one particular cultural expression,"[10] and we will take a similar line by applying such models to games. In light of this, and the correlation we have already seen in the previous discussion of Niebuhr and Campbell, we can expect few anomalies.

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is important to keep in mind the inherent differences between game and film when borrowing from film methodologies. Because Johnston's spectrum is a holistic approach, there is less danger of using inappropriate methods to understand gaming – the focus here is on how the topic of gaming itself is approached theologically and the mindset of those doing it, rather than on an understanding of the games themselves. I will draw on specific games and their potential interpretations to support the viewpoints being explored, but this is separate and complementary to the method being appropriated from Johnston. As such, there is not yet a need to distinguish between types of interactivity or other key differences between the media in general, although it is necessary for some specific examples.

Avoidance

Critics (and viewers) using this type of approach may avoid films completely, but Johnston considers that in more modern times it also describes those who practice "selective boycott[s] of films judged morally objectionable."[11] Those responding to films in this way begin with a clear idea of their own morality, and select acceptable films based on whether they fit within this moral

[10] ibid. 78

[11] ibid. 57

structure. Johnston's examples of this type of attitude come largely from earlier in the history of film, citing Herbert Miles' assertion that "[movies] are the organ of the devil, the idol of sinners, the sink of infamy, the stumbling block to human progress, the moral cancer of civilization, the Number One Enemy of Jesus Christ,"[12] although he also includes the boycotting and condemnation of the late Nineties film *Dogma* by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. For Miles, Hollywood was (almost) completely incapable of producing a film worthy of a Christian audience, and for the boycotters it was important to make a stand against those films which do not already accord with their religious morals.

Regarding video games and theology, Rachel Wagner gives an example of what she perceives as an inherent incompatibility when writing about the interactivity within games, and how this can conflict with the goals of those wishing to use video games as a theological tool. In relation to the depiction of Jesus in media, she asserts that "the notion of interactivity clashes with the notion of theological inevitability."[13] As noted briefly in the first chapter, there are areas of theology where we cannot use video games as a tool for understanding because their nature conflicts with the scripturally established events of Christ's life, death and resurrection – they are to be avoided theologically because they clash with notions of theology that are already held. Thus, her view represents a form of 'avoidance' in terms of rejecting the potential for games to shed light on the person of Christ. Inevitability in games is something to which we will return, albeit from a different angle, and for now we will limit our consideration of it to Wagner's concerns about the need for certain fixed narrative structures.

Wagner's starting point for this assertion is that, while games have narratives, they appear in a different form than in texts, which are much more rigid and cannot be interacted with in a way that would alter their conclusion. Reaching back to Paul, Irenaeus and Augustine, Wagner notes that "The Christian preference for narrative over game is traceable back to early Christian insistence on the fidelity of the Jesus story as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy"[14] and that there is no real acceptability of 'play' with such a text. Wagner therefore concludes that "due to its own fixed trajectory, [film] is thus more suitable to theological inevitability than games;"[15] film does not bring with it the risk that the audience could alter the story or blasphemously inhabit the persona of Jesus.

[12] Margaret Miles, quoted in Johnston 57

[13] Wagner, "The Play is the Thing", 47

[14] ibid. 48

[15] ibid. 49

For all their similarities, this latter part particularly highlights the differences between film and games, and the effects these differences can have on theological analysis. What Wagner raises here is that the interactivity of video games is usually based on the control of a character (excepting more abstract games), which becomes fundamentally problematic for developers trying to make a video game that highlights the story of Jesus. Wagner writes that Eskelinen would expect players to be frustrated by a game centred around a predictable narrative[16], and this is a salient point. Taking this view, the developer creating our hypothetical Jesus-game would be forced to make a choice between providing a game that would be unengaging to players, and allowing the game to 'play' with the narrative of Jesus. Given Wagner's above assertion about the necessity of inevitability in the Passion, it is not difficult to see why this would be problematic for a theologian, quite apart from the potential blasphemy that some might consider is inherent in 'playing' as Jesus. For instance, the subverting of the Passion in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* led to furious opposition by religious leaders and the banning of the film in several local authority areas, despite the creators' insistence that it wasn't intended as a mockery.[17]

However, concerns about blasphemy aside, Wagner's view remains unconvincing. First, many gamers will be aware that the narrative in a game is often just as inevitable as in a film – many mainstream FPS (first person shooter) titles, particularly those from the previous generations of games consoles, involve a very linear storyline and even those that offer an element of player choice often have a single conclusion. This includes titles from the original *Mario* games to the *Fable* series and, if we apply this to the inevitability of key plot developments within choice-heavy games, then even such narratively-open games as *The Walking Dead* are, essentially, linear narratives. Therefore, while there are games offering an inappropriate level of interactivity for a story requiring a foregone conclusion, there are also games that offer fixed narratives without boring consumers. This means that the media is not itself inherently in conflict with the theology of the Passion, just that careful choice is required.

Moreover, there are ways of portraying the message of Jesus without the game featuring the actual story of the nativity or Passion. Something that we will later explore in much more detail is the appearance of characters who seem to emulate or represent aspects of Christ or elements of the Passion, but this has relevance here, too. The figure of Atlas in *Bioshock*, for example, is a character who comes to terms with his own pre-determined path in life. Unknowingly controlled

[16] ibid. 50

[17] Robert Sellers "Welease Bwian" *The Guardian*

Theologians agree with this intention; Carl Dyke, for instance, states that "In terms of core Christian beliefs, the movie is reverent and unquestioning" and describes it as "a nudge in the ribs" Carl Dyke "Learning From The Life of Brian: Saviors for Seminars" in *Screening Scripture* 237-8

by the phrase 'would you kindly?', Atlas is led through the dystopia of Rapture until he discovers his identity as the son of the city's founder and the fact that he has been brought here for a purpose. Kevin Newgren describes this, saying “despite the freedom you appeared to have... the goals were chosen for you, and you had no choice but to obey them or stand staring at the wall.”[18] While Atlas' destiny is to commit murder for the sake of the world, and Christ's was to be killed for the sake of humanity, there is a lot to be gained about the Passion from Atlas' experience. Jesus' final night before His trial, when He begged for his future to be changed[19], speaks of discomfort with the inevitability of His sacrifice. Similarly, Atlas struggles with the discovery that he has also been brought to an inescapable conclusion by powers beyond his control. It would, as explored in the previous chapter, be hard for developers to create a Jesus character who had these same struggles without the risk of blasphemy – it would not really be an option for players to be provided with a way to think twice about going to Golgotha (even though Jesus himself prayed for this burden to be lifted), and even if it were it would somehow be an empty choice because we know how the story ends. However, when playing as Atlas, the story can highlight the reticence of Rapture's moral saviour to do his duty, and it is not problematic if a player wants to spend half an hour really thinking about the moral implications of what they are forced to do. Moreover, even though Atlas' choice has been made for him, the decision to carry on playing to see whether his sacrifice works still resonates with players because they are having to grapple with pre-destination for themselves. Ultimately, while there are difficulties in marrying video games with specific areas of theology, the medium has the distinction of being flexible enough for these matters to be avoided through creativity and originality in game design.

Compared to Niebuhr’s categorisation, this approach has most in common with the ‘Christ Against Culture’ attitude that he describes. This is certainly the case for those who reject the medium of film entirely, and see no way in which this type of secular culture can ever have a positive, religious impact. Nonetheless, Johnston’s category is broader than this and includes those who may engage with films that they have very carefully screened. Willingness to watch content that is perceived not to be morally objectionable (and, by extension, in line with Christian belief) may overlap with our previous interpretation of the ‘Christ the Transformer of Culture’ model; those who are comfortable with some aspects of culture, if religious sensibilities have acted to make it acceptable. Regarding Campbell’s typology, this has clear parallels with the ‘reject and resist’ attitude; such critics have no interest in appropriating or reconfiguring secular film for religious ends. They may create movies with a religious basis (much like the Kosher internet example she cites), but that is as far as they are willing to go, with all other instances rejected out of hand and

[18] Kevin Newgren “Bioshock to the System: smart choices in video games” in *Halos* 144

[19] Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42 NRSV (Anglicized Edition)

their normalisation resisted. In the previous chapter we posited that these two of Niebuhr's categories found a place more comfortably within this one of Campbell's, and examining them in the light of Johnston's spectrum bears this out.

Caution

This response is less extreme than the previous one, but is still predicated on starting from a position of the viewer's own morality. Rather than avoid all movies that could potentially contain material antithetical to pre-established morality, these viewers will go to see more risqué films, but with caution of their contents and from a clear moral standpoint that they will filter the film through. Johnston provides several examples, but he notably includes Margaret Miles, who he describes as "[viewing] movies from her ethical/theological point of view and [judging] whether or not they fit."[20] Rather than avoiding the 'evils' of Hollywood, Miles engages with them to critique their content and themes, but Johnston notes that she still sees the movie on her own terms instead of seeing it on its own terms.[21]

While some may reject many video games because they are not compatible with their existing ideology, others are willing to accept many games, as long as they are treated with caution. For some critics this may involve specifically Christian takes on gameplay, such as the video game adaptation of the *Left Behind* books. For others, this may involve partaking in mainstream games but being careful about overly violent content, or excessive bad language.

Left Behind: Eternal Forces, as explored briefly in the first chapter, is an ostensibly 'Christian' video game, in that it was deliberately developed with a Christian message and according to specific set of beliefs, with a heavy focus on the rapture and the power of prayer. A form of real time strategy (RTS) gaming, the goal of *Eternal Forces* is to convert the 'left behind' during the apocalypse by evangelising to them, which is achieved by increasing the amount of 'spirit points' an individual has.[22] As may be evident from the above, it is a heavily instructional and confessional approach to game development. The goal of this type of game shares elements in common with the sincere 'Jesus movies' of the film world – *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, rather than *The Life of Brian* - they provide a 'safe space' within the media type, allowing Christians to engage with the medium without encountering potentially problematic content, such as violence, the occult, and generally unwholesome behaviour. It is also related to the somewhat sanitised alternative rock that makes

---

20 Johnston, op. cit. 63

21 ibid. 63

22 Mark Hayse, "Ultima IV: Simulating the Religious Quest" in *Halos* 43-44; Schut, op. cit. 39-40

up the Christian music market; all the technical hallmarks of the medium, but with content rooted firmly in the religious tradition rather than secular trends.

Another way of partaking in games from a Christian standpoint is to alter those games (or types of game) that are already successful in the mainstream. Rather than creating a completely new Christian game, this might mean removing problematic content from mainstream games server – the site Christ Centred Gamer hosts a server for *Team Fortress 2* (a team FPS) which "has the blood disabled and swearing is not tolerated."[23] Alternatively, a developer may draw heavily from an existent game, but adapt the mechanics of their own title to more closely reflect their personal beliefs. For instance, while the *Doom/Quak*e-style dungeon games are hugely popular, some find even the pixelated depictions of gore to be unacceptable. In response to this, one developer created a very similar type of game (named *Catchumen*) that lacked the blood and gore of the original, and inserted religious symbolism.[24] These types of game alterations act as a 'filter' so that Christians acting with caution can experience the same type of gameplay or narrative as with the 'real thing', but without interfering with their own moral codes.

This approach still carries some echoes of Niebuhr's rejectionist model in that, although the cautious critics may engage with potentially problematic content, many do so in order to judge them against their own moral position. They are not accepting these cultural artefacts and technologies on their own terms or looking for them to provide any kind of education or revelation, but as examples to categorise as showing acceptable or unacceptable material. However, as explored in the previous chapter, this attitude is much more closely aligned with the transformative model; here, insertion of Christian moral and social values in the gaming medium produces material expunged of problematic secular content. In its place we instead find clean language, sanitised violence and explicit references to Christian tradition and mythology. However, as with the 'avoidance' position above, cautious approaches are still encapsulated by Campbell's 'reject and resist' definition. *Left Behind* shares deep parallels with the Kosher internet example that Campbell gives; in both instances, a fundamentally secular technology (video games or internet) is adapted to address religious concerns about their potential effects and to make them into an acceptable tool for faithful adherents.

While the good intentions here are self-evident, this approach is not necessarily as robust as it may initially appear, and perhaps for surprising reasons. Taking *Eternal Forces* as our first example, there does not seem to be anything fundamentally wrong with playing this rather than a fantasy title involving druids and mages. However, by doing this some scholars consider that

---

[23] "What is Christ Centered Gamer?" *Christ Centered Gamer*

[24] Matthew Davis "Christian Purge video game demons" *BBC News*

players are missing out on a wealth of theological education. In contrasting the fantasy RPG *Ultima IV* with *Eternal Forces*, Mark Hayse brings out the essential problem facing those who attempt to create games in a solely Christian fashion.

In *Ultima IV* the aim is to achieve full development of a selection of virtues (such as honesty and justice) by earning (and losing) points attributed secretly to various actions available whilst playing the game[25] - Hayse describes it as "a game about ethical choices and their consequences."[26] For Hayse, the gameplay of *Ultima IV* brings out questions such as "What is the right thing to do when I am attacked by others?" and "Are there certain tools that I should not employ in the service of virtue?"[27] - it never asks these outright, but full engagement with the game means that they arise naturally for the player. It is an inherent requirement of the game to grapple with such vital moral questions that leads Hayse to state that the concepts behind *Ultima IV* "can transform video gameplay from mere puzzle solving into a reflection of God's unfolding work of salvation history in Christ."[28]

However, while Hayse evidently considers that there is plenty of room in the gaming world to contain genuine religious and theological moral education, this is not his view of *Eternal Forces*. Hayse notes that in all material ways (graphics quality, sound, technical complexity) *Eternal Forces* is far superior to *Ultima IV,* but considers that it ultimately "reflects a much weaker religious educational curriculum."[29] Hayse's concern about the educational value of *Eternal Forces* stems from its principle mechanic of spirit points – for Hayes, it is so clear that praying and evangelising increase spirit points that players

> never need to wonder, "What are we supposed to do now? How are we supposed to treat others? What do we need to do in order to practice virtue? What is the nature of right and wrong?"[30]

and instead only need to keep score. Contrasted with what Hayse terms the 'unfolding revelation'[31] of *Ultima IV*'s requirement for players to consider deeply which virtues their actions

[25] Hayse op. cit. 36-7

[26] ibid. 38

[27] ibid. 39

[28] ibid. 36

[29] ibid. 43

[30] ibid. 44

[31] ibid. 44

will affect, *Eternal Forces* seems lacking in mystery and "serves only as a thinly wallpapered statistical system in which moral practice is vulgarized."[32]

Whether this is perceived as a fundamental flaw depends very much on the purpose given to the game. If intended as 'neutral' replacement for more problematic content, rather than as a teaching tool, then the hollow theology of its mechanics is of no concern. However, that rings rather false for a game that takes so much care to insert ideologies into game mechanics. It is clear that *Eternal Forces* is intended to be at the very least a platform for educating Christian children in a 'fun' way, if not for active evangelism. Therefore, its content has a purpose beyond the mere replacement of corruptive secular entertainment and should be considered in this context.

Hayse is not the only one concerned by the mechanics of *Eternal Forces* – Schut too considers that the point system fails to deal adequately with the nuances of spiritual behaviour. He asserts that

> Faith, in this game, becomes a matter of earning or losing points. It suggests that formulaic actions and behaviours can positively or negatively affect my faith. In short, spirituality and spiritual actions become technology in this video game – a far cry from a Christian faith that is built on a relationship with a living God[33]

While Hayse has doubts over the usefulness of *Eternal Forces* as an educational tool because of the lack of engaging thought required, Schut's concerns have far greater implications for this type of religious game, particularly in light of its clear intention to teach. The presentation of Christian spiritual behaviour in this game is essentially reduced to a means by which the end (salvation) can be reached, rather than as a way of having a relationship with God in the present. The actions become meaningless – if the context of the game story changed they could be replaced by anything else and the mechanic would still work. Rather than being a way for believers to approach the gaming world successfully, *Eternal Forces* risks being just as poor an influence as the games it seeks to replace because it undermines the gravity of what it means to be a Christian.

But what of those Christian games that are an adaptation of successful mainstream titles? Schut also remains unconvinced about these. He provides a reason for the caution (and avoidance) practised by some believers when he states that "Some Christians, when confronted with a filthy world, want to pull back or force clean it. Don't touch video games because they're of the devil, or, if we *must* go there, purify out all the sex, drugs, and laser guns."[34] It is easy to see why games like *Eternal Forces* and *Catchumen* exist when some people feel this way about elements of

[32] ibid. 44

[33] Schut op. cit. 40

[34] ibid. 10

popular culture. However, Schut thinks that this attitude is wrong, and fundamentally at odds with the realities of faith.

First, taking this attitude assumes that "we can somehow escape what's wrong with the world, that we can go somewhere or do something that isn't tainted with sin,"[35] whereas "The narrative of the Bible and the Christian tradition argues that *everything* is partly messed up... it's all corrupted to some degree."[36] We could try to wash blood and gore out of video games, but that won't stop it being in the world. Arguably, it could impede us from being able to deal with it when we encounter it for real, or from being able to understand the motivations and impulses that lead to violence and tragedy. Moreover, Schut's belief is that Christ sees the bad things within us as the problem, rather than the influences from outside, asserting that "People can surround themselves with *Dora the Explorer* (or better yet, *VeggieTales*) and still be rotten misanthropes."[37] Playing *Eternal Forces* rather than *Call of Duty* no more guarantees that you will be any less selfish or unkind, than playing *Resident Evil* inherently makes you less loving or generous.

Second, Schut doubts that the explicitly Christian content has much value. Considering other forms of media containing narratives or elements considered 'good' (such as films and books), he notes that "the stuff that makes it good usually has nothing to do with number of explicit references to Jesus."[38] It is not just the sanitizing of games that misses the point of their content, but that replacing gore with gospel does little to further the quality of the games itself (and therefore its potential impact). The fallacy here is to assume that there is a binary good/bad nature in the content of video games, and that they either contain 'evil' and are therefore un-Christian, or are of the type outlined in this section and therefore Christian. Rather, Schut argues for a more nuanced look at what *message* a game is giving out and whether references to Christ are sufficient to make a game 'good' – something that can't be considered when being so cautious as to disregard games for their expected content.

Schut's rationale for dismissing *Eternal Forces* as a piece of failed theology (on the grounds that we need to recognise and engage with the flawed nature of man) is redolent of Niebuhr's dualist 'Paradox' model, which holds that culture is separate from faith but must be experienced as part of life. When assessing media in this way, it is important to accept it on its own terms and in its

[35] ibid. 10-11

[36] ibid. 11

[37] ibid. 11

[38] ibid. 11

own context, before considering what theological value it might hold. While not present in a cautious approach, this is a hallmark of the next type of response.

Dialogue

This is the turning point in Johnston's spectrum, where viewers no longer start from their own moral position but see the movie "on its own terms before entering into theological dialogue with it."[39] Having done this, the viewer is then free (or perhaps obligated) to look for Christian elements, such as Christ-figures or theological narratives, and consider how theology can enrich the film-going experience by revealing deeper layers in the movie. In his previous edition of *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston explains that John Cooper and Carl Skrade

> recognize that it is insufficient and perhaps dishonest simply to use a movie to make a point or illustrate a theological truth. Viewers must let the movie work its 'charm' on them, enlighten them, disturb them. Only then can it have a chance to deepen their understanding of reality[40]

For critics like Cooper and Skrade (and Johnston himself), film is a medium that requires openness to the way in which it functions. Movies are designed to affect their watchers in specific ways, and if audiences see them whilst being pre-emptively morally defensive then how can they successfully consider their value?

To put theology and games in dialogue successfully, it is important for gamers to approach the game as it is, within the medium and without pre-judging the content. Through doing this, even a violent and ostensibly morally problematic game can convey important messages about theology or practical belief. Similarly, a theological reflection on the game itself can reveal different understandings than a superficial consideration of it otherwise would have. A key example of this can be found in *Bioshock*; we have already considered the role of determinism within the game in relation to the character of Atlas, we can examine further how the game itself can first inform theology, and then how theology can be used to gain a deeper insight into the gameworld the characters inhabit.

Kevin Newgren sees the game as a potential way of experiencing the difficulties around concepts of free will, having first experienced the game for itself.[41] As previously mentioned, for much of the early game the player believes themselves to be a free agent – while they are subject to the usual constraints of an only slightly divergent narrative, their choice to kill or save specific characters makes a difference to the in-game performance. However, it is later revealed that all

[39] Johnston, op. cit. 64

[40] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality 1st ed*. 52

[41] Newgren op. cit. 144

the commands given by the game that told the player how to proceed with the game were prefaced by the phrase “would you kindly,” which the player's character (Jack) had been trained to obey automatically. What had sounded like suggestions and helpful advice for how to proceed had actually been an irresistible command that could not be disobeyed; without knowing it, the player’s actions had been more tightly controlled than they would have supposed. We are so used the idea of games telling us what to do that it never seemed odd, until *Bioshock* revealed the manipulation. As Newgren puts it “despite the freedom you appeared to have in solving puzzles, the goals were chosen for you, and you had no choice but to obey them or stand staring at the wall.”[42]

Linda Zagzebski describes the basic premise of theological determinism thus: “if it is impossible for [an omniscient] God’s belief about a future human act to be false, it seems to be impossible for that person to do otherwise. How, then, can her act be free?”[43] That is, if God is understood to know everything with infallibility and believe that each human will take specific actions in future, then these actions must occur, or God would have been mistaken (undermining omniscience). In such a circumstance, where a specific action logically must be taken, this suggests that free will cannot exist and all actions are predetermined. One question raised in this paradox is whether we have moral responsibility for our actions, if we have no choice to do otherwise.[44] In exploring counter-arguments to this principle Zagzebski provides an illustration of an instance where someone may or may not do something freely: in this case, a neurosurgeon who wants someone dead plants a device in a third party’s brain that will allow them to take over this party’s actions. The third party also hates the person that the neurosurgeon wants dead, and will have the opportunity to kill him. They may choose to kill the person of their own volition; if not, the device will be activated, and the neurosurgeon will commit the murder through the third party. Zagzebski’s aim is to demonstrate that even where we have no practical choice to take an action (the third party would have had to commit murder regardless of their personal intention) we may still have moral responsibility.[45]

This problem and the illustrations used to explore it are complex and somewhat convoluted. However, Zagzebski’s counter-example bears strong similarities to the player’s experience in *Bioshock* - the player may be forced to take certain actions because it is a requirement to proceed in the game, but they may have intended to take those actions anyway and made those choices

[42] ibid. 144

[43] Linda Zagzebski, "Foreknowledge and Human Freedom," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Taliaferro, Draper, and Quinn 474

[44] ibid. 475

[45] ibid. 476-7

themselves. What *Bioshock* provides here is a way of approaching the complex subject of determinism in an interactive manner, without the player being aware until the character makes his discovery. Although the player would have been aware, more broadly, of the necessity for them to follow the guidance to progress in the game (as this is standard for most FPS games), they would not have made the explicit link between the inevitability of the story for them as the *player* and the inability of the *character* to act any differently. In any story we can think about the narrative possibilities if the main character had resisted the key plot points or done something totally unexpected that shifted the paradigm; in *Bioshock*, we realise that this would be fruitless because Jack could never have acted any other way. Other paths were physically possible but, like the narrative boundaries given to the players that control him, his story is set in a single direction with only the fine detail available for change. As a result, the revelation of Jack's programming is a genuinely shocking moment in the game, and one that will cause players to pause and consider their own freedoms of choice.

In order for the game to make this point successfully, gamers need to approach it on its own terms; to apply Johnston's above point directly, they must allow the game to "work its 'charm' on them."[46] The understanding of determinism that *Bioshock* reveals is only possible if it is played for itself first – it is pointless to play the game purely to experience the character's discovery of his pre-determined journey, as if you have this intention you already know what will happen and there is no value to be gained. By playing the game as intended, gamers are provided with a moment that can help them to understand the nuances of a complex concept within theology.

This is further enhanced when, moving beyond Newgren's general point about determinism, we consider a more specific type. In relation to Martin Luther, Albrecht Beutel writes that he

> drew a line of categorical distinction: With respect to its relationship to God, the human will is totally bound. On the other hand, with respect to its dealing with worldly things, freedom of choice belongs to humans.[47]

Placing this approach in the context of *Bioshock* helps is to understand more about the role that player choice has in games of this type. If we understand Atlas, in this case, to occupy the position of God in Luther's assertion, and the player's character to be representative of humanity, we understand that the existence of choice may be a dual-natured concept. Rather than define games as having 'choice' or 'no choice', we might instead be clear that players can have a choice in the 'worldly things' that are unimportant to the eventual goal of the game (such as

[46] Johnston, 2nd ed. 52

[47] Albrecht Beutel, "Luther's Life," trans. Katharina Gustavs, in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. McKim 15

participation on side missions), much as they are fundamentally unimportant to the spiritual goal of religious fulfilment. However, the player has no choice when it comes to their relationship and dependence on Atlas to help them progress toward their goal. Strikingly, in relation to Luther Markus Wriedt states "The loss of free will is a consequence of the fall of humanity;"[48] below, we discuss the impact and inevitability of the downfall of Rapture in more depth, but as far as the game is concerned there would be no need for Atlas' control of Jack if the city (which is considered by its founders to be the pinnacle of civilization) had not fallen. If this event had not occurred, Jack would not have been effectively stripped of his free will in relation to Atlas' plans. Reflecting on this aspect of how *Bioshock* treats player choice in the context of its specific narrative can encourage the player to consider how the destruction of Rapture could have been avoided and, therefore, highlights deeper aspects of the game narrative than may otherwise have been immediately apparent.

Dialogue, however, is a two-way process, so how can theology help us to understand the events unfolding in *Bioshock*'s city of Rapture? Rapture is an underwater city hidden in the Atlantic, built in the first half of the 20th century by Andrew Ryan; its purpose was to be a place where every citizen was free to pursue their own interests and make a virtue of selfishness. Unconstrained by what Ryan calls 'petty morality', the scientists of Rapture discover a way to harvest genetic material (named ADAM) from a species of sea slug, which can be synthesised into a supporting agent called EVE. Together, these substances allow the denizens of Rapture to rewrite their genetic code – initially this provided powers such as telekinesis, but overdosing on the two substances caused mutations of both body and mind. By the time the player's character, Jack, makes it to Rapture, the city has suffered a catastrophic civil war, leaving only the warped addicts ('Splicers') roaming the underwater streets. It is revealed that Jack was always intended to come to Rapture as its saviour and that his final task is to bring peace to Rapture by killing Ryan.

The story is well-developed and certainly more than superficial, but if we look at it through the lens of theology it deepens and highlights the tragedy of the city's downfall**.** The naming of the substances as ADAM and EVE is somewhat unsubtle and was clearly no accident, so what can we make of this nod to the first humans? In the story of Rapture's history, it is abundantly clear that the use of ADAM and EVE brought about the downfall of a place that was intended to be a paradise. They were not solely responsible – as Newgren notes, the citizens of Rapture arrived expecting to be royalty but instead found

> everyone looking out for their own self-interest to the detriment of the community, those who found themselves relegated to menial work felt deep

[48] Markus Wriedt, Luther's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion* 111

> bitterness. When everyone looked first to their own rational interests, the community of Rapture experienced unrest and constant revolution.[49]

In other words, Rapture was on its way down anyway, but ADAM and EVE were catalysts that made things worse. To those looking to further themselves physically and mentally, to gain abilities that humans did not naturally possess, these substances brought corruption, war and death.

This has some clear parallels with the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which grasping for knowledge beyond human understanding led to ejection from paradise. These parallels go beyond the names given to the gene modifying chemicals synthesised in Rapture, but those names act as a signpost to tell the player where they might find further answers in the story of *Bioshock*. Adam and Eve caused paradise of Eden to fall, and ADAM and EVE exacerbated the already huge civil issues within the supposed paradise of Rapture. More than this, though, the Adam and Eve story helps the player to understand the inescapable nature of Rapture's fall. If we consider the disobedience of Adam and Eve to be an inevitability, an event that, however damaging and seemingly dreadful, was necessary for the world to contain the freedom of moral choice (whether understood symbolically or literally) as did Irenaeus[50], we can compare this with the fate of Rapture. By recognising the parallels with this story, players of *Bioshock* can come to see that the downfall of Rapture was necessary, given the moral freedoms that it played with – it speaks of not being able to have a utopia if citizens are given the 'wrong kind' of moral choice. Eden was doomed because humans needed the freedom of moral choice to develop what Hick terms "the perfection that represents the fulfilment of God's good purpose for him"[51]; Rapture's downfall was written because it considered that obeying morality was an impediment to human development. Moral freedom, specifically the ability to make the wrong choice, is a necessary part of being human, but so too is the exercise of that morality to which the citizens of Rapture had no regard - to go too far in either direction is damaging, and so a balance must be sought. This layer of *Bioshock*'s narrative, which is obscure and inaccessible without considering theology, is put into so much sharper focus when the two are in dialogue. Here, as suggested by Browning, we see theology and popular culture providing their own kinds of answers to the questions raised by the other with the effect being, in Newgren's view

> An interesting contribution to the old theological and philosophical debate regarding people's ability to make choices on their own, measured against being

[49] Newgren op. cit. 142

[50] In order to provide the right context for humanity to learn empathy and compassion
John Hick *Evil and the God of Love 1985 reissue* 214-215

[51] Hick 215

> victims of circumstance or the will of God. This is the power of the *Bioshock* mono-myth embedded within an interactive experience.[52]

When we put this approach in conversation with Niebuhr's typology, as expected from Schut's objection to cautious criticism, we see a form of the Paradox model. For Johnston's dialogue to function as intended, media must be allowed to speak on its own terms without first being judged against religious standards. This allows theology to examine a product of the world as it is, even if that product is violent, blasphemous or corrupt. Only then can media and theology raise and answer questions for each other. This requires a recognition of the dual nature of faith and culture; both co-existing, but occupying separate areas of human experience and, therefore, able to offer up suggestions to answer those questions that affect existence more holistically.

This recognition of the dualist model in a dialogic approach helps to shed further light on why Campbell's 'accept and appropriate' category falls more completely within the Paradox model than others. The 'acceptance' category recognises the place that media has in furthering faith activities, while not being intrinsically capable of performing religious functions; there is no argument that the printing technology used to distribute leaflets is, in itself, playing a role in any conversion experiences as a result of reading that material. Rather, the technology is enabling such experiences to take place when used to create something that *does* have its own religious function. Seen under the light of the Paradox model, the dialogue approach allows theology and media (in this case, games) to speak to each other as twin aspects of human existence in order to understand more about each, but without the expectation that it will lead to an encounter with God as secular culture does not necessarily share the fundamental qualities necessary to do so. Here, film and video games provide a means by which religion and media can converse to find deeper understanding, often by illustrating important aspects of these conversations, but they do not have an intrinsic religious function.

Appropriation

Going onwards, the approaches on this end of the spectrum see films as things that can aid theology and belief, rather than potentially hinder morality. Those who appropriate film use movies to teach others and themselves about theological and moral matters, trusting that the medium can convey a message that might otherwise be hard to construe. Contrary to what might immediately come to mind when one considers using film to support belief, proponents of the viewpoint consider that it is not necessary for films to contain explicit religious references. Johnston asserts that "Those theologians who would seek to appropriate a movie's vision of life recognize that movies can offer insight to the viewer about the nature of the human. There is

[52] Newgren op. cit. 144

something new that a movie can provide a Christian."[53] Thus, the message of the film should come first, so its impact and influence can more readily be understood.

When describing what constitutes an attitude of 'appropriation', Johnston notes that "movies can tease out of their viewers greater possibilities for being human."[54] The same is true for video games and theological approaches, in that those who seek to appropriate games do so because they consider that games are able to speak to people in a way the other media perhaps cannot, and use this media for their own purposes. One such example of this approach is an organisation called Gamechurch who are using video games for evangelism. The overarching concept of Gamechurch is not to be explicitly evangelistic – it bills itself as a site for gamers, not Christian-gamers, and stresses that it won't be shoehorning Jesus into every game review.[55] What it does is to frame games in a way that makes them a potential learning tool for Christian thought, and to provide an avenue to reach out to people who might otherwise have no connection with Christianity.

One of the most Jesus-centric articles on Gamechurch (which is still framed in a casual and somewhat irreverent way) is 'Ten 2013 Games That Jesus Loves (and Why)."[56] It might seem surprising for the site to label it as games 'that Jesus loves', and not 'that Jesus *might* love', but Gamechurch comes at this concept with the belief that

> Jesus is totally cool with games and that maybe, given the opportunity to play them, he would actually enjoy them. In that spirit, we've come up with a list of ten games Jesus would genuinely love. Yes, we're speculating here, but we think it's an informed kind of speculation.[57]

It is already clear from this that Gamechurch not only consider gaming an acceptable past-time for Christians, but that it can be a way to be closer to God by carefully considering which games Jesus might find value in Himself. The article continues "These aren't just any games. More than merely "fun," they resonate with the life, message or values of Jesus himself. We think that's worth celebrating,"[58] and it is here that we really get a sense of how Gamechurch is taking a stance of appropriation of the medium – the games are not merely entertainment, they are a way

[53] Johnston, op. cit. 73

[54] ibid. 70

[55] Drew Dixon "A Call For Writers: What GameChurch.com Is and Isn't" *Gamechurch*

[56] "Ten 2013 Games that Jesus Loves (And Why)" *Gamechurch*

[57] op. cit.

[58] op. cit.

of relating key Christian values without necessarily making any reference to overtly religious content or themes.

One of the games on this list is *Papers, Please* – a deliberately low-fi simulation of a passport checking desk in a post-war communist country.[59] Gamechurch note that the player is required to check whether prospective entrants have the right documentation to enter, or whether they must be turned away. As the games goes on, you face making decisions about whether to let people through without documentation (because they bring you a heart-rending story) and face loss of income, or whether to stick to the rules before you.[60] For the Gamechurch writers, *Papers, Please* is ultimately a game that speaks about humanity and forces players to engage with what this means, asserting that

> Hope is hard to come by in Arstotzka, but just as Jesus' mission on Earth was to bring a message of hope to a people who had none, *Papers, Please* teaches us that we find our humanity through our willingness to hope and to bring hope to others in the midst of desperation, regardless of how absurd that may seem.[61]

Coming to this conclusion about the nature of humanity, hope and desperation is a challenging thought process; for Gamechurch, the medium of video games provides a more accessible path and provides structured support for the type of thinking needed to reach those conclusions. It is the interactivity and decision-making required of the player in *Papers, Please* that makes it powerful, something that would not (and, potentially, could not) be as emphatic in other media because in film and literature all we can do is watch as someone else makes decisions about people's lives. Gamechurch recognise this power, and are pointing it out to gamers.

The other way that Gamechurch appropriates the medium is to use it not just as a tool for learning, but for introducing people to the Christian life. At events they attend, Gamechurch give out copies of 'Jesus For The Win' – a booklet about Christianity, which also contains the Gospel of John. Within this are examples of conversions. One of these is about a teenager, who started to spend time at the Gamechurch 'Armory' (a centre where people pay to play video games). Because he didn't have much spare money, he instead learned Bible verses for gaming credits, and says that "It wasn't long before I started to see that the verses actually applied to my life and the situations I was facing."[62] Gamechurch are using the medium itself as a way to help people feel comfortable with approaching religion and, as well as using gameplay facilities to reach out to non-Christians, they use the language of games to help contextualise belief and show its

[59] "Papers, Please" *Steam*

[60] Gamechurch op. cit.

[61] ibid.

[62] "Jesus For The Win" *Gamechurch* 64-5

compatibility with gamers' lives and hobbies. In a section of 'Jesus For The Win' (the title itself being a play on gaming lexicon) about the reason for Christ's death, Gamechurch explain

> For sure, God could've stopped the stream of failure and come down like a Level 70 Prestige in Modern Warfare, dropped a tactical nuke and be done with the whole thing... Instead He sends His son... And Satan took the bait. It was sort of like sending a Level 20 Rogue into an Alliance camp. It was completely nuts.[63]

Gamechurch appropriate not just the products of the medium (the stories and actions of the games themselves), but also the culture and approach of gaming itself to reach out to others.

However, not everyone is satisfied with the way that Gamechurch has appropriated the medium of gaming. While Schut lauds "Gamechurch's intention to reach out to the gaming community" and believes that "They are right to speak the language of gamers, just as missionaries to any culture,"[64] elements of their approach leave him feeling uncomfortable. For example, 'Jesus For The Win' opens with a section entitled 'How we've screwed it all up', which is not about the presence of sin, but about how 'most' Christians have got it wrong. It contains passages such as "We have taken a very clear and concise book, the Bible, and use it out of context and force it down the throats of all who'll listen and sometimes to those that won't" and "It's a tragedy that we feel the need to force, judge, cut and manipulate people."[65] While Schut admires their intentions, he is also "not sure that this justifies starting their evangelistic booklet with a fervent critique of empty religiosity... honestly, it feels kind of arrogant."[66] Nonetheless, Schut's concerns clearly relate only to part of Gamechurch's approach, as he is a contributing writer for the site.[67]

For Schut, this Gamechurch dilemma exemplifies the dilemma of Christians taking part in popular culture, asking "how can we be *in* the world but not *of* the world? How can we play video games, hang out in game culture, make video games, and yet not lose what makes us faithfully distinct as God's children?"[68] This is a key issue with the concept of theological appropriation of this (or any) medium for those like Schut – to use the medium fully you must see it on its own terms and believe that it has a role to play within belief. However, engaging in pop culture like this brings the danger of being too involved with the more unappetising worldly aspects of it, and no longer being able to set oneself apart. We noted above that Schut's criticism of *Left Behind* indicated an

[63] ibid. 102

[64] Schut, op. cit. 171

[65] Gamechurch op. cit. 5

[66] Schut, op. cit. 172

[67] Schut "Alone Together: No Man's Sky" *Gamechurch*

[68] Schut op. cit. 173

attitude well-aligned with Niebuhr's dualist model, and this concern to see games located as 'of the world' further underlines this indication.

Some aspects of Gamechurch's work perhaps fit more comfortably in the 'dialogue' approach; their actual review of *Papers, Please* shows that they often put games in dialogue with Christian ideals and use them to find lessons and further their understanding of human nature. However, their broader utilisation of gaming culture and the video game medium speaks more to Niebuhr's synthesist (Christ Above Culture) model. Gamechurch aim to use the gaming subculture as a means by which to support Christian faith, including as a tool for evangelism and a platform on which to grow the faith of those who are already Christians. This way of using secular culture as a means to reach God, whether by Gamechurch or by the films that celebrate humanity, recognises the value of secular culture in supporting religion. This is also echoed in Campbell's 'reconfigure and innovate' category, to some extent. Building a church in *Second Life* is very redolent of Schut's call to 'plant love' in *World of Warcraft*; it seeks to reach people where they are and to use secular technology as a tool for developing Christian faith directly.

Divine Encounter

This is the point on Johnston's spectrum that treats film not as something to be avoided, and not even a medium merely capable of relaying a message, but as a way in which the viewer can encounter God. Of this concept, Johnston writes that "Movies have, at times, a sacramental capacity to provide the viewer an experience of transcendence."[69] It is not that films are in themselves mystical or otherworldly, but they can present as accessible experiences that other media would not readily be able to portray. In this way, critics taking this approach see film as a way to be closer to concepts of God than with other media. This part of Johnston's typology illustrates how it is not necessarily a spectrum of opposite positions, where it would be impossible for those occupying an approach at one end to countenance an idea at the other, but something broader and more flexible. For instance, those practicing extreme caution (even bordering on avoidance) are not precluded from experiencing a divine encounter through film. A work such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* may, for some viewers, shed light on the person of Jesus in such a way as to encounter God, despite suspicion and rejection of secular film.

Having considered the role of video games as religious educational tools, we must finally turn to the question of whether these games can fulfil a greater function that comes closer to worship or religious experience than simply teaching. Given that there is still a certain amount of controversy

[69] Johnston, op. cit. 74

about gaming as a past-time compatible with Christian life[70], it is uncommon to find those who suggest that gaming may go beyond its currently (contested) status as a potential tool for teaching and evangelism. However, this is a view that is starting to come forward. In his consideration of the appeal of the Wii console, Kutter Callaway identifies elements of gameplay that he suggests may be able to fulfil a worship function in the future.

Callaway begins by noting that the huge popularity of the Wii console suggests that "contemporary persons are in fact seeking a particular type of experience – an experience that they perceive, at least initially and in some manner, that the Wii provides."[71] Callaway recognises that there are some who remain suspicious of the worldly urge to play games, but says

> rather than decrying the contemporary urge to find meaning in the decidedly embodied experience offered by gaming consoles such as the Wii, we might best understand this impulse by locating it within a larger theological framework, conceiving of it in terms of the energizing presence of God's Spirit in the world... we are not simply embodied; Wii are inspirited.[72]

For Callaway, the desire to engage with the tiny white Wii machine isn't necessarily an example of people shirking religion for worldly pursuits, but of people seeking satisfaction in ways that are perhaps hard for them to quantify.

In unpacking the way the system works and the player feedback to its constituent elements, Callaway asserts that the success of the Wii and the experience being sought hinge on the provision of three kinds of satisfaction: bodily, holistic, and emotional.[73] First, he notes that the famous Wii interface of motion-activated controllers insist upon the player moving more than just their thumbs, leading him to describe it as "a full embodied engagement with the virtual world."[74] When we play Wii games, we become more involved than with any other type of video game because we have to match our movements to those of the character or object that we are trying to control. This provides a level of immersion that other platforms struggle to obtain. Second, this movement is not just physical exertion but is matched with the need to solve a puzzle or keep in time with a command. Callaway asserts that the way in which the Wii combines physical activity with the cognitive stimulation inherent in its status as a gaming console as an "experience which

[70] Focus on the Family, for instance, recommend 'safeguarding' measures for gameplay hobbies, raising concerns about the medium itself let alone the content.

Vicki Caruana, Chris Caruana, and Olivia Bruner "Safeguards for Video Gameplay" *Focus on the Family*

[71] Kutter Callaway, "We are Inspirited" in *Halos*, 88

[72] ibid. 76

[73] ibid. 83

[74] ibid. 81

firmly locates the mind within the body."[75] Uniting these two facets of human action and experience, the console provides a holistic way of playing, which we might consider to be akin to the role play or 'tag' games of children. Third, Callaway looks toward the casual and forgiving nature of many Wii games, alongside the provision of titles from retro consoles, to determine that the Wii "provides an occasion in which players are engaged affectively" with "deeply felt passions and desires."[76] These are not games that intimidate new players or exclude those with little skill; they provide opportunities for collaborative play with a wide range of people, such as inter-generational family play experiences. As well as this feeling of community, the pleasure of nostalgia from the availability of older games taps into our need for emotional satisfaction and engages us through reinvigorating pleasant memories of favourite games. Callaway asserts that theology should look to address these areas that people are clearly searching for, noting that these are themes which "perhaps not surprisingly, the Christian tradition appears to be either ill-equipped to address or simply unwilling to engage."[77]

Thus far, Callaway appears to be taking an approach more akin to dialogue or appropriation than suggesting a way for divine encounter. After all, he is suggesting that game and theology can inform each other, and that games can go further than this and provide ways to support and improve theological understanding of the human need for certain experiences. However, having discussed these issues, Callaway suggests that this leaves room to push beyond appropriation, asking

> Are we to consider the essentially secular devotional practice of video gaming as a mere imitation or precursor to an alternative and intrinsically more satisfying practice – one that assumes the form of traditional Christian worship? Or, in light of our consideration of the work of the Spirit in creation, might we consider these practices as potentially (trans)formative acts of worship that are simply in need of a new orientation – one that finds all our somatic, holistic and affective desires ultimately fulfilled in God's "in-Spirit-ing" presence?[78]

Essentially, Callaway makes space for us to consider that it may be possible for video games to function as a form of worship that succeeds in satisfying our somatic, holistic and affective needs, and that perhaps all that is required is to play or create video games with theological drives in mind, with eyes open to the possibility that they might provide further questions or even suggest answers. In light of our earlier exploration of *Eternal Forces* and the pitfalls of 'Christian' gaming, this would need to be carefully done, but it may be that through playing titles such as *Ultima IV*

[75] ibid. 82

[76] ibid. 83

[77] ibid. 83

[78] ibid. 88

gamers are already edging towards a form of play that leads them closer to God. Callaway, however, stops short of stating that this is a definite consideration for the future of theology and games. Reflecting on the suggestions above, he states that he "would certainly argue the former" but is "unable to reject the latter out of hand" because "the construction and development of these cultural practices reflects, not a longing for a particular ritual form, but a fundamental yearning for the presence of God."[79] Nonetheless, there is the suggestion that this is a possibility.

However, there are some considerations that need to be made about whether this suggestion can be compatible with Christian life. Firstly, Callaway recognises that he has used a very specific example – the Wii is a unique console, and was really the first of its kind. It is therefore hard for us to know whether conclusions about gaming as a whole can be inferred from those drawn from the experience of the Wii. Is it therefore the case that gaming could be legitimate form of worship, or is this solely the preserve of motion-dependent, family-friendly consoles like the Wii? Callaway's concern with the console-specific nature of this consideration is furthered when he states that, because of the unique nature of the Wii, it may soon be the case that it has been "shown to be a passé blip in the history of video gaming."[80] As such, while Callaway's work demonstrates a potential space for this style of thinking, there is a lot more work needed to determine whether it pans out for the whole gaming world.

Nonetheless, gaming technology moves quickly and since Callaway wrote on this subject we have already seen the next-generation version of the Wii (the Wii U), which continues to build on 'whole body' gameplay and collaborative exploration of its predecessor. More than this, we are just now starting to see the popular uptake of virtual reality technology - headsets that fully immerse a player in a gameworld, allowing them to move around and interact directly with objects and characters rather than filter that experience through a fixed screen. This is a step-change in players' experience of games, allowing ever deeper engagement with other worlds and, therefore, allowing further room for the possibility of devotional practice. For instance, the game *Tilt Brush* provides a space in which players can create three-dimensional paintings in light, filling the space around them with drawings that float in mid-air. In this act of virtual creation, some players might find the opportunity for completely embodied spiritual reflection. Nonetheless, such technology is still too new to know whether it will establish itself firmly and continue to be part of the gaming landscape or whether it is a passing fad.

Callaway's second concern has already been touched on above, but requires more consideration here. He wonders if the satisfaction felt by playing the Wii is a "mere imitation or precursor to an

[79] ibid. 88

[80] ibid. 88

alternative and intrinsically more satisfying practice – one that assumes the form of traditional Christian worship"[81] and while he won't dismiss the potential for games to be more than this, it is this interpretation that he is more convinced about. What he raises is the danger that we misunderstand what video games are doing – perhaps rather than becoming a way to get close to God, they are in fact simply borrowing techniques from and mirroring the ways that Christians already try to do this. There is potential to commit the fallacy of thinking that games are integrating with theological experiences, when in actuality they are appropriating religious behaviours for themselves. An urge to play these games might still point to a need for religion to be engaging on a somatic, holistic and affecting level, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the games themselves will ever be able to serve that purpose within theology or practical faith.

As with the appropriation attitude, seeking divine encounter in video games share some aspects in common with Niebuhr's synthesist model. It is still an approach that uses secular media as a platform to reach God, and to some extent appears to recognise that culture and religion are separate aspects of human experience. However, it also has the potential to blur these lines and to make video games a part of religious practice. If Callaway's view is borne out - that some people start to use games to create legitimate forms of worship - then there is the possibility that this would start to raise culture up and, in so doing, identify Christ as a part of it and occupy the culturalist 'Christ Of Culture' attitude. The adoption of technology to enable worship is already encompassed in Campbell's innovation category; by establishing a church in *Second Life*, Christians are not just using the platform to reach people or to facilitate their spiritual development, but are providing a virtual space in which worship can take place. However, the examples she gives stop short of allowing technology to provide the religious encounter - for her, they remain as tools to support that experience, rather than providing it in themselves. As such, and as explored in the first chapter, this aspect of Campbell's typology does not cover the culturalist approach that Niebuhr identifies, although it does not dismiss it.

Furthering the approach

This chapter posed the question of whether a methodology intended and built for examining film could be put to work for video games, both in terms of narrative structure and in reference to the unique aspects that set games apart from other media. What is apparent from this exercise is that the same wide range of responses can be found for both; from those who oppose the medium or are wary about its appropriateness for some aspects of theology, to those who see a role for media in encountering God. There is less to say about video games at this latter end of the spectrum, but that speaks to the nascency of the platform and a reluctance to ascribe serious

[81] ibid. 88

qualities to a medium that is still novel. As Callaway suggests, this may well change as technology (and our comfort with it) develops.

As made clear in the respective sections, the attitudes of avoidance and caution are theologically unconvincing, both for film and for games. There can be significant challenges in marrying theology with any form of popular culture, but ignoring or underestimating the potential for fruitful dialogue or meaningful contribution is not a constructive approach to take. Nonetheless, there is also the need to recognise the limitations of theological responses to new media; as Callaway notes, while there is the potential for games to facilitate and provide divine encounters, it is too soon in the medium's history to determine whether a space for gaming as a form of worship truly exists.

The above discussion demonstrates the potential for film methodologies to be applied to video games - in each instance, a genuine parallel could be found without over-stretching. Moreover, by using Johnston's spectrum to examine responses to games, new light is shed by sorting them in a meaningful way. It is much clearer to see the caution apparent in *Eternal Forces* (and the potential pitfalls of such an approach) when placed on a spectrum with Gamechurch's assertion that mainstream video games and all their worldly ills can teach the messages of Jesus, and Hayse's contention that theology in a game takes more than a character command labelled 'prayer'. Approaches to games are as nuanced as the medium itself, but the bolder outlines of Johnston's work help us to understand how approaches change and relate to each other, and where the most helpful responses might lie. Applying this typology to a different medium to that for which it was constructed has also helped us to understand more about its links to other ways of categorising approaches to cultural artefacts and strengthened the conclusions drawn in the previous chapter.

From exploring Johnston's typology, we can also locate the type of exploration we intend to continue with, that of analysing the questions that games and theology ask of each other, in the 'dialogue' category. By understanding its place on this continuum, we can recognise the surrounding attitudes and where there could be the potential to expand our considerations outward in future work. For instance, while Gamechurch are primarily concerned with appropriating the game medium for use as an evangelical and spiritual tool, it also uses dialogue with games as a part of this process. Considering this, we can understand the potential for the coming discussion to become part of work surrounding other kinds of theological engagement with games.

Having established that the application of film methodologies is possible and effective, we must go on to consider whether this holds true for other ways of interrogating the media and, if so,

what new understanding we can gain from analysing games more closely. To break this down, we will look at three specific ways in which religious interpretations content might be discovered, followed by an exploration of how we might find opportunities for theological dialogue in broader themes. In the next three chapters we will use another existing framework from film to analyse three specific types of religious content in-depth and consider how far the dialogic model can be taken regarding games. I am going to take examples of three ways in which film and theology have successfully found spaces for dialogue, and apply these approaches to video games. In this way, it can be demonstrated whether theological understanding can result in further insight for players, and whether games themselves can provide new meaning for theological concepts.

The three areas to look at initially will be: the role of scriptural references, the potential for Christ-figures, and the depiction of broader religious themes such as apocalypse. These draw broadly on the three elements chosen by Adele Reinhartz to examine scriptural content in film - plot and character, and themes[82] - adapted to better fit the aims and context of this piece of work. Rather than looking at plot and character as indicators of scriptural references, I will look at scriptural content in general (to determine whether video games are broadly capable of carrying it) and look at characterisation in its own right, before going on to consider wider themes. The first of these three areas is perhaps the most concrete in terms of finding potentially theologically-rich content within new media - the role that scriptural references can play in providing meaning to narrative and in being explored through the text itself. By 'scriptural references' I mean references to specific parts of scripture, rather than just to key narrative themes (such as eschatology or redemption) without an accompanying nod to a particular chapter or verse. I have chosen this as a key area for consideration because the incorporation, particularly when explicit, of scriptural material - or content evocative of such - is potentially one of the most straightforward ways in which dialogue can be opened. Questions of whether a character's speech or a series of events has a biblical parallel are framed on a much more concrete basis than some of the concepts we will go on to consider and, particularly where scripture is directly quoted, almost arise by themselves with no prompting.

Following this, characterisation of Christ-figures continues to provide an almost tangible reference point for dialogue, with discussion centred around the attributes of a specific character. However, it adds a layer of subjectivity to the conversations in a way that explicit scriptural quotations do not; as we shall see, the debate is not just about what the character might be saying in their role as Christ-figure, but whether they even bear this role at all. As such, it draws out a more nuanced and careful opportunity for dialogue. Finally, we broaden this out further to consideration of the

[82] Adele Reinhartz *Scripture on the Silver Screen* 4

background and themes of whole story arcs; whether the overall construct of a game or film can contain religious themes that facilitate mutual questioning between media and theology. This builds further on the subjectivity and interpretation of the Christ-figures analysis, which in turn stands on the foundation of the more concrete references to scripture. Together, these three elements provide a framework for exploring the many potential ways in which video games might contribute to the conversation between theology and popular culture.

4. Radiation and fresh water: use of scripture in video games

In the previous chapter, we explored the potential for methodologies from the field of theology and film to apply to video games, primarily by looking at how successfully Johnston's typology for categorising responses to texts works when used for video games. Having shown that, if the inherent differences between the two media are kept in mind and accounted for, such an approach can be successful and productive, we will move on to more in-depth considerations of the actual content of games. As mentioned at the end of the preceding chapter, the first topic for this exploration will be the use of scripture, specifically the Bible, in films and video games.

There are two core ways in which media can reference the Bible, which are both encompassed in Adele Reinhartz's statement that:

> [films] may show the Bible or parts thereof on the screen; they may quote or allude explicitly to the Bible and/or to specific biblical verses, passages, or stories; and they may use biblical narratives as the paradigms for their own plots and characters.[1]

First, scripture can be referenced directly within the film by being quoted in the context of its narrative, such as having a character recite the appropriate verse or having it displayed visually - for instance, the recitation of Psalm 23 in *Spiderman*[2]. In some instances, there may be a less explicit reference, such as a visual tableau of a specific Biblical event[3], which is nonetheless direct and deliberate. The second way in which Biblical references can figure in film and games is much more oblique, usually comprising a narrative with a clear frame of reference to a specific biblical extract, though it might not contain an actual citation of it. Adele Reinhartz, for example, suggests that *The Lion King* could be understood as a re-telling of the story of Moses through its shared narrative characteristics (including exile and return) rather than any explicit references.[4] The existence of such references is much more subjective and up for interpretation, rather than being clearly placed for the whole audience to see and recognise. This approach therefore has much in common with the analyses in the following two chapters (which deal with characterisation, specifically Christ-figures, and wider themes that have much common ground with theology, particularly apocalypse), which are much broader, and we will therefore necessarily return to this point in due course. Nonetheless, discussion of such references in the context of scripture forms a helpful counterpoint to the overt quotations and paraphrases that characterise the more direct

[1] Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema* 132

[2] Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture* 2

[3] The 2017 *Murder on the Orient Express*, for instance, shows 12 characters arranged along one side of a long table, reminiscent of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*

[4] Reinhartz, op. cit. 2

approach. Looking at both forms, the explicit and the alluded-to, ensures that we can see the full picture of how such references may be deployed and will allow us to consider the degree to which they may occur simultaneously in games, and whether they might both be helpful avenues for dialogue.

In this regard I will be first considering Adele Reinhartz's examination of overt scriptural references in *The Shawshank Redemption.* To provide a fuller picture of the issues with this approach, I will also be including Reinhartz's considerations of where Biblical references might be ill-used within media and infer a meaning which is not there. As a contrasting example, we will be touching upon Erin Runions' examination of *Boys Don't Cry* (included in Aichele and Walsh's edited collection referred to below), where she puts the film in conversation with Ezekiel 16 to uncover new insights for viewer and theologian alike. Unlike *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Boys Don't Cry* does not feature overt references to scripture, but Runions highlights the parallels and points of difference with a specific biblical narrative to uncover deeper meanings in her specific interpretations of both. The nature of these interpretations is something to which we must give thought, particularly as Runions' selection of the scriptural passage to place alongside the film is largely dependent on her view of both.

As well as there being two main ways in which these references can appear there are also two aspects to interpreting the references themselves. George Aichele and Richard Walsh note, in reference to a series of essays on film and scripture, that

> In one way or another - and more or less explicitly - these movies actually "project" biblical texts on to the silver screen. Second... they repeat the Scripture in a highly nuanced way. The movies themselves are not scriptures, but the project Scripture in a "new light," in terms of culture as well as in terms of medium. They "quote" the biblical text, translate it to a different narrative context, and give it the concreteness that cinema always does to written text... The screening of Scripture is an act of translation; like every act of translation, it is profoundly ideological.[5]

First, we can consider the fact of the references itself, whether it is obvious or whether it requires a high degree of interpretation - in doing so we must ask what the reference is and how it fits within the immediate context of the scene or action. For instance, the use of the Sermon on the Mount in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* is a clear reference to scripture, even when told in its now infamous 'blessed are the cheesemakers' form - the context of the film as a whole and the initial direct quotation from the Bible both provide such an indication. However, the aforementioned analogy of *The Lion King* contains no explicit clues in itself, and must be decoded through an

[5] George Aichele and Richard Walsh, "Introduction" in *Screening Scripture* viii

interpretation of its narrative against the story of Moses. Then, we can look at the nuances of the 'projections'; what might the text be telling us in its inherent translation of scripture, and what new ideas emerge through such translation for both text and scripture? As we will explore in this chapter, Reinhartz and Runions both place film and scripture in conversation in order to shed new light on both. Aichele and Walsh illustrate here the potential inherent in the two approaches to scriptural referencing; both explicit and implicit projections allow film to comment on scripture and bring it into conversation with culture. Doing so allows for new meanings or understandings to be unravelled - some of this may be through placing a quote in a new context, thus offering a different lens through which to view it, and some may be through more implicitly presented parallels with biblical stories and events.

Moreover, the presence of a direct scriptural reference might act as a starting point for a wider discussion around related themes. Once a conversation has been started on the basis of a reference to scripture or a close allusion to narrative sequences therein, there is scope to broaden out this dialogue to encompass more general (but nonetheless related) issues. This is something we will explore specifically in relation to the game Fallout 3; the scriptural reference itself, which in this instance is a direct quote from Revelation, will be considered in terms of its specific meaning before we take forward the wider imagery contained within it for consideration more broadly.

Having first analysed both ways of examining dialogue between film and scripture, through Reinhartz and Runions' work, we will use these approaches to interrogate the inclusion of a scriptural reference in the post-apocalyptic world of *Fallout 3* to determine how well such approaches might be applied to video games alongside film. Taking into account the immediate context surrounding the presentation of a verse from Revelation, we will consider what this means for the narrative and what we might learn about the game itself. Taking this further as noted above, we will consider the wider role that water (which is the focus of the imagery in the specific passage quoted) plays in *Fallout 3* and unpick the less explicit scriptural allusions and suggestions in the game. Specifically, we will consider the role that water plays in the game, particularly in relation to the water shortage caused by nuclear war and how this links to current Christian thinking about the global water crisis.

Adele Reinhartz and The Shawshank Redemption

In her introduction to *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, Reinhartz notes that she had struggled to find resources dealing specifically with the use of scripture in film and that she "chose twelve films

that draw explicitly on a variety of biblical texts."[6] Each film is considered over a single chapter, in which a particular methodology is followed; a discussion of the quoted passage and its context, a summary of the film and its themes (as far as is necessary for understanding of the following exploration), and then a section analysing the texts.[7] This approach provides a helpful structure with which to consider the video game example, as it ensures that the texts can be understood in their own contexts and on their own terms as well as being placed together. Reinhartz's work is also a clear example of analysing explicit references to scripture, rather than more subtle allusions or broader themes, and it is therefore a useful tool for helping to construct a way of doing this for video games. To examine the capabilities of and potential for mirroring Reinhartz's approach, we will first look at one key example from her work and consider what elements will be most helpful for our case study. This will be supplemented by particularly salient points made in relation to other films, as well as references to work from others taking a related approach.

The value that Reinhartz sees in undertaking this work is explained as follows:

> [films] often filter their use of the Bible through other media such as art, literature, and music; they use the Bible as a vehicle for expressing the views of the filmmakers and examining issues of importance to contemporary (usually American) society. Perhaps most important, they add depth by implying that the meaning of their stories exceeds or over flows the specific events being portrayed on the screen.[8]

For Reinhartz, scriptural references in film play many roles in developing the story and the characters to whom they are attached. Most notable for our exploration is her assertion that that they help to bring to the fore contemporary issues and underline how the messages of the film are not constrained to the celluloid world; rather, films have something to say about the scriptural references that they include, and these messages should be engaged with.

Reinhartz notes first that "The Bible is prominent in [*The Shawshank Redemption*] - through frequent quotation references and allusions; as a paradigm for plot and for characterization; and as a prop on the screen;"[9] this provides plenty of material for us to consider the role of scripture in film. A large part of Reinhartz's comparison focuses on the more explicit references to scripture within the film, where quotations are said or seen, and it is these which I am going to focus on specifically, rather than any discussion of more paradigmatic elements. This is because the next two chapters, which examine characterisation and wider narrative themes, will address this latter

[6] Reinhartz, op cit. 4

[7] ibid. 4

[8] Ibid. 132

[9] ibid. 132

area in depth; the purpose of this chapter is specifically to consider the role of more explicit references and allusions to scripture.

The first analysis Reinhartz makes is of the Biblical quotations presented explicitly within the films, with her initial example being a verse displayed in the office of the egotistical and corrupt prison warden: "His judgement cometh and that right soon."[10] She suggests that the initial presentation of this verse in the early part of the film infers that the "judgement of the state has already come."[11] However, when shown for a second time shortly before warden's suicide, it indicates instead that the warder has cheated the justice system by putting his own justice upon himself[12]. Here, Reinhartz demonstrates that the shifting context of scriptural references can provide deeper meaning within the film - the first presentation has a straightforward meaning and a sense of satire or flippancy in its appropriateness for display in a warden's office, but the second reveals a deeper meaning and inspires a consideration of what type of 'judgement' is coming for the warden when used as a 'caption' for the presentation of his suicide. Reinhartz specifically mentions that the warden's suicide is his own judgement upon himself, but there are other possibilities - perhaps by killing himself the warden brought the judgement of God in the afterlife closer to him, in which case the quote ceases to be fitting by describing the judgement of the warden as in the first presentation, and instead becomes a comment of the judgement *on* the warden. While not included in the collection to which Aichele and Walsh refer above, this dual stage structure of Reinhartz's exploration - looking first at the more readily-apparent reading of the quotation, then considering subtler interpretations - is nonetheless entirely consistent with the implications of it and speaks to the broad applicability of this style of analysis. Reinhartz's success in examining different layers of meaning within these references indicates that we will be successful when we apply it to games.

Second, Reinhartz considers the exchange between Andy Dufresne and the warden soon after Dufresne's arrival in Shawshank. In this scene, the two characters exchange favourite Bible verses, with Andy choosing "Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh"[13] and the warden "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."[14] Reinhartz notes that, as with the first presentation of

[10] Reinhartz (ibid. 132) notes that this is a paraphrase of Revelation 14:7: "Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters."

[11] ibid. 132-133

[12] ibid. 133

[13] Mark 13:35 cited in Reinhartz, op cit. 133

[14] John 8:12 cited in Reinhartz, op cit. 133

the Revelation paraphrase, these references serve to describe how the characters see each other or themselves (such as Dufresne acknowledging the warder as his 'master').[15] However, Reinhartz also identifies a second layer of meaning within this conversation. First, the warden's smile at Dufresne's recitation of his passage suggests that this is in recognition of the fact that the 'master of the house' is a reference to Jesus and that the warden appreciates casting himself in this role.[16] Beyond the straightforward statement of belief in the warden's chosen verse, Reinhartz sees a foreshadowing of later events in the suggestion that by 'following' the warden Dufresne will survive, given that his success in Shawshank is partly based on a partial alliance with the warden.[17] This is particularly poignant in the light of the inference that the warden likes to see himself in the role of Jesus; it suggests that salvation for the inmates lies in obeying the warden, just as Christians can receive the 'light of life' by following Jesus. By considering the immediate suggestion of the verse (that the warden selected the verse because it demonstrates his Christian faith) and a more nuanced interpretation (that it is an instruction to Dufresne), Reinhartz reveals further depths to the nature of the warden's character and a way of understanding his self-importance.

What Reinhartz's analyses of these references demonstrate is that by considering them fully a deeper meaning to the film can be revealed, as well as some indications about the chosen elements of scripture. In the case of the warden's Revelation verse, the reference serves to highlight the changing circumstances of the character, revealing a deeper layer to the narrative, but the actions of the character prompts us to ask questions of the nature of the judgement in the verse. As noted above, Reinhartz's aim is to allow the films to speak for themselves first, before considering the implications of the quoted passages, and this is a clear example of how such an approach succeeds; we do not judge the characters by the message of the verses, but instead use what we know about the characters and their actions to frame a re-interpretation of the scene and of the verses themselves. When it comes to the scriptural exchange between Dufresne and the warden we once more gain a deeper insight into the characters, both in the way they see themselves, each other and the world of Shawshank around them. This latter comparison has, perhaps, less to give in terms of understanding scripture through the lens of the film, but it does ask questions about the nature of faith in Shawshank, given that the seemingly-devout warden is also incredibly corrupt.

[15] ibid. 133

[16] ibid. 133

[17] ibid. 133

Reinhartz's other comparison with scripture concerns the themes of redemption, hope and salvation as depicted through the events of the film and the actions of the Shawshank inmates. As I will be considering the nature of references to Biblical themes in the next chapter it is unnecessary to outline each of these here, but will instead focus briefly on Reinhartz's view of salvation within *The Shawshank Redemption*. During the scriptural exchange with Dufresne, the warden notes that "Salvation lies within" Dufresne's Bible,[18] not knowing that Dufresne kept the means of his escape hidden within the hollowed-out pages of the book. As before, Reinhartz notes that this could be a sincere (if ironic) references to the warden's beliefs[19], but she uncovers a further layer of meaning to the phrase by seeing a wider application in the context of Shawshank itself; she sees it as "a summary of the film's fundamental message about hope and the human spirit,"[20] noting that Dufresne works to carve out room in Shawshank for "human dignity and self-development."[21] For Reinhartz, the salvation of Shawshank is not only Dufresne's escape, but also the liberation of human spirit that he achieves for those still incarcerated.[22]

Clive Marsh agrees that *The Shawshank Redemption* deals with salvation, but differs from Reinhartz in that he specifically asserts that it does it in an 'incomplete' manner.[23] Focusing specifically on the parole hearing at which Red (a fellow inmate of Dufresne's) is released after many years' incarceration, Marsh notes that Red does not verbalise his repentance, and that the film instead relies upon an "emotional bond between screen character and viewer"[24] for Red's remorse to be understood. As such, Marsh writes that

> an effective response to what the film offers via this emotional interaction will only result when the film's reception is located within a wider cognitive framework in which key concepts such as redemption, salvation, liberation and atonement are given substance. The question of how experiences of regret, remorse, forgiveness... are to be lived and understood is posed by the emotional exchange, but remains unanswered without an appropriate cognitive framework being offered in response.[25]

For Marsh, then, *The Shawshank Redemption* can carry the theme of salvation that Reinhartz identifies, but only where the viewer is receptive to it and views the film through an appropriate cultural-cognitive lens. Because developments like Red's remorse are not verbalised, they depend

[18] ibid. 141

[19] ibid. 141

[20] ibid. 142

[21] ibid. 142

[22] ibid. 142

[23] Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's challenge to theology* 48

[24] ibid. 55

[25] ibid. 55

on the interpretation of the scene by the viewer, and an interpretation of salvation is only possible where it exists in the viewer's own framework to begin with. Nonetheless, this does not prevent the film from providing a poignant and nuanced illustration of what salvation might mean for the characters concerned. Although a viewer may bring the "worldviews they inhabit"[26] to bear on the film, *The Shawshank Redemption* can still suggest revisions to that cognitive framework and invite the viewer to expand their understanding of what salvation looks like. In identifying such themes, Reinhartz and Marsh demonstrate that the scriptural references considered previously are not necessarily just empty words or phrases chosen to highlight the religious background of the characters. Rather, through the salvation that Dufresne brings to Shawshank, they are framed in a way that shows them as a meaningful expression of the characters' motivations and the nature of life within the prison.

Reinhartz's conclusion about scriptural references (and Biblical themes) within the film is about this last consideration - that the Bible is not just for Christians but can be a way for anyone to acknowledge issues that are all-encompassing. She writes:

> *The Shawshank Redemption* shows that the Bible can be a source for themes, language and images about fundamental things, even for people who do not necessarily identify with the religious institutions and communities that hold the Bible as sacred canon.[27]

While part of this is down to a more thematic similarity, that of redemption, salvation and baptism, than a direct scriptural reference, Reinhartz nonetheless demonstrates the value of *The Shawshank Redemption's* inclusion of Biblical verse. Not only does it serve as a nod towards the roles of the characters and the root of the irony of Andy keeping his escape tool inside his Bible, but it shows the value of scripture outside the canon of religion. We understand more about the characters because of these references, and because of that we can turn the comparison around and find further insight about what religion might have to say. For instance, the new life brought to Shawshank by Dufresne (which Reinhartz identifies above) can tell us about the nature of hope and humanity in a manner that brings this concept to life and helps to place them within the context of ordinary human life. In this way Reinhartz's observations, like Runions' below, evince the reflections between the texts themselves, and between their effects on the reader; they show not only the relationship and the dialogue between film and scripture, but by doing so also speak to the potential effects that each might have on their respective reader.

[26] ibid. 55

[27] Reinhartz, op cit. 142

This conclusion is also drawn by Robert Jewett who, although not looking specifically at the Biblical references in the film, writes that

> The film is of particular interest, because its hope of deliverance is so clearly derived from the Bible, albeit in the ironic form of a small rock hammer hidden inside its pages.[28]

Jewett's references to the Biblical derivations of *The Shawshank Redemption* come not from the explicit quotations analysed by Reinhartz, but from what he sees as reflections of Saint Paul's writing on hope. For instance, he notes the phrases "Perseverance produces character" and "character produces hope" from Romans, and draws out the ways in which both Dufresne and fellow inmate Red experience a building of character that leads to Red's expression of hope when he finally gets paroled.[29] Indeed, this change in character is also noted by Clive Marsh in a broader, non-scripturally-focused study, who links it explicitly with Red's successful attempt at parole when he writes "he actually lets the shutters down, and reveals the extent to which he has understood himself [which] forms the ground for his final release."[30] Jewett employs a very different way of analysing the scriptural content of the film to Reinhartz, yet it arrives at a fundamentally similar point - that the message of *The Shawshank Redemption* is hope, and that this is signposted through scriptural references, whether explicit or implied. This method of considering the scriptural content of films is one that we will shortly go on to consider in greater detail shortly, when we explore Erin Runions' analysis of *Boys Don't Cry*, in which she takes a similar approach.

However, Reinhartz is also careful to point out the potential pitfalls in assuming that all scriptural references are as meaningful as those in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Although many of the comparisons between film and scripture that she makes are intended to reveal the same sort of meaning, she also specifically deals with films which include scriptural references that turn out to be meaningless or even misleading, which we will consider below. This is an important consideration for exploring references within video games - the inclusion of a superficially-relevant Bible verse can be a shortcut to making a two-dimensional character seem more fleshed-out or an event more significant, even though deeper consideration uncovers inconsistencies of meaning, and it is vital not to be lead astray by such theological red herrings.

The first example that Reinhartz considers is the 1985 film *Pale Rider*, most notably the recitation of Revelation 6:4-8 as the eponymous rider approaches, which includes the phrase "And I looked

---

[28] Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul Returns To The Movies* 163

[29] ibid. 171-173

[30] Marsh, op cit. 46

and behold a pale horse and his name that sat on him was death and Hell followed with him."[31] Reinhartz notes that there are some superficial similarities between the Biblical and filmic 'pale riders', such as the colour of their horses and their mysterious appearances and reappearance, and also acknowledges the refrain of "come and see" in light of the film's use of vision.[32] However, beyond this Reinhartz starts to question the relevance and coherence of this particular verse, especially as it is given so significant and prominent a role. First, she observes that the reference to "Hell followed with him" (and the continuation of the verse as describing his power to kill) does not bear out in the plot - noting that while some characters were depicted as suffering, this was before the rider's arrival and that his presence reverses their misfortune.[33] Moreover, she states that "his main mission is not to kill but to save this small community from destruction."[34] Thus, Reinhartz draws the conclusion that the only element revealed by exploring Revelation 6:4-8 is the identification of the character "as a divine agent of justice or judgement"[35] (which is hardly subtle even without this specific context). Still, Reinhartz does not deny that scripture could hold a place in the film to reveal further elements about the nature of the hero. She instead asserts that it would have been more fruitful for a different verse to be included and suggests Revelation 19:11-16, as it more clearly places the rider as an agent of righteousness[36], rather than misleading with references to Hell. Nonetheless, even Reinhartz's suggested alternative may not be interpreted as accurate by other viewers. Although Ostwalt agrees that the rider is "without a doubt the defender of the righteous community... one still finds it difficult to picture this Eastwood character as a representative from the kingdom of God."[37]

There is, however, scope to disagree with both Reinhartz and Ostwalt over their interpretation of the Revelation verse. Alan Garrow considers that the horsemen in the quoted passage are

> classic foreshadowing images. These characters are messengers sent out to warn the four corners of the earth about the disasters which will pour forth from the scroll when it is eventually opened.[38]

---

[31] Reinhartz, op. cit. 168

[32] ibid. 170

[33] ibid. 171

[34] ibid. 171

[35] ibid. 171

[36] ibid. 171

[37] Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., "Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes In Recent Cinematic Presentation," in *Screening the Sacred*: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film, ed. Martin and Ostwalt 57

[38] A. J.P. Garrow, *Revelation* 18

If we look at the role of the Rider in the light of Garrow's assertion, can we find a better match between the character and the verse that heralds his arrival? If his role is as a messenger with a warning, then his warning is twofold; first, and most immediate, he warns off the developers terrorising the town and forces them to leave. However, if we take a wider view we might also understand that warning as extending to the development of natural land in general. Reinhartz notes that *Pale Rider* contains a "contemporary ecological message"[39] centred around the use of the land by miners. In this context, we might understand the Rider's actions and the climax of the film to act as a warning to viewers about overdevelopment and the erosion of natural resources - that those who try it should expect to meet their downfall. While Reinhartz's assertion that the Revelation verse is not applicable to the circumstances of the film has significant merit, particularly when the verse is considered very literally (i.e. as a description of the Rider and his actions), there are alternate readings that bring out the salience of the passage. Therefore, although it should not be suggested that all scriptural references are relevant and appropriate, it is important to note that the same verse may resonate differently for different viewers, particularly when the reference itself may be interpreted in different ways.

The second example Reinhartz uses is the recitation of sections from Song of Songs in *Nell*, which she describes as "the most prominent and problematic biblical elements"[40] in the film. Most of her concerns revolve around Nell's quotation whilst swimming naked in a lake with a male parent-figure: "Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah."[41] Reinhartz observes that, for those viewers who recognise the reference, "identifying the passage and placing it in its fuller context does not provide insight but rather misleads"[42] because the context of the Song of Songs is ultimately a profession of love and desire[43], whereas the rest of the film clearly places the man in a parental role, and shows Nell trying to set him up with another woman. In this instance, therefore, those viewers attempting to gain further understanding of the character interaction by using their knowledge of the quoted scripture will be led astray as the characters' motivations are completely at odds with what is inferred by the scriptural reference. As Reinhartz reiterates, although viewers who are unfamiliar with the reference will not be particularly concerned, "Viewers who do know

[39] Reinhartz, op. cit. 169

[40] ibid. 178

[41] ibid. 179

[42] ibid. 181

[43] David Carr notes that this is a common interpretation of Song of Songs; David Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature*

the Song of Songs, however, and attempt to use it in their interpretation of the film will travel down a dead end."[44]

What Reinhartz shows in these two examples is that, although on a superficial level some filmic references to scripture may appear to parallel the plot or the characters, it is all too easy for their deeper meanings to be in another direction entirely. In this way, texts can inadvertently lead their readers to the wrong conclusion if those readers are aware of the wider context or levels of meaning to the references used. It is therefore important, when making this type of analysis, to be aware of the possibility that some references may be less significant, and more superficial, than could otherwise be expected. It is also not enough to take the reference at face value and assume that matching character depictions, such as in *Pale Rider*, automatically confer the right kind of inference to a role, but consideration must also be given to the wider meaning of the reference even if not inherently demanded by the text. When considering *Fallout 3*, therefore, we must consider whether the wider context of a scriptural phrase (rather than just the extract itself) is congruent with the game setting, whether any similarities or points of convergence between the game and the quotation are merely superficial and, if so, whether another verse might be more fitting.

Erin Runions and Boys Don't Cry

Erin Runions takes a similar approach to Reinhartz, although with a slightly different focus. Like *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, Runions' *How Hysterical* takes a film per chapter (in this case half a dozen) and considers Biblical references that can be found within in it. However, her method diverges in two key ways. First, Runions' focus includes films that do not explicitly reference a Biblical passage and may, instead, contain narrative similarities or other allusions. In Runions' words, she "uses theory to read a film with and against a similar biblical text, regardless of whether the Bible appears as a direct citation in the film."[45] As noted above, exploring this more interpretative approach to scripture provides us with an alternative way of considering biblical references, which may help us to uncover more in our case study than might be apparent were we to stick only to the quoted passage. Second, Runions looks at films through a specific lens; her focus is on exploring "identifications [that] normalize oppressive political and cultural configurations such as colonization, patriarchy, the heterosexual gender binary, wealth and whiteness."[46] While Runions' focus is different to ours (which is more closely aligned with

[44] Reinhartz, op. cit. 182

[45] Erin Runions, *How Hysterical: identification and resistance in the Bible and film* 2

[46] ibid. 2

Reinhartz's wider, more general consideration of film and scripture), we can nonetheless learn from examining the way in which she analyses film.

Runions' work is particularly helpful here, largely because of the specific thematic focus she employs. While Reinhartz considers the themes suggested by the explicit use of scripture on the films she selects, Runions' exploration uses the themes of the film to identify the commonalities with particular pieces of scripture. In *Boys Don't Cry*, as we shall see below, the gender identity of the protagonist and the violence she experiences suggests to Runions a shared narrative with a specific section of Ezekiel; this is then explored in further detail with references to specific aspects of both texts. This approach is a helpful counterpoint to Reinhartz's work because it demonstrates the breadth with which this topic can be explored and therefore opens different possibilities for application to the case study further below.

To place our ongoing analysis of video games in a wider context, it is also helpful to understand why Runions sees value in looking for scriptural references and allusions in film. In introducing her work in this area, she states;

> Religious texts and images, as well as received interpretations of them, hold out points of identification not only for adherents to the faith represented, but also, increasingly, for those who identify as spiritual... Both the Bible and popular film tend to assume and demand very specific kinds of identifications, but at the same time to open up unlikely spaces for alternate identifications.[47]

What is most striking about this justification for her work is the assertion that, alongside the more specific and obvious identifications in both texts (for instance, the use of 'everyman' characters such as Kristen Wiig's character in Bridesmaids, and the humble, flawed individuals who appear throughout the Gospels[48]), there is the potential for identifications that are less explicit. As such, Runions invites us to make more nuanced interpretations of film and scripture to find common ground that is, in fact, less commonly uncovered. To explore this approach in depth, we will consider a specific example of Runions' work in this area - the interplay between the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* and Ezekiel 16.

Here, Runions explains that her task was "to consider how like scenes in Bible and film can be read together productively. To my mind, the framing, focus, and staging of each can illumine what might otherwise go unnoticed in the other."[49] To do this she approaches both with the idea that

[47] ibid. 1

[48] For instance, the Samaritan woman at the well, with whom Jesus shares water in John 4:1-40

[49] Erin Runions, "Why Girls Cry: Gender Melancholia and Sexual Violence in Ezekiel 15 and Boys Don't Cry" in *Screening Scripture* 188

they might reveal something about "contemporary constructions of gender"[50] and seeks to uncover what this is. It is unnecessary to outline Runion's entire comparison of the two texts, as there are several parts that, methodologically speaking, do not add a great deal to our consideration, but the main thrust of her argument and the key elements of the comparison will be sufficient to understand the way in which it is achieved.

First, Runions highlights the immediate, more superficial similarities of the texts, in terms of the treatment of women, between the assault and murder of the transgender character of Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* and the anthropomorphised female character of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16. Runions notes that the two texts are "remarkably similar in portraying graphic and traumatic sexual violence against women: stripping, beating murder."[51] Jan William Tarlin describes Ezekiel as "[inviting] the reader to identify with the triumphant pleasures of male sadism as the text gleefully details the assertion of mastery over would-be rebellious women via the infliction of humiliation and pain,"[52] which echoes Runions' view of the behaviour and motivations of Brandon's attackers in *Boys Don't Cry*. Runions also asserts that both texts are about women pursuing lovers and having their sexualised behaviour 'rewarded' with violence in kind, and notes that although the protagonist in *Boys Don't Cry* is living as a trans male, the violence meted out is in the context of the character as their biological gender.[53] On this latter point, others agree; Sarah Hagelin, for example, notes that Brandon's body is shown as female during his most vulnerable moment in the film, describing "the increasingly horrific vulnerability of his body as it is increasingly gendered female"[54] - the more Brandon's biological gender is revealed, the more his body is vulnerable to the intentions and aggression of his attackers. In describing a moment of intimacy between Brandon and Lana, after Brandon's assault, Judith Halberstam interprets the film as ultimately defining Brandon as a woman, rather than the man he would rather be; she writes that "the scene ties Brandon's humanity to a particular form of naked embodiment that in the end requires him to be a woman."[55] As such, although Brandon identifies as male and lives his life as a man, his aggressors and even the film itself see him still as a woman and his violent treatment is as a result of this identity. These similarities are shown in a very broad and high-level manner - they act as a jumping-off point, from which questions can be asked as to where they

[50] ibid. 188

[51] ibid. 189

[52] Jan William Tarlin, "Utopia and Pornography in Ezekiel," in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*, ed. Beal and Gunn 175

[53] ibid. 189

[54] Sarah Hagelin, *Reel Vulnerability: Power, Pain, and Gender in Contemporary American Film and Television* 104

[55] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* 90

might have potential for speaking to each other more fully and how, in due course, such points can be used to further dialogue.

Runions then considers the stark differences between the two narratives, not in terms of their actual stories but in terms of the reactions to them and the purposes they serve. She notes that while feminist biblical critics have labelled Ezekiel 16 as "profoundly unhelpful as a religious metaphor let alone as a culturally influential text, the acclaim for the film has been almost entirely positive."[56] The root of the criticism for Ezekiel is not difficult to determine; for instance, Tarlin notes the presence of "graphically depicted violence against women that pervades... the parable of Yahweh's people as the unfaithful adopted daughter/bride, in the notorious chapter 16"[57] and goes on to assert that the text is "Insidious because the more deeply one becomes involved with this text, the harder it is to avoid the impression that its violence is deeply eroticized."[58] The violence that Runions and Tarlin read in Ezekiel 16 is not just problematic because it is violence, but because it is graphic and heavily gendered, focussing on the sexual imagery of Jerusalem as a woman.

When both texts contain graphic violence against women (one an anthropomorphised city, the other a trans male abused because of their biological gender), why did the film receive such positive responses? Runions posits that this may be due to three specific aspects of the film and its production; that as a tragedy about a transgendered life it is "unusual and iconic for people who are interested in questions of gender and identity,"[59] that it is a true story and therefore an "honest specimen of truth-telling"[60] rather than the fiction of Ezekiel, and that the self-identified gay female director and producer would have been unlikely to produce something damaging to women[61]. We might consider it somewhat ironic that, in telling the true story of abuse and violence, *Boys Don't Cry* received a warmer reception even though it paints a bleaker portrait of the reality of sexual violence than the use of such violence as a metaphor.

Ultimately, though, Runions denies that these latter considerations are enough to exempt the film from the type of critique levelled at Ezekiel. Rather, the question she has for the film is the same as for the Biblical text: "whether this film has something interesting to say about gender identity

[56] Runions, op cit. 192

[57] Tarlin, op cit. 175

[58] ibid. 175

[59] Runions, op cit. 192

[60] ibid. 192

[61] ibid. 192-3

and the violence that surrounds gender transgressions."[62] The traditional framing of the story as two boys battling over a girl suggests to Runions that perhaps there is nothing new that the film can say, but the different approach of using Ezekiel to decode the film may provide a new insight.[63] By taking care to consider the differences in reaction and assess the rationale that lies behind them, Runions uncovers an avenue for dialogue that may otherwise have been unconsidered; her concern about the misogyny she identifies in the Ezekiel passage highlights the need to think critically about the positivity around *Boys Don't Cry*, and the necessity to ask the same questions of each.

Having considered the appropriateness and usefulness of considering the two texts together, Runions then moves on to a more specific and overt comparison, and frames it in the context of the portrayal of the "identification of the lost object that is operative in gender melancholia."[64] The key similarity here is the loss of parentage for both lead characters in the texts; the anthropomorphised city of Jerusalem in Ezekiel, the heterosexual woman, has lost her mother, and the character Brandon, who identifies as a heterosexual male, has lost his father. Not only this but, as Runions points out, these losses

> precipitate gendered identification. Certainly the biblical text makes much of Jerusalem's identification with her mother... Likewise, Brandon... takes on the identity of a man, arguably an identification with his lost father.[65]

Alongside this, and the similar external brutality that both characters suffer, Runions notes the small expressions of reproachful acceptance that she would expect as a component of gender melancholia. She finds these expressions in Brandon's attitude and acceptance of himself as a 'jerk' and an 'asshole', and asserts that "one gets the feeling that Jerusalem would have no regrets either, if she could speak."[66] This comparison builds on the more superficial links noted earlier; Runions goes from a broad view of Brandon and Jerusalem as abused women to pinpointing the narrative motivations behind that abuse and finding further ways to tie the stories together. In doing this, she uncovers a deeper connection between the two texts, demonstrating that they share more than the coincidence of wider story motifs.

However, it is here that the comparison itself is less sure-footed. Although Runions acknowledges several points of reasonable and concrete similarity between the texts, the existence of Jerusalem's lack of regret, which is a key part of attaching the narrative to gender melancholia, is

[62] ibid. 193

[63] ibid. 193

[64] ibid. 197

[65] ibid. 198

[66] ibid. 199

significantly less so. The violence against and gender identity of Jerusalem are made very clear in the texts and are depicted in detail, but the sense of acceptance so crucial to the comparison is based solely on Runions' "feeling" about Jerusalem's reaction; she offers up no evidence to underscore this assertion. To base a key aspect of the comparison on such a conclusion lessens the impact of Runions' argument, and suggests a degree of over-interpretation of the similarities between Brandon and Jerusalem, which may be rooted in the very personal slant that she gives to her writing. Deacy, for instance, says of *How Hysterical* that it "is laden with a considerable amount of ideological baggage which may not be to everybody's taste."[67] The assumptive nature of this point serves to undermine the comparison itself, which could nevertheless remain significant and compelling even without this part of Runions' argument. It therefore serves as an example of going too far when reading scripture into media, and is an important consideration when applying this form of observation to video games. In combination with Reinhartz's concerns about *Nell* and *Pale Rider*, it is apparent that academics working in this space must be cautious not to take an interpretation too far; where we run the risk of doing so, such conclusions must be tempered suitably and acknowledged for being less concrete.

Ultimately, Runions concludes that the texts "do indeed have something interesting to say about the construction of gender"[68] and, the despite concerns raised about over-interpretation, this is a reasonable conclusion in light of the questions she uncovers on both sides. She notes the similarities within the narratives of the texts, and the likely effect of these upon the reader, suggesting that "these texts can be said to mirror each other in some way."[69] By doing so, Runions has demonstrated how film and scripture can reflect each other's narratives, even when critical reception was markedly different for each, and thus provide an avenue to explore themes which they have in common. In this example Runions unlocked a message of gender identity from a piece of scripture that she noted that feminist critics had widely been derisive of, and (we might therefore assume) were less willing to consider, and unravelled themes of violence against women within a film portraying a trans male, thus demonstrating that film and scripture can serve to illuminate each other and work in dialogue. However, by pushing this comparison slightly too far and including conjecture over inference, Runions also highlights the necessity for keeping these analyses in check.

---

[67] Chris Deacy, "Review of E. Runions, 'How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film" *Journal of Contemporary Religion*

[68] ibid. 210

[69] ibid. 210

Case Study: Fallout 3

With these examples in mind, we must consider whether the same type of analysis can be made of scriptural references within video games. To this end, I have chosen a game that features a Bible verse prominently and attributes some significance to it. By exploring the inferences and meanings given by the references to this verse, I will demonstrate that the methods used to analyse similar concepts within film are also applicable to the medium of video games.

Fallout 3 is an FPS (first-person shooter) set in the post-apocalyptic Wasteland around the city of Washington DC; in 2077, worldwide political tensions lead to nuclear war and the end of the modern age[70]. Throughout the game the player ('The Wanderer') wanders through the Wasteland, encountering 'super mutants' who are attempting to eradicate humanity, and the government 'Enclave' forces who are taking advantage of the desperate state of the country to exert control. The aim of the game unfolds itself as a quest to create a machine capable of purifying irradiated water in large enough amounts to save humanity.

At the very start of the game the player sees a framed verse in the family living quarters:

> I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely Revelation 21:6

and explains that this verse was a favourite of the Wanderer's late mother and, later, the verse is repeated. The early part of the game constitutes hardly more than 20 minutes of gameplay, yet the verse is presented prominently twice.

First, as Reinhartz did with the verses in *The Shawshank Redemption*, we will explore the potential meaning of this verse in terms of the game itself. Our aim is to determine, within the narrative of the game, what relevance this verse has and what it may be highlighting or alluding to.

The initial presentation of the verse reveals little to the player and much of what it suggests is largely superficial. It is somewhat notable in its explicit religiosity - a relatively rare thing in video games. Unlike film where, as Reinhartz demonstrates by drawing on a dozen examples, scriptural references are not uncommon, in video games such references do not appear often. This is, perhaps, because many games take place in alternate realities or worlds that do not share our cultural and spiritual references points. Because of this, and because there is little else to tell her story, players may interpret the verse as a key insight into the personality of the Wanderer's mother, suggesting personal faith meant a great deal to her, even after a catastrophic event. Even so, despite the obvious significance of the verse due to its prominence, this is an inference rather

[70] Reed, Kristan "Fallout 3" *Eurogamer*

than any real indication as to its purpose. One reviewer notes the foreshadowing potential of the verse[71] and, indeed, the real importance of the passage is revealed later in the game: the verse from Revelation was the Wanderer's mother's inspiration for 'Project Purity', which aimed to provide clean water for the Wasteland. The water imagery is revealed to be the key component of the verse's interpretation.

In this context, the verse brings with it new insights into the world of *Fallout* and the meaning of its events. Firstly, it indicates the possibility of salvation for the citizens of the Wasteland, through its links with imagery and events throughout the New Testament. There are plenty of examples of water imagery, primarily connected with baptism, but Paul Barnett notes that there are particular "echoes between Revelation and the Gospel"[72] regarding Revelation 21:6 and the following two verses:

> John 7:37 - If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink
>
> John 4:14 - The water that I shall give him will become in him spring of water welling up to eternal life[73]

When linked with these verses from John, particularly the second, which directly references the same 'water of life' imagery as the Revelation verse, the meaning of the Fallout story seen through the Revelation extract gains new depth. Read in this context we can appreciate the reference to the 'water of life' is not just a practical and literal depiction of water that will save the denizens of the Wasteland from choosing between radiation sickness and dehydration, but a more far-reaching kind of salvation. It foreshadows a future in which life for the Wasteland is made better, not just through the provision of water, but through the triumph of good over evil and life over death[74]. At this point we might consider whether the use of a verse in this context might have been intentional. While this is certainly a possibility, there is nothing to suggest this definitely; as mentioned above, the use of scriptural references in games is uncommon, but they still hold cultural currency as readily-identifiable texts from outside of the game's own world. It is therefore more likely that the game's developers chose it for its water imagery in a very general and literal sense, rather than because of the implications of its wider context. Nonetheless, as explored in the introductory chapter, we are considering the message of the text itself outside of

[71] Hernandez, Patricia "Fallout 3's first level does everything right" *Kotaku*

[72] Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times*, 312

[73] Verses as quoted in ibid. 312. Barnett notes in his examples that the words 'fountain' and 'spring' (from Rev 21:6 and John 14:4 respectively) are translated from the same original word

[74] This aspect of the verse and its narrative context may suggest that a focus on the eschatological implications of Fallout 3 could be fruitful. A similar case study looks at eschatological possibilities of games in Chapter 6.

the developers' intentions and, as such, are not constrained by whether the interpretation suggested by the verse was intentional.

A further understanding of this verse (and its surrounding context) by Jürgen Roloff also reflects these themes of salvation and grace, and further cements links with Old and New Testament verses;

> The following promise of God that in the new creation he himself will quench all thirst without cost with the living water is formulated in close connection with Isa. 55:1…That for which members of the church now thirst in their persecution and suffering (cf. Matt. 5:6), namely, God's saving presence and communion with him."[75]

Here, Roloff calls to mind the repetition of the 'living water' motif throughout the Bible and ascribes it a salvific meaning. Viewing the use of the verse in this context allows us to consider its ramifications more deeply. By linking to a verse from Matthew ("Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled"[76]), Roloff identifies the 'thirst' of Rev 21:6 as the persecution and suffering experienced by the early church, borne alongside a belief in inevitable and eventual salvation from God. The inhabitants of the Wasteland are not a church, but suffering is widespread because of the water shortage and we could potentially see a literal interpretation of the verse. We must bear in mind that this is not a straightforward understanding of this passage and its placement in the story, and therefore be cognisant of falling into the '*Pale Rider* trap' if done without awareness of this limitation. However, if we acknowledge such a limitation we might take this analysis further still.

Within the world of *Fallout 3* there are mutant creatures widely distrusted and maligned by the human citizens. One of the ways in which the game can end features the water supply being contaminated with a substance benign to humans but deadly to the mutants, an illustration of the hatred with which they are considered. These are, then, the persecuted people of *Fallout 3*; what happens if we explore Rev 21:6 in this context? If, given Roloff's interpretation of the verse, the persecuted are the 'thirsty' to whom the verse is addressed (rather than the wider audience of the *literally* thirsty), then in the context of *Fallout* it speaks to the mutants. The game itself may therefore indicate to the player that the desired path to take is not to eradicate the mutants through the new water supply, but to see them as part of humanity and to allow them to reach salvation of a kind by finding a place for them in society. They are the figuratively thirsty, being the persecuted, and so the literal provision of water must be extended to them to confirm their acceptance into human society. We see hints of this in the story, too; the player befriends a

[75] Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation: A Continental Commentary.* tr. John E Alsup and James S Currie 237

[76] Matthew 5:6 NIV

mutant, who sacrifices himself to assist completion of a vital task and thus demonstrates a more empathetic nature than his type is usually given credit for. As such, we might be confident that this is not an over-interpretation of the verse, although it may not have been an intended outcome of its inclusion.

The links with the Gospel may indicate the availability of salvation for the Wasteland, but does the story truly bear this out? This is a complex question, as *Fallout 3* allows multiple endings depending on how the player acts. This means that the player can choose to follow the command of an evil faction leader, poison the mutants, or even fail to activate Project Purity altogether. In the previous chapter, we considered how the existence of player choice in *Bioshock* acted to highlight a sense of predestination in the plot, but the mechanic is used very differently here. Because the player can fail to activate Project Purity without failing to complete the game's main mission (unlike *Bioshock* where the only choice is to take an action or leave the game uncompleted) there is no similarly enforced sense of inevitability insofar as the salvation of the Wasteland citizens is concerned. This means that the verse itself cannot accurately foreshadow the provision of water by the Wanderer.

Nonetheless, the fact that there *is* an ending congruent with the potential interpretation of the verse means that there is validity to the wider interpretation of the verse's suggestion of salvation. The more positive cut-scene provided at the end of the game bears this out - the typical 'good' ending, in which the Wanderer manages to destroy the faction leader and activate Project Purity at the expense of their own life, could be interpreted as the direction that the game was intended to go, with the other endings essentially being failures in a narrative sense (if not in a technical one). In the cut-scene that follows a successful and virtuous activation of the Project, the game states that "the child followed the example of [her] father, sacrificing life itself for the greater good of mankind". This takes forward the foreshadowing of the Revelation verse and deeper interpretations of salvation; the Wanderer succeeds in bringing about the downfall of the Enclave and provides pure water for the Wasteland, even at the expense of their own life. This echoes one view of the story of the Passion, whereby Christ sacrificed His own life as an act of salvation[77], and the next chapter will consider in more detail the use of such characterisations within video game narratives rather than continuing such an analysis here; while the structure of this analysis divides possibilities for dialogue into discrete strands, the reality is that they are ultimately interrelated. One of the 'bad' endings also bears out the role of water in providing succour - in an ending where the Wanderer introduces a chemical into the purifier that will weed out any citizens who have been subject to mutation through radiation, the cut scene states "The

[77] Romans 3:24-5;

waters of life flowed at last, but the virus contained within soon eradicated all those deemed unworthy of salvation". Significantly, the act of 'failing' the mutants causes the game directly to state that the mutants were denied salvation and, therefore, confirm that this would have been the result of the total success of Project Purity, as suggested above. To this extent, we can state that this is not a situation like *Nell* or *Pale Rider*, and that the use of the text is more than merely superficial; layers of interpretation were required to explore the salvific inferences of its inclusion, and this is effectively borne out by the game itself.

However, even in the evil faction's defeat, this resolution is not total. The game begins with the statement "War never changes", and a cut-scene tells the backstory of the nuclear war, of how humans destroyed the world but failed to destroy war itself. After the 'good' ending, the cut-scene suggests that the struggle in the Wasteland is not over, and the final words spoken are a repeat of the phrase "war never changes". In this way, the salvation achieved through the triumph of good over evil, as suggested by the references to 'waters of life', is clearly not total. Although the Enclave faction has been defeated and the best possible outcome reached, the Wanderer has not managed to provide the same kind of salvation as the player might have hoped for. The verse and the accompanying weight given to the Project Purity mission by the game story suggests the possibility of an all-encompassing ending, in which the world is set on the right path, rather than one leading back to the horrors and destruction of an inevitable future war. For those who have been influenced in their expectations by the presence of the verse, similarly to those interpreting the use of the Song of Solomon in *Nell*, there may be disappointment in having been led somewhat astray. One might also suggest that the above comparison may, like Runions' assertion that Jerusalem's lack of regret can be found in Ezekiel, be unfounded and rely chiefly on conjecture and biased inference. Such a view might lead us to say that the verse indicates much which eventually unfolds, but is not total in its relevance to the story of *Fallout 3*.

This, however, is in its own way a contrived argument. Unlike *Nell*, the use of the scriptural passage here is clearly relevant and used in a fitting context; it does not imply something wholly other than the narrative arc in which it is used. The fact that the narrative does not bear out the suggestions of the verse to its full potential does not detract from this and may provide a more thoughtful conclusion to the story than if the ending were to be perfect and complete. The message that the Wanderer's success was not a panacea for the problems of the Wasteland and the wider world (hence the potential for war) should not be surprising. Rather, it demonstrates the limitations of human endeavour in finding permanent solutions to problems of our own devising. In this way, *Fallout 3* depicts a world in need of further help despite all that the Wanderer has achieved and thus makes clear that individual humans are not able to fix global problems. Whether divine intervention or large-scale co-operation are the answer is left open,

but by doing this the game asks a vital question and thus prompts further discussion about the role of God and man in stewardship of the Earth.

As well as looking at how the use of this verse in *Fallout 3* is consistent with and draws together interpretations of the passage itself, these is also merit in considering more deeply the water imagery brought up by this exploration. Should we find further points of convergence between the game and the use of water in scripture, it would be another indication that the two can form successful conversations partners. As is clear from the above, scarcity of water is the core driver for the narrative in *Fallout 3*, and we have already seen how the Revelation verse highlights its importance. What then, can we make of the theology surrounding the importance of human survival? In *Just Water*, Christiana Peppard describes global freshwater shortages as "A Right-to-Life Issue for the Twenty-First Century"[78] and considers how Christians should respond; we will now explore how the themes in *Fallout 3* might coalesce with Peppard's point of view and, in so doing, have something to say about the importance of water. One particularly striking point that Peppard makes is about the place of water within creation, stating "Fresh water is one of the "goods of creation" meant for everyone, now and in the future,"[79] going on to doubt that this is the way it is currently treated. Peppard's concerns are, of course, firmly rooted in current problems with fresh water - climate change, water usage and large-scale industry, rather than irradiation from global nuclear war. However, while the cause of the shortage may have some relevance (and, in terms of the current issues, certainly speaks to wider ramifications of industrialisation and wealth inequality), the response to the shortage can remain the same, and we can therefore learn something by putting her work into dialogue with *Fallout 3*.

Peppard notes that

> people living in poverty who cannot afford to pay market price for fresh water are those who suffer most when fresh water becomes scarce... But it is not the case that a person's need for water correlates to the ability to pay for it.[80]

This conflict between means and need is highlighted in *Fallout 3*, not just as part of the wider narrative arc about Project Purity, but in other, smaller and more poignant scenes. At one point, the player passes an ill or injured character begging for water; it is an incidental moment that does not form part of a mandatory mission, and there is no penalty to walking by without assisting. My instinct when playing was to hand over some of my carefully-collected stash of fresh water, but I found myself unable to do so because I had none to spare. Ultimately, I placed my

[78] Christiana Z Peppard, *Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis* 51

[79] ibid. 58

[80] ibid. 61

character's needs over the beggar's, despite (as Peppard asserts) these being equal needs that are unaffected by whatever status the respective characters hold in the world of the game. One could argue that the Wanderer's needs are greater because they are aiming to solve the water issue once and for all, but the *biological* need remains identical; any discussion on those lines becomes one about morality, rather than right-to-life at its most basic. *Fallout 3* allows the player to, in one sense, agree with Peppard's assertion about the fundamental right to water; as mentioned above, the player can choose what to do with Project Purity and, to some extent, how freely available to make the clean water. In making this choice, the player will necessarily need to consider the value of water and its necessity to life, and consider how they want their narrative to end. Through the gameplay, it is made clear that a lack of water is having a devastating impact on people's lives, and this will inevitably feed into players' understanding of the narrative.

On a broader level, *Fallout 3* illustrates another aspect of Peppard's point. She notes that

> In places where fresh water is unavailable or unsafe, water can be very expensive to procure. The results are wrought economically, or through bodily energy that is spent seeking and transporting the heavy liquid, or through forgone opportunities for education.[81]

In economically-developed countries, where water is safe and easily accessible, these specific issues do not arise, and our economic and infrastructure development has not had to account for them. However, *Fallout 3* shows what happens to a previously 'developed' nation when, alongside existing infrastructure, supplies of fresh water are destroyed; amongst other problems, it shows civil unrest and a complete lack of healthcare, education and government systems. This is, of course, to be expected in the aftermath of a colossal nuclear attack, but the game works hard to imply that the water issue has been a huge sticking point in re-instating the elements of society that we have grown so used to. Were such a vital natural resource more readily-available, the rebuilding of modern society may have been much further progressed than how the game portrays it. As such, the game highlights the disparity between developed and developing nations, but does so by showing players the problems that currently deprived nations are experiencing, set within the context of a familiar city that represents one of the most economically advantaged countries in the world. In relation to the environment of the game, one reviewer stated that "rooting the game in the realms of potential reality gives the world [of *Fallout 3*] credibility,"[82] and this credibility can be a tool to help the player interpret the messages of the game. Through experiencing the game, players can gain an appreciation of how their lives might be different if

[81] Ibid. 61

[82] Reed, op cit.

severe fresh water shortages had to be overcome; social instability, a lack of permanent housing or settlement, and a focus on martial law to curb civil unrest.

On a more specifically theological point, Peppard considers the state of the River Jordan and contemplates the seeming disconnect between the importance placed on baptism and the pollution of the 'original' baptismal font. She notes that

> it is strange that polluted waters persistently can be viewed as purifying. It is even more odd that, thus far at least, there has been little Christian ethical engagement with the waters of the Jordan. The material and symbolic status of the river need to be drawn together more tightly if ecology is indeed a vital part of faith.[83]

One can draw significant parallels between this concern and the aim of the Wanderer in *Fallout 3*. The story revolves around a significant river (in this case the Potomac) and the decline of its waters into a highly polluted and unusable state. In *Fallout 3*, concerns around the water relate only to its physical, rather than spiritual properties, but the broad point remains the same, even down to the references to purity in the name of the Wanderer's mission. In both instances an ancient and socially or religiously important watercourse has been adversely affected by modern life, to the point where it cannot fulfil its most important function; the Potomac poisons those who drink it, and the Jordan loses its 'purifying' qualities because it becomes hard to associate "polluted, pea-green and degraded"[84] water with spiritual cleansing and the first baptism. Stephen Haar writes that "To uncover the theological meaning of water is to be faced with the challenge of ecological conversion,"[85] and Peppard is clear that Christians should be facing up to water pollution as part of faithful engagement with the 'purifying' meaning of baptism. The focus on water as vital to life in *Fallout 3* draws out clearly the vital role of clean water for the future of a robust and fairer society and, in that regard, can be a part of stimulating and facilitating dialogue with that process.

Moving forwards

The aim of this chapter was to explore how video games might use scriptural references in a way that could lead to fruitful dialogue with theology. Having considered how this is achieved in the study of film, we drew on approaches used by Runions and Reinhartz and applied these to *Fallout 3* to determine whether the quoted passage from Revelation had the potential to engage the game in useful conversation, or whether it was purely superficial. This was an important step to

[83] Peppard, op cit. 141

[84] ibid. 141

[85] Stephen Haar, "Reflections on the Global Water Crisis in Dialogue with Revelation 17-Harlot, Hegemony and H2O," *Lutheran Theological Journal*

build on the previous chapter's work, which looked in very broad terms at the function and theological uses (or lack thereof) for games, rather than content specifically.

The examples we looked at from Runions and Reinhartz show ways that film succeeds in using and exploring scripture, but provide helpful examples of where to be cautious about interpretation. Reinhartz specifically warns about the potential for films to contain scriptural allusion or references that are entirely superficial and, therefore, are inconsistent when considered in their full context. As such, when exploring the *Fallout 3* reference to Revelation we were able to assess the salience of the verse by considering existing interpretations from various sources of the passage and its surrounding message, and determining that it was truly relevant to the game narrative. Having established firmly that it was, we were then free to look more widely at the connected theme of water and stewardship, in a similar way to Runions' exploration of gender identity in *Boys Don't Cry*. Again, we were aware of the need for caution around the potential for over-interpretation, which was suggested by Runions' work in this area.

The in-depth exploration of *Fallout 3* is a successful example of how we can seek to interpret overt scriptural references in games. Using the verse from Revelation as a starting point and giving thought to the meaning of this passage, we were able to uncover links between the narrative of the game and the message of the verse; in both cases, the importance of water to life and its use as a metaphor for salvation. For the game, this highlighted the role that the Wanderer plays in providing help to the people of the Wasteland and, perhaps more importantly, to those previously considered inhuman and outcast. In turn, the focus of the game on the problems of a previously affluent society without access to water suggested the need to consider the consequences of human action on one of humanity's most precious resources. This case study shows that continuing to examine the theological potential of games is likely to be a fruitful avenue to pursue more widely, if we continue to bear in mind the interactive characteristics of the medium.

As with the previous chapter, we continue to see the importance of accounting for such choice in these expansive games. We noted above that the presence of player choice over the ending of *Fallout 3* adds complexity to interpreting the relevance of or links to any scriptural references used within it. The range of endings available to the player means that the narrative cannot always fully bear out the message of the passage and there will always be some doubt over its relevance. However, by considering whether there is an ending that appears to fulfil it (thus demonstrating that this is a possibility within the game story), we can encompass these complexities without becoming overwhelmed or distracted by them.

Interpreting scriptural references has the advantage of being very specific (there is a quoted verse or a clear narrative similarity, which is relatively easy to spot). It would therefore be interesting to see how the suitability of games as a conversation partner develops as we broaden out the focus from the specific to the more general. Therefore, in the next chapter we will consider the way characters are constructed to allude to religious figures, and what possibilities this facilitates for dialogue. Given the impact of player choice upon interpreting game narrative, continuing consideration will need to be given to this issue in the coming chapters, particularly when thinking about the depiction of the player's character.

5. Jesus-noir: Christ-figures in video games

In the previous chapter we explored approaches to considering the meaning of scriptural references in film and how these could be applied to video games. We will now turn to the somewhat broader topic of characterisation, particularly those characters that function as an allegory for Christ. The purpose of moving from exploring scriptural references to considering characterisation in games and film is to test the application of film methods in a broader, less explicitly religious area. Looking at the context of a quoted Bible passage or the similarities between two narratives is a tightly-focussed and relatively concrete exercise, but to develop our understanding of video games' potential for dialogue we need to discern whether an interpretation relying more on implication and suggestion (to uncover a potential allegory for Christ within a text) rather than an explicit scriptural reference would be as successful. Judging the nature of a character's attributes and actions is a natural next step in this direction; we are still tied to a specific example with clear outlines (i.e. the activity and presentation of a character) but will consider more nebulous aspects, such as interpretations of a character's motives or relationships. To some degree this formed part of the previous chapter, where we considered the more nuanced interpretations of scriptural references or allegories within film and games, but will be a much more pronounced part of the below analysis.

In undertaking the above, this chapter will shed further light on the key difference between games and films: the impact of player choice on interpretation. While this was a factor affecting our exploration of *Fallout 3*'s scriptural content, when analysing the motivations and actions of the player's character the ability of the player to affect or alter the way the character acts (in some circumstances significantly so) could impact our interpretation of that character to a large degree and, as we shall see below, our thoughts on what aspects of Christ may be represented. As such, carrying out an analysis of a game's primary character will allow us to focus on this issue in an area where it is likely to be most clearly apparent. In much the same way as the previous chapter, we will explore here how specific scholars have identified and decoded Christ-figures in film, before considering how their methods could be used to explore such figures in video games and using a case study to determine how successful this could be.

Scope

First, we must examine the term 'Christ-figure' and outline its use here. Peter Malone distinguishes between two broad ways in which the person or nature of Jesus Christ might be represented in film;

> The basic distinction is between representations of Jesus himself (Jesus-figures) and characters in real life and in the arts who resemble Jesus (from his messianic

> title, Christ-figures). The resemblance needs to be significant and substantial, otherwise it is trivial.[1]

In the same vein, Lloyd Baugh states that a Christ-figure would be apparent in a film where "the total dynamic of the film embodies the total dynamic of the Christ-event"[2] and a Jesus-figure where the character "embodies only some aspects of the life and death of Jesus, without any particular reference to his total salvific mission and to his Resurrection."[3] Anton Karl Kozlovic also draws the same distinction when he notes that

> These commercial feature films do not try to copy popular conceptions of Jesus' biblical time, place or image. That is, they are not located approximately 2000 years ago in ancient Judaea. Nor do they star a protagonist who is male, tall, longhaired, blue-eyed, bearded, with WASP features, wearing sandals and a white toga looking like some 20th century hippie.[4]

Broadly speaking, the Jesus-figure is a depiction of the physical and historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, whereas Christ-figures incorporate messages of salvation or redemption, which go beyond the biographical details of Jesus' life. A potential purpose of such characters is succinctly put by Matthew McEver, who notes that

> A common critique of epics that attempt to present Jesus or Moses 'as he was', such as *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), is that the genre presents a story meaningful to those already familiar with it, but typically fails to convey the significance of the story for the contemporary audience... On the other hand, transplanting Christological or Mosaic reference points into other genres makes the concepts more accessible. [5]

By situating Christological motifs and themes into mainstream, secular film, the potential for dialogue is opened further; as we will explore in due course, such characters might allow for a different type of discussion to happen because they place the nature of Christ situations entirely unlike those encountered in the Bible.

In this chapter, although some regard will be given to Jesus-figures to provide a wider context and background, the focus will primarily be on Christ-figures. This is chiefly because there are no mainstream games featuring Jesus-figures, and Christ-figures are therefore far more relevant for our exploration and the subsequent case study. Unlike film, there is no 'Jesus game' genre outside

---

[1] Peter Malone "Edward Scissorhands: Christology from a Suburban Fairy-tale" *Explorations in Theology and Film* ed. Marsh and Ortiz 76

[2] Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-figures in film*. ix

[3] ibid. ix

[4] Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 3

[5] Matthew McEver "The Saviour Figure" in Blizek, William L., *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*

of niche Christian independent games and even these tend not to feature Jesus as a key character. As explored in the second chapter, scholars like Wagner are unconvinced that video games can do justice to the person and story of Jesus, especially if He were to be the player-controlled character or subject to the consequences of player decisions. This is largely due to concerns about blasphemy, which can be caused by deliberate alterations to the story or inadvertent deviations by players exploring the possibilities of the gameworld (or, indeed, of the gameworld *having* different possibilities). However, this chapter aims to show that, by using allegorical Christ-figures, the medium may be able to deal sensitively with questions around the life of Christ and avoid the potential for blasphemy that Wagner is concerned about. Our analysis of current film approaches will also focus on these figurative characters, although where helpful and relevant regard will still be given to scholars' views on literal representations, most notably the depiction of Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Regarding these allegories, it is interesting to note that the following assertion from Baugh - that there are two layers of interpretation - bears considerable similarities to the way in which scriptural references might be interpreted was explored in the previous chapter:

> They submit to two levels or registers of interpretation, the direct and the analogical, the literal and the figurative; and on the figurative or metaphorical level, they accept a reading that is biblical or christological.[6]

Identifying parallels with Jesus' parables, Baugh also notes that when considered figuratively, such depictions might "fairly explode with theological or christological significance."[7] It is this significance that we will explore in the case study at the end of the chapter.

This chapter intends specifically to consider the presence of Christ-figures in films and video games. We could consider other characters (such as those that might be analogous to the Virgin Mary[8]), and this is potentially an avenue for further exploration. However, this analysis focuses on figures potentially representative of Christ. First, there is a considerable amount of literature dealing with Christ-figures in film, which will ensure a solid basis for the initial step of looking at how this topic has been approached in that field; there have been varying approaches, which allows us to take a nuanced look at the area. Second, identifying potential Christ-figures within games will be more straightforward than other such characters, due to the relative distinctiveness

[6] Baugh, op cit. 109

[7] ibid. 109

[8] An example from film is identified by Adele Reinhartz, who notes that the character of Sister Agnes in Agnes of God claims to have experienced immaculate conception. Reinhartz, *Scripture* 2

Reinhartz also identifies allegorical characters ranging from Noah to Job, demonstrating the existence of a far wider range of Biblical depictions than just Jesus or Mary. Reinhartz, *Bible*

of the criteria we will explore below. As this chapter intends to analyse the viability of using game characters as representations of figures with religious significance, it is useful to have clear, readily available examples on which to draw, rather than a more obscure or less easily-distinguishable alternative. However, we will still give some consideration to how the approaches outlined below may be applied to look at other issues of characterisation.

Finally, we must note the general limitations of seeking Christ-figures in popular culture. Aside from concerns about finding too many in superficiality (explored below), there is an important condition about the context in which Christ-figures may be located and whether this is the most fruitful kind of theology to be 'doing' for a specific film. In reference to discussing *Sin City*, in which one of the characters might be understood as an allegory for Christ, in seminars Christopher Deacy notes that

> a more suitable classroom discussion would center on the efficacy of always having women being 'redeemed' and rescued by men. What effect does this have on women's dignity, autonomy, and sense of personhood?[9]

Also noting the "unapologetically misogynistic"[10] way in which the film depicts women, Deacy makes the point that looking for a Christ-figure in the form of a detective protecting a prostitute is not the most pressing theological discussion provoked by *Sin City*. Rather, in this case, it would be much more fruitful to consider what the film says about the role of women and to use this as a point for dialogue, rather than tacitly endorsing misogyny by ignoring this to identify a potential 'Christ-figure' who in some ways may be viewed as underscoring the problematic elements of the film. When exploring our case study, we must therefore be aware of the need to look at the wider context of the character and look at whether another line for discussion is perhaps a more appropriate point of focus.

In the first part of this chapter we will examine the approach taken by Deacy, primarily relating to identifying the type of protagonist that makes for the most authentic Christ-figure and how these figures function as agents of redemption within media. As part of this we will consider how well this method for identifying such figures might function within a study of video games. A somewhat contrasting approach comes from Lloyd Baugh, chiefly the thirteen 'dimensions' that he identifies as typical attributes of successful and meaningful Christ-figures. Similarly, we will assess its suitability for application to video games and identify a wider context for both Baugh and Deacy's work.

---

[9] Christopher Deacy, "The Pedagogical Challenges of Finding Christ-figures in Film," in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Watkins 135

[10] ibid. 135

To explore this fully we will then, as in the previous chapter, examine the nature of a specific game character to test the potential applicability of Deacy and Baugh's methods and conclusions in the context of video games. As part of this we will necessarily explore the impact of player choice on our ability to interpret meaningfully the potential for theological dialogue, which has most resonance here, given that the nature of a player's character is one of the narrative aspects most affected by player choice. The analysis will use Deacy and Baugh's methods, as far as they are relevant, to determine what type of Christ-figure 'Jack' from *Bioshock* could be and, as part of this, how well he might fulfil the redemptive possibilities outlined in Deacy's work. Any disparities found here will speak to differences in the style and nature of the two media types, as well as between the two methodologies, and bring us closer to understanding the possibilities and limitations of sharing approaches in this way.

With the above points in mind, the case study in the second section of this chapter will seek to identify the aspects of *Bioshock*'s 'Jack' that mark him as a potential allegory for Christ and the impact of such a representation on the narrative surrounding the character. Some regard will necessarily be given to the more direct interpretations of his actions and story, but the core focus of our exploration will be to delve deeper and to understand the metaphorical message suggested by the game.

Lloyd Baugh - dimensions of Christology

As noted above, Baugh distinguishes between Jesus-figures and Christ-figures, and his work in this area specifically separates them out and chooses to deal with them as distinct entities (in contrast with Deacy who, as we shall see below, almost puts them in dialogue with each other). Because we will not specifically explore Biblical representations of Jesus (given their scarcity in mainstream gaming, as explored above) it would not be fruitful to focus particularly on Baugh's considerations of these literal representations in films depicting Jesus' life. However, it is worth noting that he finds them unsatisfactory in providing models of Jesus which are sufficiently "aesthetic or theological;"[11] for instance, he criticises Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* for sacrificing "subtlety, moral complexity and spiritual depth."[12]

In considering the place of allegorical Christ-figures within film, Baugh first identifies four reasons why it is appropriate to be looking for them in the first place. He notes that Christianity is a faith which "finds its meaning in images,"[13] recognising the imagery used throughout the Bible to

[11] Baugh, op cit. 109

[12] ibid. 83

[13] ibid. 109

describe God and Christ indirectly through other means, such as the Old Testament pre-echoing of Christ in the suffering of Isaiah.[14] In this regard we can seek out further images that we have created for ourselves and decode modern depictions in much the same way as picking through Old Testament prophecies to find descriptions of what Christ the messiah should be;[15] Reinhartz views this as "looking at Hollywood films through the lens of the Bible."[16]

Baugh's second assertion is that Christianity is an 'incarnational' faith, that it "insists that God reveals God's-self in and through matter and in Christ - human matter - and not only once but in an ongoing way."[17] In this way, it is evidently possible (or, at least, acceptable) to find meaningful depictions of God within images of humans, created by humans. Furthermore, if we consider Baugh's contention in the most straightforward way, it demands that the human side of Christ be made sufficiently apparent, and would therefore appear to support Deacy's view (explored below) that the depiction of Christ in film must be through an authentic human connection. As we will consider in due course, with reference to *The Last Temptation of Christ*, using ordinary humans to reflect attributes of Christ can be a way to locate Christ deeper with humanity than might otherwise be possible, as to do this directly with a depiction of Jesus might be theologically problematic or potentially blasphemous. As such, using allegorical, pictorial approaches allows us to deepen the dialogue between theology and popular culture.

Baugh's third reason is that Christianity is fundamentally a story-telling religion, with "God telling God's story and the human story."[18] He considers Christianity to have found its identity through the overarching narratives of "the creation, the fall, the promise"[19] and salvation. For a religion that bases itself on millennia-spanning narrative, it seems eminently suitable that we can continue to uncover deeper meanings by spinning our own stories from the values carried in the originals. Finally, and on a very much related point, Baugh contends that these stories are the key to how Christians interact with their faith, noting that they "know and meet God today through these narratives."[20] He points to the many ways in which stories feature in Christianity, from the Creation story, to the Gospels, and even to the parables that Jesus told to convey His messages. This reiterates the important place that stories have in the Christian faith, and points to the

[14] ibid. 109

[15] For instance, Sigmund Mowinckel identifies several Old Testament passages that could be interpreted as references to Christ, including Isaiah 9:1-6. Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson 104

[16] Reinhartz, *Scripture* 3

[17] Baugh, op cit. 109

[18] ibid. 110

[19] ibid. 110

[20] ibid. 110

possibility that new stories, such as in film, can help modern Christians to engage with their faith and theologians to uncover new potential for dialogue and discussion. We find support for this approach in Reinhartz's assertion that "The movies attest to the Bible's role in shaping the ways in which we tell our stories, mold our heroes, understand our experience, imagine our futures, and explain ourselves to ourselves;"[21] we find the Bible (and, therefore, Christ) expressed through new stories in film, and through film we can understand more about how we engage with the Bible.

Having asserted that it is appropriate and, arguably, fulfilling to look for depictions of Christ-like figures within film, Baugh then moves on to consider ways in which these figures can be found and understood, drawing on the work of Ronald Holloway. Out of four different 'levels' of increasing symbolic significance, Holloway's fourth level describes the Christ-figure whose story runs entirely in parallel with that of Jesus and has "the modality of extended metaphor or allegory,"[22] and Baugh asserts that it is primarily this level of representation which he will consider. In this context, it is clear that Baugh is dealing with a slightly different type of Christ-figure than Deacy does below; while Deacy's exploration relates primarily to the redemptive significance of the protagonist, as this is where he identifies the key Christological attributes of the characters, Baugh looks for those who have a more holistic connection to the story of Jesus and who therefore act as a more complete allegory for him.

Noting that identifications with Christ occur in different ways in different narratives, from story arcs to single, image-laden shots[23], Baugh considers the differences between these representations and the need for significance beyond a fleeting moment of cohesion between Christ and character. He notes that in those instances where a reference to Christ is made once and fleetingly, such as a single visual cruciform image, "the term 'Christ-figure' has a rather limited significance, in that it does not in any way refer to the dynamic of the protagonist in the entire film."[24] Johnston shares this view, noting that

> There is a danger... in having overenthusiastic viewers find Christ-figures in and behind every crossbar or mysterious origin. This is to trivialize both the Christ-figures and the work of art. But in certain films, the Christ-figure is a primary metaphor.[25]

[21] Reinhartz op. cit. 188

[22] Ronald Holloway *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* 187

[23] We might, for instance, compare the whole plot of *Jesus of Montreal* to the single scene in *The Shawshank Redemption* where Andy Dufresne stands with arms outstretched in the driving rain.

[24] Baugh, op cit. 111

[25] Johnston op. cit. 69

For Baugh and Johnston, then, it is not enough for a character to be merely *identified* with Christ, but that this identification should be substantial and meaningful, deeper in character than a brief nod toward a possible parallel in narrative - a point to which we will return in due course. He considers a Christ-figure must therefore have a resemblance to Jesus that goes beyond the superficial, both in terms of the character itself and the core of their story.[26] Further to this, Baugh contests that there is a significant difference between a representation of Christ as a centre of faith and Jesus as a historical person, noting that

> the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, has a dual identity today: for the believing Christian, he is Jesus who is Risen, the Christ of faith, dynamic and active in our world; for the non-believer he remains a historical figure, who lived and died and who now belongs to human culture, and as such is available to that culture as a secular icon, just as the Christ of the faith is for the Christian a sacred icon.[27]

Developing this, and drawing on the work of Neil Hurley, Baugh determines that representations of Jesus taking the form of a fleeting metaphor or brief image are drawing on the secular iconography of Jesus are a person and cultural, historic figure. Here, Andy Dufresne's outstretched arms act as a signpost to the cultural figure of Christ, and perhaps indicate to viewers that this character has achieved some great transition to freedom both spiritually and literally.

However, it is not this scene or this moment that identifies Dufresne as a potential Christ-figure in a deeper sense; rather (as explored in the previous chapter), it is his commitment to redeeming Shawshank and his success in bringing a measure of salvation to himself and his compatriots. The crucifixion pose may bring this to the fore visually, but it is not the crucial part of Dufresne's depiction. On the other end of the spectrum are those films in which these metaphors are "extended to become the basis of narratives that reflect the fundamental dynamic of the Christian faith"[28] - those may have their foundations in themes of redemption, salvation and rebirth. Such films construct their Christ-figures as images that go further than nods to a historical figure and instead make links to the active 'Jesus who is Risen'.[29] These will be explored further below, when we consider the specific attributes that identify such characters, but they include films with qualities similar to *The Shawshank Redemption*, in that their Christological elements go beyond mere window-dressing and relate instead to the intertwining of core themes (such as redemption) within the plot, and careful presentation of the protagonists. Finally, Baugh recognises that "The Christ-figure is neither Jesus nor the Christ, but rather a shadow, a faint

[26] ibid. 111

[27] ibid. 111

[28] ibid. 111

[29] ibid. 111

glimmer or reflection of him,"[30] and that, represented by a human who lacks Jesus' divine attributes, the figure may be an imperfect sinner. Nonetheless, although the Christ-figure can never *be* Christ,

> the reference to Christ clarifies the situation of the Christ-figure and adds depth to the significance to his actions; on the other hand, the person and situation of the Christ-figure can provide new understanding of who and how Christ is.[31]

Baugh is careful here to remind us that, however theologically sound and well-presented the Christ-figure may be, it is still only ever a human representation of a divine figure and the fact of its portrayal by a human renders it imperfect. Nonetheless, such figures can be helpful to both theologian and film; for the latter they add further weight to the meaning of a character and a new layer of understanding for the film itself, and for the former they suggest new ways of thinking about the person or role of Christ.

Deacy, however, raises concerns that this insistence on the inadequacy of the Christ-figure may be a barrier to effective dialogue, writing that

> there is not much point in drawing correlations unless the figure of Jesus of Nazareth is itself allowed to be approached in a fresh, creative and challenging light. There should, in short, be a reciprocal relationship between Christ and Christ-figure... Baugh does not, however, go far enough in my view towards ensuring that a full and equal dialogical relationship is capable of being initiated... Unless both sides are treated with parity, we will never be able to move beyond the superficial classification of religious themes and imagery and engage in serious theological reflection.[32]

For Deacy, as we shall see shortly, the crux of the Christ-figure in film is to provide a point for dialogue and a new understanding of an ancient figure; his view is that this is only possible if there is a degree of partnership from both texts, which is unfulfilled by Baugh's opinion that the Christ-figure is just a 'shadow'. While it is true that a Christ-figures are not literally the actual Christ, it is nonetheless the case that they can represent facets of his nature or teachings that have previously been unexplored or unconsidered in that specific way. As such, for these depictions to be able adequately to express their full meanings, Christ-figures must be understood in direct comparison with all that we know of the historic Christ. To reduce them to mere 'reflections' is to undermine the comparison by disallowing the Christ-figure from having an equal voice in the conversation and bringing all that it might to the dialogue. We will look at Deacy's justification for his argument in more depth below, but at this juncture we should be cognisant of the difference

[30] ibid. 112

[31] ibid. 112

[32] Deacy, Chris, "Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?" *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*

between the actual Christ and a Christ-figure, we should nonetheless treat them as partners for dialogue.

Having considered the role of several Christ-figures, Baugh then seeks to lay out a number of 'dimensions', a total of 13, which are often present in these characters. He asserts that all of these can be recognised in "the fullness of their meaning in Jesus the Christ, and... to a lesser extent in the figure of Christ represented in the film in question."[33] As noted above, Baugh's view is that Christ-figures are not Christ, and the elements below could therefore never be fully present within such characters. However, they are still to be found in some form and in some combination, and are helpful markers for identifying characters who may be effective allegories for Christ.

Baugh is not the only theologian to take this approach; most notably, Anton Karl Kozlovic has also determined a list of characteristics that he asserts are shared by Christ-figures. At twenty-five, Kozlovic's list is considerably longer than Baugh's and (as we shall see) contains some more unusual characteristics. In the first instance, we will use Baugh's dimensions as the basis for a comparison between the high-level contents, before moving on to look at the remaining elements identified by Kozlovic and the criticisms of this approach, and considering what this reveals about the differences between the two lists.

1. 'Mysterious origin' - Baugh notes that, as a nod toward the immaculate conception, several Christ-figures share a sense of mystery in their background, from the outer-space arrival of *E.T.* to a direct analogy of the nativity in *Hail Mary*.[34] Similarly, Kozlovic notes that Christ-figures are often 'Outsiders', particularly focusing on figures from outer space such as in *Superman: The Movie* and *The Man Who Fell To Earth*.[35]

2. Disciples - here Baugh asserts that, just as Jesus gathered followers who carried on after his death, so too might representations of Christ in films; of note are *Cool Hand Luke* and *Jesus of Montreal*.[36] In the element 'Twelve Associates' Kozlovic makes a related point, noting that there may be (rather than the full twelve)

> a few archetypal Apostles such as Judas-figures or Peter-figures coupled with other iconic biblical characters such as Baptist-figures, Satan-figures, Mary

[33] Baugh, op cit. 205

[34] ibid. 205-6

[35] Kozlovic, op cit. para 30

[36] Baugh, op cit. 206

> Magdalene-figures etc. to counterpoint the Christ-figure. Their purpose is to set the scene and glorify the Christ-figure, no matter how indirectly.[37]

3. Commitment to justice - rather than physical aspects of Christ-figures, Baugh also brings out the emotional and moral angles of their personalities, focusing first on these characters' work in upholding justice and defending the innocent, such as in *Batman* and *Alien*.[38] Kozlovic has no direct equivalent of this element, although he does identify a related theme of unjust treatment of the innocent, such as the imprisonment of Andy Dusfresne in *The Shawshank Redemption*.[39]

4. Miracles - here Baugh uses the example of *Batman* again to illustrate the theme of characters working wonders for the benefit of the citizens in their film-worlds, although he notes that outside of the superhero genre this is a less common dimension.[40] Kozlovic also identifies "Miracles and Signs"[41] as an element although, more interestingly, he also draws on superhero films (albeit it in a different way) in his identification of 'Alter Egos' as a feature, noting that

> In fact, dual identities are also an archetypal feature of the mundane superheroes who are appropriately masked, such as the Lone Ranger, Batman, Robin, Batgirl, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, the Green Hornet, Daredevil, the Phantom, etc[42]

5. Conflict with authority - Baugh asserts that in the passion of Christ a key motivating factor was the tension he held with those in authority, and finds this same conflict at work in films such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Jesus of Montreal*. We can also see examples of this in *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Batman*. Kozlovic does not refer to a similar theme, but we might see elements of this in the 'innocence' characteristic if, as a result of false accusation, the protagonist is placed at odds with those in charge.

6. Redemption - a big factor in Deacy's consideration of Christ-figures, Baugh too recognises the importance of Christ as sacrifice for the redemption of humanity, and points to Hitchcock's *I Confess* as an exemplar of sacrificial characterisation.[43] This element is strikingly absent from Kozlovic's list, although he does identify "A Willing Sacrifice"[44] as a component, which is loosely related in the sense that through such a sacrifice a character might achieve redemption.

---

[37] Kozlovic, op cit. para 38

[38] Baugh, op cit. 206

[39] Kozlovic, op cit. para 52

[40] Baugh, op cit. 206-7

[41] Kozlovic, op cit. para 58

[42] ibid. para 33

[43] Baugh, op cit. 207

[44] Kozlovic, op cit. para 51

7. Withdrawal - Baugh notes that Jesus commonly withdraws from those around him, and that this is echoed within both *Cool Hand Luke* and *Therese*.[45] This, and the two following points, are not addressed by any of Kozlovic's characteristics.

8. Prayer - linked inexorably to the dimension of withdrawal, and arguably an aspect of it, is the action of prayer, which Baugh sees in films including *Francis of Assisi* and *Jesus of Montreal.*[46]

9. Rejection - Baugh notes that a key feature of Jesus' life was that of rejection and ridicule, and finds this brought out in the character of John Merrick in The Elephant Man.47

10. Shedding of blood - linked to the idea of redemption, Baugh sees the shedding of blood in sacrifice to be a dimension of Christ's story, found in films like *The Omega Man* and *Jesus of Montreal*.[48] Kozlovic's 'sacrifice' dimension again provides a related element when he notes that Christ-figures are "frequently empowered to choose sacrifice out of their newfound knowledge, status, position, mission requirements, etc."[49] While not exactly the same as Baugh's point, it shares the idea of bloodshed being experienced for others, where the sacrifice occurs in such a form.

11. Carrying the cross - one of the most striking dimension, and described by Baugh as having the potential to be "the point at which [the Christ-figure] most closely represents Christ,"[50] is the imagery of carrying the cross to Calvary as seen in *Jesus of Montreal* and *Dead Man Walking*.[51] This is an element shared to some degree by Kozlovic, who terms it "A Cruciform Pose"[52] and describes several examples of film characters posing with their arms outstretched in a manner redolent of Christ on the Cross, including *Superman: The Movie, Cool Hand Luke,* and *Taxi Driver*.

12. Music - while obviously not a part of Jesus' story in the Bible, Baugh nonetheless notes that it is common for events in the narrative of Christ-figures to be accompanied and under-scored by music from Christian tradition, such as the 'Dies Irae' in *I Confess.*[53] This is not covered by Kozlovic

[45] Baugh, op cit. 207-8

[46] ibid. 208

[47] ibid. 208-9

[48] ibid. 209

[49] Kozlovic, op cit. para 51

[50] Baugh, op cit. 209

[51] ibid. 209

[52] Kozlovic, op cit. para 53

[53] Baugh, op cit. 209

although, like the cross imagery above, the music may serve as a signpost to the character's role and have similar resonance for viewers.

13. Resurrection - Baugh's final dimension is, arguably, the most tangible link between the character and Christ, with Baugh noting that "a filmic Christ-figure is authenticated when there is some metaphorical representation of the Resurrection."[54] This is not necessarily a literal representation; Baugh gives the example of *During the Summer*, where the protagonist is shut in a cell (a death-like experience) but is given new hope upon seeing the face of someone he cares for in the street below.[55] This is almost directly echoed by Kozlovic's category "A Decisive Death and Resurrection"[56] in which he notes examples of literal or figurative 'deaths' followed by a revival or metaphorical reawakening; these include *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and *Edward Scissorhands*.

As is clear from the above, although there are many shared qualities between the characteristics identified by Baugh and Kozlovic, there are also several points at which there is no overlap. In addition to the absence of some of Baugh's elements in Kozlovic's collection, the latter also identifies several aspects that are unaddressed by Baugh. These include the depiction of baptism, a blue-eyed Christ, a sense of triumph, and the presence of Judas and Mary Magdalene-figures.[57] In relation to his twenty-five dimensions, Kozlovic notes that

> not all of these elements will be found in any single feature film, and each element may be interpreted differently depending upon the context, but their putative commonality should at least be the starting point for analysis,[58]

and it is indeed the case that he identifies no films containing all (or even the majority) of the listed elements. Rather, his list comprises a range of characteristics, some relatively complex (such as "Service to 'Lesser', Sometimes Ungrateful Others"[59]) and some wholly superficial (such as the aforementioned eye colour) that alone or in combination might be seen as demarcating a Christ-figure within the context of a film.

While Kozlovic is careful to note that no film will embody all these dimensions, Deacy raises concerns about the usefulness of such a list, saying

[54] ibid. 210

[55] ibid. 210

[56] Kozlovic, op cit. para 46

[57] ibid.

[58] ibid. para 20

[59] ibid. para 50

> it is significant that Kozlovic is unable to identify any films that fulfill even half of the structural characteristics that he so painstakingly delineates, with most of the films he discusses bearing witness to, at most, just three or four.[60]

We must therefore question the role that Kozlovic's dimensions play in light of how wide-ranging they are; if a character can be a Christ-figure while only displaying a small minority of the elements identified then has Kozlovic cast the net too wide in trying to identify these supposedly unifying characteristics? Therefore, Deacy's point also begs the question of how significant each element is and, if not significant by itself, in what combination they must be used to 'correctly' identify a character as a Christ-figure. Presumably, it is not Kozlovic's intention, in including blue eyes as a signifier of Christology, to demarcate every blue-eyed film character as a Christ-figure; however, in the absence of any clarifications over how the 'checklist' is to be used, this is the inference. If we assume that it is not sufficient by itself, with which other element should it be combined? Is a blue-eyed character with a mysterious origin a Christ-figure, or does there also need to be a sacrificial element to their actions? If the latter, then does the character's eye colour add anything to the significance of the allegory, beyond a rather esoteric signpost to the audience? Reinhartz, for instances, suggests that only two of the characteristics (cross symbology and actions for others) are necessary to identify a Christ-figure.[61] Baugh's list, on the other hand, is much narrower in scope and incorporates into its definitions a sense of whether a point is significant. Coupled with his view, explored earlier, that fleeting references are inadequate to properly identify a Christ-figure, his list gives the sense of a weightier background than Kozlovic's, a point which will be explored further shortly.

Kozlovic sees these characteristics as a way of hiding what would otherwise be overtly religious themes, writing that

> In essence, a filmic narrative can have a dual nature, namely, an overt plot plus a covert storyline of varying complexity that is comparable to the metaphorical or symbolic within literature... Through this narratological arrangement, secular films can engage in religious storytelling about biblical characters, ideas and themes without appearing "religious." In fact, innumerable Christ-figures and other holy subtexts are hidden within the popular cinema.[62]

His list acts as a way of decoding these 'hidden' references to reveal the Christian nature of a film by way of identifying the Christ-figure. He appears here to be implying that the majority of mainstream, ostensibly secular films are in fact implicitly religious, and that this religiosity can be uncovered by those furnished with a checklist of indicators; if a character satisfies some of those

[60] Deacy, "Pedagogical challenges", 132

[61] Adele Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-figures" in *The Routledge Companion* 431

[62] Kozlovic, op cit. 5

dimensions, they are a Christ-figure. On the other hand, Deacy is concerned that this attitude misses the significance of the Christ-figure role:

> If a parallel or correlation can be seen to enlighten, challenge or even disturb both our understanding of the original text and the film in question then this is a highly beneficial endeavour which fully, and necessarily, respects the autonomy of the art form itself rather than attempt to baptize it as implicitly Christian.[63]

For Deacy, the point of a Christ-figure is not to identify a film as 'Christian', but to provide a point for questioning and dialogue through the actions and motivations of the character in question. In relation to typological approaches to Christology, he asserts that "we need to set aside the quest for correlations and to enter into a conversation about the wider usefulness of juxtaposing theology and film;"[64] the value in analysing Christ-figures is not in identifying a hidden message per se, but in what such a message might bring to our understanding of film and scripture. McEver echoes this requirement when, in noting that one role of a Christ-figure is to bring accessibility to the story of Jesus, he also remarks that "The process also allows filmmakers and viewers greater interpretive freedom."[65] For him, the purpose of the Christ-figure is to open the film to interpretation by the audience and the filmmakers, not to present objective truth that requires no such consideration. To encompass this need for interpretative analysis, it is vital to look at the film on its own terms to develop our understanding of what the whole film is trying to say; to look at a character in isolation would be "dishonest if that identification is made without regard for the context within which the alleged Christ-figure appears."[66]

This in-depth and nuanced approach to Christ-figures is notably lacking from Kozlovic's work in this area, which is limited by its superficiality, in contrast with Baugh's more in-depth approach. Quite apart from raising concerns with items that are entirely pictorial - describing one as "the most facile of the list–the depiction of the Christ-figure 'with blue eyes'"[67] - Deacy criticises Kozlovic's 'Innocent' element, stating that the problem with relying on this as an indicator of an effective Christ-figure "is that the floodgates are opened to allow for everyone who is wrongly accused of a crime (or indeed all teachers) to be categorized as Christ-figures."[68] Films are full of people wrongly accused, from the teenage drama of *Mean Girls* to the serious point made by *The Life of David Gale*; while the latter may be potentially fruitful ground for finding a Christ-figure,[69] it

[63] Deacy, "Reflections"

[64] ibid.

[65] McEver, 2009, 280

[66] Deacy, op cit.

[67] ibid.

[68] Deacy, "Pedagogical challenges", 138

[69] This is explored in more depth by Deacy, op cit. 135

is hard to imagine that Lindsay Lohan's high school student Cady Heron would make for a similarly convincing allegory, despite being falsely accused of spreading malicious rumours. 'Innocence' is too broad a category, and says little about the nature of the character.

On the other hand, Baugh's 'Commitment to Justice', while a related sentiment, is a much more nuanced and developed dimension. Rather than simply be innocent (which, arguably, most people are!) the character must have a commitment to the upholding of justice and the fair treatment of others. Andy Dufresne does not merely think of his own innocence, for example, but looks for the fair and just treatment of his fellow inmates, including those who may genuinely be guilty. This goes beyond mere 'innocence' and into a more robust depiction of qualities that have inspired Christians, such as those moved (somewhat like Dufresne) to campaign for prison reform.[70] Similarly, Kozlovic's 'willing sacrifice' motif does not look in depth at the reasons behind that sacrifice and the discussion to be had as a result, but Baugh's redemptive dimension (which could encapsulate such an action) does require some exploration of motives and outcomes. As Deacy notes, "where points of affinity are discerned between film characters and the New Testament Jesus, the question must be raised as to whether this really resembles a theological activity;"[71] the fact that a character has sacrificed themselves may be a point of affinity, but the real theology behind the analysis is *why* this happened and what this uncovers about the nature of sacrifice in the film and the life of Jesus.

One criticism does apply to both scholars' approaches, however, in relation to the inherent nature of a list-based approach. Deacy asserts that such methodologies are predicated on being able objectively to identify Christ-figures, rather than acknowledging them as a product of individual interpretation. He writes that "nobody functions in a cultural vacuum, and there is no such thing as a definitive, normative, or objective theological lens through which one may embark upon a theological conversation"[72] and "what is customarily overlooked in this dynamic and over-zealous modern day quest is the role played by the interpreter... there is no such entity as an objective cinematic Christ-figure."[73] The problem with constructing a list of features common to or shared by Christ-figures is that this attaches too concrete a structure to a subtle and interpretative theological concept; either a character has some or all of the attributes on the list, or they do not. The only scope for interpretation might be whether a specific attribute is present - for instance, whether a character's actions count as a sacrifice, or whether their eyes are blue or green - but that is a considerably less nuanced and constructive discussion than over the wider motives of a

[70] Quakers in the World "Reformers in Criminal Justice" *Quakers in the World*

[71] Deacy, op cit. 131

[72] ibid. 130

[73] Deacy, 2006

character's actions or the details of their background. As noted above, Baugh's version of the list leaves significantly more room for this type of debate, but still attaches objective labels to the Christ-figures he identifies.

A last potential problem, which encapsulates many of the above points, comes to light through a point made by Mark Roncace in relation to the film *Sling Blade*. Roncace views the murderous character of Karl in *Sling Blade* as a Christ-figure and is not alone in this[74], but his rationale diverges considerably from the others', noting that they highlight "the sacrificial nature of [Karl's] actions."[75] In particular, Roncace draws attention to McEver's conclusion that "Karl's murdering of Doyle is an act of "atonement""[76] and his focus on suffering for others. In contrast, Roncace asserts that McEver (and, by extension, the others drawing similar conclusions) "has overlooked the image of Karl as a violent, apocalyptic Christ."[77] Roncace draws up a list of attributes and background devices that he considers to be signifiers of Karl's role, several of which - 'simplicity', ostracism, prayer, cross imagery[78] - appear to come straight from Kozlovic's list. However, he also makes clear that, although he sees Karl's violent behaviour as indicative of his role as the 'apocalyptic' Christ from Revelation[79], others either disagree entirely (such as Harry Kiely, who views Karl as an antichrist-figure[80]) or, as noted above, overlook the violence of Karl's actions and find a softer focus to his role as Christ-figure. What is particularly striking about this character in relation to Kozlovic's list is that, as evinced by Roncace, we have a character who embodies several attributes - relatively many, in comparison to other examples, and more than just the superficial elements - and yet there is disagreement about what makes him a Christ-figure and whether he even is one. Not only does this raise questions about the applicability of the listed attributes to a Christ-figure and further the concerns about which are significant, but it also feeds into the above discussion around the objectivity of Christ-figures. If this were an objective matter then, faced with Kozlovic's list, there would be no debate about whether Karl is a Christ-figure and, if so, the basis on which this role is to be understood. From Roncace's drawing together of different opinions on the character, it is clear that this is not the case.

As explored so far, Baugh's list-based approach to analysing Christ-figures has its limitations, although is significantly more refined that Kozlovic's. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, it

[74] Roncace notes that at least five others also draw the same conclusion

[75] Mark Roncace "Paradoxical Protagonists" *Screening Scripture* 286

[76] ibid. 287

[77] ibid. 287

[78] ibid. 289-291

[79] ibid. 296

[80] ibid. 288

provides an interesting structure to an initial analysis of a character and, if we keep in mind the need to look further into the implications of the presence Baugh's dimensions, may be a fruitful approach if exercised with caution. As such, the case study at the end of this chapter will incorporate an analysis of Jack in terms of the thirteen characteristics outlined above, with reference to Kozlovic where relevant. However, this will simply be a starting point, and we will then continue to look in more depth at the character of Jack to look beyond these attributes and to the wider context and narrative in which he is placed.

Christopher Deacy - redemptive possibilities

In light of Deacy's criticism of Kozlovic and Baugh's approaches (to a greater and lesser extent respectively), we must consider his own work in this field in more detail. Deacy's focus on interpretation and acknowledgement of subjectivity in the identification of Christ-figures means that his work provides a helpful alternative view of the topic that will allow us to explore more fully the nature of the character in this chapter's case study. One crucial set of questions framed by Deacy, through which we might filter the following analysis of his wider work, concerns the role of Christ-figures (as touched on above). Identifying the importance of the whole film as context, he writes,

> How does a theological interpretation affect our understanding of the film? Does it enable us to apprehend the issues and themes delineated in the picture in a fresh and creative light? Does it make it easier or more difficult for a viewer to engage in dialogue with a movie if there are biblical antecedents to its narrative?[81]

These questions focus on the core of this approach to theology and popular culture, and the themes that run throughout this thesis; to what extent do the religious motifs and themes, and the ensuing theological understanding of them, contribute to our wider understand of both text and theology?

In *Screen Christologies*, when describing his approach to identifying and interpreting Christ-figures, Deacy draws a distinction between two forms of Christology found within film: first, he describes a 'high' form as originating from the Apollinarian view that, "since only God can save the world then, if Christ is our Saviour, he must be a completely *divine* figure."[82] In this form is found the type of hero who seems somewhat 'other' to the humans that he encounters and saves. Deacy mentions specifically the characters of Indiana Jones, whom he describes as appearing to be "the embodiment of good, and, even, the necessary agent of morality in an

[81] Deacy, "Reflections"

[82] Christopher Deacy. *Screen Christologies* 78

otherwise all-too-human world,"[83] and Luke Skywalker whose "messianic connotations"[84] are seen in analogies with the life of Christ, such as bestowing 'The Force' onto his followers in a manner akin to Jesus blessing His disciples with the Holy Spirit.[85] These characters are chiefly painted as existing 'above' the others who populate their worlds, and the direction of the film sets them apart from the more typically human characters (even though in *Star Wars* the other characters may be physically *in*human). They are portrayed as having the right answers and leading others along morally correct, even heroic or virtuous, paths, and don't fall prey to temptations such as greed. Indeed, Luke Skywalker's entire story arc shows his battle against the 'dark side' and his insistence on not making the same flawed moral choice as his father.

Interestingly, Kozlovic also briefly considers *Star Wars* Christologies, identifying Obi-Wan (Ben) Kenobi as a more convincing Christ-figure;

> Ben is a Christ-figure who tells Lord Darth Vader (David Prowse; voice of James Earl Jones): "If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can imagine," just like Jesus Christ.[86]

While Kozlovic's identification of this scene sets up the possibility of Kenobi as a Christ-figure, the striking element for the purposes of this part of Deacy's work is another aspect of the character's nature. In the film, Ben Kenobi is initially presented as an ordinary member of his community and there is nothing particularly special about him - it is only later that he is revealed to be a powerful Jedi who helps to shape the path of Luke Skywalker's life. He is far more down to earth than Skywalker and is not depicted in the same 'high' and detached manner.

This is notable because, for Deacy, such a 'high' Christology is an unsatisfactory representation of the nature and role of Christ in human redemption; deconstructing the themes encountered in the characterisations of these Christologies, he concludes that they are theologically unsound. He notes that, because traditional views of Jesus as both human and divine need the human side as much as the divine,

> without adequate emphasis on the authentically human nature of the person of Christ, which is liable to result from an over emphasis on his divinity, the extent to which the person of Christ constitutes a redemptive figure is actually placed in serious jeopardy.[87]

[83] ibid. 79

[84] ibid. 79

[85] ibid. 80

[86] Kozlovic, op cit. para 27

[87] Deacy, op cit. 82

This lack of humanity in the all-too-divine Christ-figures of *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* is therefore theologically problematic because they downplay the humanity required for the characters to represent real exemplars of redemptive possibility. In Luke Skywalker, for instance, we see flashes of his humanity as he struggles with temptation, but we do not get the sense that giving in is a real possibility. On the other hand, and while we will refrain from making any judgement as to whether Kenobi is indeed a Christ-figure, Obi-Wan embodies humanity far more thoroughly and, in this regard, has more potential for being an effective Christ-figure than Skywalker. Although the characters of Jones and Skywalker are physically human and therefore technically represent a facet of Christ's humanity, their roles as moral arbiters and longed-for messiahs remove them from unity with humanity. This would not be an issue if the films then focussed on bringing them back to this origin, but instead they focus on what sets the character apart from other humans. Even non-allegorical representations of Jesus may find problems here: regarding *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Deacy notes that the film draws most attention to events where Jesus was shown to be divine (such as his miracles), and that even Jesus' dialogue sets him in a "category apart from all the other characters"[88] because his lines are derived from the King James Bible as opposed to everyday language[89]. As such, this representation of Jesus is theologically unsound because it denies the humanity that Deacy considers essential for an authentic Christ-figure. Therefore, while all these characters offer the promise of redemption to the citizens of the films themselves, their lack of humanity makes them inauthentic and unable to carry meaning beyond the film-world.

Baugh also identifies this separation as a cause for concern; writing about *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, he notes that "Jesus seems separated from the people and even from his disciples"[90] and that the film's depiction of the Sermon on the Mount uses shots that "emphasize his distance from the people, as does the oft-repeated image of Jesus from behind, while talking as if to himself."[91] Strikingly, Baugh also criticises the film for downplaying Jesus' *divinity* as well, through the absence of miracles and the near renouncing of creation itself,[92] leading him to state that "If Pasolini's Jesus is not well integrated into his [divinely created] world, he is even less integrated into human society."[93] For both scholars, the balance between human and divine is integral to the success of a Christ-figure, whether allegorical or literal.

[88] ibid. 83

[89] ibid. 83

[90] Baugh, op cit. 104

[91] ibid.105

[92] ibid. 104

[93] ibid. 104

In contrast, Deacy outlines examples that illustrate the possibilities for seeing a depth of humanity within depictions of Christ. Of particular note is Willem Dafoe's portrayal of Jesus in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which Deacy describes as "The epitome of an Antiochene Christology"[94] - a reference to the tradition that asserts a human soul is a requirement for redemption because it is the central part of our consciousness.[95] Deacy points to the ways in which *Last Temptation* sets Jesus down firmly among humanity, like being shown on his audience's level during the Sermon on the Mount,[96] and only performing miracles once he has decided to live as a human.[97] What is key here in Deacy's analysis is that this focus on humanity does not do away with divinity altogether;[98] Jesus performs miracles and undergoes a vivid period of temptation in the desert, which, in contrast with the films that focus on divinity and in so doing remove the humanity, serve to depict both aspects of his nature. By bringing these two elements together, Deacy asserts that the film "does not deny Christ's divinity but, in contradistinction to the traditional Christ epic, it stresses the *unity* between the divine and human natures,"[99] which therefore allows Defoe's Christ to be a redeemer set apart from those in films like *Greatest Story*.

Baugh also writes on *The Last Temptation of Christ* and, although he agrees that the film succeeds in drawing on the human aspects of Jesus rather than depicting him as wholly divine[100], he raises concerns about the extent to which this is done. Scorsese's Jesus "[opposes] his own divine identity and vocation... [a position] unlikely in first-century Palestine, and certainly unacceptable to any serious theologian or believing Christian;"[101] what Deacy views as an example of human and divine unity, Baugh considers to be a rejection of Jesus' divine nature altogether and, in doing so, reminds us of the necessity to bear in mind the alternative interpretations of a single narrative (even more so the multiple narratives possible in some games). We will return shortly to this difference of opinion, as it offers a point of discussion with the core elements of Deacy's position.

In considering human examples of the Antiochene Christology, Deacy suggests the possibility of *Dead Poets Society* as a potential source of balance between human and divine. He notes particularly that the character of Keating "inspires his pupils to follow a path of self-fulfilment and to encounter themselves as individual human beings against the forces of conformity and

[94] Deacy, op cit. 85

[95] ibid. 82

[96] ibid. 86

[97] ibid. 88

[98] ibid. 87

[99] ibid. 87

[100] Baugh, op cit. 65

[101] ibid. 65

institutionalization, which have the potential to impede human growth and development"[102] and that one of his students has "learned to pursue a life of dignity, truthfulness, freedom and authenticity"[103] to the point where he chooses death instead of relinquishing it.[104] In this regard, Deacy notes that Keating is "in some respects, *Christ-like*, and [is] much closer to the person of Christ than the more-than-human [redeemer-figure] of Indiana Jones."[105] Taking this example we can therefore consider that the divinity of Christ can be demonstrated through a human character who reflects values and aspirations that go beyond the commonplace or material. McEver also identifies Keating's Christological potential, noting the school's aim "to make Keating the sacrificial lamb"[106] for his student's suicide and that "Keating's regeneration comes in the final scene, when the disciples engage in a demonstration which affirms his impact on their lives."[107]

However, even though he comes closer than others to being a Christ-figure, the character of Keating is not sufficient for Deacy to consider him a "fully fledged Christ-figure."[108] Although Deacy notes that Keating's offering of liberation from institutionalization resembles in some way "Christ's redemptive activities,"[109] it is still in his humanity that Keating is lacking. It is not because he represents a set-apart humanity, as with Skywalker, but because "he has not himself come face to face with his own limitations and fallibilities as a human being, a confrontation which is a necessary prerequisite of redemption."[110] Deacy makes this limitation clear when he says

> It is not the case that all film protagonists are 'Christ-like' simply by virtue of being intrinsically human in nature, and performing acts that accord with various tenets of Christ's life and work. Rather, for the film protagonist to be in any fundamental sense Christ-like, and to be capable of imparting the possibility of redemption, there must be a specific confrontation with evil and suffering, and with the human propensity towards sin - the absolute and non-negotiable prerequisite of redemption in the Christian tradition.[111]

From this, we can understand that the nature of a Christ-figure does not just come from Christ-like acts and a connection to humanity, but from an engagement with the core aspects of humanity from which redemption is being offered. The rather saccharine versions of Jesus

---

[102] Deacy, op cit. 94

[103] ibid. 95

[104] ibid. 95

[105] ibid. 96

[106] Matthew McEver "The Messianic Figure in Film: Christology Beyond the Biblical Epic," *Journal of Religion & Film*

[107] ibid.

[108] Deacy, op cit. 96

[109] ibid. 96

[110] ibid. 97

[111] ibid. 96

mentioned above and the human characters who, like Keating, do not understand their own fallibilities are unsuitable as Christ-figures because they have not had the confrontation with evil that Deacy identifies as necessary for a redemptive role.

It is evident from Deacy's exploration so far that the type of character comprising an authentic Christ-figure is one who carries the promise of redemption and balances the focus on the human and the divine. His regard for the importance of redemptive possibility is set out in his response to Kozlovic, where he states

> the significance of Christ's redemptive work is that, as a consequence of his atoning death on the cross, redemption may be imparted and accomplished in turn by those who hear and have responded to the Christian message of salvation. In an analogous manner, we should not rule out the possibility that Christ-figures... not only suffer (and even undergo redemption) themselves but are themselves potential agents and bearers of redemption.[112]

That is, because part of the outcome of the crucifixion was the provision of redemption for others, Christ-figures may themselves be redemptive agents in a manner that goes beyond merely symbolically depicting the life or nature of Christ. It is clear to see how this might be achieved in a direct portrayal of Jesus himself, but then the question remains of how to balance the human and divine when representing His redemptive possibilities through a fully human character. The examples of Indiana Jones and Luke Skywalker above gives us a hint, as these are characters whose focus and place was beyond the reach of ordinary humanity and offered more than mere mortals are usually capable of, and - as is the point of their inclusion - they go too far and separate themselves too distantly from the humanity that they should also represent.

In light of this rather damning indictment of characters held to be Christ-figures, we must ask then what type of character would Deacy to consider to be an authentic model of redemption? For Deacy, the qualities intrinsic to the characters of the specific genre of *film noir* generally, and the work of Martin Scorsese more specifically, are those that lend themselves particularly well to authentic representations of Christ.[113] Indeed, Deacy's reasoning for this is that, considering the requirement for human suffering to be engaged with,

> since the dark, cynical and oppressive milieu of *film noir* epitomizes the human condition, and... is thereby a fertile site of redemptive activity, there is a fundamental sense in which the film audience has the potential to undergo an experience of redemption.[114]

[112] Deacy, "Reflections"

[113] ibid. 98

[114] ibid. 98

Since the protagonists of *film noir* are characters who are fundamentally flawed and utterly human, and who suffer for themselves and their base humanity before redeeming themselves or others, they fulfil the criteria that Keating and others were unable to. Like Skywalker, they bring redemption, and, like Keating, they do this whilst lacking the messianic qualities that focus too heavily on the divine, but unlike these characters they confront the messiness and absurdity of real human suffering and the almost indefatigable ability to overcome this obstacle. *Noir* characters are so flawed as to be - often explicitly - criminal,[115] but for Deacy this imperfection is precisely what perfects them as figures of redemption because it provides that important engagement with basic humanity.

Interestingly, Kozlovic makes an explicit reference to redemption as part of his list when commenting on the centrality of Christ-figures to the plots in which they figure, stating that "'redeemer Christ-figures' emerge from a context of evil or strife to take on the sinfulness of those around them, usually through their own suffering or death."[116]

However, although Kozlovic identifies the potential significance of redemptive qualities, we must bear in mind the concerns raised above about the over-flexibility of the attributes he lists. While it is referred to, it is one of many qualities that may or may not be evident in a character - indeed, it does not even have its own place on the list, but occupies a single paragraph within the 'Central' item (the attribute of a character being central to the film "just like the Son of God is central to the second half of the Christian Bible"[117]). As such, Kozlovic clearly does not place the same weight on the necessity of this quality that Deacy does; for Kozlovic, such an attribute is optional and of only fleeting importance, but for Deacy it is central to a character's role as Christ-figure.

This focus on *noir* demonstrates why Deacy's work is so useful here; the genre shares many similarities with video games. As Deacy notes, the genre is rather lacking in a comprehensive and widely-agreed definition.[118] This is even more so the case when it comes to video games, where genres tend to be largely based on the playing style over narrative content (although some games may be described as 'horror' or 'fantasy RPG'). Therefore, when exploring the nature of Christ-figures in video games it will be based on Deacy's assertion that what "distinguishes *film noir* from films of an escapist persuasion is the challenge that such films present to the optimistic, life-affirming and 'magical' spirit of traditional Hollywood cinema,"[119] with utopian musicals and

[115] ibid. 99

[116] Kozlovic, op cit, para 28

[117] ibid. para 27

[118] Deacy, op cit. 36

[119] ibid. 36

romantic comedies as particular anti-examples of *noir*. Defined in this way, *noir* games become almost ubiquitous - aside from children's games and 'rhythm' games (like *Guitar Hero*) there are few games that present an idealised world. A huge number of FPS games[120] feature the lead character either as an underdog fighting against forces destroying the world[121], or as a petty criminal rising through the ranks of a dystopian city[122], and almost always feature revenge and betrayal. Even beloved and happy-go-lucky series like *Sonic* or *Mario* titles show a world in which princesses are captured and innocent creatures enslaved, with the protagonists forced to battle their nemeses in a bitter final fight that decides the fate of their world. Considered in this manner, the medium of video games may perhaps be an even richer source of *noir* narrative possibility than cinema itself.

Deacy's key examples of *noir* protagonists as redeemer-figures come from the films of Scorsese, one of which is *Mean Streets*. He draws out the distinction between the empty redemption offered to the lead character, Charlie, by the Catholic Church, in the shape of a weekly ritual of "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys" in response to weekly sins, and the possibility of redemption that Charlie carves out for himself by trying to redeem another in turn.[123] Charlie's potential chance at redemption is made authentic by his face-to-face confrontation with the consequences of the life he leads, and the sacrifices he makes in attempting to save his cousin Johnny Boy from sharing the same inevitable fate, concluding with a car crash.[124] Deacy remarks that for Charlie "this moment epitomizes his hitherto implicit acknowledgement that without a painful penance or sacrifice one cannot hope to be redeemed,"[125] drawing comparisons with the pain of Christ on the cross and making clear the link between Christ's humanity in suffering and the need for Christ-figures in film to undergo something of the same. Moreover, Deacy notes that "it is Johnny Boy's sin that is the prerequisite to [Charlie's] own ability to undergo a process of salvation"[126] as he must take responsibility for how his actions have ended, and so serve his "penance."[127]

Out of all the potential Christ-figures mentioned thus far, Charlie is, on the face of it, the least likely of candidates. He is a criminal who has lost trust in his Catholic faith and finds the traditional

---

[120] See, among many others*, Fable, Bioshock, Fallout, Infamous, Prototype, Alan Wake, GTA, LA Noir, Saints Row, Doom* and *Quake*

[121] Such as *Infamous, Beyond: Two Souls*, and the whole *Bioshock* series

[122] The *Grand Theft Auto* series is perhaps the best example of these, but similar themes can be found in *Kane & Lynch*, for example

[123] ibid. 107-110

[124] ibid. 107-110

[125] ibid. 110

[126] ibid. 110

[127] ibid. 110

routes of absolution to be inauthentic and lacking in meaning. He bears no resemblance to the insipid and overly-divine Christ of *Greatest Story*, and similarly has nothing in common with the well-meaning Keating or messianic Skywalker. Instead, he is a character who takes his redemption into his own hands and seeks out an absolution more powerful than the recited rhetoric prescribed for him by the Church. As Deacy notes, Charlie doesn't rely on words but upon actions, drawing comparison with Francis of Assisi.[128] These actions lead to more suffering and a higher degree of challenge than Charlie has ever known, but *because* of these actions he becomes a meaningful figure for redemption because he seeks salvation for himself and others that is honest about the nature of humanity's capacity for transgression. The conclusion to which his actions inexorably lead has "opened up... the process of redemption"[129] through "his confrontation with sin and with his struggle for harmony and integration,"[130] demonstrating the value and necessity of humanity in redemption.

Returning to Baugh's criticism of *Last Temptation*, we therefore find a point to consider in relation to Deacy's focus on *film noir*. Baugh's concerns relate to Jesus' apparent rejection of his divinity, saying that "Scorsese shows Jesus violently resisting God, trying to escape from God and God's influence. Trying, that is, to escape from himself."[131] As noted above, *Last Temptation's* depiction of Jesus' struggle with his divine nature is the very quality that Deacy identifies as redolent of a protagonist who can believably offer redemption; more importantly, this sense of facing up to imperfection and temptation is precisely the characteristic that makes *film noir* a rich source of the type of protagonist that Deacy considers most resonant as a Christ-figure. Essentially, *Last Temptation* is perhaps unique as an example of *Jesus-film noir*.

What does this difference of opinion suggest? Aside from a reminder, as noted above, that we must be cognisant of different interpretations of the same narrative, and even different takes on the *same* interpretation - since Deacy and Baugh agree on the essentials of *Last Temptation's* depiction - it provides an opportunity to look more closely at difference between literal and allegorical presentations of Jesus. Although Deacy's argument draws upon both, his references to the role of *film noir* protagonists are in relation to allegorical Christ-figures, rather than actual depictions of Jesus. While Baugh's concerns about Scorsese's depiction of Jesus in *Last Temptation* may be well-founded, these were very specifically in relation to a literal, rather than allegorical, presentation of Jesus. As such, while 'Jesus noir' may be viewed as taking the

[128] ibid. 109

[129] ibid. 110

[130] ibid. 110

[131] Baugh, op cit. 65

representation of his humanity too far, it does not necessarily follow that this would still be the case for allegorical Christ-figures.

This difference may be the result of the degree to which humanity is 'obvious' in the respective protagonists. For films depicting Jesus, we are already aware of the divinity narrative surrounding his character and will therefore view such depictions through this lens; in the case of allegorical representations, we know we are looking at wholly human characters because divinity is not an intrinsic part of their existence. To place Jesus in a human context means acknowledging his ordinariness and, to some degree, reflecting a struggle between the human and divine (whether or not to the extent of *Last Temptation*). For representational characters, however, because we already know them to be human it is necessary to further highlight their flaws - mere ordinariness is insufficient for these characters because we are so used to it that it must be underscored by a greater degree of struggle and temptation. Jesus' humanity is shown by being on our level and facing some uncertainty or difficulty with his divine role, but humans are already so flawed that a non-divine Christ-figure in a film needs these qualities to be amplified. The mixing of these two states is, perhaps, what leads to Baugh's discomfort with the depiction in *Last Temptation*; the character of Jesus is shown in a state of such temptation and uncertainty that it is more akin to the treatment of human protagonists in search of redemption - as Baugh identifies, this diminishes his divinity to the extent that it essentially removed. Therefore, the use of noir-style struggle as a hallmark of an effective Christ-figure may be most appropriate in allegorical depictions, rather than straightforward Jesus narratives. This need not concern us particularly for the case study in this chapter - our selection is allegorical and there is not yet a video game equivalent of *Last Temptation* - but it must be borne in mind to understand the context of Baugh and Deacy's approaches, and for any future exploration of material to which it would be relevant.

Case Study - The figure of 'Jack' in Bioshock

The character of Jack was mentioned previously, and rather than look at a single aspect of his story (that of pre-destination as explored in the second chapter), I intend to explore his characteristics and determine how far he could be considered a Christ-figure under Deacy and Baugh's approaches. Looking at the game through the lens of both these ways of analysing Christ-figures is important because it gives a wider view of the matter. With reference to characteristic-based and redemption-based approaches to the subject, David Fillingim writes that

> the concurrent presence in a film of a significant cluster of such characteristics warrants reading certain characters as Christ-figures. But Deacy is correct in

> pointing out that cinematic Christ-figures do not automatically provide raw material for constructive Christian theology.[132]

While the points made above undermine a collection of characteristics 'warranting' a Christ-figure interpretation, a list-based approach like Kozlovic's[133] may provide an indication that a character is playing the role of a Christ-figure, therefore instructing us to look more carefully because a figure with those characteristics might have more to say. However, it is this 'might have more to say' factor that Deacy so clearly calls for. By using both approaches - characteristics to determine a more superficial similarity with Christ, and a focus on the redemptive qualities of the character to understand more about his nature - we can benefit from the most helpful facets of each.

It is important to first consider the potential for spaces between the two media types that may not allow for this comparison to take place effectively. First, we must consider the nature of game characters and the characteristics that they must embody to be considered as Christ-figures. Deacy's approach to examining Christ-figures demands that there be a high degree of humanity present within the character, as without this quality the representation is inauthentic and theologically flawed, and Baugh also recognises the importance of this quality, but this might be a harder distinction to make in games than in films. In both media types the protagonists are not confined to being mere mortals - the settings of game and film run through a whole inhuman spectrum from stylistically improbable animals in *Ice Age* or *Sonic*, sentient everyday items in *Toy Story* and *Viva Piñata*, or humanoid aliens and cyborgs beloved of sci-fi titles from films like *Aliens* to *Superman*, and games like *Metroid Prime* to *No Man's Sky*. With this huge range of character types, are characters with real humanity common enough to make the potential for Christ-figures significant? In the context of a game environment, it arguably doesn't matter whether your character is the archetypal action-hero human or a walking piggy bank - their humanity is not present in their form but in their actions and character. If a character is acting in a manner consistent with authentic humanity then they can be considered as such, even if on the surface they are entirely other. Furthermore, it is important to remember that these characters are created by humans and therefore intrinsically reflect human values even when set in worlds that are intended to be light years away; in this regard, they fall easily within Baugh's rationale for considering Christ-figures in films because as human stories they have the capacity to illustrate facets of Christ's nature.

---

[132] David Fillingim, 'When Jesus was a Girl: Polymythic Female Christ-figures in Whale Rider and Steel Magnolias', in *Journal of Religion & Film*, 20

[133] although, as already explored, we will primarily refer to Baugh because the characteristics he identifies are deeper and more nuanced

This brings us to a second consideration - if we argue that humanity is embodied in game characters because they are controlled by humans, then is it subsequently the case that we can never find an example of a 'high' form of Christology within video games? After all, it would be hard for a Christ-figure to be lacking in humanity when his every action is controlled by a human player. Although characters in films are acted by humans, they don't have the same limitations because those humans are deliberately choosing how to portray the figure, through careful acting, directing, and filming (for instance, the Vulcan lack of emotion in *Star Trek* shows humanoid characters but with very different natures and characteristics). The same cannot be said for the way that games are played because players don't control their characters based on any regard to the balance between the humanity and divinity of the protagonist. As such, it seems that there could never be little enough humanity in human-controlled characters for high representations of Christ (that is, those that focus on the divine) to exist.

However, it is also important to consider the role that the other elements of film - such as direction, writing and the way in which a scene is filmed - play in defining the balance between Christ's divinity and humanity. In the case of *Greatest Story* Deacy notes that it wasn't just the portrayal of the character that created the divide between Jesus and the people around him, but the use of Biblical language and placement of the character in key scenes. Similarly, it was the story itself that prevented Keating from engaging with his own humanity, rather than just Robin Williams' depiction. In the same way, if the player is directed to make her character perform certain tasks and is told that the character has particular motivations for doing so, or if the dialogue between characters is scripted in a particular way, then there is still room for these characters to have 'too much' divinity. It may be the case that the characters err in the execution of tasks, or have the potential to go about them in less than perfect ways (such as committing theft in *Fable* to provide money to correct an injustice), but the possibility is there nonetheless. It would therefore appear that, while human control allows for the possibility of humanity within non-human characters, it does not automatically follow that there is no possibility of high Christologies either.

Having considered the initial potential problems with implementing Deacy and Baugh's concepts across different media, it is now important to explore them through application. I intend to take the example of Jack from *Bioshock* and determine how far he can be considered a Christ-figure for both methods of classification. Not only will this provide an insight into the prospect of finding similar kinds of Christ-figures in games as in film, but will also afford a further opportunity to examine the differences between the two approaches.

The Story of Jack

The player, who sees the world from Jack's point of view and is never shown more of the character than his hands, is quickly pitched into a battle to save the citizens of the world from the crazed inhabitants of Rapture[134]. The player is frequently required to take part in violence against the deranged citizens, primarily for self-defence, but often pre-emptively, and is finally tasked with deliberately committing two acts of murder, one of them against his own father. Along this journey Jack is given opportunities to demonstrate the traits of mercy and selflessness, or instead choose to condemn others to death for his own benefit. Throughout the game the player is shown the twisted nature of Rapture's inhabitants, such as the plastic surgeon who aims to recreate the beauty of a Picasso portrait in living faces and the insane, bereaved mother who places a gun in her pram in place of a baby.

The Christological Dimensions of Jack

However, determining whether Jack is likely to also be considered an authentic Christ-figure following Baugh's work is less clear-cut. Rather than outright requirements, Baugh instead provides indicators in the form of characteristics that a Christ-figure is likely to possess. We must therefore consider which of the dimensions brought out by Baugh are embodied by Jack, and whether they are sufficient to categorise him as such a figure.

1. 'Mysterious origin' - when the player first begins the game, they are given no information about Jack and the implication is that Jack is suffering from amnesia; certainly, he appears not to recognise Rapture or have any concept of the way the city works. Clues are given throughout the game as to his background, but even when Jack's origin is revealed it is so bizarre as to still be practically inexplicable.

2. Disciples - Jack collects an ally as he travels through the game, but as he has no teaching or similar message to share it is hard to see that they could reasonably be considered a 'disciple'. Nonetheless, she aids Jack in his attempts to escape Rapture, and it could be considered that this is a shared goal of great importance, since it leads to the defeat of evil as embodied in Fontaine. It is also notable that Jack's original ally, 'Atlas', is revealed as being Fontaine who has been manipulating him all along. Jack may not have a disciple, but in the betrayal of 'Atlas' he certainly finds a Judas.

[134] As noted in previous chapters, Rapture is a city beneath the Atlantic Ocean, founded on the tenets that man should not be constrained by government, socialism, or ethics. By the time the story of *Bioshock* begins, the city has fallen into civil war and most inhabitants are either dead or have been rendered insane by genetic splicing technologies.

3. Commitment to justice - there is potential within *Bioshock* for Jack to demonstrate this facet, but it is not required by the game. Throughout the story Jack is given the opportunity to kill or save 'Little Sisters' (young girls who are biologically altered to produce ADAM), and the player chooses which it could be. Should they choose to save the girls, it could well be argued that this is an example of Jack helping the innocent and therefore upholding justice. Moreover, the final showdown with Fontaine, in which Jack murders him to prevent the disease of Rapture spreading to the rest of the world, might be viewed as a form of capital punishment and a judgement upon Fontaine for ruining the utopia created by Ryan.

4. Miracles - Jack does not work miracles as would commonly be understood. However, through the power of the ADAM and EVE substances he has powers that go beyond those of an ordinary human, such as the ability to shoot fire and electricity (and bees) from his hands.

5. Conflict with authority - during the main narrative arc Jack finds himself caught up in the arguments that lead to Rapture's civil war, and ends up face to face with the man who assumed power in the city and sealed its fate. Jack also battles with the 'authority' of those using the "would you kindly?" trigger that has the power to control him.

6. Redemption - as will be explored in more detail below, Jack provides redemption for Rapture by removing a possible source of its corruption, while also preventing this corruption from spreading to the surface. In some senses, he also redeems himself by discovering his origin and addressing the flaws of his father's work in Rapture.

7. Withdrawal - there is no real sense of Jack withdrawing during the game, although for most it he is alone with only the voices on his two-way radio to keep him company. As in many FPS games, Jack never speaks, but this is more a facet of the medium (which avoids distracting the player from the feeling that they 'are' the character) than of Jack himself. Therefore, these is a sense of enforced withdrawal from the world, which is only reversed in the 'good' ending (where Jack is surrounded by family).

8. Prayer - the concept of prayer, or even a convincing allegory, does not appear in *Bioshock*. As noted above, Jack never speaks, and nor does the player see enough of him to know whether he makes any prayer-like gestures.

9. Rejection - having brought Jack through Rapture, Fontaine (one of the very few real humans that Jack encounters) then tries to murder him, as do all the sub-human characters throughout the game as well as some set-piece confrontations with more complex characters. It could be argued that this constitutes the rejection by authority of a man who clearly poses a threat to the

status quo of Rapture on one level, and the rejection of one who is 'different' by the populace on another

10. Shedding of blood - depending on the skill level of the player, Jack is frequently in a position to be injured and is regularly attacked by a variety of other characters. There are also frequent images of bloodshed within Rapture, including pictures of the 'Picasso' beauties created by the insane plastic surgeon. Most notably, the phrase "would you kindly?" appears scrawled in blood on a wall; the use of a phrase so inextricably linked to Jack's persona clearly connects the character to this bloodshed.

11. Carrying the cross - there is no notable cross imagery in *Bioshock* (although much religious imagery appears in the sequel, in the form of references to a 'lamb' and even a quasi-Jordanic baptism scene). However, the sight of Jack's wrists reveals that he has five links of a chain tattooed across each one, which is understood by fans to be a reference to both the ideological economy of Rapture and Jack's slavery.[135] These marks could therefore be understood as a visual representation of Jack carrying his burden of powerlessness against both "would you kindly?" and the heavy influence of Rapture itself. Since the latter concept weighs on all the citizens, it is perhaps symbolic of the sacrifice that Jack will make to free them from it.

12. Music - the soundtrack to *Bioshock* is incredibly atmospheric, and is notable for frequent references to styles of music popular in the 1950's, but does not contain any pieces that would be recognised as a 'signpost' in the way that Baugh describes.

13. Resurrection - throughout the game there are 'resurrection chambers' in which Jack is revived should he die during combat. However, these are more of a game mechanic than a serious narrative device, and could not reasonably be given much significance. Jack does not undergo a physical resurrection, but he does have a form of rebirth in a much less literal sense. Near the end of the game he is 'de-programmed' so that the triggers implanted in his consciousness are no longer effective, including a trigger that would have led to his death. For Jack this is a new form of life that is unlike his other, and leaves him impervious to death from that specific source. In this regard it could be understood as a form of resurrection.

Not all of Baugh's dimensions are encompassed by Jack's character, and this is unsurprising because (as explored above) it is unlikely to be the case in film either. Nonetheless, many of the dimensions are depicted fully, and still more are incorporated in a more abstract sense. Given the presence of so many, it is reasonable to consider that Jack therefore constitutes a Christ-figure

[135] Unknown author "The Great Chain" *Bioshock.Wikia*

under Baugh's criteria. However, as already discussed, the identification of a Christ-figure in this manner is only partly relevant; the crux of the matter is how deeply this association goes and, most importantly, what possibilities for dialogue with theology this characterisation facilitates. As such, we will now consider the same story and character from the point of view of Deacy's approach.

The Humanity of Jack

In determining whether Jack is a suitable Christ-figure under Deacy's approach, we must give first consideration to the way in which his humanity is depicted. For Jack to be the same kind of authentic Christ-figure as Deacy considers Scorsese's protagonists to be, it is important for him to engage with humanity and to experience human nature at its most truthful, and Baugh also ascribes some importance to this facet, so how is this presented in *Bioshock*? Primarily, it can be argued that Jack confronts the nature of humanity head-on when fighting his way through Rapture. As he progresses through the city he must defend himself against the citizens affected by the influence of Rapture's toxic addiction. These citizens became hooked on a substance called ADAM which, along with its counterpart EVE, allowed them to rewrite their DNA to develop powers such as telekinesis. However, the libertarian ideals of Rapture and their addiction to these substances and their effects turned them from ordinary humans into a slew of deformed and deranged creatures who exist only to harvest more ADAM from the bodies of those they kill. In fighting these monsters Jack is therefore symbolically grappling with the base human qualities of desire, greed and selfishness which are embodied by the single-minded citizens of Rapture.

Jack faces humanity's demons not just in an abstract and metaphorical sense, but in a real fight for his life. While doing this, Jack must use the same toxic substances to survive in the city, and must do so whilst constantly being reminded of the effects of overindulging in the acquirement of power and therefore the potential for all humans to end up in this state. Moreover, in the very act of killing these creatures (and the others mentioned above), Jack himself takes an active part in the continued desecration of Rapture and the human condition. It therefore appears that the story and character of Jack depict with a startling clarity the flaws and failings of humanity. Jack does not shy away from confronting them, and even takes part in similar acts to save himself and others. Given this and the redemptive acts that he performs, it follows that it is legitimate to start to consider Jack as the kind of Christ-figure specified by Deacy's approach.

The Redemption of Jack

Both Baugh and Deacy require, albeit to differing degree, that the representation of Jesus must provide a form of redemption to be considered an authentic Christ-figure. Without this, it would be echoing only the secular iconography of Jesus, rather than carrying the meaning that Christians

understand the person of Jesus to carry. It is therefore key to explore whether this is present, aside from any other characteristic, as without it the character is unlikely to be considered as having more than a superficial connection with Jesus.

Jack's role in Rapture alters throughout the game - to begin with the focus is on escaping Rapture, with the diversion of helping his guide's family to get out as well. However, as the narrative progresses and Jack learns more about the state of Rapture and the fate of its citizens, his focus slowly shifts, and the players finds herself directing Jack to save the city and, potentially, the world. In the end, Jack commits patricide (and is commanded to do so by his father's suicidal use of the "would you kindly?" trigger explored previously), and then moves on to confront and kill the man responsible for the downfall of Rapture, Fontaine. Within these two acts, Jack's narrative unfolds in two distinct and notable ways. First, in killing his father, he comes fully to terms with the control that others have over him and chooses to obey the command as his father wishes. In practice, the player has no meaningful choice - if they do not kill Jack's father, then the only other option is to abandon the game - however, this acts much like the plot of a film (in which the audience have no say) and forces the character to face up to the nature of Rapture and the necessity of violence in this world. By making this action a requirement of the story's narrative, as opposed to just leaving it up to the player, the game ensures that Jack struggles with the ramifications of his father's actions and his own place in Rapture, setting the stage for his potential redemption. Second, in murdering Fontaine, Jack willingly (and this time without the "would you kindly?" trigger) ends a just-about human life to secure a safe future for the world. In doing this, Jack's ultimate purpose has been fulfilled through the destruction of the man who damaged Rapture.

Here it is possible to see parallels with the sacrifice of Jesus, who also chose to obey his purpose and the command of those above him, even though to do so resulted in pain and suffering for himself, and made this sacrifice to save the world[136]. Of course, Jack isn't choosing to sacrifice his own life, but perhaps the murder of his own father can be seen a sacrifice of a common moral ideal, and the series of deaths as Jack taking the burden of an unspeakable act to keep the world safe from the reaches of Rapture. Furthermore, in acquiescing to these actions, both the forced murder of his father and the required death of Fontaine, Jack accepts his place in the world and sacrifices his humanity by choosing to commit such acts rather than stand by and watch the world burn. There are further parallels if we consider the role of Fontaine in the city of Rapture - he was directly responsible for several changes in the city that led to a civil war and the deranged state of the citizens. As an orchestrator of chaos and evil, it is striking that he is defeated by the son of the

[136] E.g. Luke 22:42-44

man who founded Rapture (or 'Paradise') in the first place. This overarching narrative further indicates that the choices Jack made to save the world from the fate of Rapture are of the same type (although to a lesser degree) than that made by Christ on the cross and, in this regard, Jack provides some form of redemption for himself and his father by preventing the curse of Rapture from sullying the rest of humanity.

Kevin Newgren identifies redemptive themes within *Bioshock* and Jack's story in particular. Referring first to Joseph Campbell's work on a single overarching description of hero narratives, Newgren notes that "For Christians, this mono-myth may sound especially familiar"[137] and lists features of Jesus' life that fit with Campbell's outline (essentially, a call to adventure, a series of trials, and a return home with a reward[138]). More strikingly, in relation to the mono-myth more generally, he writes

> Video games can reclaim this mythology. They have the potential not only to communicate the story of the ultimate hero but also to invite us into that story in engaging ways. Moreover, they provide the opportunity to participate in games with redemption as subject matter... opportunities to open up conversations centered on how Christ may be reflected in, or differ from, the protagonists in these games.[139]

For Newgren, video games are a site of potential redemptive narrative and characterisation and, therefore, they can facilitate dialogue through discussions of Christ-figures (and, interestingly, non-Christ-figures as well). Newgren clearly views the mono-myth structure as inherently supportive of a redemption-based narrative and, considering the parallels with the story of Jesus, also supportive of a narrative centred around a Christ-figure. Specifically, he says that "this possibility can be revealed by once again returning to the game *BioShock,*"[140] thereby identifying Jack as a potential Christ-figure based on redemptive activity - a conclusion that we will shortly consider in more depth.

Kozlovic also notes the role of the mono-myth in Christologies, writing that the protagonists of such stories

> play the same heroic roles, and they face the same sort of challenges, time and time again. Indeed, everything is completely different except for the fact that it is all the same as the familiar is reimagined. In fact, the Christ-figure can be seen as

[137] Newgren, op cit, 139

[138] ibid. 138

[139] ibid. 139

[140] ibid. 139

> a special religious subset of the Hero Cycle... the Christ-figure is of a far higher order of greatness, power and mystery than other hero-figures.[141]

Here, Newgren and Kozlovic identify stories with Christ-figures as specific and special examples of the mono-myth typology; not only do allegories of Christ's life repeat the same themes and challenges in their own ways, but they also repeat key aspects of a broader, secular form of story that goes beyond the religious. Strikingly, Newgren also notes that "It is actually a challenge to find a story-driven game that does not cater to this mono-myth."[142] If the mono-myth is ubiquitous, and the Christ-figure is a subset of it, then can we assume that Christ-figures in games may be numerous? Newgren's point indicates that it may therefore be well worth looking at games other than *Bioshock*.

However, we must exercise caution. Like the objections raised earlier in the chapter to the over-simplification that Kozlovic's list-based approach brought to the identification of Christ-figures, it is important not to view the parallels with the mono-myth structure as too significant. Campbell's work identifies narrative elements common to hero stories and, as Newgren notes, there is both considerable overlap with the story of Jesus and significant use of the structure in video game writing. Nonetheless, it would be erroneous to assume that stories following the mono-myth structure would necessarily also be about Christ-figures, in much the same way as it would be fallacious to view all innocent characters as Christological allegories (as explored above). Rather, we might use Newgren and Kozlovic's observation about the mono-myth in a similar way to the list of characteristics - it can be a signpost to the potential of a game (or film) to contain redemptive possibilities and, by extension, the presence of a Christ-figure. We still need to add a layer of further analysis, but it can help to provide a starting point.

Such an analysis is suggested by Newgren when, with reference to *Bioshock* and the player's ability to choose to save the Little Sisters' lives, he states that

> Players can make the choice to turn away from this tyrant, and free the inhabitants from his rule, rather than perpetuate some of the evils being carried out. But three different endings are programmed into the game, dependent upon the players' actions. *BioShock* offers an opportunity to consider and feel the consequences of redeeming a fallen place.[143]

In *Bioshock*, players can choose whether to 'save' the Little Sister characters - if they save them, they receive fewer resources than if they kill them. As alluded to by Newgren, the game shows players a different ending depending on whether they chose to save the Sisters: if a maximum of

[141] Kozlovic, op cit, para 9

[142] Newgren, op cit, 139

[143] ibid. 139

one[144] Sister was killed then the player sees an ending where it is assumed that the defeat of Fontaine led to the containment and isolation of Rapture, as well as the gratitude and care of the rescued Sisters. However, if the player chooses to kill any more Sisters, the ending is ambiguous and includes footage of Rapture citizens making their way to the surface and the implication that Jack has either failed in his attempt to contain Rapture, or has seized power and attempted to take over the world.[145]

This brings us to an interesting implication for player choice in this specific example. If the player behaves in a Christ-like manner throughout (where choices are given) and therefore upholds justice by saving the Sisters, the result is an ending where Jack's murder of Fontaine was an act of redemption that led to the salvation of the world. In that instance, Jack would be a redemptive Christ-figure in line with Deacy's approach to the topic. However, if the player does not choose to uphold justice and sacrifices the innocent Sisters, then the murder of Fontaine becomes not an act of redemption but, potentially, a coup to take over Rapture or an effort for Jack to save his own life with disregard for anyone else. This completely changes the context of Jack's struggle against Rapture's citizens and, moreover, renders him unable to be considered as a Christ-figure in this model because he is no longer an agent of redemption.

Newgren identifies saving the Little Sisters as a form of redemption for Rapture - through setting free some innocent children, the player makes a stand against the twisted values of the city, even though their mission to alter the society would be easier if they killed them. In this way, the player can choose not to give in to the 'easy path' that Rapture presents as its way of life, and make their whole mission one that is grounded in the belief that Rapture is entirely in need of redemption, not just destruction. If the player kills the Sisters, we might understand their whole journey as an example of the unbroken cycle of violence created by Rapture, rather than a story of its end.

More importantly, however, Newgren identifies a key turning-point for the character of Jack; the decision about whether to kill the Little Sisters (to gain more resources) or to leave them alive (which lessens the resources you can gain from them) can potentially affect the redemptive qualities featured in the narrative and, in so doing, affect the way in which Christ may be reflected in Jack. Players choosing not to save the Little Sisters may complete all the same key plot points as players who choose to save them, but their approach to saving Rapture is subtly shifted. While both players succeed in destroying the man responsible for Rapture's twisted morality, only one

[144] It is interesting that the game allows one Sister to be killed and still depict the 'good' ending, as though it is leaving room for the player to kill the first Sister and become so horrified by their own actions that they are determined to save all the rest.

[145] GotGTA "Bioshock - All 3 Alternate Endings" *YouTube*

of the players does so in a manner that rises above the horrors of the city and shows that there is an alternative path for humanity. For Newgren, the ability of the player to choose a particular set of actions (alongside the main plot) is important because it provides a way of experiencing first-hand the different consequences that a character might cause.

In his comments on player choice in *Bioshock*, Newgren identifies a key issue (referenced briefly in earlier chapters) to which we must give further consideration - to what degree the interactivity and choice within the video game medium affects the way in which we can interpret the actions of characters. Player choice is uncommon in modern games and some studies, such as Quantic Dream, make a point of layering their narratives with multiple possibilities[146]. In these cases, it would be much more difficult consistently to apply a 'Christ-figure' label to characters whose moral choices are in the players' hands because their authenticity is entirely changeable depending on who is controlling them. Unlike with film, the categorisation of game characters as redeemer-figures may need to carry with it a caveat of "if these specific choices are made". Considering this, what are the implications for the practicality of using Deacy and Baugh's approaches for this different media type?

In the first instance, this case study reveals the core differences between the two approaches. For instance, if the player kills the Sisters, the applicability of Baugh's dimension of 'commitment to justice' might then be questioned, but it is arguable as to whether that by itself would be sufficient to negate the remaining factors. This is because the other elements all remain in place, superficially unchanged by this choice. However, when using Deacy's redemption-based model, the treatment of the Little Sisters has a powerful effect on the possible interpretations of Jack's story and can entirely undermine the redemptive narrative of Fontaine's defeat. This shift in interpretation makes clear the differences between the two models and the deeper nuances of Deacy's approach over that of Baugh and Kozlovic.

Additionally, it indicates the potential for a further depth of dialogue when using the redemptive model, depending on how player choice is present within the game. Sometimes, characters will be Christ-figures regardless of the player choice element, either because there is none (meaning that the analogy with film is very close) or because the elements of choice are superficial or unrelated to redemptive activity. It could, for example, be argued that the fate of the Little Sisters in *Bioshock* is secondary to the core plot and that the choice made by the player does not affect Jack's redemption of Rapture. In such an interpretation, Jack would be a Christ-figure regardless

[146] The games *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls* are particular examples from this studio but, as evinced by the other games referred to in this case study, there are many more

of what happened to the Little Sisters (although this interpretation does not account for the more negative ending that results from their deaths).

In other games, identification of a Christ-figure will be wholly dependent on the actions chosen by the player because those choices are absolutely interlinked with the climax of the plot. For instance, in *Fable II* the character saves the world and has a choice about how to proceed - they either save a large number of villagers (who had been enslaved in the project that threatened the world), save their family, or receive a great deal of money[147]. Despite the same core actions leading up to that point, the nature of the protagonist's actions is unclear until the choice is made. If the player chooses to save the villagers, they will have sacrificed their loved ones (and the possibility of great wealth) to achieve this. Such a sacrifice for the redemption of innocent civilians who had been coerced to do evil has strong Christological themes and to settle on such a choice could demarcate the character as a Christ-figure and suggest that their actions in the core story were those of a hero determined to save the world because it was the 'right' thing to do. On the other hand, choosing instead to abandon the villagers and the family in favour of a fortune does not offer redemption to anybody and implies that all the protagonist's earlier actions were carried out in the pursuit of future financial gain, rather than sacrifice or moral duty.

What *Fable II* then leaves open for discussion is the role of the third choice - to abandon the villagers and the money, so that the hero's family and friends will be safe. While the other two choices are clearly polarised in terms of their moral and redemptive value, how should players understand the decision to take a third path? This question prompts further consideration of several themes, such as the nature of sacrifice (can the abandonment of the villagers be viewed as a sacrifice to save your family?), the nature of redemption (your family did not take part in the activity that risked the world, so is the redemption offered in this narrative open to them?) and the nature of different kinds of love and compassion (why save your family if you could sacrifice them and save a larger number?). As such, not only does the game present us with a protagonist who can be a Christ-figure, it also asks questions and prompts discussion around wider theological themes and, therefore, displays its potential to facilitate dialogue between popular culture and theology.

Deacy's approach and, to some extent, Baugh's as well, can be effective for games with a large degree of player choice, and this is because there are possibilities and narrative spaces within the game where a character can embody the likeness of Christ in their actions and motivations. We need to be aware that this is changeable and that not every player will experience the actions in

[147] Unknown author "Retribution: The Choice" *Fable.Wikia*

the same way, but this is not to say that the consideration of video game Christologies is useless or meaningless. If the characters are there and the possibility for them to be used in a way that fits with the above approaches is also there, then there is room to label them as Christ-figures. Indeed, it may even be a more useful approach because, as with the *Bioshock* example, the consequences of particular actions for the character's redemptive abilities may tell us more than if those choices were not there. In this case, the fact that the game's ending revolves around the treatment of the innocent Sisters could arguably carry with it a message that this element is so key that without it an attempt at redemption is ultimately futile - that redemption of the whole city is only effective if, along the way, you also redeem the individuals whose lives you encounter directly. Examining game characters may be more complicated than analysing film protagonists, but it can also provide more opportunities for dialogue; far from diminishing the capacity for games to showcase Christ-figures, player choice provokes further debate about how such characters should be depicted and how they should behave, and has the potential to uncover more ways of understanding Christologies in popular culture. Newgren has opened the importance of choice for redemptive possibility - player choice allows us to experience the consequences of redemptive action, or lack thereof, which makes it a powerful tool for deeper discussion.

Towards a Christology of gaming

The intent of this chapter was to explore whether and how video games might have the same potential to feature Christ-figures as film, and to identify avenues for dialogue. Examining work from Baugh and Deacy, supplemented by others, gave a firm basis for understanding two key approaches from film that we could then endeavour to apply to video games by using a case study. The intention of this exploration was to build further on the conclusions drawn in preceding chapters, particularly the one concerning scriptural references. This chapter aimed to move from explicit, clearly-defined examples of religious reference to look at more subjective and interpretative religious features in the form of allegorical characters.

The approaches from Baugh and Deacy illustrated ways in which we might identify and analyse Christ-figures in film, but also helped to delineate some areas in which certain methods may be lacking. Having considered the ramifications of a characteristics-based approach, with reference to Kozlovic, it was clear that this can only be a starting point for a deeper analysis using other methods because of the need (identified by Deacy) to appreciate the subjective, interpretive qualities of Christ-figures. Nonetheless, as a starting point a list-based approach can be helpful in identifying characters that may warrant further examination. Therefore, in the *Bioshock* case study we could use Baugh's list of attributes to look at the more superficial aspects of Jack's character, before going on to look at his redemptive qualities in line with Deacy's work. This

allows us to examine the relationship between these two approaches and consider points of congruity or difference between them.

The case study clearly indicated the potential for video games to feature robust, nuanced Christ-figures in a manner that allows for open dialogue with theology. As outlined above, Jack's story and context fulfilled many criteria on Baugh's list of dimensions, some of which (as noted earlier on the chapter) overlap with Kozlovic's selection of attributes. This indicated that the character had potential for further analysis, especially as the 'redemption' dimension on Baugh's list was satisfied, which is the most significant similarity with Deacy's work. Moving on, it became clear that video games have a remarkable capacity for showing the human side of Christ-figures; not only are they controlled by human players (who might make choices about pivotal actions), but they are commonly *noir* in style, having much in common with Deacy's chosen genre. Finally, we considered the way in which Jack brings redemption to Rapture and, in some instances, to the Little Sister characters. By examining the difference in plot and ending as a result of killing or saving the Little Sisters, we brought out the nuances that player choice creates in this type of game. Although such variability has the potential to complicate the interpretation of characterisation, it also adds significant depth to the process. Rather than dealing with a single set of actions and consequences, we can look at the way the game narrative changes if different decisions are made and, therefore, learn more about the message that the game might convey. In this instance, further light was shed on how the game treated redemption of innocent individuals, as well as the player's success in the plot as a whole. This case study demonstrated the need to be cognisant of the differences between game and film, to take these differences into account, and the rewards that may be reaped by taking care to do so.

Having demonstrated the presence of Christ-figures within video games, there are two potentially fruitful ways in which such an exploration might continue. First, a study of other games and genres might uncover the different ways in which such figures are presented and, potentially, the different forms of redemption that may be depicted. While many games ask the player to save the world, not all of them are so broad in scope and it would be interesting to examine those with a more limited view - *The Cave*, for instance, looks at a group of characters who are forced to confront their past misdeeds and decide whether to regret them, which could have the potential for redemptive narrative. In addition, many Japanese games (such as *Devil May Cry*) use a significant amount of Christian - largely Roman Catholic - imagery. A study looking at the correlation with Kozlovic's list and an analysis of humanity and redemption imagery, in light of the alternative cultural background, could be fascinating.

A second avenue for further thought would be alternative figures. The scope of this chapter specifically stated that this exploration would be limited to Christ-figures, but noted that allegorical representations of other Biblical figures were nonetheless in existence. Considering this, an examination of such figures might yield similarly positive opportunities for dialogue. For instance, given Reinhartz's assertion (mentioned above) that *The Lion King* presents a Moses allegory, we might compare the film version and the video game version of the story and determine whether the protagonist in the latter still represents Moses. If not, we might ask where the points of divergence lie and what that might tell us about the medium or the Biblical figure. The game *LA Noir*, which features a pivotal moment of betrayal, might be a good candidate for attempting to find a video game Judas.

For the current study, however, we will develop our methodology more widely. Rather than looking further at characterisation and Christ-figures, we will broaden the nature of the analysis and, in the next chapter, look at the topic of overarching narrative themes. As we have stepped from specific scriptural references to a more interpretative character-based study, so we will move from the well-defined focal point of a single character to the sweeping themes of an entire scene or a whole game.

6. Karl Barth and the undead: apocalyptic themes in video games

Having considered specific references to scripture and Biblical figures, we turn our attention to how games could reflect Christian narratives more broadly. Aside from 'salvation', explored in the previous chapter, a recurring theme in the Bible and Christian theology more widely is that of Apocalypse. Anne Rehill states that "The word *apocalypse* comes from the Greek word meaning 'to uncover' or 'disclose"[1] and, regarding the application of 'apocalypse' to historical religious writing on the subject, John Collins notes the following definition of apocalyptic literature arrived at through a review of the genre:

> a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.[2]

This understanding of apocalypse therefore has two key strands - the temporal, eschatological phenomenon of the end of the world and the salvation that follows, and the spatial aspect of another world, both of which produce a revelatory outcome. Rehill echoes the multiplicity of this genre, when she asserts that

> Most Americans today understand it to mean total annihilation, or a final clash between good and evil. But that is only part of the story that John tells in the Book of Revelation, often called the Apocalypse[3]

That is, the temporal aspect of eschatology is perhaps (in terms of popular culture) the most obvious and well-known element of apocalypse, seen in end-of-days films like *Deep Impact* and *The Avengers*, but it does not stand alone.

However, we must bear in mind that these comments and definitions primarily describe scripture directly or describe works (such as commentaries or studies) that have scripture as their focus, and therefore deal with explicitly religious material. As has been the case throughout this work, our focus will be on secular media, in which a supernatural or definable Judeo-Christian element may not be explicitly present. As John Morehead states,

> While the New Testament apocalyptic material speaks more to the unveiling of divine mysteries (which can include predictions of judgement), it has increasingly been understood as referring to doomsday, and this concept has permeated

[1] Annie Rehill, *The Apocalypse Is Everywhere: A Popular History of America's Favorite Nightmare* xi

[2] John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* 5

[3] Rehill op. cit. ix

> popular culture to the extent that any number of potential disasters are referred to as apocalyptic.[4]

Given the different viewpoint on apocalypse of our pop culture texts, we must frame our use of the term carefully in the context of these definitions and their more specific uses. Acknowledging that the spatial, otherworldly element of apocalypse is less common in secular media, which largely ignores the involvement of a supernatural world revealed by the physical phenomena, we will primarily pick up the eschatological (temporal) strand as a key element of the wider revelatory apocalypse. Considering films, games and other media in which the end of the world is a chief focus, we will use this as a starting point for exploring the potential for dialogue with theology. The revelatory aspect will also be considered, but (in light of the often diminished or absent focus on the supernatural, particularly in the chosen genre identified below) rather than examine the revelation of supernatural forces that may be a feature of the apocalyptic narratives themselves, we will instead concentrate on the revelatory nature of this dialogue more widely and consider how ostensibly secular eschatological narratives - that is, those that have an overwhelmingly human cause and focus - can uncover theological discussion points. As such, we will identify the potential revelatory outcome of apocalyptic popular culture in a manner that is consistent with more traditional definitions, while acknowledging the different context of these narratives and adjusting our approach and methods accordingly.

Conrad Ostwalt notes that in films (and, indeed, theology) dealing with the end of days

> the end of the world does not simply result in the end of things... Almost invariably, the end brings about the ascendency of something to authority - some greatness to believe in,[5]

and it is this concept of ending and ascending that will be of chief interest in the study of apocalyptic video games - what is ending, and what is replacing it? This theme is widely used within both the game and film industries, particularly as a key way in which a narrative is motivated - it is a very common plot device to have characters and players battling on-coming global destruction, if nothing else because it gives a clear impetus for action. Indeed, Rehill notes that "the myriad apocalyptically focused games include *Armour-Geddon, Doom, Fallen Earth, Fallout, Gears of War, Halo, Rage, Resistance: Fall of Man,* and *Maelstrom*;"[6] the end of the world is worryingly ubiquitous in the world of video games. Our starting point for this exploration will be Ostwalt's work on apocalypse in film (initially from the 1990s and expanded later) on the shift

[4] John W Morehead "Zombie Walks, Zombies Jesus, and the Eschatology of Postmodern Flesh" in *The Undead and Theology*, ed. Paffenroth and Morehead 104

[5] Conrad Ostwalt *Secular Steeples: Popular culture and the religions imagination* 157

[6] Rehill op. cit. 215

from natural disasters to manmade events, moving on to consider the more recent work from scholars such as John Morehead and Jessica DeCou specifically on the 'zombie apocalypse' type of media. Having looked at the robustness of these approaches and the ways in which they can distinguish the potential for dialogue between theology and film, we will then consider their applicability to the video game medium and present a specific example of how these themes are present there.

The specific type of apocalypse to be explored here is a genre in its own right - the phenomenon of the zombie. The purpose of looking at a one type of apocalypse is, to a large extent, to focus our work more tightly, both in terms of the scholarly material we draw on and the games with which we intend to create dialogue. As alluded to above, there is a wide range of apocalyptic scenarios in both game and film; correspondingly, there is work covering this range - from Annie Rehill's broad study of apocalyptic history and depiction on a variety of American media in *The Apocalypse is Everywhere* and Peter Szendy's examination of the apocalypse in modern film in *Apocalypse-Cinema*, to Richard Walsh's focus on the two specific themes of community and supernatural possession in apocalyptic cinema[7]. Ostwalt's work is valuable in this respect; his broader look at apocalypse forms a more general backdrop against which to set our specific consideration.

The first question is, then - in a medium containing every creature, whether real or imaginary, why examine zombies? Kim Paffenroth, whose work on the living dead in film is spearheading the 'undead theology' school of thought, answers this by asserting that "More than any other monster, zombies are fully and literally apocalyptic, as the movies acknowledge."[8] He notes that, not only do zombies in film tend to herald or accompany the end of the world, but they also provide links to the original 'revelation' meaning of the word 'apocalypse' by revealing "terrible truths about human nature, existence and sin."[9] For instance, he notes that zombies only partially consume their victims and do not appear to be affected by hunger anyway, and suggests that "cannibalism seems added for its symbolism... humans, not just zombies, prey on each other, depend on each other for our pathetic and parasitic existence, and thrive on each other's misery,"[10] a truth about human nature revealed by depictions of the undead. Moreover, he asserts that

[7] Richard Walsh, "The Horror, the Horror: What Kind of (Horror) Movie Is the Apocalypse?" Journal *of Religion and Popular Culture*

[8] Kim Paffenroth *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's visions of Hell on Earth* 13

[9] ibid. 13

[10] ibid. 4

> Zombie movies are especially suited to presenting theological ideas of human nature and human destiny because of the nature of zombies and the threat they pose. Zombie movies deal... with a situation in which all humans are... robbed of intellect or emotion or, as surviving humans, barricaded and trapped in some place from which there is no escape[11]

This chapter uses zombies for this very reason; as explored in the introductory section to this thesis, the questions of interest for dialogue between games and theology are those that deal with humanity. By presenting a twisted kind of human, zombie media invites us to ask questions about the humanity of these figures and, therefore, to consider our own natures: an inherently apt genre for this purpose.

Furthermore, zombie movies are very useful when endeavouring to keep theology up to date with popular culture, as they tend to reflect very current trends. Paffenroth notes that

> threats of terrorism, anthrax and AIDS have been incorporated in the zombie menace, with the preferred explanation for zombies now being an infectious disease, or a biological weapon gotten out of hand, and with the heartless execution of the "infected" in the name of self-defense,[12]

and postulates that in future we may see zombies caused by an act of terrorism, or by recent disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, as the movies shift to reflect our ever-changing cultural fears.[13] Eric Michael Mazur notes that even earlier zombie films (released during the growing European unrest in the 1930s) were part of this pattern when he writes that "the figure of the zombie appealed to American insecurities; just as the zombie represented Haitian fears of returning to slavery, so too did it represent American economic fears of being subjugated by foreign entities."[14] A couple of decades later, during the nuclear developments of the 1950s, zombies created through radiation reflected how "American audiences were increasingly drawn to science-fiction fare capitalizing on scientific, nuclear fears over supernatural ones."[15] Referencing later zombie films, Margo Collins and Elson Bond note that "late-twentieth-century depictions of zombies illustrate spreading anxiety over both social atomization and the loss of individual identity."[16] Somewhat ironically, given their requisite lack of a functioning circulatory system,

---

[11] ibid. 22

[12] ibid. 134

[13] ibid.134

[14] Eric Michael Mazur, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film* 451

[15] ibid. 452

[16] Margo Collins and Elson Bond, " "Off the Page and into Your Brains!"- New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses," in *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Christie and Lauro 187

zombies help us keep our finger on the pulse of social concerns and cultural attitudes toward global disaster.

In his 2003 work, Ostwalt sees this trend mirrored in wider forms of apocalyptic entertainment - he notes that in the recent past nuclear holocaust was a key theme of apocalyptic films, and points to an even earlier incarnation of this concern embodied through nuclear war narratives in films such as *Dr Strangelove*, which laid out our Cold War-era fears in celluloid.[17] He sees this moving on through films like *Independence Day*, in which we depart from fears of nuclear annihilation and instead worry about the threat of alien invasion.[18] *Waterworld* and *12 Monkeys* depart even further, demonstrating more contemporary threats of global warming and international viral pandemics[19].

Conrad Ostwalt - defining apocalyptic media

Ostwalt's work has been chosen because it clearly outlines elements that contribute to the conveyance of apocalyptic themes within film. Moreover, these elements are not inherently specific to film and contain nothing that would immediately exclude them from being coherent with a study of similar themes in games. Finally, Ostwalt draws on a broad range of sources, reasoning that apocalyptic themes can span genres; as the relative nascency of video games as a medium means that there is a narrower selection of examples, a methodology that keeps the possibilities for dialogue as wide as possible is valuable.

Ostwalt's works draws comparisons between the prevalence of apocalyptic imagery in film, and the nature of Western (particularly American) culture. Notably, Ostwalt applied strict criteria to selecting the films he used in this study:

1. The films must "project apocalyptic themes and imagery,"[20] although they do not necessarily have to depict the end of the world. Ostwalt can then incorporate films such as *Apocalypse Now*, which have narratives rich in apocalyptic suggestions and consequences, but never explicitly refer to the physical end of the world.

2. The films must be "relevant to contemporary popular audiences."[21] As Ostwalt's purpose is to interrogate the cultural meaning behind apocalyptic references in film, he ensures that the films

[17] Ostwalt op. cit. 171

[18] ibid. 171

[19] ibid. 171

[20] Conrad Ostwalt "Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes In Recent Cinematic Presentation," *Screening the Sacred* 55

[21] ibid. 55

themselves are those that are of meaning to contemporary audiences; an irrelevant film is a poor mirror in which to reflect cultural ideals.

3. The films must be from a variety of types,[22] reflecting Ostwalt's assertion that these themes arise across several genres, rather than being restricted to one. For instance, apocalypse-aversion is a key theme for the more action-oriented sci fi films (like *Life*), but also finds itself in epic stories such as *Lord of the Rings*

4. The selection for study must be representative of apocalyptic films in general, and the ones Ostwalt specifically chooses for study do this by exemplifying how these themes are demonstrated through character, setting and plot.[23]

Through applying these criteria, Ostwalt (writing in the early 1990s) chose *Pale Rider* to exemplify the use of character, *Apocalypse Now* for its use of an apocalyptic setting, and *The Seventh Sign* to consider the role of the plot itself.[24]

Beginning with *Pale Rider*, Ostwalt notes that the film is not about the end of the world, but that the apocalyptic imagery is centred around the eponymous lead character[25] and that the western genre in general tends to "present the apocalyptic conflict between good and evil."[26] Ostwalt's interrogation of the film, in which he notes similarities with other films, encompasses the whole of the genre, from traditional westerns to the extension of the genre into sci-fi classics such as *Star Wars*. In so doing, Ostwalt notes that

> in each case, an apocalyptic hero or heroine emerges to avert the impending cataclysm. In fact, apocalyptic themes in most westerns and science-fiction movies seem to be dominated by this hero and, thus, by character rather than by plot[27]

Continuing with his exploration, Ostwalt turns to the setting of *Apocalypse Now*, in which he notes that although the characterisation is important, the Cambodian jungle atmosphere highlights the insanity of the rogue Colonel Kurtz and highlights the apocalyptic references.[28] For Ostwalt the setting is important not only for the pressure it brings to the characters and their actions, but because "Vietnam War and nuclear disaster films provide some of the most effective

[22] ibid. 55

[23] ibid. 55-56

[24] ibid. 56

[25] ibid. 57

[26] ibid. 56

[27] ibid. 57

[28] ibid. 58

settings for apocalyptic themes, because the terror and frustration of the war and the fear of nuclear annihilation have been part of the U.S. consciousness."[29] He also notes that it is not just the end of the world as we know it that we fear, but the potential for what the world would be like in the aftermath of such an event - another way in which the setting of a film provides the apocalyptic impetus.[30] Moreover, this horror "breeds the desire to avoid such an Armageddon"[31] and brings Ostwalt to his exploration of the final film.

The Seventh Sign is described as "the most explicit example... of contemporary apocalyptic vision through a creative combination of Christian and Jewish apocalyptic imagery and folk tradition;"[32] Ostwalt describes the protagonists' realisation that the end of the world is imminent and details their attempts to prevent it from occurring, as well as their willingness to sacrifice themselves if necessary.[33] He summarises the theme of *The Seventh Sign* as "Renewal of the world, yet avoidance of the apocalyptic cataclysm,"[34] and notes that films of this particular type "emphasize the possibility" that mankind can prevent the apocalypse while still enjoying the renewal and rebalance brought in the wake of disaster averted.[35]

Preventing the apocalypse is ubiquitous in video games - you might save the world from splicers in *Bioshock*, fight incoming alien ships in *Space Invaders*, or battle Nazis in *Wolfenstein* - likely because it adds a sense of urgency to gameplay. In some games, such as *Space Invaders*, it is possible for the player to lose and, by extension, the apocalypse to take place. This would result in a 'game over' and, for more recent games, a cut scene demonstrating the consequences of the player's failure. In *Bioshock*, for example, failure to make correct moral choices (even while completing the plot) results in a cutscene showing the monstrous splicers making their way to the surface world that the player has tried so hard to defend. Nonetheless, other games do not allow players to lose the battle, and this is the type of game that echoes the theme Ostwalt sees in *The Seventh Sign*.

One such game is *Fable II*, where players protect a medieval-style land from the consequences of a catastrophe, both by building resources and by fighting the invading forces. Through managing resources selfishly or benevolently, the player chooses how well the land is defended and how

[29] ibid. 57

[30] ibid. 59

[31] ibid. 59

[32] ibid. 59

[33] ibid. 59-60

[34] ibid. 59

[35] ibid. 59

many denizens survive. However, where the player has no choice is in the saving of the land itself - a key plot point is destroying the malevolent entity and if the player refuses then the game simply will not progress. Just as films march inexorably on to the triumph of humanity over the end of the world, *Fable II* ensures that the player always saves the world.

Ostwalt concludes that the modern attitude toward apocalypse, as expressed through these films, is one of departure from traditional Judeo-Christian ideas of the end of time. He considers that the apocalypse has a function of 'ordering time' to give our lives context and meaning[36] and that, where traditionally the end of the world was one of global destruction by God to reach a new world in His kingdom, the 'new apocalypse' instead follows the destruction of evil with the renewal of the human world and a second chance on Earth.[37] Furthermore, rather than God being responsible for the destruction of the world, it is instead humankind that causes it, in Ostwalt's words "placing time completely in the control of humankind."[38] Samuel Weber echoes this view when he states that

> Ever since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when it first became evident that human beings had acquired the power to destroy life on earth, and to destroy it in a spectacular and rapid manner, apocalyptic thoughts and images have increasingly proliferated.[39]

Now we have power that, in centuries past, was reserved for God - the ability to destroy the planet - our thoughts and, therefore, our popular cultural narratives turn towards this idea in myriad different ways. In films that exemplify this view, the cataclysm is prevented by humans and the world benefits from this struggle because it is renewed without the necessity for mass destruction. In showing the ability of humans to rise above and avert such catastrophes, Hollywood demonstrates the removal of "the end of time from the sacred realm of gods and places the apocalypse firmly in the grasp and control of humanity."[40]

The appearance of such a theme in video games coalesces with Ostwalt's view because the player does more than watch humanity conquer the apocalypse - he takes an active part. Without the player, the end of the world is never averted; in titles such as *Fable II* if the player avoids the set-pieces that advance the plot, the best the virtual world can hope for is that the apocalyptic threat hangs over it forevermore, as it will never be resolved. In games, particularly those where the

---

[36] ibid. 61

[37] ibid. 62

[38] ibid. 62

[39] Samuel Weber, "Foreword: One Sun Too Many," in *Apocalypse-Cinema: 2012 and Other Ends of the World*, ed. Szendy, trans. Will Bishop ix

[40] Ostwalt op. cit. 63

player can choose *not* to save the world, the virtual apocalypse really is 'in the grasp and control of humanity'. If we do not care about, actively try to achieve, realise how our actions could lead to the apocalypse, then it happens; if we resist it, we have the power to avert it.

This part of Ostwalt's work provides a foundation from which to consider the meaning of apocalyptic imagery in new media, but it cannot serve as the sole model for doing so. It is important to consider that the work referenced above is from the 1990s, and that media moves on. While the general basis of this initial exploration is a good place to begin, we must also consider whether the media landscape is different and whether Ostwalt's work still has a place. Therefore, we will be exploring both Ostwalt's later work and a much more up-to-date consideration of apocalyptic themes within film - the theological impact of the zombie apocalypse. In doing this we will identify how the newer work of scholars such as John Morehead, Kim Paffenroth and Jessica DeCou link with and diverge from Ostwalt's initial and later ideas about the man-made apocalypse. As this subject represents recent work on apocalyptic themes within visual media it is apparent that considering Ostwalt's earlier work in the context of the issues raised by Paffenroth and others will allow us to see it from a more contemporary angle and consider more thoroughly how it fits with his later writing.

The zombie genre impacts across a remarkably wide range of media types, including TV, comic books, literature, and live action roleplay, some of which are quite a dramatic departure from film. However, despite the different experiences arising from the varying formats that these narratives take, ultimately the same questions and issues arise; the zombie is nothing if not unifying. Therefore, in this section we will not be limited to looking solely at zombie films, but television programmes and even a form of performance art. With specific regard to the latter, which will be described in more depth below, 'Zombie Walks' are a form of interactive expression in which people 'play' at being part of a zombie mob. While not the same type of media as a film or book, this form of cultural expression shares many similarities with abstract gaming (particularly those such as *Left 4 Dead* and *Plants vs Zombies* where players can take on the role of zombie) and is therefore a useful source for seeking out theological approaches. Indeed, as John Morehead states in his consideration of zombie walks

> Scholars and film critics have long noted that zombie films provide commentary on contemporary social life and their related pop-culture spinoffs, including Zombie Walks, should be no exception[41]

[41] Morehead, op. cit. 103

The zombie genre is more than just a film trope, and it is important that we consider it in such a context if we are to determine its theological value.

John Morehead - the variety and meaning of zombie media

Having looked above at the broader concepts of zombie films as a type of apocalyptic narrative, we now narrow our focus further to look at concrete examples. The first of these is the work of John Morehead who has examined the phenomenon of 'zombie walks' and uses this as a starting point to examine the genre across all media. The zombie walk is a pop culture phenomenon where a large group of people dressed as zombies gather in public, which Morehead considers "can be understood as a piece of eschatological theater shaped by the postmodern apocalyptic imagination."[42] Morehead's work is important in the context of this chapter because it speaks to how the 'end of the world' aspects of apocalypse are expressed and understood through zombie media and, as we shall see below, forms a helpful discussion partner to Ostwalt's more holistic study of onscreen apocalypse.

Of chief interest is the presence of 'Zombie Jesus' in these walks - Morehead notes that "when the Zombie Walk and Zombie Jesus come together it represents a form of postmodern apocalyptic reimagining."[43] While the zombie walk itself demonstrates a contemporary way of contemplating the end of the world, this is extended with the inclusion of a satirical Christ-figure and becomes an entire re-imagining of traditional eschatology. In particular, Morehead asserts that Zombie Jesus gives this type of event a deeper meaning and that the presence of the figure "hints that these events can at times reveal more than an expression of fun or performance art."[44] The origin of Zombie Jesus, according to Morehead, can be found in an online atheist parody of the message of the resurrection,[45] and it is therefore evident that the figure was not originally intended to carry any real theological meaning (besides personal disagreement with the existence of Jesus or the resurrection). However, Morehead also notes that the online community has embraced the figure and, while some are still offended, others are prompted to consider the ramifications of the details of the resurrection, even producing websites linking Bible verses to behaviours that would not be out of place in a zombie film.[46] Morehead therefore argues that, while the potential for social commentary arising from such cultural events has been widely discussed, the presence of Zombie Jesus demonstrates that this potential extends to "satirical

[42] ibid. 102

[43] ibid. 103-104

[44] ibid. 103

[45] ibid. 103

[46] ibid. 103

religious commentary related to 'The End',"[47] and from this we can understand further use of the genre as a tool for dialogue.

Morehead understands zombie walks, and the genre as a whole, to be active representations of the postmodern concept of the end of the world without redemption, a context that he notes rejects

> the idea of divine rescue and the resting place in a New Jerusalem for the redeemed. The postmodern apocalyptic is more pessimistic concerning human nature and its chances for surviving the apocalypse[48]

He sees this reflected in the pessimism of George Romero's classic zombie films, as well as TV programmes such as *The Walking Dead*, and even the use of the phrase 'zombie apocalypse', all of which he asserts demonstrate an irreparable end of a world habitable by humanity[49]. Morehead concedes that some exceptions are more positive about humanity's prospects in the aftermath of a zombie epidemic, but notes that these are a minority in the genre.[50] For instance, the conclusion of the film *Shaun of the Dead* indicates that the outbreak has been stopped and that zombies have gained some social use or even acceptance by the remaining humans. On the other hand, this is vastly outweighed by films like *Zombieland* which, even when they hint at possible redemption, show a world irreversibly changed and with no sure indication of hope for the future. Ultimately, Morehead considers that "the dominant pessimism in zombie apocalyptic concerning humanity fits well with the 'neo-apocalyptic variant' of postmodernity where human beings are beyond saving"[51] and "where no New Jerusalem on a New Heaven and Earth is available."[52]

Eric Michael Mazur echoes this, stating that some scholars view the zombie apocalypse as "the total failure of any effort by humanity to save itself; what remains is faith in the saving grace of the divine after death."[53] In this understanding, humans have been unable to save the world, just as Morehead describes, but Mazur identifies a far more positive theological outcome. Here, Mazur sees room for the saving grace of God as a result of humanity's failure, in stark contrast to Morehead's pessimistic view that the zombie apocalypse cannot lead to a New Jerusalem.

---

[47] ibid. 103

[48] ibid. 106

[49] ibid. 106

[50] ibid. 105

[51] ibid. 105-106

[52] ibid. 106

[53] Mazur op. cit. 453

Nonetheless, although Morehead notes that the cultural context of the genre rejects traditional Judeo-Christian concepts of the apocalyptic, he does not suggest that the genre cannot be seen in dialogue with the theological. Rather, Morehead notes the postmodern themes of zombie apocalypse and suggests that

> while the Zombie Walks with Zombie Jesus may be interpreted as reflecting Christian eschatology, it does so in a postmodern fashion where the Judeo-Christian narrative is challenged and combined with the zombie narrative reflecting the pessimism of many of the depictions of the zombie apocalyptic in horror.[54]

Zombie Jesus is theologically challenging because it inverts the nature of the most fundamental tenet of Christianity and puts Jesus in the role of a creature that makes a mockery of basic humanity. It also asks, 'what if redemption was *not* made possible by Christ's death?', particularly when Zombie Jesus is surrounded by undead on a zombie walk, doomed to wander the Earth without salvation. However, as Lynch implies when he defines theology as "the process of seeking normative answers to questions of truth, goodness, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty in the context of particular social situations,"[55] raising uncomfortable questions to reach such answers is an important part of theology, and, as Morehead states, Zombie Jesus ties together the hope of Christ's resurrection with modern discomfort and doubt about humanity's chances for redemption or survival at the end of the world. Bringing together the modern pessimism embodied in the zombie genre with traditional Christian beliefs can help us examine these beliefs in an up-to-date way, reflecting concerns and cultural attitudes embedded in popular culture.

Thus far, there is evidently significant scope for zombie media to act as a tool for theological discussion, bringing new light to established concepts and asking new questions in the context of modern attitudes to the end of the world. However, we must consider how congruent Morehead's more pessimistic views are with Ostwalt and Paffenroth's work. The idea underpinning Morehead's assertions - that zombie apocalypse belies a nihilistic view of apocalypse - has the potential to diverge considerably from Ostwalt's more positive understanding of how apocalypse is used and depicted in film. Ostwalt's premise is that, although apocalypse films showcase the potential end of the world, they primarily feature humankind fighting back and overcoming seemingly inevitable global destruction. Therefore, while Ostwalt contends that their narratives come from discomfort at the fact that we would be capable of such destruction, these films are ultimately optimistic. This is echoed by Rehill who, in relation to environmental literature, states that "Many works can be termed apocalyptic only in a general

[54] Morehead op. cit. 106

[55] Lynch op. cit. 36

sense, because they culminate in a great disaster with no ultimate prospect of hope;"[56] by saying that works with no prospect of hope can only be 'generally apocalyptic', rather than concretely and specifically so, she thus identifies hope as an important revelatory component in apocalyptic narratives. Morehead's assertion that the zombie genre is inherently pessimistic, both about our probability of surviving this type of apocalypse and mankind's chances of salvation, is in distinct contrast. Nonetheless, despite the differences between these positions, there is potentially some common ground to be uncovered.

To some extent, Morehead's pessimism highlights a key difference between generic apocalypse (as written about by Ostwalt) and zombie-specific narratives; in most zombie films, even if the outbreak is halted or reversed, the world is often past saving once the infestation has taken hold, whereas in other apocalypse narratives the struggle to save the world comes before much damage is done[57]. Zombie films still include the battle for Earth depicted in Ostwalt's examples, but these come once the apocalypse has already taken hold. Compare, for example, the difference between the zombie rom-com *Warm Bodies* and Ostwalt's example of *The Seventh Sign* - in *Warm Bodies* a cure of sorts is found, and the world returns almost to normal, but only after death and destruction, whereas Ostwalt notes that the protagonists in *The Seventh Sign* prevent such occurrences in the first place. Some zombie films feature a fight to stop the plague worsening in the first place and stave off total destruction, such as the frantic race to develop an antidote in *World War Z*, but even this is not the same kind of prevention that Ostwalt describes because it occurs after a considerable about of damage has already been done. Moreover, *World War Z* and *Dead Rising* are relatively rare examples in that a cure or vaccine actually exists, and is even reasonably effective. Usually, the survivors are battling to survive and eventually eradicate the undead menace, before trying to regain some semblance of civilisation, instead of stopping it before it takes hold. While such films sometimes end with a vague sense of hope for the future, it is very unusual for the characters to be clearly on track to rebuild and renew the world, and are usually secure only in their own continued survival

This suggests that Morehead's different attitude towards interpretations of end of the world narratives is not an inherent point of conflict with Ostwalt. Rather, it is a consequence of the specific type of apocalypse about which he is writing; because zombie media necessitates widespread destruction that cannot be prevented, it requires a different reaction than those disasters that can be resisted. We must understand the differences between their approaches as products of the attributes of the specific types of film that they discuss. It also suggests that,

[56] Rehill op. cit. 169

[57] In *The Avengers*, for instance, there is a lot of damage done to New York, but the point is to stop this being the fate of the world, instead of one city.

although we might look for echoes of Ostwalt's conclusions in zombie media, there may very well be a good reason why they are not replicated entirely.

Nonetheless, despite the differences between the structure of these apocalyptic narratives, there are deeper points of cohesion. Although the battles to save the world may have different starting points (pre- or post-destruction), it is still notable that they all feature groups of humans fighting desperately to prevent imminent disaster. Civilisation in zombie media may be significantly more damaged (even irreversibly so) than in other apocalypse films by the time the protagonists attempt to rectify matters, but the core of the narrative is that these people are trying to save the world from destruction, regardless of how much has already been lost. Similarly, in relation to the novel and film *On The Beach*, in which the last nation on Earth faces eradication, Rehill states

> These works turn their Book of Revelation influence into the service of a larger moral point, in much the same way as the environmental movement often does. What they hope to reveal to humans is that they have the capacity to cause their own Armageddon and thereby work to avoid it[58]

This approach to apocalypse embodies the aim of this chapter - to find the *wider* revelatory potential of a film or game, rather than a specific set-piece of revelation within the narrative itself. While, as with *On The Beach*, a film's story may not bear out hope or reveal a truth for its protagonists, it nonetheless has a broader message with ramifications outside of the film world. Hope is to be found either in a different stage of salvation (preventing further disaster, rather than averting it entirely) or located outside the text. As such, while Ostwalt's work may not be wholly applicable to zombie apocalypse films on all levels, there is still a great deal of potential if we look beyond the prima facie narratives.

Another potential difference between the two scholars' work relates to the statements that different types of apocalypse make about humanity. Morehead gave the examples of Romero's films and *The Walking Dead* to demonstrate the negativity embodied by the zombie genre, and if we return to these we find further support for his argument. Not only do the titles mentioned show a bleak view of humanity's future (or lack thereof), they are also heavily critical of humanity itself, routinely showing the worst we can be. For instance, when considering Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, Paffenroth notes that

> it is not the zombie's bite that turns us into monsters, but materialism and consumerism that turn us into zombies, addicted to things that satisfy only the basest, most animal or mechanical urges of our being. [59]

[58] ibid. 179

[59] Kim Paffenroth "Apocalyptic Images and Prophetic Function in Zombie Films" in *Undead Theology* 153

Morehead's view is underpinned further by Paffenroth's contention that the zombie apocalypse is "both a funny and potent parable against human hubris, arrogance and self-sufficiency"[60] - it is a warning about the damaging potential of the worst traits of humanity. In the zombie we see our biggest flaws; whether the shopping mall zombies of *Dawn of the Dead* that comment on consumerism, or the frenzied, grasping monsters of *World War Z* that tear through the city of Jerusalem with no regard for its history or significance.

As such, Ostwalt, Paffenroth and Morehead consider the apocalypse from different viewpoints - Ostwalt seeing stories of how humanity can take control of nature and avert or reverse even man-made disaster and Morehead seeing the worst aspects of humanity. Paffenroth echoes Morehead's concerns, but adds an additional layer by asserting that zombie stories contain reflections of uncontrollable contemporary fears, whose terror lies in their insurmountability. As above, the difference between Ostwalt's position and those of Morehead and Paffenroth might well be explained by the different focus of the apocalypse narratives. In more generic apocalypse movies, particularly those where the threat comes from outer space or from a natural disaster, the role of humans is to fight against it and show the best aspects of humanity. Even when these films comment on, for instance, humanity's disregard for nature and the consequence of such an attitude, the message of the film is that we can change and can overcome these obstacles. In zombie films, however, the enemy is humanity - we fight ourselves, presented in a way that shows us at our very worst. While other apocalypse films show humanity fighting outwards to regain control over what threatens them, zombie films necessitate turning this conflict inward, thereby showcasing both the best and worst aspects of humankind.

Nonetheless, while these positions are different, they can be held at the same time without conflict. It is reasonable to suggest that humans can imagine their control over some aspects of apocalypse (such as the asteroid menace in *Deep Impact*, which our modern understanding of astronomy and rocket physics could help us overcome) while at the same time fearing elements of existence that seem uncontrollable (such as the rampant spread of bacteria due to antibiotic resistance) or highlighting concerns about human nature. It suggests that the perceived control we have over some situations is the factor that determines whether we could imagine averting or resolving a disaster based upon them. Perhaps the reason that zombie films appear so hopeless is because we know that we lack control over our real natures and the potential for destruction that they carry.

[60] Paffenroth *Gospel* 17

Moreover, there is another point of cohesion with Ostwalt's view in Morehead's work. For Ostwalt, humanity rallies so hard against the celluloid apocalypse because we are now capable of destroying the world through powerful weapons and other disasters of our own devising. Potentially, then, as a continuation of fear about our ability to destroy as noted above by Paffenroth, this could include bringing about destruction through the avarice and selfishness that Paffenroth sees depicted in Romero's work. There is still a point of departure, in that Ostwalt sees humanity ultimately overcoming the apocalypse whereas Morehead does not, but perhaps we can see that this nuance arises because the fundamental nature of humanity shown by the zombie genre cannot be so easily overcome as the more tangible risks depicted in other apocalyptic narratives. This difference is not necessarily because Ostwalt and Morehead take radically different views on cultural attitudes toward the apocalypse itself, but because the specifics of the zombie genre deal with a very particular aspect that lends itself to pessimism far more than other fictions of global destruction - the two agree that humans can be responsible for the threat of the world ending, but the avoidance of calamity rests on how they consider this will happen.

Another aspect of Ostwalt's later work also has implications for the refusal of zombie films to resolve their respective apocalypses. Ostwalt notes that the key difference between eschatological films from secular and religious perspectives is the survival of humanity, and the identity of who decides humankind's fate. In explicitly religious films (Ostwalt gives *Left Behind* as one of his examples) humanity is shown as having no control over the end of the world, with supernatural forces taking charge.[61] On the other hand, secular apocalypses, as previously outlined, show humanity striving to save the world and being agents of their own salvation. They also show the end of the world as something that can be avoided or delayed, and that we are in control of our futures.[62] Zombie films are generally secular works[63], and do largely show humanity working to stop their own annihilation. However, as noted above, it is very common for these films to show the end of the modern world as, if not a fait accompli, then at least something impossible to reverse entirely. One notable theme common to many zombie films is the implied, or even expressly stated, lack of hope for the future. Zombie games (such as *Left 4 Dead* and *The Last of Us*) often depict a handful of humans overwhelmingly outnumbered by their undead

[61] Ostwalt, *Scripture*, 168

[62] ibid. 171

[63] Bryan Stone, for instance notes that the horror genre "is the film genre least amenable to religious sensibilities. It offends, disgusts, frightens, and features the profane, often in gruesome and ghastly proportions" and "is not widely respected as a serious partner for religious, theological, or philosophic reflection;" in "The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films" *Journal of Religion & Film* 1-2

peers, and films such as *Zombieland* depict protagonists who are so few that they are surprised to find other survivors. This sense of restless destruction echoes Ostwalt's view that in religious apocalypses, there "can be no lasting world peace and no final solutions to problems such as poverty and hunger."[64] Considering this parallel, it is arguable that zombie films present a more religious eschatology than other, 'more secular' disasters.

The biggest point of departure between Morehead and Ostwalt's views is that of the renewal and salvation afforded to humankind in the aftermath of such an apocalypse. Morehead states that the zombie apocalypse leaves no room for a New Jerusalem,[65] whereas Ostwalt asserts that the films of the 1990s showed a hope for renewal without total apocalyptic destruction, because evil was destroyed instead.[66] However, although Morehead points to the nihilistic postmodernism that he sees within the zombie genre, it does not necessarily follow that there is no hope of renewal. He mentions himself that Romero's *Land of the Dead* and the comedy-horror *Shaun of the Dead* are examples of optimism because they contain hints that the world might regain balance,[67] but these are just the ones that *show* this return to normality. Ambiguous endings are common across the genre, these narratives therefore have the potential for a similar kind of return to normality or harmony, even if not made explicit. Above, we considered the possibility that this ambiguity could feed the sort of pessimism identified by Morehead, but we might equally imagine positive outcomes for these narratives. *I Am Legend*, for example, ends with (untested) cure delivered to a (possibly non-existent) safe haven; viewers can decide for themselves whether the film suggests that a resurrection of humanity is imminent, or whether this is just wishful thinking.

There is a further point in favour of a more optimistic outlook for zombie films, and the potential for mankind still to undergo the kind of renewal experienced in Ostwalt's examples. Although the genre exemplifies human frailties and failings through the behaviour of the zombies (and, often, those failing to contain the outbreak), the hero protagonists may be characters embodying the positive elements of humanity to survive (for instance, Paffenroth identifies the *Dawn of the Dead* survivor Fran as the least taken in by materialism and violence[68]). Moreover, those displaying evil traits, that presumably landed humanity in trouble to begin with (such as *Dawn of the Dead's* Roger, whom Paffenroth describes as the film's "most violent character"[69]) receive their

[64] Ostwalt op. cit. 169

[65] ibid. 106

[66] Ostwalt, *Hollywood*, 62

[67] Ostwalt, *Scripture*, 106

[68] Paffenroth *Gospel* 59-69

[69] ibid. 69

comeuppance, often in a gruesome display of hubris. Therefore, those surviving a zombie apocalypse to rebuild the world may represent the best of humanity, rather than the worst as depicted by the zombies. The continuation of humanity as the sum of its best traits is a form of renewal and even verges on the development of the hope of a New Jerusalem on Earth that Ostwalt sees and Morehead denies. This is still a departure from Ostwalt's idea of renewal (reliant on preventing disaster and receiving salvation regardless, rather than as a *consequence* of destruction) but demonstrates that Morehead's genre does not fall so far from his Ostwalt's work as might initially be thought.

It is clear from this comparison that the zombie genre does not occupy quite the same cultural space reflected in the apocalyptic films of the 1990s, although there is a much more significant degree of overlap than is apparent at first glance. The popularity of the zombie genre demonstrates that we are no longer just railing against mankind's physical capacity for destruction and taking ownership of the apocalypse by producing narratives about its prevention. Rather, zombie apocalypse narratives bring us face to face with man's own moral capacity for destruction through our inherent nature and attitude, rather than deliberate force. While hope for renewal is usually there, even when not specifically depicted, it is not resolved on screen because it could instead be resolved in the minds of those watching, playing, or taking part in the zombie walks. In the same way that those in classic apocalypse films are given sufficient warning to prepare to fight their destruction, perhaps zombie narratives act as a warning for us about the catastrophic potential of human avarice and puts the very real renewal of humanity in our hands. Or, as Paffenroth puts it

> Zombie movies imagine a scenario far worse than nuclear war or a cabal of vampires taking over the world: they present us with a world in which humans and monsters become very hard to distinguish[70]

In light of this, when considering the depiction of apocalypse in video games we must be careful to take an approach that complements Ostwalt, Paffenroth, and Morehead's varying positions - since each speaks to valid and coherent aspects of the genre in its own ways - and recognises the development in media over the last few years. When we come in due course to the case study we will consider it in the light of Ostwalt's focus on character, setting and plot to determine which elements might be carried over into video games and which cannot be applied coherently. Following this, we must then explore whether they demonstrate an active prevention of apocalypse, or a reactive battle to reclaim the world once destruction has begun, and whether this is ultimately successful. For games that have different possibilities for success, it may be

[70] ibid. 10

fruitful to examine what the criteria for this success would be and how it compares with the commentary that zombie films make on human nature. Finally, and taking the above elements into account, we must consider the key messages conveyed by the game and what this can tell us about understanding the concept of the apocalypse.

Ultimately, while zombie media holds in common with religious apocalyptic material the notion that the end of the world is a done deal, out of the control of humans, it is not the same eschatology. Ostwalt asserts that "Peace and alleviation from suffering can only be achieved in God's kingdom,"[71] but in zombie films and games there is no suggestion that such peace is available. Indeed, if peace is ever found it is the fleeting product of humans barricading themselves from the zombies, rather than of divine rescue. Zombie films provide the bleak, inevitable destruction found in the evangelical apocalypse and combine it with the human responsibility found in the other apocalyptic films explored by Ostwalt, as well as the underlying commentary on contemporary social fears. Nonetheless, at its core the zombie genre still holds sufficient significant similarities with non-zombie apocalypses that it is instructive to look at it through a more general lens. Although there is continued value in considering a wide range of world-ending stories, zombie media may be particularly well-placed to help us consider theological themes of the secular apocalypse, in the context of its focus on the role of humanity, and warrants further exploration.

Jessica DeCou - the applied theology of Barthian zombies

Having established themselves as a means through which to examine apocalyptic themes, zombies must show themselves to be a suitable and thought-provoking medium for dialogue between media and theology. Jessica DeCou has sought to do this by considering the theology of Karl Barth from the point of view of a survivor in the popular television series *The Walking Dead*. This section acts as an illustration of the possibilities for wider dialogue within the genre, before going on to consider the issue of apocalypse more stringently. DeCou 's focus is a recently 'turned' zombie - who therefore still looks very human - used to reflect on an extract from Barth's *Church Dogmatics* that deals with man's potential for evil even within good works and good times.[72] By extending Barth's work from the ideal and ordinary to the fictional and apocalyptic, DeCou looks to test the relevance of his concepts to fringe situations and tease out the intricacies of what humanity means for Barth by looking at it through the lens of the inhuman.

[71] Ostwalt op. cit. 169

[72] ibid. 82-84

One notable question raised in DeCou's piece is whether a zombie can ultimately be considered 'human' (and why). At the beginning of the outbreak a human was defined as having a "capacity for social connectedness and emotional recognition of the humanity of others, special allowances being made for those who lack these attributes due to unrelated medical conditions."[73] She then asserts that the real objective of this definition was not so much to identify humans, but to "confirm that the infected are *not human*, have no rights, and can be destroyed with impunity."[74] In the context of this definition, we can understand it as given that any recognisably infected individual is no longer human, and that the zombies of this universe are incapable of connecting with or recognising humanity. DeCou identifies similarities with Barth's understanding of what a real human encounter means[75] - "mutual seeing, communication, assistance and gladness"[76] - to consider its authenticity, asserting that in Barthian theology

> the *imago dei* is not found in the immortality of the soul but in "being in encounter" with our fellow humans. We are not human in and of ourselves, but only in relation to the other.[77]

We already know that zombies 'fail' the test (as that is its purpose), so the comparison of this artificial means to identify 'non-humans' with a definition designed to understand and quantify a completely human experience may give us an insight into how sound the general basis for the 'official' definition noted by DeCou's author really is.

DeCou defines Barth's first element of human encounter, 'mutual seeing', as eye contact[78] and asserts that the zombie would be incapable of looking her in the eye because he "does not recognize the countenance of the other."[79] The 'mutual communication' that is the second part of Barth's encounter, and understood to be the state in which both parties communicate willingly and honestly,[80] cannot be partaken in by the zombie because he cannot speak or empathise.[81] Similarly, the 'mutual assistance' characterized by a willingness to help and be helped[82] is lacking from any encounter with him because this lack of empathy means that he will be incapable of

[73] ibid. 85
[74] ibid. 86
[75] ibid. 86
[76] ibid. 86
[77] ibid. 86
[78] ibid. 86
[79] ibid. 90
[80] ibid. 86
[81] ibid. 90
[82] ibid. 86

offering assistance to anyone requiring it.[83] Finally, the zombie is also prevented from experiencing 'mutual gladness' when another is encountered with no intent to "dominate or manipulate,"[84] as zombies only seek encounters with those they wish to cannibalise.[85] Given this, it would appear that DeCou considers zombies inhuman and is therefore free to 'kill' (as far as that word is applicable to the undead) the zombie trapped in the skip. The description of zombies as lacking in humanity is shared by Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, who states that the "This horrific spectacle of the familiar zombie takes hold when the 'human' aspect is removed, leaving only a reactionary piece of meat in its place."[86]

DeCou provides a thought-provoking consideration of both Barthian theology and the role of humanity in zombie biology, shedding light on two parts of this topic. Primarily, she helps us understand more about the nature of the zombies in *The Walking Dead* (and, as *TWD* features an archetypal form of zombie, its appearance in most other media) and puts forward a more detailed and nuanced exploration of the definition of 'inhumanity' than might otherwise be possible. Considering this definition in the light of a theological concept gives it a meaning beyond mere a narrative construct and way for characters to categorise each other. Rather, it shows this definition of 'inhuman' as a relatively sophisticated way of understanding the necessity for human interaction and honest communication even in such a crisis as a zombie apocalypse. It also fills in the gaps highlighted by DeCou - that the definition of human or inhuman by itself may not be enough to sanction destruction because it is insufficiently accurate, and that we need to consider context and circumstance too. Moreover, by borrowing Barth's concept of absolute humanity DeCou helps to outline what makes zombies so 'other'. She demonstrates that it is not just their appearance and tendency to eat, rather than love, their neighbour that sets them apart, but their inability to connect with and understand 'real' humans. While DeCou ultimately finds this an unsatisfying way to truly determine the morality of destroying them, it nonetheless hints towards the underlying differences in their essential nature.

Second, however, DeCou's exploration sheds new light on Barth's concept of human encounter. Barth would not have had zombies in mind when considering the elements that define human connectedness, but by becoming a partial answer for the questions of "what makes a zombie inhuman?", Barth's theology is brought to life in an almost tangible dilemma. By applying it to a modern take on the question 'what makes us human?', DeCou shows how Barthian theology can

[83] ibid. 90

[84] ibid. 86

[85] ibid. 90

[86] Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, "All Dark Inside- Dehumanization and Zombification in Postmodern Cinema," in *Better off Dead* 139

still be relevant today. Not only does this demonstrate that zombie media can provide deep and valuable dialogue with theology, but that exploration of the zombie apocalypse can refresh established theories and arguments. As embodiments of philosophical, moral, and biological dilemmas, DeCou's work demonstrates that zombies are useful tools for the modern theologian. Barth answers the question (for some) of what humanity means, but through applying it to the world of *The Walking Dead* DeCou roots its meaning in a context that, although wildly fictional, makes a fresh insight into how humanity operates. Barth's theology helps us understand more about the zombie world, but in turn the use of this theology in such a monstrous context helps us to understand more about how it applies to humans and provides a striking illustration of why an encounter may be inauthentic without the right elements.

Nonetheless, while Barth's work helps to consider the problem of whether zombies are human, DeCou is unsatisfied with the idea that zombies are expendable just because they are inhuman[87], and considers whether we can justify removing the vestige of life zombies to which are clinging, regardless of their inhumanity. She cites the example from *TWD* of a character who believed in the potential for zombies to regain their humanity, and who herded them up to keep in captivity rather than end their lives, but asserts that "by defending the humanity of the undead, he threatened the safety of the living,"[88] thereby clearly setting out her view that to do nothing is unsatisfactory. For DeCou, the threat to 'real' human life by the zombies has the potential to outweigh a zombie's own life, demonstrating that zombies may not be entirely inhuman, but are still inferior. Justification for destroying the undead is found in DeCou's assertion that Barthian theology allows for killing in exceptional circumstances[89]. She notes that each person should "follow his/her conscience"[90] and that, although Barth's exception was devised in the context of it being permissible to kill animals for human survival, the circumstance of killing zombies to prevent human destruction is - for her - sufficiently similar as to make Barth's statement that death can be justified applicable to her current situation.[91]

However, although DeCou's exploration of the definition of humanity was particularly thought-provoking and helpful, this aspect of her treatment of Barth's work is far less convincing. In noting that Barth, while largely opposed to the killing of humans, allows for 'exceptional cases', she writes "Barth is therefore willing to make allowances for the "exceptional case" in which killing (in

[87] DeCou op. cit. 86

[88] ibid. 91

[89] ibid. 92

[90] ibid. 92

[91] ibid. 92-93

war, self-defense, tyrannicide, suicide, abortion, euthanasia, hunting food, etc) is justified."[92] Of this list, war, self-defense and euthanasia are arguably the closest categorisations (other than straight-forward homicide) of the act of killing zombies - the humans in the worlds of zombie movies clearly see themselves at war with the undead, the argument for self-defense is obvious in light of the zombies' aggressive need to feed on humans, and the parallels with euthanasia come from those characters who believe that the zombies are humans suffering from some awful affliction of which they need to be relieved.

While the implication of DeCou's statement is that killing the zombie may be permissible because Barth allows the listed exceptions, others interpret Barth's 'exceptional cases' differently. Robert E. Willis writes that

> Related to the possibility of legitimate abortion is the issue of euthanasia or "mercy killing". There are, Barth asserts, no exceptions whatever here. Euthanasia is unequivocally prohibited by the command of God;[93]

and, on self-defence:

> the protection of one's possessions and life cannot be the first word in Christian ethics, for these are not viewed as ultimate goods to be preserved at all costs.[94]

For Willis, killing a zombie cannot be morally justified by labelling it as 'euthanasia' because this is not a valid Barthian exception. Moreover, killing in self-defence is just as problematic because one's right to life cannot be preserved at the price of another. At that point, we return to the dilemma of whether a zombie's life is equal to a human's; if it is not, then the argument of self-defence could stand. However, part of DeCou's intention in bringing in the 'exceptional circumstances' aspect of Barth's work is to sidestep the need to define zombies as human or inhuman, given the difficulties explored above. As such, a solution relying in part on this definition does not bring us forward.

While it may not bring us closer to deciding whether the zombie should be killed, this self-defence argument helps to illuminate a potential line of questioning in Barth's argument. Here, Willis comments that self-defence is not an adequate justification for killing another person because one's life is not so significant as to take such a precedent over another's. However, DeCou's fictional author is not in a straightforward self-defence situation (the zombie is trapped in a dumpster and therefore bears no threat); rather, the question is of defending humanity in its entirety. DeCou's scenario implicitly highlights the difference between killing for self-defence of

[92] ibid. 92

[93] Robert E Willis *The Ethics of Karl Barth* 376

[94] ibid. 376

one's person (which Willis sees as incompatible with Barth) and in defence of humanity, which is a fundamentally different justification. This highly fictional scenario brings the nuances of Barth's work to the fore.

Writing earlier than Willis, Otto Weber stated that, while abortion and martyrdom had some capacity for the exceptional,

> such does not apply - in what follows - to the taking of a so-called worthless life. It is to be regarded "simply as murder, that is, as an outrageous usurpation of God's sovereign prerogative over life and death". And the same is true of "euthanasia." Whence would anyone really know that an ever so painfully tormented life "has ceased to be that blessing God intended for this man"?[95]

And, indeed, Barth himself wrote

> A question which... cannot in any sense be regarded as providing an exception. Has society as constituted and ordered in the state a right to declare that certain sick people are unfit to live and therefore to resolve and execute their annihilation?... The question whether human society has the right to extinguish the life of such people is to be answered by an unequivocal No.[96]

More damningly, particularly for those who believe in the underlying humanity of zombies, Barth also states that

> [Euthanasia of the physically or mentally infirm] is a type of killing which can be regarded only as murder... A man who is not, or is no longer, capable of work, of earning, of enjoyment and even perhaps of communication, is not for this reason unfit to live... The value of this kind of life is God's secret. Those around and society as a whole may not find anything in it, but this does not mean that they have a right to reject and liquidate it[97]

and goes on to say that "the imposition of a capital sentence on criminals or as a defensive measure in times of war"[98] is equally impermissible. Barth's view here is unequivocal - to end a human life on the basis of infirmity, even to the point of an inability to communicate, or as a defensive measure is murder. DeCou may have raised a valid point that zombies are not capable of genuine humanity because of their condition, but it is clear from the above that this does not override the importance Barth places on the sanctity of human life. More importantly, considering the above discussion on authentic human encounters, Barth acknowledges the potential for value in human life even when incapability of communication (which is a prerequisite for authentic

[95] Otto Weber *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics: An introductory Report on Volumes i:1 to iii: 4* Tr. Arthur C Cochrane 234

[96] Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics: III 4 The Doctrine of Creation* 423

[97] ibid. 423-4

[98] ibid. 424

humanity) occurs. Insofar as Barth's position on euthanasia and self-defence apply to the zombie problem, then, it is then doubtful that it would fall within the exceptional and be permissible on those grounds.

What, then, of parallels with the final of Barth's three most salient exceptional cases - war? Barth is clear that in many cases, war is avoidable, and it is morally unacceptable. He writes that "The many ways of avoiding war which now exist in practice should be honestly applied until they are all exhausted"[99] and terms avoidable war "mass murder,"[100] also stating that war for reasons such as political or geographic expansion, honour and prestige, or a calling to lead all nations "is an act of murder."[101] Barth therefore insists that the Church should be opposed to war on such grounds, leaving it to be a last resort:

> Christian ethics cannot insist too loudly that such mass slaughter might well be mass murder, and therefore that this final possibility should not be seized like any other, but only at the very last hour in the darkest of days.[102]

The point to consider, then, is whether a zombie apocalypse might be termed the last hour in the darkest days and, therefore, whether killing zombies might potentially be justified under a banner of war.

In examining what the 'exceptional case' in Barth's work really means, Matthew Puffer notes that

> to find oneself in the borderline case is not, in Barth's mind, the same as hearing the command of God to kill. Rather, it is precisely the set of circumstances within which such a command may come.[103]

We therefore cannot say that, if the zombie apocalypse represents an exceptional case, killing is definitely justified. Rather, it is a situation in which it might be justified, instead of being absolutely prohibited. The question, then, is whether a zombie apocalypse represents the type of circumstance where one might reasonably expect such a command.

The circumstances of war that Barth appears to have in mind are very different from the situation encountered in *TWD*; he writes chiefly on war between nations and identifies Capitalism's need

[99] ibid. 460

[100] ibid. 460

[101] ibid. 461

[102] ibid. 456

[103] Matthew Puffer, "Taking Exception to the Grenzfall's Reception: Revisiting Karl Barth's Ethics of War," *Modern Theology* 483

for expansion and resources as a key driver of war.[104] He also identifies state-created civil unrest as a chief cause of war, stating that

> It is when the power of the state is insufficient to meet the inner needs of the country that it will seek an outer safety-valve for the consequent unrest and think it is found in war.[105]

Neither of these situations apply to the world of *TWD* - there, the conflict between zombie and human is created by the animosity and danger from the zombie threat, and the need for humans to carve out a safe space to survive, rather than greed over resources or civil unrest. Between the humans of *TWD* these elements certainly exist and spill over into war-like behaviour on a smaller scale, but they are not present between the zombies and the humans. Therefore, the first limitation of applying his work to *TWD* is this disjoint between the scenarios considered. Nonetheless, there are aspects of his writing that may cross-apply. Barth's primary concern is the behaviour of the state and the requirement for its usual purpose to be the building of peace and well-being:

> What Christian ethics has to emphasise is that neither inwardly nor outwardly does the normal task of the state, which is at issue even in time of war, consist in the process of annihilating rather than maintaining and fostering life[106]

He also states, in relation to the absolutism of pacifism and militarism, that "Neither rearmament nor disarmament can be a first concern, but the restoration of an order of life which is meaningful and just."[107] We can therefore understand that the broad context of an exceptional circumstance is one in which this order of life is threatened, and no peaceful means are left by which such a threat can be defended against. Indeed, Barth says that the only "legitimate reason for war"[108] is "When [a nation] has to defend within its borders the independence which it has serious grounds for not surrendering."[109]

While the zombie apocalypse does not relate to a nation *per se*, it still features conflict between two groups, with the zombies as aggressors and humans as defenders. Although (as explored above) humans may have been responsible for starting the conflict by creating the zombie they are the defensive party because their way of life, independence, and entire civilisation are under attack from the zombies. As the conflict takes place in the spaces once occupied by humans, both

[104] Barth, op. cit. 459

[105] ibid. 458-9

[106] ibid. 458

[107] ibid. 459

[108] ibid. 461

[109] ibid. 461

in terms of the locations and the bodies in which the zombies now reside, the war takes place within the borders of the defending humans, and their aim is to repel the intruders. Finally, humanity arguably has legitimate and serious grounds for not surrendering - to surrender to the zombies would be to end human life on Earth and replace it with a force that is either inert or destructive, never constructive or life-affirming. Considering this, the zombies' aggressive existence appears to create the kind of circumstance that Barth might view as an 'exceptional case' in the context of warfare and, therefore, their eradication may be justified. The application of Barth's writing here shows the potential for such comparisons to expand on our understanding of the text. The zombie apocalypse provides a scenario that is war-like (and therefore related to Barth's work) but sufficiently different that we must consider how Barth's assertions can be stretched and applied in situations that move on from the type of warfare prevalent in the period in which he wrote. Exploring this fictional setting allows us to consider the ethics of another kind of warfare that Barth did not explicitly provision for but, nonetheless, might have something to say about.

As discussed above, aspects of DeCou's arguments are unconvincing in light of Barth's work. However, there is another problematic element to this part of DeCou's exploration of morality, and that is her reticence to expand the topic beyond the immediate world of *TWD*. DeCou is careful to state that

> this essay is not *in any way* a veiled tract on hot button issues like euthanasia, suicide, etc., and should simply be taken at face values. The conclusions reached herein are unique to these very fictional circumstances, and it would be *wholly inappropriate* to transfer them out of that world and into ours.[110]

In addition, despite them being the closest comparators for the events of *TWD*, DeCou states "nor are we talking about euthanasia or acts of war,"[111] thus distancing herself from this parallel. Nonetheless, by referring to Barth's list of exceptional cases, DeCou's conclusions are framed by precisely the topics that she wishes to avoid. Because this section of Barth's work deals with specific circumstances, it is impossible to use that work without reference to those circumstances and dealing with the fallout of that line of questioning, particularly when the rejection of killing on the grounds of euthanasia or self-defence are so clearly rejected by the conclusions of that work. While DeCou does not want her conclusions about zombies to be carried into the wider debate about euthanasia and abortion, by utilising a system that specifically considers whether 'hot button issues' are potential exceptions to homicide, there is no reasonable way to avoid it. Moreover, despite DeCou's assertion that her work should not be 'transferred' out of the world of

[110] DeCou op. cit. 99

[111] ibid. 92

TWD, it is hard to see how else we are to evaluate the accuracy of her assertions if we cannot approximate her discussion to events with which we are familiar. That this is not adequately dealt with is a serious flaw in DeCou's argument.

This is the biggest weakness in DeCou's approach, and one we should be careful to consider; the zombie-killing dilemma is a fantastic opportunity to drill down into the topics of euthanasia and self-defence, and to consider whether Barth's views on these are consistent with the hallmarks of authentic human experience and contemporary understanding of human identity. However, by using Barth's list of exceptional deaths to defend killing a zombie, while insisting that the conclusions drawn are not taken to the 'outside world', DeCou misses the opportunity to delve into these issues and evaluate Barthian theology for the present day. If theology and new media are to be in dialogue, this is precisely the kind of conversation to encourage and to experiment with; rather than shying away from difficult issues by adhering to the boundaries of the virtual world, we should be engaging with these issues in the real world and using fictional circumstances to facilitate that engagement.

Finally, DeCou explores what part the soul might play in her author's dilemma. She notes that

> for Barth, the relationality that defines genuine human being extends also to the constitution of each individual as a relation of body and soul together - neither a disembodied soul nor an unbesouled body would be genuinely human.[112]

Therefore, for DeCou if not for Barth, the 'killing' of the undead is not the same kind of action as the murder of a human, because a zombie does not have this same relationship between body and soul, and their death is not death in the same sense.[113] In the language of the above excerpt, a zombie would be understood as an 'unbesouled body', rather than a human combination of both. Having considered these three strands of Barth's work - human connectedness, exceptional circumstances, and the significance of the soul - DeCou concludes that killing zombies is "not only permitted but commanded"[114] because it is the only way to safeguard the living and to give the undead the potential for the redemption and resurrection promised through Christ.[115]

Considering the above discussion, DeCou's conclusion is largely uncompelling. While her comments regarding the zombie as 'unbesouled' and therefore inhuman is an engaging line of argument, it does not address the whole issue. Ultimately, it is an argument that ultimately comes back to 'if it is inhuman it may be killed', which is an attitude DeCou has already dismissed as

[112] ibid. 87

[113] ibid. 93

[114] ibid. 93

[115] ibid. 93-4

unsatisfactory. This element of her work is, therefore, inconsistent and she has not demonstrated that categorising zombies as inhuman can stand by itself as a defence of their death. The only aspect of Barth's theology that appears to justify killing zombies is the understanding that war may justify death; all the other attempts by DeCou to validate the death of the zombie collapse. However, while we can find this point of vindication, it is far less compelling than suggested by DeCou's conclusion; as already explored, the circumstances in which war may be morally permissible are those in which one could *potentially expect* such a command from God - this is far from DeCou's statement that killing zombies is "commanded". Indeed, DeCou herself notes that Barth "reminds us frequently of the limits of human understanding, such that we cannot know with any certainty whether we are faced, at any particular moment, with such an exceptional case;"[116] it is a point of weakness in her argument that this is not reflected upon further.

Despite the flaws identified above, DeCou's novel exploration of Barth's work in a fictional landscape is nonetheless a valuable addition to this nascent field because it highlights the potential for similar work in future. DeCou's work encourages us to look at traditional material in a new and interesting light, and demonstrates that it is possible for more novel aspects of the secular apocalypse to be in dialogue with traditional theology. Even though the attempt is not persuasive in all its elements, it is important not to let the less-conclusive aspects of her approach overshadow the potential for dialogue that lies within the piece; the problematic elements lay in her interpretation of *TWD* or Barth, not in the creative methods she employs. However, it also brings to light the necessity, when applying the work of a theologian to narrative worlds, not to assume that the work of one reality can be applied completely to another without being viewed through the lens of the closest representations we have to hand. However much one may wish to avoid implicit comparisons between euthanasia and killing a zombie, the parallels are too strong to be ignored and must instead be used to their full potential. It illustrates the danger that in our haste to apply the traditional to the novel, we may be too contrived or too shy, and thus either risk misappropriation and reach errant conclusions, or too large a degree of reticence and miss an opportunity for real, in-depth dialogue.

Case study

As set out at the beginning of this section, many games deal with the apocalypse in some form or another, far more than deal with scriptural references or Christ-figures, and so selection is somewhat more important than in previous explorations of games. Because they are designed to select films with an appropriate level of relevance of meaning, I have drawn on Ostwalt's criteria for selecting film examples to determine which game to consider, deciding on *Bioshock*. It satisfies

[116] ibid. 92

Ostwalt's criteria by depicting apocalyptic themes - *Bioshock* features an imminent threat to the world, as well as its own 'local' annihilation - and is recent and well-regarded enough to be relevant. I have selected only one game, so the variety of genres is not considered here, although *Bioshock* does contain elements from first person shooter and horror-survival genres, and is well-representative of its type. Finally, it contains scope for there to be present a suitable focus on character, setting and plot (although not all three to the same extent). In keeping with the above exploration of the zombie genre as a particularly modern form of apocalypse *Bioshock*, while not a classic zombie game, nonetheless deals with creatures who are the sort of 'altered' human described by DeCou.

Character

The characterisation of *Bioshock* does not present the same kind of apocalyptic imagery as Ostwalt sees in *Pale Rider*. Rather, as noted in the previous chapter, the lead character is more aligned to that of a Christ-figure than the avenging spirit found in Revelation. Nonetheless, Ostwalt asserts that in films dealing with these themes an "apocalyptic hero or heroine emerges to avert the impending cataclysm,"[117] and it is this character we see in Jack Ryan, a man who appears at a critical moment and takes his part in the dismantling of a system that saw the city of Rapture fall into despair. Furthermore, Jack does to some extent avenge the city when he kills those responsible for its downfall and potentially prevents the murderous citizens from reaching the surface.

Setting

*Bioshock'*s setting brings apocalyptic imagery to the fore - from the wall of flames at the start to the abandoned and ruinous hallways, littered with the belongings of the dead, the entire city of Rapture is a testament to the tragedy that happened there, and which threatens to reach the surface. Through bloody graffiti (especially the chilling "Above all do no harm" scrawled by a deranged surgeon) and adverts for the DNA-altering substances that led to the downfall of Rapture, the player is guided through the city's history and shown glimpses of the future for the rest of Earth if the same focus on self finds its way to surface cultures. In the same way that Ostwalt saw the jungles of Cambodia draw attention to the potential fate of the protagonists in *Apocalypse Now*, so Rapture warns against and highlights the oncoming disaster. The atmosphere of a game is crafted in much the same way as in film, with the full realisation that it contributes to the overall message of the game. A feature film-worthy soundtrack lends a sense of increasing menace, punctuated by sudden snatches from old jazz standards and inhuman shrieks. In this

[117] Ostwalt *Hollywood* 57

way, games can have a great deal to contribute through explorations of how such a setting reflects specific themes.

Plot

While *Bioshock* contains apocalyptic characterisation and setting to some extent, the real potential for dialogue comes from the plot, and so this is where we will focus our exploration. The type of struggle against impending apocalypse that is the cornerstone of the *Bioshock* story is particularly useful for this analysis because it contains both a reaction against a tragedy that has already passed, and a desperate attempt to prevent the end of the world as we know it. In other narratives this might seem to be contradictory, but *Bioshock* presents the player with two distinct worlds, giving us a unique opportunity to look at both concepts. In the primary elements of the plot, those which are more evident and at the forefront of the player's experience, Jack Ryan has stumbled across a desolate city in which the end has already come - the few citizens remaining are other crazed and murderous, or are the remainder of the powerful elite who have managed to hide themselves away and cling on. Jack makes his way through the city, learning about the events of Rapture's civil war and the triggers for it. He destroys key figures in Rapture's bloody past, redeeming it little by little, death by death, until he finds himself facing up to those responsible. Unable to save Rapture entirely, just as survivors are unable to undo the damage of a zombie apocalypse, Jack instead tries to prevent a worsening of the situation. In this side of the plot, *Bioshock* represents the type of struggle that Morehead sees in the zombie genre, of an almost futile attempt to rectify a situation that is beyond help - Rapture will never be great again, and Jack can do no more than eliminate the creatures that he comes across.

However, the story of *Bioshock* is not just about Jack's ability to survive and escape the submerged city, it is also about his struggle to ensure that the same calamity does not befall the surface world. In one of the endings, where the player has completed the plot but failed to accomplish a set of tasks in a way the game considers to be morally 'right', a group of 'splicers' are seen at the surface of the ocean, the implication being that they are setting out to wreak havoc on the rest of the planet. Jack's story can therefore be understood as a battle to save the planet from an apocalypse yet to come, as in *The Seventh Sign*. More than this though, through fighting the denizens of Rapture Jack learns horror of what has befallen the city, providing an additional impetus to stop it spreading and affecting the future of the rest of the world. Bringing these strands together in *Bioshock* creates the kind of message that more straightforward narratives are unable to - in those where protagonists are fighting against a future yet to come they are doing so with no real idea of what will happen to the world, but because Jack experiences a sealed-off world where the apocalypse has already taken place he is all too knowledgeable about the disaster that could befall the surface.

This type of multi-faceted plot is, of course, not unique to video game media and it could be portrayed in film or literature. However, the duality present in this kind of narrative lends itself easily to this medium, in part because the player's focus on their own activity (rather than a global narrative) helps to reinforce the two motivations for Jack's struggle and prompts questions from the issues arising on both sides. In the case of *Bioshock*, which features creatures brought to their damaged state by life in a selfish city, the potential answers to these questions function like the possibility previously mooted for zombie films to act as a warning against man's worst traits. Of course, the world will not literally end up like Rapture, but it warns players about the dangers of worshipping the superiority of man regardless of moral considerations.

The question of whether *Bioshock* ultimately gives an optimistic or pessimistic view of the apocalypse is difficult, and does not have a straightforward answer. The elements of the story relating to the fate of Rapture itself exemplifies the postmodern attitude posited by Morehead - the citizens of Rapture came to what they thought would be a paradise, only to see it ripped to shreds by greed and self-obsession. However, the remainder of the tale is very dependent on the player's own actions within the game world. As explained previously, part of the game is a choice over whether to kill the innocent Little Sisters in return for more of the substance that allows the player to gain new abilities, or whether to free them and receive a little less. If the player chooses to kill the Sisters they receive the end cut-scene mentioned above, where the fate of the world appears somewhat bleak, but if they save the Sisters the end instead shows them growing up and caring for Jack in his old age, with no mention of splicers ever reaching the surface. Therefore, whether the ending to this narrative arc is optimistic or pessimistic is entirely down to the player's choices when dealing with the Little Sisters, and the difference between the world ending or being saved is the refusal to exploit the innocent for the gain of the greedy. This element of *Bioshock* highlights why video games are such a rich source for dialogue - in the game players can see the results of their actions played out on screen and can play again to see how different choices affect the gameworld, but in a film with a fixed choice and ending this is impossible. Because of the choice afforded by its medium, *Bioshock* acts as a learning experience for players, carrying the same kind of message and warning as the zombie narratives outlined previously, but in a much more tangible and experiential way. As Paffenroth notes "Human violence reaps what it sows; the fiction of zombies just makes this more graphic."[118]

Ultimately, *Bioshock* demonstrates the potential that video games possess to deal with such important and all-encompassing themes. The use of setting and atmosphere is coherent with that seen by Ostwalt in *Apocalypse Now* and lends support to Ostwalt's view still carrying weight in

[118] Paffenroth *Apocalyptic Imagery* 47

more modern cinema and new media. When considered in the context of the conflict and cohesion between Ostwalt and Morehead's assertions on the meaning of these apocalyptic narratives, however, *Bioshock* shows how video games come into their own. They are a medium uniquely suited to helping players explore the impact of their choices and the ramifications of them for the world, and they also lend themselves very well to narratives with more than one focus.

The aim of this chapter was to examine the potential for video games to contribute to theological dialogue through depictions of the apocalypse. Ostwalt's work on apocalyptic cinema provided a context for the subject more broadly and, to narrow down this wide topic, we chose the specific subset of 'zombie apocalypse' to focus on and to look at in depth. A comparison between Morehead and Ostwalt's work drew out some of the distinct differences between zombie media and other forms of apocalypse (such as asteroid impact), establishing the zombie genre in general as capable of striking commentary on human attitudes to the end of the world and our ability to control it (or not). Following this, we considered a direct application of zombie media to traditional theology in the form of DeCou's Barthian analysis of *The Walking Dead*. Although her account did not reflect some of the deeper facets of Barth's work on acceptable human death, and shied away from using this novel exploration to grapple with difficult topics like euthanasia, it nonetheless demonstrated the potential that creative approaches to theology and new media can display. Having firmly established the veracity of the zombie apocalypse as a source for theological discussion, we use *Bioshock* as a case study for how far this might extend to video games (rather than films and TV series). By matching the content of *Bioshock* to the characteristics of apocalyptic media that Ostwalt and Morehead identify, and focussing particularly on the unique interactivity of games, we confirmed that the same elements that make film, TV and other kinds of zombie and apocalypse media effective conversation partners for theology are also present in video games.

We should briefly consider further avenues of exploration in this area. In terms of zombie media, there are other, very different, depictions of zombies in video games that may provide a different angle on the subject. For instance, the cartoonish 'tower defence' game *Plants vs Zombies* features a range of zombies trying to attack a suburban garden. Some of these zombies are dressed in clothes redolent of their living past, such as athletes, whose behaviour echoes these roles (for instance, a zombie dressed like a pole vaulter will vault over obstacles). Here, the clothes and matching characteristics of the zombies may serve to indicate that they retain some vestige of who they were and, therefore, may provide a commentary on the differences (and similarities) between us and our zombie reflections. Kim Paffenroth makes a similar point when discussing *Dawn of the Dead*, in which Romero clearly depicts zombies crowding towards a

shopping mall because they are following instincts arising from the consumerist habits of their previous lives among the living[119]. Other games, such as the multiplayer modes in the *Left 4 Dead* series, allow the player to play as a zombie character, and therefore see the world (and the other, human players) from the perspective of the undead. These game mechanics could allow us to look deeper at the differences between zombies and humans, through an examination of (for instance) the different types of movement available to the zombie and human players and which side's success is presented as the 'right' ending. Such an examination would build further upon the foundations laid by this chapter, which indicate considerably potential for zombie games specifically - and, by extension, apocalyptic games more widely - to contribute to theological conversations and suggests way of answering questions about what it means to be human.

[119] Paffenroth op. cit. 153

7. Torture porn and the Passion: violence in video games

The preceding chapters showed that games can provoke theological discussion, in which a twofold exploration might occur; theological insight can provide further depth to the game narrative, and the game can suggest both questions and answers on theological issues like the nature of human experience. We will now move on to content that ostensibly has no religious connection, whether obvious or implicit, to determine whether this, too, may be a fruitful source of understanding.

Violence is an example of generic game content without the clear religious interpretation as the themes considered in previous chapters. Unlike apocalyptic narratives, it is not inherently theological; rather, it borders on the generic. While it may be part of a wider context to a scriptural reference or interpretation of a Christ-figure, that would be a different study of violence than the depictions I intend to cover here. Instead, this chapter examines the role that violence plays in, and how it might alter our understanding of, the game narrative while provoking dialogue with theology. Our starting point is Kent Brintnall's comparison between Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and visions of Christ's crucifixion in Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, which we look at alongside Jolyon Mitchell's exploration of the depiction of violence within film. Following this, we will consider how we can best engage with video games, in view of the potential for violent content to have problematic effects. These explorations will then form a template for us to consider the role that violence plays in scenes of violence against the self in *Heavy Rain*.

The suspicion that games might cause violent behaviour is well known and widely reported; As Miguel Sicart notes, "One common media argument claims that games lead to violent behaviour and desensitization in the face of violence."[1] For instance, "Study finds that violent video games may be linked to aggressive behaviour"[2] and "Violent video games DO trigger aggressive behaviour, decade-long review claims"[3] are just two headlines reporting on this topic. The media's view of the cause and effect relationship is not always clear-cut, however - the Telegraph reported "Study finds no evidence violent video games make children aggressive."[4] Kevin Schut refers to this mix of views, stating "if we're looking for a nice straight line between shooting

[1] Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, 3

[2] Jon von Radowitz "Study finds that violent video games may be linked to aggressive behaviour" *The Independent*

[3] Jack Milner "Violent video games DO trigger aggressive behaviour, decade-long review claims" *Daily Mail*

[4] John Bingham "Study finds no evidence violent video games make children aggressive" *The Telegraph*

dangerous robots in a digital futurescape and behavior at the office, we're unlikely to find it."[5] In *Halos and Avatars*, Daniel White Hodge acknowledges the existence of negative findings, but notes that these may be balanced by other studies showing positive findings in relation to intelligence and multi-tasking, as well as observations that teen gamers are also social and that games have civic dimensions.[6]

Gareth Schott states that "makers of games have been heavily chastised for the excesses and intemperance that games signify and the power and freedom they accord players to act violently,"[7] suggesting that that the "traits and risks" of "violence, gore, and bloodshed"[8] have been focussed on by critical parties to argue for better regulation. Drawing on tragedies such as the Columbine shooting he asserts that "These concerns are persistently revisited, thanks to the indelible association that has been created in people's' minds between mass shootings and game violence."[9] Schott therefore identifies the link between game violence and real-world violence almost as a facet of popular culture in its own right; a trope that is frequently repeated in the media regardless of evidence. Others, such as White Hodge, suggest that "Violence in video games is, in many ways, a reflection of the violent society in which we live."[10] It is against this context of media attention and concern over the effects of violent depictions in video games that we analyse the potential of such content to lead to productive and fruitful dialogue with theology.

The Showings of Quentin Tarantino

Brintnall's aim in his comparison of *Reservoir Dogs* and the writings of Julian of Norwich is to

> contribute certain insights to Christian theological understandings of the significance and meaning of the crucifixion [and] demonstrate how a truly interdisciplinary methodology between theology and film studies is both possible and productive for constructive theological discourses.[11]

By tracing parallels between two sets of imagery, Brintnall finds fresh space for dialogue that sheds new light on the crucifixion. This exploration is particularly helpful for our work in this area because it uses popular culture and existing theological work in a creative and unusual way, creating new opportunities for understanding. Brintnall acknowledges that *Reservoir Dogs* and the

---

[5] Schut, *Of Games and God*, 67

[6] Daniel White Hodge, extracted quoted in Craig Detweiler "Introduction" in *Halos* 3

[7] Gareth Schott *Violent Video Games: Rules, Realism and Effect* 1

[8] ibid. 1

[9] ibid. 1-2

[10] Daniel White Hodge "Role Playing: Toward a Theology for Gamers" in *Halos*, 168

[11] Kent L. Brintnall, "Tarantino's Incarnational Theology: Reservoir Dogs, Crucifixions and Spectacular Violence" *Cross Currents*

work of a medieval mystic "are from radically different historical periods, generated for different reasons, produced in disparate mediums, by 'authors' with remarkably different commitments."[12] However, he considers that the similarities he sees between the structures and themes of both works is sufficient to frame them as suitable conversation partners.[13] Moreover, Brintnall explicitly states that his exploration is just a starting point for deeper discourse. By applying this point of view to the medium of gaming, and by comparing his stance with Mitchell, we will determine how robust a starting point this is.

Considering Julian's work, Brintnall notes her "fascination with the gruesome details of the body of the crucified Christ"[14] and that "the brutalized body of Jesus serves as the foundational inspiration for Julian's theological musings."[15] The main point for comparison that he sees in *Reservoir Dogs* is the interplay between 'Mr Orange' and 'Mr White', writing that

> Just as the figure of Jesus is the brutalized body around which Julian's theological writings are organized, the wounded body of Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) lies at the heart, quite literally, of Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs.[16]

Noting the graphic way in which Julian describes her vision of Christ's Passion and how this forms the centrepiece of her visions, Brintnall compares this with the injury and violence in *Reservoir Dogs*. He makes mention of an early scene where Orange is "shown screaming and writhing in the back seat of a car, the victim of a gunshot wound to the belly"[17] and how the juxtaposition with the various backgrounds against which his injured body is set, such as the stark industrial warehouse in which most of the film takes place, draw focus to the nature of his suffering. Noting the compassion expressed by White as a direct result of the violence experienced by Orange, Brintnall asserts that "In both texts, then, a wounded, bleeding, brutalized body organizes and controls the discourse"[18] because the role of Orange in *Reservoir Dogs* corresponds to the central place afforded to the suffering Christ in Julian's visions.

The suffering experienced brings out a theme of compassion in both works; in Julian's reflections we see a building and understanding of God's compassion through meditation on the violence and brutality of the Passion and, in *Reservoir Dogs*, the concern that White has for Orange is demonstrated throughout the film in his interactions with the dying man, whom he treats almost

[12] ibid.

[13] ibid.

[14] ibid.

[15] ibid.

[16] ibid.

[17] ibid.

[18] ibid.

tenderly. Edward Gallafent draws out the catalysation of the relationship between White and Orange as a result of the latter's injuries, stating that his "physical condition creates a relation that is almost one of adult to infant"[19] and that White's defence and compassion for Orange "comes to express his belief in the possibility of a benign relation to another person (and hence the possibility of such relations for others)."[20] Brintnall sees the violence as a means through which a deeper meaning is elicited, saying of the connection between White and Orange that

> This bond, however, is only possible given the violence enacted against Mr. Orange's body. Both Julian's and Tarantino's work, then, calls its audience to a place of compassion and empathy, but the mechanism for this ethical call is the display of a brutalized body.[21]

Gallafent, too, notes the almost taboo nature of this bond, calling it "a form of intimacy, a feeling that the culture that he inhabits is designed to repress or deny,"[22] and Jason Jacobs asks, "Would Mr White tenderly comb Mr Orange's hair in *Reservoir Dogs* if Orange wasn't bleeding to death?"[23] In both these works violence has a key role to play in communicating to the viewer the roles of and interactions between those involved in the scene or vision. Brintnall notes that both

> use representations of the bloody, wounded, human figure as a mechanism for generating ethical critique... Not only does physical brutality enable and generate an ethical critique, but this critique has a very specific content in both Julian's and Tarantino's work. This understanding... may open up very different conceptions of the salvific nature of Jesus' death[24].

For Brintnall, the use of violence by Tarantino and Julian serves a purpose. It points to the ability of violence to illustrate a deeper meaning about the subject - in the case of *Reservoir Dogs*, this is the potential for a moment of tenderness between two men in a hyper-masculine environment, and in Julian's work it demonstrated the necessity of the Passion's violence in mankind's salvation through Christ. Ellen Ross reflects this conclusion when she writes that

> experiences of emotional and physical suffering can lead to and be a part of deepening love of God and neighbor. And yet pain is not pursued for its own sake but rather emerges as a part of a spiritual process of renewal.[25]

While not writing about *Reservoir Dogs*, or even about film, her point about the use of painful experiences for a deeper purpose rings true here. Similarly, in *Reservoir Dogs* the pain suffered by

---

[19] Edward Gallafent, *Quentin Tarantino* 15

[20] ibid. 15

[21] Brintnall, op cit.

[22] Gallafent, op cit. 18

[23] Jason Jacobs "Gunfire" in *Screen Violence* ed Karl French 167

[24] Brintnall, op cit.

[25] Ellen M. Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* 40

Orange is not 'for its own sake' (implying gratuity) but is entwined with the deepening affection shown by White.

A similar use of violence to challenge and uncover gender roles is identified in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* by Gallafent, who notes that the confident, masculine assassins Jules and Vincent rely on someone else to clean the blood-soaked car that is the consequence of an accidental death. He asserts that

> Jules and Vincent fit into familiar masculine stereotypes of calm, controlled power. The effect of the outpouring of Marvin's blood is to abolish the assumption of masculine control, in part to feminise them.[26]

Here, again, Tarantino's explicit depictions of violence reveal complexity to the characters and add new dimensions to the wider narrative and structure of the film. In this sense, the violence (although dramatic and visceral) is not gratuitous because it serves a specific purpose; this is not isolated to a single Tarantino film, but becomes a powerful tool across multiple productions. Gallafent also draws a contrast with the *lack* of violent imagery in an earlier scene from the same film, in which Jules and Vincent murder a character they had been interrogating. Noting that there is no explicit lingering on this character's corpse, he writes that "It is expressive that at this time Tarantino gives us no shot of Brett's body as soon as the job is done, he ceases to be present to Jules' or Vincent's consciousness."[27] The effect of this treatment is to normalise Brett's death and highlight the matter-of-factness with which his life was taken. The difference in reaction and depiction of Marvin's accidental death is therefore made significant, underscoring the specific and deliberate role that violent imagery plays in constructing the film's wider narrative.

The Ultra-Violent Passion of the Christ

Mitchell's work also considers 'ultra-violent' film, with his key example being Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde,* in which the final bullet-ridden scene was shot to "show how violence was translated into myth" and stay truthful to the death of the real heroes (who Penn reports received 87 wounds between them).[28] This was reflected in some of the film's contemporary reviews, with Mitchell noting one assertion that "the violence was necessary to remind viewers of the grim realities of the actual story,"[29] although (as explored below) others were far less accepting of Penn's vision. This view encapsulates one of the key roles that violence can play within narrative media: Tarantino and Penn looked for realism in their violent scenes because they recognised that

[26] Gallafent op. cit. 48-9

[27] ibid. 47

[28] Mitchell op. cit. 171

[29] ibid. 171

this violence was an integral part of the story itself, and even more so for Penn because it was based on the real events of Bonnie and Clyde's story. This realism serves the purpose of reminding the audience that such events are possible, or that such events have even happened and, in the case of *Bonnie and Clyde*, acts against the potential for the story to be sanitised of its violence when it enters into mythology.

Mitchell provides further evidence for this view when he considers Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, describing how the director was concerned about the desensitisation to violent media as a result of repeated dramatic footage from the Vietnam War being shown over the television. The stylised violence in *The Wild Bunch* was Peckinpah's attempt to "deglamourise film violence and show the ugliness of real violence" by "heightening" it and emphasising "the sense of horror and agony that film provides."[30] Stephen Prince echoes this view when he asserts that

> By breaking the established representational conventions, Peckinpah hoped to convey the horror of violence to viewers he believed had been rendered complacent by decades of painless, bloodless movie killings.[31]

As with *Bonnie and Clyde,* this violence has a role to play in making audiences aware of the nature of the violence that they see around them through the rest of the media. Finally, Mitchell revisits this idea in modern cinema when he notes that the opening sequence from *Saving Private Ryan* belongs to that genre of war films that "attempt to cut through the traditional cinematic glorification of war"[32] and was considered by many reviewers to be "successful in creating the appearance of raw reality through cinematic technique."[33] In all these examples, excessive and realistic 'ultra-violence' is used to emphasise the nature of real-world violence and provoke a realisation within their audiences.

The question remains, 'why such gruesome violence?' Why is it necessary to hear Orange's screams, see the ever-expanding pool of his blood, or witness the aftermath of removing a hostage's ear? Surely a broken body can be an effective means by which to explore a narrative without it becoming sickening. In acknowledgement of this, and in conjunction with Tarantino's own assertion that *Reservoir Dogs* uses very realistic violence, Brintnall states that

> To make an ethical demand, violence cannot be fantastic; theatrical, cartoonish violence is too easily deflected and dismissed. Realistic violence may also be a

[30] ibid. 173

[31] Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* 50

[32] Mitchell, op. cit. 183

[33] ibid. 183

> source of disgust and discomfort, but it draws us into the drama of the events represented more fully and completely.[34]

In other words, if the violence in *Reservoir Dogs* was muted and sanitised, we would not have the same experience of the narrative because it would not affect us in so deep a way; the realism of Orange's suffering is necessary for the sequence of events (and the meaning therein) to capture us entirely. Annette Hill draws a similar conclusion from interviews with female film fans about violent imagery; in relation to one participant's comments about the violence in *Reservoir Dogs*, she concludes: "For her, 'new brutalist' films deal with extremes, in this instance the extremes of humour and pain in *Reservoir Dogs,* and this encourages her to reflect on the issue of violence."[35] Hill goes on to assert that "the narrative, characterisation and style of the film work to explore violence in a more extreme and challenging manner."[36] The degree to which violence is presented in films like *Reservoir Dogs* is, therefore, not solely gratuitous. It heightens the viewer's understanding of the narrative and helps them react to and reflect upon the events that are unfolding. Had Tarantino toned down Orange's injuries or the infamous ear-amputation scene, this sanitisation would have lessened the intensity and the revulsion of such acts and therefore reduce the opportunities for reflection. This is reflected in Mitchell's above assertions about *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch* and *Saving Private Ryan*; the level of violence displayed in these films was necessary to bring a sense of realism to the narratives, either because they were re-tellings of real events, or to challenge complacency about glamourised violence featured in other films. This imagery serves a purpose and, without it, the films would be significantly affected.

To a large extent, the same can also be said for Julian's work. Tarantino's films are renowned for their use of hyper-realistic violence[37], but what Brintnall addresses less forthrightly here is that Julian herself used violent realism in her depictions of Christ that would not seem out of place in such a film. For example, she describes how the thorn-pierced skin on Christ's forehead became loosened and hung down, and how his skin turned black and brown and his nose shrivelled.[38] Unlike sanitised depictions of Christ that downplay the agony of His death and the enormity of the sacrifice by both Father and Son, Julian's visions likewise envelope her readers in how great a

---

[34] Brintnall, op. cit.

[35] Annette Hill "Looks like it hurts: Women's responses to shocking entertainment" in *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate* ed. Martin Barker and Julian Petley 139

[36] ibid. 140

[37] Gallafent, for instance, states that his films are "admired for their styles, visual and verbal wit, ingeniousness of casting, narrative structure, choreography, their attitude to race and their treatment of violence. They have also been widely reviled, on the basis of most if not all of the same characteristics", op cit. 1

[38] Julian of Norwich and Denise Baker, *The Showings Of Julian Of Norwich* 27-8

degree of suffering was borne for the salvation of humankind. By way of explanation, Ross states that

> The images of Jesus' agony and death... in the Showings graphically portray the pains he endured. Meditation on the details of the suffering heightens awareness of what Christ endured for humanity and, along with this, prompts the observer to reflect on why Christ chose to undergo such pain.[39]

By emptying the Passion of sentimentality that ignores the reality of the death Christ endured, Julian places much greater value on the Passion. After describing this part of her vision and the pains she felt alongside Christ, she says that "Here felt I stedfastly that I lovyd Crist so much above my selfe that ther was no peyne that myght be sufferyd lyke to that sorrow that I had to see hym in payne,"[40] demonstrating that her gruesome visions served only to strengthen and further solidify her faith and love for Christ. Violent imagery in this context has a specific and meaningful purpose; it highlights the nature of Christ's sacrifice and the reality of what it meant to suffer on the cross in a way that would not otherwise be possible.

One of the more recent films that Mitchell considers is Mel Gibson's re-telling of Christ's death in *The Passion of the Christ*. He notes how Gibson deliberately used intense and realistic violence in order to "push the viewer over the edge" and make them understand "the enormity of that sacrifice,"[41] although he questions the theological validity of this depiction.[42] Mitchell contends that the violence in *The Passion* is present because "both audiences and directors have become increasingly used to gazing upon dismembered limbs and blood-spattered wounds" and that the content is "less surprising when seen in the context of the evolution of cinematic violence."[43] The graphic violence is therefore tacitly described as gratuitous, and Gibson's claim that he wanted to give the story authenticity almost treated as a veneer of respectability. What this response passes over, despite references to "the long tradition of Christian art to express theology visually,"[44] is that this kind of violence is not new in depictions of the Passion. Indeed, Mitchell states that *The Passion* shares similarities with Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece (which shows a grotesquely twisted and wizened Christ), but only in order to dismiss Gibson's claim of research into depictions by Caravaggio. Nonetheless, one traditional depiction to which Gibson's vision of Christ's death bears a striking resemblance is Julian of Norwich's. Both are graphic and specific in their descriptions of the wounds inflicted on Jesus, including elements such as the scourging or

[39] Ross, op. cit. 34

[40] Julian of Norwich op. cit. 29

[41] Mitchell, op. cit. 185

[42] ibid. 185

[43] ibid. 185

[44] ibid. 186

lashing prior to crucifixion and Julian's writing focuses in explicit detail on these injuries and the moments of his death. Although in a different format, Julian's focus on Christ's suffering is just as concentrated as Gibson's. As explored above, Julian's depictions of Christ's death serve a purpose and it is undoubtedly reasonable to see Gibson's depiction in the same way. Although Mitchell may be concerned about Gibson's imagery, it is not necessarily the product of audience desensitisation to screen violence but rather a continuation of brutal artistic depictions of the Passion.

Brintnall's work, although an unconventional pairing of texts, demonstrate that there is a role for violent media within theological discourse, not least because theological works themselves can contain violence of much the same kind. Concluding his study, he writes that

> It seems clear to me that a text as non-theological as Tarantino's and a disciplinary field as a-religious as film studies can provide useful analytical tools to Christian theologians... Specifically, representations of violence have an ethical import because they can focus our attention and generate our sympathy in particular ways.[45]

When considered in their own context, we see that even the hyper-realistic violence of pop culture texts can have its place in dialogue with theology. Just as Orange's horrific injury is the catalyst needed for White to demonstrate compassion, so too does Julian of Norwich react to the violence suffered by Christ. In these instances, violence is a means to accessing and appreciating a significant aspect of the narrative. In her writing, Julian appears to hold violence as a prerequisite to a deeper understanding of the compassion present in and dependent on the crucifixion. Such conclusions demonstrate, as acknowledged by Brintnall, the potential for violence to be a legitimate focus for dialogue between theology and new media.

In Dialogue with Danger

While it is apparent that there is legitimacy in allowing media to speak through depictions of violence, thought must still be given to its effects. We have already considered the pitfalls in the media itself and how violence is presented, but it is important to examine possibilities about the way it is *received*. This is not an ethnographic study and the intention here is not to focus on the audience over the text itself, but in light of the context surrounding conversations about media violence (as outlined above) we must consider concerns about the effects of such content. Whether violent games and films really affect people's behaviour and make them more prone to aggression or copycat behaviour that is an area for psychology[46] and is considerably wider in

[45] Brintnall, op cit.

[46] Such as Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt's *The Video Game Debate* or Craig A. Anderson, Douglas A. Gentile, Katherine E. Buckley's *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research,*

scope that the subject of one chapter. Rather, this exploration acknowledges the concerns about this link and the potential for it to exist, and therefore asks how we should engage with potentially harmful or dangerous content when we want to use it for theological dialogue.

First, although Brintnall and Mitchell's work suggests a valid role for violence to play, we must consider the context in which depictions of violence are placed and whether this puts up different barriers to dialogue. While Mitchell describes views that lend this possibility to film violence, his exploration also carries a note of warning. With regard to Peckinpah's later film, *Straw Dogs*, Mitchell draws on Prince and notes his view that although the director may have had "laudable objectives... he and the rest of the production team clearly derived considerable aesthetic pleasure from creating memorable montage sequences."[47] This was also a criticism Prince levelled at *The Wild Bunch*, highlighting the "contradiction between Peckinpah's laudable moral intention of shocking his viewers into confronting the horror of violence and his own fascination with the montage spectacle."[48] Although cinematic violence can provoke a meaningful reflection it does not follow that this is always the case, nor that it is not simultaneously there for aesthetic reasons. Tarantino, Penn and Peckinpah may have identified a use for violence in film, but it does not preclude them finding enjoyment within the portrayals in and of themselves, regardless of the deeper meaning that can be found within. This apparent conflict, of enjoying the spectacle of violence while engaging on a deeper interpretative level, will be returned to in due course.

Taking this further, Mitchell turns to *A Clockwork Orange* – a film that specifically deals with the repercussions of ultra-violent behaviour. Although the film is supposed to demonstrate the necessity of man's choice in his actions,[49] Mitchell considers that Kubrick's narrative focus is problematic. By continuing to use Alex as a point of identification and by turning his victims into stylised caricatures, Mitchell notes that the film allows "his victims to become little more than objects to be used or damaged or later to impose revenge."[50] He concludes that "the violence of *A Clockwork Orange* is both hard to escape from and troubling: it is far from redemptive."[51] The essential narrative of the film - that it is important for us to be able to choose morality and that rehabilitation needs more than 'programming' - carries a huge amount of potential, and violence

and Public Policy essay collections, which gather together current thinking. Schut also reflects on the potential for such studies: op. cit. 56-9

[47] Mitchell, op cit. 174

[48] Prince, op cit. 100

[49] Mitchell, op cit. 176

[50] ibid. 176

[51] ibid. 176

is a necessary part of how this would be portrayed. However, the way Kubrick choses to frame Alex's actions brings to the story a shift in focus that unnecessarily glorifies violence.

With regard to Tarantino's style particularly, Mitchell states that the use of ultra-violence is "an attempt to heighten the audience's experience" and "becomes one tool frequently used to hold a viewer's attention."[52] Highlighting the drawn-out end of Orange as an example, Mitchell identifies a split in critical opinion about this aspect of Tarantino's storytelling, with one side feeling that the violence is "a vital realistic critique of the 'bang, bang you're dead' movie-making approach"[53] - a view that would no doubt be shared by Brintnall and, of course, Tarantino himself. This approach is consistent with Brintnall's view that the violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is important as a means by which the viewers are enfolded in the narrative and able to access the deeper meanings, such as the relationship between White and Orange.

However, the opposing view is that the violence is "gratuitous, doing little more than attracting the eye rather than developing the narrative."[54] Travis Anderson notes that the critic Ella Taylor, for instance, was "infuriated by the torture scene [in *Reservoir Dogs*], which she thought masked the horror of real violence by depicting it with a 'cool, giggly insouciance.'"[55] In this critic's opinion, this depiction of violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is "pure gratuity, without mercy for the viewer"[56] because of the way Tarantino presents it and the attitude that this displays. For such critics, these displays of violence are for shock or for spectacle and, although they may be realistic in their depiction, the power of such imagery is diluted or destroyed by casualness or cruelty. While Brintnall's acknowledges that Tarantino's use of violence can attract the viewer, he does not see it merely as spectacle in the same way as Taylor. For him, its role is to draw the audience more fully into the narrative itself; the criticism that Mitchell identifies challenges this intention and suggests that it is entirely gratuitous and there simply for the sake of shock.

Anderson, however, notes that Taylor and others with similar criticisms of Tarantino rely

> too little on careful exegesis of the artwork and too much on casual commentary by the artist (much of which - in this case, at least - reveals more about

[52] ibid. 186

[53] ibid. 187

[54] ibid. 187

[55] Travis Anderson "Unleashing Nietzsche on the Tragic Infrastructure of Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs" in *Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy: How to philosophize with a pair of pliers and a blowtorch* ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad 28

[56] Ella Taylor, quoted in Anderson, op. cit. 28

> Tarantino's naive and forthright pleasure in simple, unguarded conversation than about the workings and meanings of the film itself).[57]

For Anderson, even though Tarantino may have made comments that Taylor has used to support her view (such as "I sucker-punched you... You're supposed to laugh until I stop you laughing"[58]), the film must be viewed in its own right, separate from such comments. Without evaluating the film on its own terms, careful criticism is not possible; it is important to determine whether scenes of violence are genuinely gratuitous on the grounds of their content and context, and use this conclusion as a firm basis for further comment. In view of Taylor's interpretation of the 'insouciance' with which Tarantino treats the depiction of torture, her criticism is also a reminder that there will be multiple readings of the text and that we must be open to differing interpretations in order to explore most fully the potential opportunities for dialogue.

The main problem that Mitchell identifies in Tarantino's approach is not the films themselves but the influence that they have had on others within the film industry. He notes Taylor's comments that Tarantino's "visceral, stylish, derivative and detached" use of violence "has grown into a virus, frantically copying itself all over the map of contemporary cinema."[59] What is particularly notable about this spread is that, with reference to *Sin City* (in which Mitchell sees this influence), "viewers who can endure the mostly unrealistic depictions of castrations and amputations... are portrayed by many reviewers as 'strong-stomached'."[60] Far from the carefully choreographed blood loss of Orange, the hyper-realistic violence of Tarantino's earlier films appears to Mitchell to have influenced *unrealistic* portrayals of violence in recent films. Although influenced by films that found a valid role for violence, by moving away from the realism celebrated by Brintnall these movies lose the quality that kept the graphic depictions of death and injury from becoming purely aesthetic and therefore gratuitous. Some depictions of violence may have a valid theological or moral part to play, but we must be careful to consider whether over-stylisation reduces this.

The Processes of Violence

Looking at the violence in a different way, Wagner explores the setting of video game violence and considers the 'magic circle' they create by placing players within a separate reality during play. She states that this attribute of games

[57] Anderson, op. cit. 28

[58] Tarantino, quoted in ibid. 28

[59] Ella Taylor in Mitchell, op. cit. 188

[60] Mitchell, op. cit. 188

> means that any unsavoury actions engaged in within the magic circle should be viewed as having no bearing on real life, and perhaps even as being required within the rules of the game. Evil, in such a context, is to be viewed as only make-believe - a form of play or what-if within the "magic circle".[61]

When we engage with a game, we interact within a completely different world and can therefore set aside the societal and moral norms against which we would usually calibrate our behaviour. This can be seen in less 'virtual' forms of play; children pretending to shoot their friends during a game of cops and robbers know that they are not acting within the real world and have no desire to shoot their friends for real. Similarly, although a game player may be a pacifist in real life and balk at the thought of harming a human being, she is not precluded from stepping into the magic circle to dispatch virtual enemies in *Goldeneye* or *Hitman*. In this way, the immersiveness of video game play may serve to lessen the danger of the influence of violence, since it is so distinct from the real world. This separation is reflected further in Wagner's statement that "in video games [violent] activities are typically understood as ephemeral, inconsequential, and even entertaining;"[62] such entertainment and fleetingness are possible because the violence is grounded in unreality.

Nonetheless, Wagner highlights another aspect of play that may have the opposite effect and increase the potential adverse impact of violent content. Drawing on work from Bogost, Wagner explains that games may influence the players through 'procedural rhetoric', which she describes as

> the ways that such processes (especially software-based ones) try to persuade us to see the world in a particular way, and to encourage us, at least within the confines of the procedural experience and implicitly beyond it, to act in particular ways.[63]

She refers here to the structure of a game and the way in which it leads a player through a series of in-game processes to a particular point of view. An explicit example of this may be the awarding of points for certain actions or a clear direction to act in a certain way; many ring-fighting games (such as *Tekken* or *Soul Calibur*) encourage the player to use violent fighting moves by removing increasing amounts of 'health' from their opponent, but also by showing amusing or more interesting animations for more brutal moves or particularly dramatic victories. More subtly, a game might reinforce certain behaviours through the reactions of characters or simply through having a fixed, linear storyline without player choice. *Fable II* allows the player to perform 'bad' actions (such as theft or murder) which will increase the amount of fear that the world's

[61] Wagner, op. cit. 163

[62] ibid. 162

[63] ibid. 162

inhabitants display towards the character and even affects their physical appearance. As such, it gently discourages these actions through this process. While influence can be carried in other media, Wagner notes that

> Bogost insists that procedural representation is the *most vivid* form of representation apart from actual experience, and that it is even *more vivid* than moving images with sound, and thus more vivid than film alone, despite the qualities of video game graphics.[64]

This highlights again a chief difference between film and games, which Deborah Mellamphy frames as the difference between 'seeing' what a character does and 'doing' what they do[65], and the necessity to bear this in mind when constructing a pattern for dialogue with games.

Indeed, Mellamphy makes a similar point to Wagner and Bogost when she states that

> violence in cinema involves a different type of gaze than violence in video games. It is this difference that demands video game players perform a more active role in constructing violence.[66]

Her particular concern is about the 'torture porn' genre, which in film is typified by movies like *Saw* and *Hostel*, where there are lingering, graphic shots of injury and cruelty to the protagonists. Mellamphy focuses on the different nature of film and video games within this genre, highlighting how games allow for a greater degree of identification with the action:

> [in film] the traditional shot-reverse-shot dynamic of cinema allows the onscreen figure to become the owner, or possessor, of the look and the cinema spectator identifies with this gaze... The effect of [game] mechanics is that, in games, the spectator's gaze becomes less passive as the spectator becomes a more active participant in the spectacle and narrative.[67]

In the torture porn genre, it is straightforward to see how this shift in gaze could be problematic as players move from spectators to participants. Nonetheless, we might well see this participation as occurring within the 'magic circle' which, as Wagner notes, could mitigate any negative effects. Mellamphy, however, is of the view that "the images of such games do undoubtedly harbour moral implications for the gamer"[68] although still leaves room for a positive function for gaming

[64] ibid. 168

[65] Deborah Mellamphy, "Dead Eye: The Spectacle of Torture Porn in Dead Rising" in *Game On* 40

[66] ibid. 37

[67] ibid. 40-41

[68] ibid. 46

when she states that “this form of gaze demonstrates the cathartic function of gaming,”[69] despite her opinion that it “"makes active sadists of its players."[70]

Despite the concerns implied by the presence of procedural rhetoric - that we may be more influenced by games than by film - Wagner is less certain of the moral effects of violent game imagery and is careful to note that such effects are not concrete. While it is arguable that the influence of games is greater, and although she raises concerns that gamers may be less able to ‘detach’ from a character in a game in the same way as one from a film,[71] she states that

> It's less clear *what* it is that we learn by doing, and whether or not this doing has an explicit moral component - that is, whether or not the procedural rhetoric teaches us how to feel or what to believe, and to what extent we may or may not be aware of this process.[72]

That is, although there is potential for the interactive and procedural nature of games to exert an influence on us, it is unclear whether this is actually happening and to what extent it is possible. Moreover, the question of whether we would be aware of such a shift in our thoughts or beliefs and the direct cause of this leads to the possibility (explored in detail further below) that risks may be mitigated by thoughtful engagement with games instead of uncritical acceptance.

Procedural rhetoric can lead us to a better grasp of the ideas that lie behind the structure of the game. Referring to the fundamentalist Christian game *Left Behind*, in which players must convert those at risk of being left behind by the Rapture, Wagner asserts that

> the procedural rhetoric can and should also be read as a theological affirmation of the evangelical impulse of the designers of the game and of those evangelical players who embrace it, so that the performance of gameplay is itself a moral and theological exercise.[73]

Wagner’s statement here is an affirmation of the ability of games (even, as explored in a previous chapter, those of dubious theological quality) to take part in a dialogue with religion. In this case, the existence of the game and the development of controversial game mechanics and processes that lead us to discuss the intentions behind the game’s publication and the motivations of its players. It leads us to consider whether a game has a particular agenda and how, in the context of its procedures and structure, it conveys this or attempts to influence gamers. While *Left Behind* is

[69] ibid. 46

[70] ibid. 46

[71] Wagner, op. cit. 171

[72] ibid. 168

[73] ibid. 170

a far less violent game than any of the games or films referred to in this chapter, it is still a helpful example of how procedural rhetoric can be a useful analytical tool.

Alongside his study of film, explored above, Mitchell also gives video games some consideration, chiefly in the context of an exploration over whether violent media causes violent behaviour. The primary criticism of violence that Mitchell sees in media appears to be the glorification of violence - although he notes that there is debate over the validity of the approach, he does leave room for some violence to be cathartic (particularly in video games) and therefore of use, but has concerns over how violence is portrayed. He reports how, when in captivity, the Beirut hostage Terry Waite was shown a film set in the Vietnam war, but found the on-screen violence too close to what he heard going on outside his cell from day to day.[74] From this, and other examples, Mitchell states that "the viewer's imagination is far from a blank slate watching in a vacuum"[75] - we bring our own interpretations and environments to bear on our media experience, and the glorification of violence can be problematic in such a context. Schut adds to this from a faith-based context when he states that in Christian practice "there really isn't much room for the glorification of violence"[76] and notes that Christians should be careful about games in which violence is depicted "for all the wrong reasons: to provide cheap emotional thrills, to provide shock appeal, to get publicity, to satisfy bloodlust."[77] For him, gratuitous and glorified violence poses a problem to Christian faith, but there are other contexts in which depictions of violence might be considered appropriate and constructive.

Engaging with Violence

Although exploring the impact of the 'magic circle', Wagner is nonetheless careful to acknowledge that we cannot know the attitude that a player brings to their interpretation of a game, stating that

> even though a sort of procedural evil *appears* to be enacted upon playing the game, we can never be sure of the motivations of the player or the attitude with which he or she engages the experience.[78]

As such, it is difficult to quantify the likely effects or impact of violent media because it depends on the approach of the player. Some may engage in a manner that predisposes them to negative effects, and others may have a very different experience if they approach violence with a more

[74] ibid. 217

[75] ibid. 217

[76] Schut, op. cit. 67

[77] ibid. 70

[78] Wagner, op. cit. 184

critical attitude. This difference is important to Wagner, as she goes on to explain that a player's approach affects

> how one interprets violence in religious ritual and in video games will... depend upon the intentional, reflexive purpose with which one encounters these cultural artefacts and ultimately, how one *chooses* to define them.[79]

Interpretation is heavily dependent on the way in which the game is approached and engaged with, and is therefore of significance for our study because it suggests that with the right motivations and attitude, violent media can remain a rich source for dialogue.

Mitchell echoes Wagner's concerns and, to some extent, takes the point further. He is clear that violent media should not be rejected outright on 'Christian' grounds, and is critical both of Christians who seek a general ban on media violence and critics who accuse all Christians of taking this attitude;[80] he states:

> I am advocating neither total avoidance nor an end to video game or cinematic violence. Both suggestions are unrealistic, but I am arguing for patterns of formation that will help players and viewers become more critical of why certain kinds of violence are to be found in games and films, while other kinds are hidden.[81]

Ultimately, he considers that the Christian perspective has moved away from rejecting media violence outright "towards approaches that value film, even films that employ explicit violence, as a site for theological and ethical reflection,"[82] and we can see this attitude embraced in relation to video games as well. He describes, for example, a game called *September 12*, where the player is tasked with killing terrorists, but collateral damage radicalises previously friendly citizens who in turn become terrorists.[83] The clear message of this game, which utilises explicit violence in a context drawing heavily on the real world, is ultimately a pacifist one that demonstrates to the player why in the war on terror it is inappropriate to fight fire with fire.

Mitchell therefore asks

> surely there is considerable sense in developing peaceful habits which encourage viewers to reinterpret what they choose to watch? If there is the possibility, for

[79] ibid. 186

[80] Mitchell, op. cit. 217-8

[81] ibid. 227

[82] ibid. 219

[83] ibid. 228

> example, of increasing aggression or desensitisation, surely there is wisdom in encouraging players to avoid uncritical use of violent video games?[84]

For him, the danger is not with violent content, but lies in engaging with it without considering its context and its message; in accepting it blindly and matter-of-factly, instead of reflecting on what it might mean and how we might be interpreting it. This aligns with Brintnall's reflections on Julian of Norwich's writing, when he considers that her works "indicate a relationship between spectacular violence and a response in the viewer that seeks to understand, participate in the alleviation of, and overcome that violence through compassion."[85] The value of Julian's work lies not in the violent spectacle of Christ's death, but in the response of the audience and their understanding that violence needs to be overcome. This requires the same critical engagement that Mitchell calls for in relation to violent games; it is not enough to take depictions at face value, as it is necessary to engage on a more thoughtful and contextual level.

This approach is echoed by Schut, who says that "*unthinkingly* exposing ourselves to (or participating in) a constant stream of violent video games would shape the way we look at the world."[86] Like Mitchell, he concludes that "the meaning of video-game violence and its rightness or wrongness should be judged in context"[87] and that a "whole series of factors"[88] should affect a player's conclusion - including the individual background of the player. Wagner contributes further to this call for considered engagement when she describes the potential impact of two games with violent and racist content:

> In the processes of [*Ethnic Cleansing* and *Border Patrol*], images are used *procedurally* to make an offensive ideological argument. Again, it's impossible to say to what extent the playing of such games generates a moral response in kind with the one generated by the rhetoric of the game itself, but at the very least we can notice the ideological components of such arguments, even when they are made procedurally.[89]

Her statement again highlights the difference between games and film in this space; films present an idea in a linear, solely audio-visual way, but games take us through a series of actions and use the mechanics of gameplay to encourage and enforce certain modes of behaviour within that world. Therefore, while Wagner makes much the same point as Mitchell when she notes the need to "notice the ideological components of such games," in the context of her broader comments

[84] ibid. 227

[85] Brintnall, op. cit.

[86] Schut op. cit. 58

[87] ibid. 70

[88] ibid. 70

[89] Wagner, op. cit. 168

about this difference it carries a higher degree of urgency and necessitates an even more conscious and self-aware form of engagement than Mitchell describes.

What, then, might a critical use of violent modern media look like? In relation to film, Hill notes the following about one of the women she interviewed about their enjoyment of films like *Reservoir Dogs:*

> Sally tests personal and cultural boundaries... However, testing boundaries does not relate to real experience of violence, and her memory of acute distress at witnessing real violence reinforces her new understanding that responses to fictional violence are not the same as responses to real violence. This understanding comes as a result of exploring her emotions through viewing violent cinema.[90]

Here, Sally uses violent films to push her boundaries, doing so with a profound degree of self-awareness. Specifically, she compares the violence she sees on the screen with violence that she has experienced in real life and reflects on the differences between them, reassuring herself that the two are not the same. For her, violent media is a way of understanding her emotions and her reaction to violence, and does not encourage her to participate in or respond in the same way to violent acts in the real world.

To transfer Sally and Mitchell's approaches to theological exploration, rather than personal consumption, we must take the same informed and critical view, while allowing the media to speak on its own terms. For instance, when considering the content ratings systems given to video games, Schott notes that the classification methods

> suggest a focus on the declaration of the presence of content, rather than any assessment of how it is experienced in the context of play and how that might mediate or transform the impact of (otherwise familiar) content.[91]

It is apparent that we risk the same approach when analysing the content of violent media for its theological potential if we do not appreciate the full context in which such content is situated; the *effect* of that violence on the content and the messages relayed by the text as part of the experience of violent scenes is the crucial part of the analysis. We must look for and recognise the aspects of the text that are enhanced by the depiction of violence and, from that standpoint of critical engagement, make a judgement as to the enlightening or gratuitous nature of such content.

[90] Hill, op. cit. 145

[91] Schott, op. cit. 33

Case study: Heavy Rain

To consider how the wider themes raised by Brintnall and Mitchell, as well as the others explored above, can be applied in more detail to video games we will explore them in relation to an exemplar scene from the game *Heavy Rain*. First, we must consider the setting of the violence and whether it carries with it concerning connotations or is gratuitous. These qualities would not necessarily render a violent depiction invalid as a tool for dialogue, but it is important to frame any subsequent discussion in the knowledge of any potentially problematic aspects. Having considered the context of the depiction, we will then consider whether it belies a deeper meaning to the character or narrative, and what (if anything) is accessed through the use of violence in this instance. This includes exploring how realistic the violence is, the effects it has on both character and player, any interplay that may be catalysed by use of violence (such as in *Reservoir Dogs*) and comments it may make about real-world violence. It will also reveal aspects about the medium that provoke important questions about how we interpret games. As with our exploration of characterisation, we may expect the role of player choice to impact upon the fruitfulness of the dialogue and the possibilities for further study. Finally, we will then consider what critical engagement with the game would look like and how this might affect the way in which it is played. Drawing on the anecdote from Sally, explored above, we will look at the ways in which the game might be helpful and the aspects requiring careful examination by the player.

Violence in context

In *Heavy Rain* there are several scenes of violence, some of which depend on the player choosing to act, such as stopping an armed robbery using violence. One particularly intense scene instructs Ethan to cut off a finger in exchange for a clue to the whereabouts of his kidnapped son. Ethan enters a dirty apartment and the player must first look around to find the right tools for the job - they may come across an axe or a meat cleaver, as well as rubbing alcohol to clean the wound and a wooden block to bite down upon. If the player chooses to complete the task, they hold down combinations of buttons to mimic the actions of the character and the tension he is under. Once Ethan has removed his finger, they receive the clue that was the object of the challenge. This clue is not definitive, and completing the task does not necessarily mean that the player will find Ethan's son (there are five clues, all of which require similar engagement with violence against Ethan).

It is important to place this scene in the context of the wider game, which features similar scenes of violence towards the self, as well as interpersonal violence when the characters are evading capture or similar. From one perspective, the game is largely sympathetic towards the victim, and indeed for the more intense acts of violence the player acts from the perspective of the victim; a

tendency that we will explore further in due course. However, unlike film where the action unfolds regardless of the audience's feelings, this game contains an element of choice and the player can choose not only whether Ethan goes through these trials but also the way in which they are carried out and whether to give up halfway through. Also, although the player has the option to skip the trials and forgo the clues, it seems unlikely that they would do so on their first run through the game because the point is to 'win', and the chance of succeeding increases with every challenge met and clue gained. As such, the game encourages - albeit somewhat passively - acts of violence against the main character. How this game will be interpreted and how the player will identify with the character is in the hands of the player.

The question of whether the violence is relevant or ambiguous holds a much clearer answer, as the narrative is almost entirely shaped around it. The main character's story arc requires him to suffer for a chance to save his son, and the violence he suffers (and on occasion metes out) is entirely in line with this. The degree to which the violence is perpetrated against Ethan is, perhaps, more debatable. The tasks he is asked to do include crawling over broken glass before climbing through a series of electrified barriers, which is sadistically specific in the extreme and suggests that the development team tried to incorporate the most painful experiences they could imagine. Nonetheless, the crux of the narrative is that Ethan is supposed to test the limits of what he can endure to save his son. If the tasks were less cruel, this facet of the narrative would weaken. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that the violence in this aspect of the story arc is fitting and not gratuitous.

Indeed, the violence in *Heavy Rain* supports the narrative to such a large extent that it becomes an intrinsic part of the game's structure and environment. Because uncovering clues always requires a degree of violence on the part of the player, these actions become a means of progressing with the core story arc, rather than an expression of an intention to harm. In relation to game violence, Schott notes that

> expressive and functional tools, such as weapons, reflect a player's key means of engaging with an environment, a problem-solving device, an activator of new spaces, and a means of discovering new encounters... To this effect, there is a component of game violence that is principally systematic in nature.[92]

Sharing a degree of similarity with Wagner's point that violence may be considered acceptable within the bounds of the story, Schott points out that it is not simply a matter of players choosing violent acts *because they are violent*. Rather, in the logic of the game and its narrative, a violent act may be necessary to progress to the next stage of the plot or, as in *Heavy Rain*, uncover a vital

[92] Schott, op. cit. 19

element of the deeper story. We can therefore continue to draw a distinction between the actions of the player and the actions of the character; the player interacts with a virtual world to progress, whereas the character performs virtual acts of violence. There are many games in which violence is not used for this purpose (such as the arena-fighting games mentioned above), but in these the violence often acts as a proxy for other things. In *Tekken*, for instance, the action on the screen is violent and gory, but the player is actually competing to see if they can press particular combinations of buttons more quickly than their opponent; the violence onscreen is a product of this (to make it more interesting) rather than the direct action of the player. However, the crucial difference is that such violence is largely unconnected to a narrative and is therefore more likely to be gratuitous in nature.

Player choice and narrative interpretation

Given that *Heavy Rain*'s violent imagery does not in itself seem particularly problematic from the point of gratuity, we must turn our attention to what it contributes to the message of the narrative. The initial reading of the acts of violence to which Ethan is subjected is straightforward: the depictions of his suffering demonstrate the lengths to which he is prepared to go to save his son. This is given more complexity when we consider the interactive nature of the medium, in that the player can choose whether Ethan will try to complete the tasks. From one perspective, this choice could take away some or all the significance from Ethan undergoing his challenges. In a film the audience would learn about the writer's vision of the character through the choices he makes, and whether to complete the tasks would be a very large part of this. The audience would learn a great deal about Ethan's resilience, his feelings for his son, and his character in general through the decisions that he makes. By taking away the concept of pre-ordained choices for the characters this significance would be lost if the decision to undergo his challenges depended on the whim of the player rather than the motivations of the character himself. In this reading of the game, we can learn nothing from the violence because the reason for it happening is entirely aesthetic (because the player enjoys putting the character through the trials to watch the spectacle) and at best apathetic (because the player does not care and has taken the choice at random). There is no deeper motivation to the violence because there cannot be one when seeing violence is the driving force behind the player's choice.

However, this is not the only potential reading of the choice that the player has. Instead of understanding the mechanism as the player determining what Ethan chooses to do, we can understand it as the player choosing which version of the story they want to see. The difference is subtle, but important. In this reading the player does not think "Ethan will cut his finger off because that is what I want to see him do," the player instead thinks "How would the narrative develop if Ethan chose to cut his finger off?" - they ask a question of the game rather than

answering one. By doing this the violence Ethan suffers can deepen the narrative because it can now form a part of the character's background rather than being a result of an arbitrary decision, and as players we are informed about the feelings of that *version* of Ethan that made one choice or another.

There is a third, alternative, way of considering this issue, and that is to understand the player as constructing the character themselves. In a game with simple choices that have big impacts on narrative, we can imagine the player thinking "Ethan will cut his finger off because *I think* he would do that" (or, closely related, "because *I* would do that"). In this reading the player uses the choices to learn more about the character and shape the narrative in the way that they want to see it outlined. When played in this way, the deeper meaning revealed is less about the character of Ethan and more about the motivations of the player herself, making this a potentially powerful tool. Not only does it offer the opportunity to explore what they might do in that situation, it can also offer the potential to learn about the consequences of such actions by seeing how the character is affected (in games that have this mechanic).

The consequences of this for the violent imagery and actions within *Heavy Rain* draw us back to Wagner's magic circle, but also resonate outside it and bring a new point of view. As with many games, the backdrop and narrative of *Heavy Rain* is clearly fictional (incorporating, for instance, a futuristic device for scanning crime scenes and looking through virtual evidence files). Players engage with the game knowing that it is 'just' a game and that they are controlling characters who do not represent them and who exist only within this separate, computer-generated world. As such, the actions they take lie within the magic circle of the game and make sense only as a part of the procedural rhetoric of the game's processes. However, the gaze of the game in the finger-chopping scene is absolutely aligned with Ethan; he is the character that the player controls and, when the final choice is made, his tension is almost palpable. Thus, the player may be made to feel as though they are deciding what to do to *themselves*, rather than the character. Those players (the ones described in the third viewpoint above) do inhabit the magic circle, but in a way that causes them to reflect on their real selves and, in so doing, brings them partly outside of it. For such players, Ethan becomes our viewpoint for violence against the self, at which point we move away from the sadism of the 'torture porn' genre and start to see the game as an opportunity for reflection. Here, the game aligns the player with the victim, not the assailant, and provides an opportunity to really consider how they would behave and react in such a situation. It is, of course, not a perfect simulation (the player knows that they will not lose their finger) but it is sufficiently immersive to be a moment of significance.

Critical engagement

That last point touches upon our final consideration for this case study; how can we engage critically with *Heavy Rain* and use the violence as a point of reflection and dialogue? Above, we note that under some circumstances the player will identify with Ethan and use this experience to reflect on their own reactions to his situation. Such an approach is a self-aware and critical use of the game; players taking this approach are testing their boundaries in a similar way to Sally and learning about their own reactions to violence, both in terms of the act that Ethan is required to undertake, and the emotional violence meted out in the kidnapping of his son.

However, we must consider the value of the game beyond general personal reflection. Both the individual scene discussed and *Heavy Rain*'s whole narrative paints a very negative picture of humanity - a woman is attacked in her apartment, a young boy is hit by a car and his brother kidnapped, a father is forced to undergo torment for a slim chance of saving him. The player, however, can choose to withstand these trials and find in themselves the courage for Ethan to complete the sadistic tasks in front of him; in such a reading, the player is not the sadist forcing Ethan to experience pain, but is Ethan's support and resilience, ensuring that he will be able to complete these challenges. When we recall the violence present throughout the Bible, not least in Christ's death as explored above through the lens of Julian of Norwich's visions, this interpretation may bring new light.

Examining violent themes in the Bible, James Crenshaw describes the wrath of God in the Old Testament when he writes that God

> resorts to mass destruction, wipes out specific towns, and poses a monstrous test to a loyal subject... trying to kill Moses and executing thousands of Israelites, in addition to Pharaoh's subjects. Similarly, the Deuteronomistic History abounds in stories of divine ire with no rational justification,[93]

and notes that this continues in the New Testament, where

> The Apocalypse of John portrays a vindictive God bent on destroying civilization except for a few celibate men. Seven bowls of wrath have replaced water, but the result is the same as the ancient deluge.[94]

Such a context of violence lends a threatening undercurrent to parts of scripture, which suggests an air of legitimacy towards such actions. Indeed, John Collins notes that "When it became clear that the terrorists of September 11, 2001, saw or imagined their grievances in religious terms, any

[93] James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* 179

[94] ibid. 180

reader of the Bible should have had a flash of recognition."[95] Such expressions of modern, human violence are, for Collins, redolent of the cruelty and brutality described in scripture. Tina Pippin makes a particularly pertinent comparison between horror media and the Bible's treatment of the Whore of Babylon when she writes that

> The Apocalypse has similarities to the genre of horror literature in the splattering of blood and gore on the reader and in the intensity in which it draws the reader to gaze on the ripped flesh. What is the usual response to such scenes of violence? Because this text is sacred scripture to Christians are we taught to ignore the violence and to repress our revulsion?[96]

Here, Pippin identifies a double-standard in our treatment of violent content in media and in the Bible, as well as parallels in the way that reader and viewer are both encouraged to focus on violence. This shared-but-different quality is present in a similar way to the depictions of and reactions to Christ's death as described by Julian of Norwich and filmed by Mel Gibson.

Pippin nonetheless sees some value in these violent depictions, stating that

> One must face the horror, because a moral decision must be made, and the choice is written on the foreheads: the mark of the Beast (13:16) or the mark of the Lamb (22:4). Facing the horror is part of the pleasurable torment of reading the Apocalypse.[97]

For her, the violence in Revelation is horrific and revolting, but not gratuitous; it serves a purpose in that it forces the reader to confront a moral choice, and does so in a thrilling and almost tangible way by illustrating the consequence of that choice. Thus, while brutal in nature, the violent imagery here has a value. Crenshaw, too, looks for a positive role for the violence of God, concluding that "The Bible also depicts a compassionate deity whose long-suffering extends to personal involvement in overcoming evil."[98] The Bible contains violence, but it also role-models compassion and a commitment to overcoming evil. Pippin and Crenshaw highlight here the presence of a paradox - that scripture is sometimes compassionate, sometimes violent, and sometimes violent for purposeful moral reasons.

Looking at the role of violence through video games helps us understand this paradox and the multiplicity of (sometime conflicting) roles that violence can play. In the context of negative media

---

[95] John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *Journal of Biblical Literature*

[96] Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* 83

[97] ibid. 86

[98] Crenshaw, op. cit. 180

reactions to video game violence, White Hodge reflects on the presence of Biblical violence and remarks that questions about it

> will continue to plague not just gamers but theologians as well. Moreover, there may not be any clear-cut answers, and that is often why games are played: to seek some type of comfort in an ambiguous world.[99]

Heavy Rain takes this all-encompassing depiction of violence and despair, and allows the player to take ownership and control. The variability of the narrative also allows them to understand the consequences of the choices offered to them in the game and the way the denouement unfolds according to the actions they took. In so doing, it has the transformative potential to turn that world into something fruitful and affirming in the actions of the player. The game delivers the comfort referred to by White Hodge by giving players a way to experience and overcome the chaos of violence and suffering through Ethan's success. Critical and self-aware engagement with *Heavy Rain* and games of this ilk has the potential to explore the consequences of violence, not just their negative impacts but the events that violence shapes, and to put the violence of the Bible in context.

At the game's conclusion, some endings reveal that this was a test of Ethan's resilience and love for his child, conducted by a stranger who wanted to find a father able to face the challenges he set. Earlier on in the game, before the kidnapping, Ethan's relationship with his son has apparently broken down, but through his trials this is implied to be on the mend, as though he has proved to himself and his son that he is willing to sacrifice his well-being. As such, just as Julian of Norwich's violent imagery is legitimised through the realisations of compassion and sacrifice that they invoked, so too does the violence in *Heavy Rain* highlight the underlying motivations of its characters and demonstrate the changes they go through as a result of their experience.

The positive outcomes for Ethan, which may have mended an otherwise irretrievably broken relationship with his son, are redolent of John Hick's work on the necessary and transformative role that evil plays. Of violence in the Bible, Hick states "In these writings there is no attempt to evade the clear verdict of human experience that evil is dark, menacingly ugly, heart-rending, crushing,"[100] a more forceful version of White Hodge's observation above. Hick goes on to explain that the pinnacle of this violence was to be found in Christ's Passion, and from this one could go on consider the role of violence in identifying Christ-figures and explore the potential for Ethan to inhabit this narrative space. However, as the last-but-one chapter looked at Christ-figures in

[99] White Hodge, op. cit. 169

[100] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* 243

detail, it would be more fruitful for this analysis to take a wider view of Hick's work on violence and his exploration of the justification for it.

One striking parallel with Ethan's story is Hick's contention that, as the death of Christ was "the greatest good of all,"[101] "there is no room within the Christian thought-world for the idea of tragedy in any sense that includes the idea of finally *wasted* suffering and goodness."[102] For Hick, the central role of a violent death is an indication that violence and suffering on Earth is not purposeless, a view that shapes his theodicy defending the parallel existence of God and evil. Applied to the narrative of *Heavy Rain*, we see this acted out in a very straightforward manner; ultimately, none of Ethan's suffering is wasted because it leads to the rescue of his son and, crucially, the potential to rebuild his relationship. If he had not been willing to undergo the trials demanded of him (thus not saving his son or demonstrating his worth as a father), he would not have benefitted and would have suffered further through the death of his son. This reading of *Heavy Rain* dovetails with a further conclusion drawn by Hick, that

> the world is not intended to be a paradise, but rather the scene of a history in which human personality may be formed towards the pattern of Christ. Men [are to be thought of] on the analogy of human children, who are to grow to adulthood in an environment whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realization of the most valuable potentialities of human personality.[103]

Hick asserts that evil plays an integral role in the 'growing up' of humanity; just as children cannot realise their full potential if indulged rather than challenged, so too can humanity not reach theirs if they inhabit a world where pleasure is all that can be experienced. Through trials of evil and violence, humanity develops traits that draw closer to the full potential foreseen by God; traits that would not be possible if these challenges were not present and, in Hick's view, our world must therefore be "a place of soul-making."[104] In a similar way, through the ordeals set by his son's kidnapper, Ethan develops as a person and discovers previously unknown resilience and is able to demonstrate in a tangible and concrete way his devotion to his son. Ethan's experiences, although violent and unpleasant, provide a way for the critically-engaged player to reflect on the changes to Ethan's life and character as a result of the trials he had to face.

However, we must also bear in mind that we have focused on the 'good' narrative result - the one that arises from the most successful playthrough in terms of characters saved - but the game has

[101] ibid. 244

[102] ibid. 244

[103] ibid. 258

[104] ibid. 259

seven endings for Ethan alone, depending on his interactions with other characters,[105] and more relating to others. The complexity of the narrative means gives players the opportunity to explore the different choices and the consequences for engaging with or avoiding violence. For instance, if the player 'opts out' of having Ethan do anything violent, he will not receive the clues that help him find his son. One consequence is an increased risk that his son will not be found, although the other playable characters may do so, but even if he is saved there are more resounding consequences for Ethan. In this version of the story, Ethan was not able to undergo the trials required of him and was unable to demonstrate his commitment to his son. This is a fundamental shift in the relationship between the two characters; here, the player did not allow violence to play a role in Ethan's narrative and he was therefore unable to benefit from its consequence. In this way, *Heavy Rain* illustrates the constructive role that violence and moral evil can play in the broader scheme of humanity's wider development. By offering narrative choices the game facilitates critical engagement and thoughtful imagination about how these choices affect the characters, even where this is not depicted explicitly.

Final reflections and future opportunities

In this chapter we have considered whether violent imagery in video games may play a role in facilitating or illuminating dialogue between popular culture and theology, and exploring a specific example that had potential to do so. The intention of doing this was to build on the work from previous chapters that dealt with narrative devices with a firm link to theology (scripture, Christ-figures and religious themes) to determine whether similar success would be found in analysing a more generic form of content. In this chapter, we therefore moved away from explicitly religious content (such as scriptural references) and the concretely implicit (such as the subtler characterisations of Christ-figures) towards content with no ostensible religious connections to uncover whether we might still find scope for dialogue.

Examining work from Brintnall and Mitchell, set against the context of Julian of Norwich's explicitly violent descriptions of Christ's death, we analysed the role of violence in catalysing on-screen relationships and providing opportunities for reflection on the deeper significance of the narrative as a whole. Against this, we balanced the need to acknowledge the (as yet not definitively proven or unproven) potential for violent games and films to have a negative moral impact and the importance of critical engagement, rather than unthinking acceptance, of this form of entertainment. To implement these approaches in the *Heavy Rain* case study, we considered the nature of the violence in the game to determine whether it was gratuitous and how it contributed to the development of the narrative and characters. Having ascertained that it

[105] Unknown author "Endings" *HeavyRain.Wikia*

had a valid role to play, we considered what critical engagement and self-reflection might look like in the context of *Heavy Rain* by drawing high-level parallels with key elements of Hick's work on the origin of and justification for evil, looking at its constructive possibilities in the story arc concerning Ethan's kidnapped son. Using these parallels, we were able to highlight the constructive development of Ethan's character and the ability of players to discover the consequences of *not* taking violent actions, which lent depth to Ethan's experiences. Thus, this exploration demonstrated the significant potential for violent imagery to play a valid and constructive role in dialogue with theology.

Moreover, the ability of games to model different narrative paths (by offering players a choice) was demonstrated to be able to make a unique contribution, over and above that of film alone, in accordance with conclusions reached by previous chapters. Through considering the role of violence within video games that contain player choice we have identified a point of departure with film in that the approach a player brings and their own interests in the role that violence plays will affect potential interpretations of violence scenes. This is a prime example of the two-way nature of dialogue and how theological considerations can deepen our understanding of games, not just in terms of their individual narratives but how their differing forms impact upon engagement.

Having demonstrated the potential of violent imagery to play such a role, one fruitful avenue for further exploration would be to consider other types of violent content in the same way as *Heavy Rain*. Ethan's scenes of violence, while orchestrated by another, are primarily against himself and, as explored above, this puts the player's gaze firmly within the sphere of the victim. It would therefore be helpful to consider examples that are more ambiguous, or which actively place the player in the role of aggressor, as such scenes might have the potential to allow room for reflection on the aggressor's motives. For instance, in *Grand Theft Auto V* the player is required to torture information out of another character in a series of graphic (and thoroughly interactive) actions,[106] and the player therefore inhabits the gaze of the aggressor instead of the victim. While on the face of it such a scene may be shocking, and such an interpretation led to it being condemned by the organisation Freedom From Torture[107], some parts of the media interpreted it as satire instead. Writing in Forbes, Erik Kain, for instance, stated that

[106] The scene can be viewed here, and includes knee-capping, waterboarding, pulling teeth, and electrocution by a car battery: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDSGBYs8f-A

[107] Alex Hem "Grand Theft Auto 5 under fire for graphic torture scene" *The Guardian*

> Far from glamorizing torture, the scene makes you uncomfortable... you realize quite quickly that 'the victim' would have talked sooner and probably given better information if you *hadn't* tortured him[108]

and noted that the characters involved in the scene explicitly state that torture is for the torturer, not the information. As such, and in light of the fact that waterboarding is one option open to the player, he concludes that "This is obviously commentary on the US government's of [sic] torture."[109] John Morris, writing in *The Guardian*, noted that the scene is in the context of a game world where actions have consequences and where the character will frequently be chased by the police when they do wrong, leading to the headline "Anyone claiming Grand Theft Auto 5 is just violence for violence's sake hasn't played it."[110] While Tom Watson agreed with the satirical interpretation of the game as a whole, he nonetheless raises concerns that players cannot opt out of the "unnecessary" torture scene.[111] This range of media views on the controversial violence in *GTAV* indicate potential for a striking exploration of the role of violence in the game as a whole and in relation to this specific scene. For instance, one might consider whether the scene is gratuitous or whether it makes a significant contribution to the narrative or character development, whether it lives out the satire seen by the above writers, or whether it ultimately fails in this endeavour because it feels out of context or otherwise 'wrong' for the medium.

Overall, this chapter has demonstrated that violent games may have a great deal to contribute in dialogue with theology. As well as the role of violence in general, this exploration has shown the ability of games to partner with theology using content that is does not in itself contain religious imagery or interpretation, but comments instead on wider human experience and requires that we ask questions of it. Through this questioning process we can learn more about a game's narrative and about the theological concepts through whose lens we view the gameplay. What now remains is to draw together the methodological tools we have used in the preceding chapters and consider how best they can be implemented together to provoke and promote dialogue with theology.

---

[108] Erik Kain "'Grand Theft Auto V' Torture Scene is Satire" *Forbes*

[109] ibid.

[110] John Morris "Anyone claiming Grand Theft Auto 5 is just violence for violence's sake hasn't played it" *The Guardian*

[111] Tom Watson "Grand Theft Auto V: a giant, targeted missile of satire" *New Statesman*

8. The princess is in another castle! Future directions

This thesis asked whether, considering the existing research into popular culture, video games have a contribution to make to the dialogue between theology and new media, and whether existing analytical frameworks can be used to find the areas of most potential. To answer this question from a text-based point of view, I focused primarily on the strong links between film and games, which justified an appropriation of film methodologies for the analysis of games. Early on, it was apparent that in applying these methodologies special care would be needed to account for the extra layers of interactivity within games that are not present in film, and throughout the analysis this has leant further depth to the conclusions reached. The analysis was structured by moving from explicit textual references to religion, such as scriptural quotations, to the entirely secular, in the form of depictions of violence. This structure allowed us to move thoughtfully and logically onwards, 'testing' the potential of games by looking first for clearly religion-based content and moving further out until we were examining broader, more generic gameplay elements.

This exploration has some limitations. First, although a text-based study is useful for determining the potential of the text to carry a message, it cannot speak either to the audience's reaction to the piece or to the author's intentions. Therefore, although the chapters demonstrate ways in which games can partner with theology to form fruitful dialogue, this is on an analytic and academic basis. However, as noted in the first chapter, this text-based approach allows us to take a view on any game, regardless of origin or popularity. Because the content can be observed by anyone looking at the game (rather than needing to interview the developers or existing audience), it is relatively straightforward for others to become involved in the debate. In a nascent field, this is helpful for stimulating the debate and widening the group of contributors, before exploring more nuanced and specific elements. Ultimately, we return to Deacy's contention that the *capability* of the text and its capacity to engage the audience in theological dialogue is of importance, even if that audience does not take it up in practice.[1]

The second limitation is the necessarily small number of games covered by this study. There are over 2000 games companies in the UK alone[2]; even if it takes each company 4 years to make a game, that is over 500 potential new games every year. The online platform 'Steam', for instance, contains thousands of titles,[3] from the enormous blockbusters of *Grand Theft Auto* to tiny indie offerings. In this thesis, the dozen or so games explored are a tiny fraction of what is available for

[1] Deacy, *Screen Christologies* 10

[2] "The Games Industry in Numbers" *UKIE*

[3] "Welcome to Steam" *Steam*

players, and there is therefore a great deal of untapped potential across the medium. It would be undesirable and impractical to cover *every* game (similarly with film) but, although there is a wide range of game mechanics and styles of play, the games studied cover some very typical formats for modern games, and some atypical ones as well (such as *Her Story*), so we can be confident that the broad conclusions drawn in this thesis are applicable in many instances. Nonetheless, we will not have covered every eventuality and it is important for the findings to be recognised in such a context.

The key finding of this thesis is that games are fertile ground for theological dialogue; their narratives and the gameplay that these stories are embedded within can be fruitful sources for asking and answering Marsh's 'life questions'. In arriving at this conclusion, we have also established that the methodologies used for other media can be a helpful tool for analysis, and in so doing have looked further into the role that narrative plays within games. This has led to an exploration of the ramifications of interactivity and player choice which, in some cases, is profound. Film methodologies provided a helpful structure at this early stage, but a particularly important outcome is the necessity to adapt these methodologies and, therefore, begin to suggest and move towards bespoke approaches that are specific to the medium. Considering our exploration so far, what might such a methodology look like?

Methodology

Categorising narratives

The first step is to determine what kind of narrative the game contains; this is because the approach is predicated first on the existence of a narrative, and then to what extent this can be manipulated by the player's choices. In chapter 2 I suggested four broad categories for typifying game narratives:

Abstract - games with no inherent narrative, such as *Tetris* or *Wii Fit*

Linear - games with a fixed storyline, such as *Sonic the Hedgehog*

Divergent - games with multiple, specific pathways, such as *Heavy Rain* or *Bioshock*

Labyrinthine - games where the narrative is down to the player, such as *World of Warcraft*

The games selected for the chapter case studies were primarily 'divergent', although this in itself runs a spectrum from the single choice of saving the Little Sisters in *Bioshock*, to the morality system of *Fable II* that culminates in the same three options for the ending, to the complex and interlocking narrative paths of *Heavy Rain*. Games in this category are ideal for delving into the

complexities of choice within game narratives, which was a focus for this thesis because it best highlights the similarities and differences with film, it is not the only category with such potential. For the type of analysis carried out in this study, abstract games have little textual relevance because they lack narrative structures. However, truly abstract games are relatively unusual - even *Viva Piñata* and *Candy Crush* have narrative constructs that embed the puzzle elements within a wider framework of story (albeit superficially) - therefore, most games will have some narrative to analyse, even if that analysis quickly concludes that there is nothing of substance. Similarly, games where the whole narrative is in the gift of the player (such as tightly-controlled playthroughs of *The Sims*) arguably contribute little because they are the equivalent of a camera and set, rather than a finished piece, but such games usually have narrative set pieces or wider contexts - *World of Warcraft*, for instance, allows players relatively free rein but is set against a backdrop of two warring factions and sets of missions that feed into this.

Not only do these categories describe the narrative, they also act as a marker for the degree of interactivity within the story and the amount of influence the player's actions have over the events. Linear games provide very little influence for players - a player might take a different path through ancient ruins in *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy*, but the story remains entirely unchanged because there is no player choice about how their character reacts to key points in the game. In Divergent games, there may be a high degree of interactivity with the narrative, which lead to completely different outcomes or an alternative interpretation of the same outcome. In *Infamous: Second Son*, for instance, the player can choose to defend or betray their community - the outcome is the same either way (everyone still gets hurt) but the community's reaction to the protagonist is markedly different and it affects whether he is perceived as a hero or villain. These game mechanics can influence the narrative in a manner that changes the message of the game, even if the fundamental story remains the same. This is important for the next two analytical steps.

Explicit references

Having established the game type and therefore an expectation of the narrative, the next stage is to look for explicit theological or religious references in the game, and analyse these in the context of the game's story. In *Lost Legacy*, for instance, the player's objective is based on the ancient Hindu story of how Ganesh lost his tusk, and is rich with visual and atmospheric religious references. One might examine how the story of the game (with themes of theft and betrayal) parallel or conflict with the ancient tale that it draws from. For references that are a key part of the game, such as *Lost Legacy* or *Fallout 3*, they will be found in the game regardless of player choice and therefore the degree of interactivity and narrative divergence matters little in terms of finding these elements for analysis. However, although player choice will not necessarily have an

impact on the existence of these references, they could considerably influence our analysis of them. For instance, a quotation like that explored in the *Fallout 3* case study could be interpreted as foreshadowing the intention of the player to bring freedom to the Wasteland through providing water, but the game allows them to take a different path at the very end of the game. Therefore, whether the interpretation is borne out depends on the actions of the player just as much as the narrative itself; the narrative gives such symbols their initial meaning (without the backdrop of the drought-stricken Wasteland the quotation would have no prophetic context) but the player then determines its relevance to the end of the game. In this context, explicit religious references become subtler because they can be obscured (or contradicted, like in *Nell*) by other narrative choices and may also become irrelevant in the eyes of some players. Any analysis must take this into account because the presence of interactive narrative mechanics brings a new layer of complexity to the work.

Implicit references

The next element to consider is the less overt references to religious content, such as characterisation (in the form of Christ-figures or others) and specific religious themes (including salvation, forgiveness, or charity). The broader themes are often carried in the whole story arc, as we explored when looking at apocalyptic games; they are the culmination of the background (the imminent threat of the world ending), the way in which the characters behave (trying to save the world) and the outcome (annihilation or salvation). Characterisation of Christ-figures, on the other hand, encompasses a character's whole being, but may be highlighted only in moments. For instance, to satisfy Deacy's requirement of salvation through humanity and suffering, the wider characterisation must set this context and provide this background, but the scenes of the character's salvation may be relatively brief yet still rich in analytical potential. Because of this difference, broader themes are less likely to be affected by player choice and instead remain as part of the wider story. In *Bioshock*, for example, regardless of the player's decision to save the Little Sisters, the themes will always cover social interdependence, sacrifice, and pre-destination.

Characterisation, however, is the point at which interactivity makes the biggest impact upon interpretation. In some games, the player's choices can completely change the character; sometimes this will not affect the overall suggestion that the protagonist is a Christ-figure (for instance, Jack's mysterious origin and sacrifice could make him a *Bioshock* Christ-figure regardless of the player's choice to save the Little Sisters) but in some cases it will completely alter the character. In *Infamous: Second Son*, the choices of the player affect the attitude with which various actions are carried out and turns the same basic storyline into a very different message depending on which type of personality the player chooses - one sacrifices themselves for others and defends the innocent, whereas the other is selfish and has no regard for others' suffering. It

is, therefore, in this specific element of theological analysis where we must have the most awareness of the unique interactivity afforded by games and take this into account - we cannot say that a character is a Christ-figure, for instance, without determining whether a different path of choices would contradict or weaken this conclusion.

Broader themes

As with this thesis, the final step is to look at the game content more widely, rather than just implicit or explicit religious references. Here we used the example of violent imagery, but there is other challenging content in games: glorification of war in *Call of Duty*, reliance on animal products in city-building games like *Caesar*, normalisation of dictatorships in *Tropico*, and even the tongue-in-cheek privatisation of healthcare in *Theme Hospital*. Games provide an opportunity to reflect upon this content because it requires that we participate. The description of *Tropico 6*, for instance, states "El Presidente is back! Prove yourself once again as a feared dictator or peace-loving statesman on the island state of Tropico and shape the fate of your very own banana republic through four distinctive eras."[4] Schut has given the game series some consideration when he writes that "being able to stray from the righteous path in *Tropico* makes my Tropican democracy all that more impressive,"[5] but there is more to discover. Is playing as a dictator and therefore sympathising with such behaviour a legitimate way for us to explore the motives of dictators in the real world, or is it purely exploitative to create entertainment that makes light of the suffering of citizens? Answers to such questions rely on the context of the game and the way the content is presented. In chapter 7, for instance, we concluded that violence must be appropriately presented and used to play a part in theological dialogue; an examination of *Tropico 6* would need to consider whether the overall message of the game provided a sufficient context for the potential for the player to act as a dictator.

Wrapping up

Having worked through the above methodology in relation to a game (or selection of games, as with this study) it should first be clear whether the game(s) in question have something to contribute to theological dialogue. As with film, not every game will necessarily have an input to make, but this in itself is an outcome to test for. If theological potential is located, the suggested steps for analysis will have determined to what degree this is superficial or contrived, as well as the impact of player choice on the way in which the game asks or answers questions. Finally, the analysis will have uncovered at least part of the way in which this potential can be realised as dialogue with theology and what the nature of its contribution is - including whether it comes

[4] "Tropico 6 on Steam" *Steam*

[5] Schut op. cit. 69

from an explicit religious reference, like the Bible verse from *Fallout 3*, or something more subtle and subjective, like the categorisation of Jack Ryan as a Christ-figure.

Answering to the literature

In the first chapter, we looked at existing work on theology and film, noting that there were some confessional studies, examinations of in-game religion, and cautious analysis of the impact of interactivity. This thesis aimed to add to existing work by providing a framework for critical analysis of games in a manner that was positive about the impact of interactivity with dialogue. In particular, the critical aspects of this study build upon Schut and Detweiler's confessional work by looking for academic points for dialogue. While some of this critical analysis may in turn support religious use of games, its intention is to provide a more structured background for other discussions, including those who seek to use games in practical religion. In relation to Bainbridge's work on religion in games, this study looks at how theological interpretations can be found within games that ostensibly have no religious content, rather than just those that contain religious constructs of their own.

Most critically, this work challenges Wagner's cautiousness about the role of interactivity when it comes to religious content in games. As discussed throughout, although in certain circumstances there is a risk of *Last Temptation*-style blasphemy, interactivity is more often a facet of gaming that brings extra layers and nuances to our analysis. By looking at the impact of player choice we can determine what the game is saying about the value of specific actions or long-term decisions, and charting whether there are any striking inconsistencies, conflicts, or agreements. Indeed, the question of whether a course of action is blasphemous may be a valid topic for dialogue with theology. This thesis therefore embraces the unique interactivity of games, welcoming the enhanced opportunities for dialogue that choice and directed action bring, while acknowledging the need to account for it in analysis.

Finally, this thesis adds to the field of work that brings together the two disparate realms of religion and culture, in the same tradition as Marsh, Ostwalt, and Deacy. In relation to Niebuhr's typologies, this study belongs most closely to the 'paradox' model, where culture and religion occupy two separate spheres and, as Marsh notes, can therefore speak to each other on their own terms. As noted, this study does not reflect upon the use of games for religious practice and therefore does not fit directly within more confessional typologies, but it is nonetheless helpful to consider where along Niebuhr's spectrum this work falls. In addition to bridging religion and culture, this thesis also seeks to take a similar approach to narratology and ludology; by treating narrative and interactivity as distinct but related characteristics within gaming, this study enables them to speak to each other in a very similar manner to religion and culture, by standing on their

own terms and both contributing to dialogue. Thus, elements of the 'paradox' model are brought to the debate within the field of computer games through its application to gaming and theology.

These findings could be of particular interest to those already engaged in work on religion (or other media) and film. Having looked at a selection of film-analysis methodologies and their applicability to games, it is likely that further methodologies, whether from film or other areas, may be similarly adaptable. This study does not change how such methodologies are applied to the media for which they were conceived, but it does mean that they might be looked at in a new light and, in so doing, draw out further contributions from games in relation to theology. Furthermore, it is of practical use to those considering an examination of games and theology; it establishes that such a study can be fruitful, that games can contribute to a dialogue with theology (both asking questions and suggesting answers), and provides a framework that suggests a starting point for analysis and which can be built upon as other strands of methodology are developed and added.

Using a theology of gaming

Using human creative endeavours to inspire contemporary theology is not novel in itself - Karl Barth was famously influenced and inspired by the work of Mozart, reflecting on music's role as "a reverberating witness to the divine promise of creation's preservation and transformative perfection."[6] For a very different cultural product, but with the same intentions and hope, this thesis furthers the spirit of this approach; although nascent, the field of theology and games can answer to many of the same issues. However, because of this nascency and as acknowledged in the early chapters, modern video games of the type considered in this thesis have yet to acquire the same degree of cultural capital as film has managed to accrue. Therefore, this discussion of shared spaces between games and theology may, for some more traditional scholars, benefit from having the relevant implications of the thesis outlined more specifically. Here are three conclusions for theology that can be drawn from the discussion in this thesis, and an explanation of how they can be useful to modern theologians.

Games can provide opportunities to reflect on Christian beliefs and understandings, as well as the variety of ways in which (for example) scripture is understood; activities that are crucial to theology

The interpretive possibilities may be limited or very wide, depending on the context, but the complexity of games is able to provide a refreshing way to examine the appearance of scripture or

[6] Paul Louis Metzger "A New Foreword" in Karl Barth *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* iii

other Christian references in popular culture and, through doing this, provoke a broader discussion about interpretation.

As touched upon when discussing Wagner's work and the configuration-interpretation question mooted by some ludologists, the flexibility of video games and the introduction of player choice suggests some parallels with the way that Christians (for example) read and interpret the Bible or apply their beliefs to worship in practice. A theologian might consider the ways that Christians interpret the messages of the Bible differently, or place different weight upon ostensibly conflicting verses, and how this affects their actions in the world, their beliefs about key issues, or the specific traditions of a denomination. In the case of the death penalty, for instance, Christian interpretations of scripture differ as to whether this practice is allowable, even down to the intended message of a specific story. Mark Osler says that, alongside his reflection on the experiences of Christ at His trial and execution, the story of Jesus challenging the sinless to cast the first stone at the woman condemned to death for adultery led him to consider that "the death penalty is not compatible with the Christian faith."[7] On the other hand, Edward Feser and Joseph Bessette, who are firm in their contention that the Roman Catholic Church should allow capital punishment, provide a different interpretation of this story, stating that it only indicates Jesus' objections to stoning for the crime of adultery, not in general terms.[8] Both positions are supported by interpretations of the same story, despite their different conclusions. Similarly, to take the example of *Fallout 3*, a player particularly concerned with the significance of the water imagery in the quoted scripture may take different in-game actions and reach an alternative (perhaps even a 'better') ending than another player who disregards it.

Moreover, imagining the relevance of scripture in a world vastly different to our own is an extended example of the Midrashic 'play' with scripture that Wagner described and allows theologians to expand their thinking on nuances of a text that may only become apparent when stretched in this way – a philosophical thought experiment that can be interacted with. There is a strong history of configuring, interpreting, and understanding scripture in different ways; Wagner notes that

> Interactivity has long played a pervasive role in religious storytelling. Every religious tradition has stories of its founders, its practitioners or its legendary figures, and many of these stories have "interactive" forms, what we might call the "stories we play"[9]

[7] Mark Osler *Jesus on Death Row* iii

[8] Edward Feser and Joseph Bessette *By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed* 106

[9] Wagner (2012) 22

and identifies examples such as the Seder meal, Nativity stories, and television versions of Hindu epics. In relation to Christian scriptural interpretation, she notes that increased availability of information such as Gnostic texts has also increased the degree of interpretative and configurative opportunities available to Christians, saying that "Today's Christians must decide for *themselves* which texts 'should' have been included in the New Testament and why."[10] In a similar fashion, games provide another avenue for theologians to inspire alternative readings that may arise from changes in emphasis, context, or application.

Fitting neatly alongside and within a consideration of scripture, the high degree of player-input in some games also makes this medium a particularly fertile ground for considering the balance of human and divine in portrayals of Christ-figures. Like scripture, the personhood of Christ and the many ways in which He is understood by Christians through interpretation may, therefore, also be considered a form of 'play'. For instance, the tradition in some Christian groups of presenting Jesus as a different ethnicity may be understood as a play on His appearance and His connection to that group, inviting commentary and questions on how and why a Middle-Eastern Jew has been reimagined. As one example, Kymberly Pinder explains that the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago (which she notes gained some notoriety as Barack Obama's onetime place of worship) uses imagery of Jesus with dark skin and afro-textured hair because "the color of God can be at the crux of"[11] the racial segregation the church observes in American Christianity. Pinder also notes that this approach has been present in black Christian art for centuries, and that such reimaginings of holy figures to align them with another ethnicity or culture are present in other religions, such as Buddhism;[12] playing with depictions is a long-established aspect of theology. Games with Christ-figure characterisation can provide theologians with a means by which to explore some of the questions that arise when we consider the variety of Christian interpretations of Christ. In more traditional media, this may involve physical characteristics (such as the black Christ described by Pinder) or behavioural play (such as the actions of Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, as discussed in chapter 5). In games, we can add a different kind of depth by including the motivations and identity of the player or the choices available to them as they control or interact with a potential Christ-figure, and consider how far this extra layer of configuration might affect interpretation.

[10] ibid. 22

[11] Kymberly N Pinder *Painting the Gospel* 3

[12] ibid. 6

Games focus on human elements, over and above other forms of media, which can provide fresh insights for theological study

As explored throughout the thesis, games add an extra human element to a textual study of media; where this concerns theologically linked themes (in this case, eschatology), this extra degree of 'live' humanity can highlight the gap between divine power and human endeavour. For instance, as we saw in the fifth chapter, modern apocalypse media often considers the role that humans play in attempting to avert disaster, with mixed results. Games are especially able to illustrate the struggle of one individual (the player) against a whole gameworld of obstacles and inevitable calamities. Like Job in the Old Testament, who suffers calamity after calamity, the player too continues in the face of ongoing adversity, with progress being continually halted and the degree of challenge ever increasing. This thematic study of games has particular salience for theologians because it deals with the intersection between humankind (as individuals or as a collective) and events so significant or over-arching that they are, for Christians, acts of God. Such intersections occur not only in eschatology, but in areas of theology such as salvation, the nature of Christ, creation and stewardship, the purpose of worship, the role of prayer, and the study of ritual. Indeed, one might argue that all of theology deals, in some way, with this meeting point between God and man. As explored when we reflected on Niebuhr's contribution to the theology of culture, it is the very fact of the human elements in cultural texts that can make them useful for study – whether it is because a scholar considers that culture may reveal God, or that it must always stand apart.

The interpersonal aspects of video games may also give theologians an insight into the broader human elements of Christianity. A large part of Christian belonging, and a focus for theology, is the role that community plays within the Church and the interactions between its members. There is incredible diversity in the ways that people contribute to the Christian community, both in terms of religious devotion and the wellbeing of individuals (and some overlap). For instance, the input and teamwork required to build churches, create music, visit the sick, celebrate festivals, and join together for worship are all part of this sense of community. Drawing on wider experiential facets of gaming, we may find equivalents there that help us to understand what part community plays in fostering this idea of 'otherness'; gamers create content to share, participate in large scale group activities, support each other in deriving the most fun or satisfaction out of a game, and actively discuss meaning, experience, and tactics. By being part of a community, gamers may experience the sense of being part of a much wider whole and the necessity to take an active role in shaping it. In much the same way as contemporary theologians have studied the 'religious' aspects of film-going, sports fanaticism, and other secular cultural rituals to uncover insights into religious practice, this approach can clearly be extended to video games.

Like other new media, games contain challenging content that can provide an interactive point of reflection for theologians, acting as a catalyst for analysis

Although the majority of the thesis deals with material that is specifically religious (although this may be implicit and interpretive), the penultimate key chapter looks at the role of violent content as an example of very broad, generic themes. As explored in the chapter, such content sometimes appears problematic in the first instance, but with careful study can provide a powerful nexus for dialogue. In the case of violence, Christian attitudes vary wildly – from pacifist Quakers to American fundamentalists who feel it is their duty to join the armed forces, as well as debates surrounding capital punishment, the ethics of torture, and the use of deadly force by law enforcement. These issues are reflected in some very widely-studied theological works, such as the classic 'Problem of Evil' (touched upon in the chapter) and Barth's consideration of a just war, and philosophical thought experiments[13]. Much of this material is even covered in secondary school Religious Studies syllabi[14], demonstrating to some degree its continued relevance both within contemporary theology and to accessible ethical and theological discourse.

In this area, games are not just another example of media with challenging content, however; as discussed throughout the thesis, their interactivity is an important part of their ability to contribute to a dialogue, and this is particularly the case here. By its nature, topics that cover violence on a wide scale (such as war) or in deliberately morally questionable situations (as is the case in many thought experiments on the subject) are rarely experienced in reality by scholars. Here, therefore, games can provide a unique dimension to these studies by providing opportunities not just to see or read about a situation (as with film or written material) but to take part in it and to experience the path of choices that lead to a moment of decision in context. Combined with an ethnographic approach, in which we learn what the gamers themselves think and feel at these moments, this presents a potential avenue for novel research into, for instance, the intersection of belief and action. This is, of course, not limited to theological studies of and responses to acts of violence; other areas with links to theology that could benefit from a degree

[13] For example, whether it is morally permissible to torture someone to reveal the location of a nuclear bomb that is about to be detonated, or the many variations of 'trolley' problems designed to test the ethics of intention over the ethics of outcome. This latter series of thought experiment is described by David Edmonds as "a debate that draws on the most important moral thinkers in the philosophical canon… and captures fundamental tensions in our moral outlook. To test our moral intuitions, philosophers have come up with ever more surreal scenarios." David Edmonds *Would You Kill the Fat Man?* 10

[14] For example, the AQA GCSE Religious Studies syllabus requires that students are able to "explain contrasting beliefs … with reference to the main religious tradition in Britain (Christianity) and one or more other religious traditions" on issues including abortion, euthanasia, animal experimentation, violence, weapons of mass destruction, pacifism, corporal punishment, and the death penalty. AQA https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/religious-studies/gcse/religious-studies-a-8062/subject-content/component-2-thematic-studies

of interactivity may include: concepts of personhood (touched upon in the apocalypse chapter), humanity's relationship with the world (particularly in city-building games such as *SimCity* or in VR simulations of real places), community and family links (whether entirely virtually, as in *The Sims*, or with other people in *Second Life* or online gaming), pre-determination (explored in the Christ-figures chapter), and embodiment (through VR gaming or Wii-style motion control, that require full-body interactivity with games).

As explored already, there is a strong history of 'playing' with theology, especially in terms of interpretation and the application of beliefs to real-world circumstances. Barth's analyses of just war and self-defence, for instance, push at the boundaries of specific situations to test Christian morality. As we acknowledged in chapter 7, on violence, Hick does a similar thing when he examines the nature of free will and the omnipotence of God in the context of the Problem of Evil. In fact, given the degree to which theology depends on these approaches, we could even go so far as to state that theology itself is inherently playful in the way that it flexes and tests the structures of Christian belief, both academically and practically. With more traditional, linear forms of media and popular culture already the subject of theological dialogue and practice, it is reasonable to expand this use of culture to cover playful forms of media; in some ways, games are a very fitting partner. Moving forward from this thesis, a sense of playfulness in theology might be found in more embodied types of gaming, such as virtual reality or motion control – adding physicality to interactivity.

Many of the points raised in the thesis are relevant to a wide range of new media and popular culture. Building on my discussion of Niebuhr in chapter 2, one way in which popular culture is helpful to theology is as a means of 'revealing God' through human endeavour, whether because God is reflected in culture or because culture is all the things that God is not. Such a view of Christianity and culture itself reflects a form of theology because it echoes how the incarnation brings together the concrete and the numinous. The secular nature of most games is an important facet of this work. Although there are Christian forms of popular culture and even video games, as explored throughout the thesis these are often theologically lacking and oddly bland in comparison to secular, mainstream media. Studying this content can, therefore, encourage theologians to look beyond the superficial and immediate, to critique media paying only lip service to Christian belief, and to seek authentic human expressions of the numinous in unexpected places. For theologians already embracing popular culture as part of their work, games can extend this approach because their participatory natures provide a layer of interactivity; as explored throughout the thesis and identified above, this can allow for more

nuanced analysis of consequences or choices. With fixed narratives we can imagine consequences of alternative actions, but with games we can *witness* them. Many of the additional contributions that games make are rooted in this interactivity and particularly within the potential for choice-making and narrative-shaping that games increasingly allow for. Such gameplay styles allow players to play with the consequences of their actions, to replay games with a different focus or gaze, and to test their approaches to decision-making in a variety of circumstances. For theologians, the ultimate relevance of video games to their work is that these participatory gameplay outcomes can be a valuable way of understanding belief in action and provide a fresh context in which to consider a range of scriptural and thematic content.

This rings true throughout the thesis; in every chapter, we use games to reflect carefully and consciously on a number of theological themes. In *Fallout 3*, the Wanderer's experience with water inspired and facilitated a reflection on the nature of humanity's role as steward for creation by providing an interactive illustration of some of the ecological-theological points made by Peppard about the pressing need to safeguard clean water. *Bioshock* provided a starting point for discussing some fundamental theological questions; the struggle with predestination and theological inevitability, and the nature of salvation being dependent on small actions as well as those large enough to create story arcs. Notably, *Heavy Rain* supplied a way to experiment with Hick's solution to the problem of evil by looking at the outcomes of committing or rejecting violence in a way that brings colour and real-world resonance to a complex and age-old theological problem. Just as Barth heard the awe of creation in Mozart's compositions, so too can we look at video games and see the 'life questions' of contemporary theology reflected back at us in the story, the characters, and the themes.

Moving forward

As noted above, this study concluded with a structure to support further work on games and theology. As a result of this work, further research might well be conducted in areas not covered by the explorations and case studies in the preceding chapters. For instance, although we have looked at the impact of player choice upon characterisation and the narrative more generally, it would be potentially valuable to consider how these mechanics might function as a way of exploring morality, particularly in relation to ethical systems that rely on outcome rather than intention. In *Heavy Rain*, the player must choose whether to murder a drug dealer in exchange for a clue as to Sean's whereabouts, a choice that becomes more complex when the player discovers that his potential victim has a daughter. In a system like Utilitarianism, which depends on the impacts of the outcome of the action, it can be difficult to work through the various effects of an

action on all involved. Games with these choices (which can be played through multiple times and the consequences examined minutely) provide an arena in which to practice applying ethical systems. Schut, for instance, notes that some scholars view games as "a safe space in which to try things, to experiment with ethics and morality,"[15] and this avenue warrants further exploration.

Further research might also focus on alternative ways of examining games, such as auteur or ethnographic studies. In relation to the example from *Heavy Rain*, a potential avenue of exploration could be to discuss with audiences the choices they would take and their rationale for doing so. Are players taking actions that are in line with what *they* would do, or with what they think the character would do? How might reflecting upon different moral systems affect the way they interact with games and perceive their choices? Does having to take the action on behalf of the protagonist affect what moral choices players make? Such an analysis would further underline the potential for games' unique characteristics to contribute to serious discussion.

With such an innovative medium and a relatively unexplored field, there is huge scope for further research - research that adds further games to the case studies in this thesis, and research that takes the exploration in another direction and even to related fields (like moral philosophy, above). As we draw to the end of this first phase, the question to ask is: ready, Player Two?

[1515] Schut, ibid. 64

Bibliography

Books

Aarseth, Espen “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation” in *First Person* ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan 45-55 Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004

Aarseth “Aarseth Responds” in *First Person,* 49

Aichele, George and Walsh, Richard G “Introduction” *Screening Scripture,* ed. Aichele and Walsh Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2002

Anderson, Travis “Unleashing Nietzsche on the Tragic Infrastructure of Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*” in *Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy: How to philosophize with a pair of pliers and a blowtorch* ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad 21-39 Chicago: Open Court, 2007

Bainbridge, William Sims *Egods.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013

Barnett, Paul *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times*. 2002

Barth, Karl *Church Dogmatics: III 4 The Doctrine of Creation* Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1961

Bauckham, Richard, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. University Press: Cambridge 1993

Baugh, Lloyd *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-figures in film*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997

Beutel, Albrecht "Luther's Life," trans. Katharina Gustavs, in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim 3-19 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003

Blizek, William L., *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film.* New York: Continuum, 2009

Bogost, Ian, *How to Do Things With Videogames*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011

Bunting, Ben “Game-to-Film Adaptation and How *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* Negotiates the Difference Between Player and Audience” in *Game on Hollywood!* ed. Papazian, Gretchen and Sommers, Joseph Michael 58-69 Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013

Callaway, Kutter “We are In*spirit*ed” in *Halos and Avatars: Playing video games with God* ed Craig Detweiler 75-88, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010

Campbell, Heidi *When Religion Meets New Media.* London: Routledge, 2010

Carr, Diane *Computer Games* Cambridge: Polity, 2006

Clark, Terry Ray and Clanton Jr, Dan W., ed., *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012

Cobb, Kelton, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005

Cobb, Shelley "Adaptable Bridget: Generic Intertextuality and Postfeminism in Bridget Jones's Diary," in *Authorship in Film Adaptation*, ed. Jack Boozer 281-304 Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008

Collins, John J. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998

Collins, Margo and Bond, Elson "“Off the Page and into Your Brains!”- New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses," in *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Christie, Deborah and Lauro, Sarah Juliet 187-204 New York: Fordham University Press, 2011

Crenshaw, James L., *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004

Deacy, Christopher. *Screen Christologies*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001

Deacy, Christopher and Ortiz, Gaye Williams, *Theology and Film: Challenging the sacred/secular divide.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008

Deacy, Christopher "The Pedagogical Challenges of Finding Christ Figures in Film," in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory J. Watkins 129-40, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

DeCou, Jessica "The Living Christ and The Walking Dead: Karl Barth and the Theological Zombie" in *The Undead and Theology* ed Paffenroth, Kim and Morehead, John 79-100 Pickwick, 2012 [Kindle edition]

Detweiler, Craig "Introduction" in *Halos* 1-16

Dyke, Carl "Learning From *The Life of Brian*: Saviors for Seminars" in *Screening Scripture*, ed. Aichele, G. and Walsh, R. 229-250 Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002

Edmonds, David *Would You Kill the Fat Man?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon; Smith, Jonas Heide and Tosca, Susana Pajares, *Understanding Video Games* New York: Routledge, 2008

Eskelinen, Markku "Towards Computer Game Studies" in *First Person* 36-44

Flint, David, *Zombie Holocaust: How the living dead devoured pop culture*. London: Plexus, 2005

Feser, Edward and Bessette, Joseph *By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed* San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 2017

Gallafent, Edward, *Quentin Tarantino* London: Routledge, 2014

Garrow, A.J.P. *Revelation* London: Routledge, 1997

Glassner, Andrew S *Interactive Storytelling* Natick, Mass.: A.K. Peters, 2004

Graham, Elaine "What We Make of the World: the Turn to 'Culture' in Theology and the Study of Religion" in *Between Sacred and Profane,* ed. Gordon Lynch 63-81 London: I. B. Tauris, 2007

Hagelin, Sarah *Reel Vulnerability: Power, Pain, and Gender in Contemporary American Film and Television* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013

Halberstam, Judith *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* New York: New York University Press, 2005

Hansen, Chris "From *Tekken* to *Kill Bill*: the future of narrative storytelling?" in *Halos and Avatars* 19-33

Hayse, Mark "*Ultima IV*: Simulating the Religious Quest" in Detweiler 34-46

Hick, John, *Evil and the God of Love (1985 reissue)*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985

Hill, Annette, "Looks like it hurts: Women's responses to shocking entertainment" in *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate* ed Barker, Martin and Petley, Julian, London: Routledge, 2001

Holloway, Ronald, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the religious dimension in cinema.* Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977

Hoover, Stewart M *Religion In The Media Age* London: Routledge, 2006

Jacobs, Jason "Gunfire" in *Screen Violence* ed Karl French London: Bloomsbury 1996

Jenkins, Henry "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" in *The Game Design Reader* 670-689

Jewett, Robert, *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's dialogue with American culture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993

Jewett, Robert, *Saint Paul Returns To The Movies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001

Johnston, Robert K *Reel Spirituality 1st ed.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000

Johnston, Robert K *Reel Spirituality 2nd ed.* Grand Rapids, MI:Baker Academic, 2006

Julian of Norwich and Baker, Denise. *The Showings Of Julian Of Norwich*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005

LeBlanc, Marc "Tools for Creating Dramatic Game Dynamics" in *The Game Design Reader* ed. Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman 438-459 Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006

Johnston, Robert K "Theological Approaches" in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden, 310-328 Abingdon: Routledge, 2009

Keough, Peter, ed., *Flesh and Blood: The National Society of Film Critics on sex, violence and censorship.* San Fransisco, CA: Mercury House, 1995

Luft, Shanny "Seven: Hardcore Christian Gamers- How Religion Shapes Evangelical Play," in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. Campbell, Heidi and Price Grieve, Gregory 154-169 Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014 Questia.

Lyden, John C., *Film as Religion: Myths, morals, and rituals*. New York, NY: New York University, 2003

Lyden, John, ed., *The Routledge Companion To Religion And Film*. London: Routledge, 2011.

Lynch, Gordon, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005

Lynch, Gordon, "Why Study Popular Culture" in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching religion and popular culture* ed. Lynch 5-20, London: I. B. Tauris, 2007

Mahan, Jeffrey H. 'Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture' in *Sacred and Profane*

Malone, Peter "*Edward Scissorhands*: Christology from a Suburban Fairy-tale" in *Explorations in Theology and Film* ed Marsh, Clive. and Ortiz, Gaye. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997

Marsh, Clive "Film and Theologies of Culture" in *Explorations in Theology and Film* ed. Marsh and Ortiz, Gaye, (21-34) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997

Marsh, Clive, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's challenge to theology.* Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004

Marsh, Clive, *Theology Goes To The Movies: An introduction to critical Christian thinking*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Martin, Joel W., and Ostwalt Jr, Conrad E., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, myth, and ideology in popular American film*. Oxford: Westview Press, 1995

Mateas, Michael and Stern, Andrew "Interaction and Narrative" in *The Game Design Reader* 642-669

Mazur, Eric Michael, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film.* Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2011

McAlpine, Andrew "Poets, Posers, and Guitar Heroes" in *Halos and Avatars* 121-134

Mellamphy, Deborah, "Dead Eye: The Spectacle of Torture Porn in *Dead Rising*" in Papazian and Sommers, 35-46

Metzger, Paul Louis "A New Foreword" in Barth, Karl *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, tr. Pott, Clarence Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1956

Mitchell, Jolyon, *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

Mitchell, Jolyon "Question Media and Religion" in *Sacred and Profane* ed. Lynch 34-46

Montfort, Nick "Interactive Fiction as "Story," "Game," "Storygame," "Novel," "World," "Literature," "Puzzle," "Problem," "Riddle," and "Machine"" in *First Person* 310-318

Morehead, John W “Zombie Walks, Zombies Jesus, and the Eschatology of Postmodern Flesh” in *The Undead and Theology* ed Greene, Richard and Mohammad, K. Silem 101-123 Peru, IL: Open Court, 2007 [Kindle edition]

Moulthrop “From Stuart Moulthop’s Online Response” in *First Person* 47-48

Moulthrop, Stuart “From Work to Play: Molecular Culture in the Time of Deadly Games” in *First Person* 56-69

Mowinckel, Sigmund, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005

Murray, Janet *Hamlet On The Holodeck: The Future of Narrative In Cyberspace* Cambridge, MA:MIT Press, 2000

Newgren, Kevin “*Bioshock* to the System: smart choices in video games” in *Halos and Avatars* 135-148

Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Christ and Culture*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951

Ní Fhlainn, Sorcha "All Dark Inside- Dehumanization and Zombification in Postmodern Cinema," in *Better off Dead* 139-158

Osler, Mark *Jesus on Death Row* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009

Ostwalt, Conrad, "Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes In Recent Cinematic Presentation," in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, ed. Martin, Joel and Ostwalt, Conrad. 55-64 Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995

Ostwalt, Conrad, *Secular Steeples: Popular culture and the religions imagination.* Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003

Paffenroth, Kim, *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero’s visions of Hell on Earth.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006

Paffenroth, Kim “Apocalyptic Images and Prophetic Function in Zombie Films” in *Undead Theology* 145-164

Papazian, Gretchen, and Sommers, Michael Joseph “Introduction: Manifest Narrativity - Video Games, Movies, and Art and Adaptation” in *Game on Hollywood!* 8-19

Peppard, Christiana Z., *Just Water: Theology, ethics, and the global water crisis*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014

Pinder, Kymberly N. *Painting the Gospel* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017

Pippin, Tina, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image.* London: Routledge, 1999

Plantinga, Carl *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009

Prince, Stephen, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998

Pulsipher, Lewis *Game Design* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc, 2012

Radosh, Daniel *Rapture Ready!* New York: Scribner, 2008

Rehill, Annie. *The Apocalypse Is Everywhere: A Popular History of America's Favorite Nightmare*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010

Reinhartz, Adele, *Scripture on the Silver Screen.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003

Reinhartz,Adele, “Jesus and Christ-figures” in *The Routledge Companion* 420-439

Reinhartz, Adele. *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction.* London: Taylor and Francis, 2013, ProQuest Ebook Central

Roloff, Jurgen *Revelation: A Continental Commentary*. tr. John E Alsup and James S Currie Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1993

Roncace, Mark "Paradoxical Protagonists: *Sling Blade*'s Karl and Jesus Christ" in *Screening Scripture* ed. Aichele, G. and Walsh, R. 279-300 Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2002

Ross, Ellen M., *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997

Runions, Erin "Why Girls Cry: Gender Melancholia and Sexual Violence in Ezekiel 15 and *Boys Don't Cry*" in *Screening Scripture* 188-212

Runions, Erin, *How Hysterical: Identification and resistance in the Bible and film*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003

Schott, Gareth, *Violent Games: Rules, realism, and effect.* London:Bloomsbury, 2016

Schut, Kevin, *Of Games And God* Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2013

Schulzke, Marcus "Translation Between Forms of Interactivity: How to Build the Better Adaptation" in *Game on Hollywood!* 70-85

Sicart, Miguel, *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009

Lisa Swain, "*Myst* and *Halo*: A Conversation with Marty O'Donnell and Rand Miller" in *Halos*, 91-107

Szendy, Peter. *Apocalypse-Cinema: 2012 and Other Ends of the World*. Translated by Will Bishop. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015

Tarlin, Jan William "Utopia and Pornography in Ezekiel," in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*, ed. Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn 175-183 London: Routledge, 1997

Wagner, Rachel, "The Play is the Thing" in Detweiler 2010, 47-62

Wagner, Rachel, *Godwired: Religion, ritual and virtual reality*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012

Weber, Otto *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics: An introductory Report on Volumes i:1 to iii: 4* Tr. Cochrane, Arthur C London: Lutterworth Press 1953

Weber, Samuel "Foreword: One Sun Too Many," in *Apocalypse-Cinema: 2012 and Other Ends of the World*, by Szendy, Peter, trans. Bishop, Will ix-xxii New York: Fordham University Press, 2015

White Hodge, Daniel "Role Playing: Towards a theology for gamers" in Detweiler, 163-175

Willis, Robert E *The Ethics of Karl Barth* Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971

Wriedt, Markus "Luther's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther,* 86-119

Wright, Melanie J., *Religion and Film: An introduction*. New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2008

Yellowlees Douglas, J "Response to Eskelinen" in *First Person* 36-37

Zagzebski, Linda "Foreknowledge and Human Freedom," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn, 2nd ed. 474-481 Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010

Journals

Brintnall, Kent L., "Tarantino's Incarnational Theology: Reservoir Dogs, Crucifixions and Spectacular Violence" *Cross Currents*, Spring 2004, Questia.com

Carr, David "Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation" *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol 119, Issue 2 2000 Questia.com

Collins, John J., "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence" *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 122 Issue 1, 2003, Questia.com

Deacy, Christopher "Review of E. Runions*, 'How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film" Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol 20 Issue 1 doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/1353790052000313956

Deacy, Chris, "Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* vol 13 2006, Questia.com

Fillingim, David, 'When Jesus was a Girl: Polymythic Female Christ Figures in Whale Rider and Steel Magnolias" in *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol 14 Issue 1, 2010 http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss1/8

Haar, Stephen "Reflections on the Global Water Crisis in Dialogue with Revelation 17-Harlot, Hegemony and H2O" *Lutheran Theological Journal* Vol46, Issue 2, 2012, Questia.com

Kozlovic, Anton Karl, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure" *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* Vol 8, Issue 1 2004, Flinders Academic Commons

McEver, Matthew "The Messianic Figure in Film: Christology Beyond the Biblical Epic" *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 2 Issue 2 1998 http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol2/iss2/3

Puffer, Matthew "Taking Exception to the Grenzfall's Reception: Revisiting Karl Barth's Ethics of War," *Modern Theology* Vol. 28 Issue 3 2012, Academia.edu

Stone, Bryan "The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films" *Journal of Religion & Film:* Vol. 5, Issue 2 2001 https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol5/iss2/7

Websites

AQA "Component 2: Thematic studies" accessed 7 May 2019 https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/religious-studies/gcse/religious-studies-a-8062/subject-content/component-2-thematic-studies

Bingham, John "Study finds no evidence violent video games make children aggressive" *The Telegraph* accessed 20 April 2017 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/03/12/study-finds-no-evidence-violent-video-games-make-children-aggres/

Caruana , Vicki, Caruana, Chris, and Bruner, Olivia "Safeguards for Video Gameplay" *Focus on the Family* accessed 01 October 2016

http://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/kids-and-technology/parents-guide-to-video-games/safeguards-for-video-gameplay

Christ Centered Gamer "What is Christ Centered Gamer?" *Christ Centered Gamer* accessed 12 September 2016 http://www.christcenteredgamer.com/index.php/faqs/13-ccgr/15-what-is-ccgr

Dart , John "Church Declares 'Last Temptation' Morally Offensive" *LA Times* accessed 24 September 2017 http://articles.latimes.com/1988-08-10/local/me-88_1_temptation-morally-offensive

Davis, Matthew "Christian Purge video game demons" *BBC News* accessed 12 September 2016 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4534835.stm

Dixon, Drew "A Call For Writers: What GameChurch.com Is and Isn't" *GameChurch.com* accessed 18 September 2016 http://gamechurch.com/a-call-for-writers-what-gamechurch-com-is-and-isnt/

Faylor, Chris and Breckon, Nick "GDC 08: Ken Levine on Storytelling in Games" *Shacknews* accessed 21 May 2016

http://www.shacknews.com/article/51423/gdc-08-ken-levine-on

Gamechurch Writers “Jesus For The Win” *Gamechurch.com* accessed 28 October 2017 http://gamechurch.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JFTW-Web.pdf

GotGTA “Bioshock - All 3 Alternate Endings” *YouTube* accessed 18 June 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3nBbo-uyZo

Hem, Alex “Grand Theft Auto 5 under fire for graphic torture scene” *The Guardian*, accessed 25 June 2017

https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/18/grand-theft-auto-5-under-fire-for-graphic-torture-scene

Hernandez, Patricia “Fallout 3’s first level does everything right” *Kotaku* accessed 15 January 2016 http://kotaku.com/fallout-3s-first-level-does-everything-right-1651415751

Hoose, Bob “Grand Theft Auto IV Game Review” *Plugged In* accessed 20 January 2013 http://www.pluggedin.com/games/2008/q2/grandtheftautoiv.aspx

Kain, Erik “‘Grand Theft Auto V’ Torture Scene is Satire” *Forbes* accessed 25 June 2017 https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2013/09/21/grand-theft-auto-v-torture-scene-is-satire/#3233ddaa50df

Milner, Jack “Violent video games DO trigger aggressive behaviour, decade-long review claims” *Daily Mail* accessed 20 April 2017 http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3201001/Violent-video-games-trigger-aggressive-behaviour-decade-long-review-claims.html

Morris, John “Anyone claiming Grand Theft Auto 5 is just violence for violence's sake hasn't played it” *The Guardian* accessed 25 June 2017

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/31/grand-theft-auto-5-torture-violence-video-games

Murray, Janet “The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology” *Inventing the Medium.com* accessed 22 May 2016 https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/

Quakers in the World “Reformers in Criminal Justice” *Quakers in the World* accessed 3 March 2017 http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/43

von Radowitz, Jon “Study finds that violent video games may be linked to aggressive behaviour” *Independent* accessed 20 April 2017 http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/study-finds-that-violent-video-games-may-be-linked-to-aggressive-behaviour-10458614.html

Reed, Kristan “Fallout 3” *Eurogamer* accessed 15 January 2016 http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/fallout-3-review

Remo, Chris “Ken Levine on BioShock: The Spoiler Interview” *Shacknews* accessed 21 May 2016

http://www.shacknews.com/article/48728/ken-levine-on-bioshock-the

Richtel, Matt “Thou Shalt Not Kill, Except in a Popular Video Game at Church” *New York Times* accessed 11 September 2016 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/us/07halo.html?pagewanted=all&_r=3&

Schut, Kevin “Alone Together: No Man’s Sky” *GameChurch.com* accessed 30 September 2016 http://gamechurch.com/alone-together-no-mans-sky/

Sellers, Robert “Welease Bwian” *The Guardian* accessed 30 October 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/mar/28/artsfeatures1

Sun, Eryn “Interactive Bible App Teaches Kids Fun Lessons, Leaves Theology to Parents” *The Christian Post* accessed 20 June 2015 http://www.christianpost.com/news/interactive-bible-app-teaches-kids-fun-lessons-leaves-theology-to-parents-65248/

Thomsen, Michael "'Her Story' review: A game about an unsolved crime that reveals the best the medium has to offer" in *Washington Post* accessed 1 October 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2015/06/16/her-story-review-a-game-about-an-unsolved-crime-that-reveals-the-best-the-medium-has-to-offer/?utm_term=.5f1a4c33e9a0

United Kingdom Interactive Entertainment "The Games Industry in Numbers" *UKIE* accessed 8 November 2017 https://ukie.org.uk/research

Unknown author "Games in 2016" *Bafta Awards Database* accessed 22 May 2016 http://awards.bafta.org/award/2016/games

Unknown author "Endings," *HeavyRain.Wikia* accessed 22 June 2017, http://heavyrain.wikia.com/wiki/Endings

Unknown author "Retribution: The Choice" *Fable.Wikia* accessed 25 March 2017 http://fable.wikia.com/wiki/Retribution#The_Choice

Unknown author "The Great Chain" *Bioshock.Wikia* accessed 18 June 2014 http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/The_Great_Chain_(Economic_Ideal)

Valve Corporation "Papers, Please" *Steam* accessed 3 November 2016 http://store.steampowered.com/app/239030/Papers_Please/

Valve Corporation "*Tropico 6* on Steam" *Steam* accessed 9 November 2017 http://store.steampowered.com/app/492720/Tropico_6/

Valve Corporation "Welcome to Steam" *Steam* accessed 8 November 2017 http://store.steampowered.com/about/

Watson, Tom "Grand Theft Auto V: a giant, targeted missile of satire" *New Statesman* accessed 25 June 2017 http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/09/prepare-be-amazed

X350 "GTA V Brutal Torture Scene [No Spoilers]" on *YouTube* accessed 14 September 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDSGBYs8f-A