



## Religion Simulacrum in Open World Video Game

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### Abstract

Apart from being a medium for entertainment simulation, video games also provide a representation of the social world. Game industry developers always carry out research to provide socio-cultural, historical and philosophical system content to enrich the content in the game. The story background in video games aims to provide experiences and impressions for the players. This research aims to qualitatively explore forms of religious representation that are simulated in open world video games. So players can play role characters in the game to experience spirituality and religiosity. Either through latent and manifest narratives or through moral choices in the context of developing the storyline and Player character in the Game. This research uses Emile Durkehim's sociological perspective of religion regarding Karl Marx's totemism and commodity fetishism to observe the incarnation of the gaming industry as an altar of worship for its players, as well as Jean Baudrillard's postmodernist perspective with his simulacrum concept to analyze the form of simulation and representation of religious symbols that appear in the game. these open world games... This research finds that the use of simulations and the distribution of representations of religious signs or symbols in games forms a religion simulacrum or a blurring of spiritual boundaries between the pseudo and the real. Video games build the Player's construction of religiosity and spirituality virtually in a simulated world that contains ritual practices, ethics, morality, cosmology, metaphysics, and theology.

## Introduction

Games in video games cannot be separated from representations of the real world or reality. Because the essence of video game simulation is to imitate the world around the player by adding elements of fantasy and imagination to provide an experience that goes beyond conditions in the real world. Video games also build perspectives, concepts and theories within the gamer or player community network (Bourgounjon 2015; Boomer 2018; Chew 2023; Nicoll 2022; Stone 2019).

This article uses a sociology of religion perspective and a post-modern social theory perspective to explain the process of simulating religious symbols and representations in video games. More specifically, what is studied in this research is Open World Video Games, where players can explore the world in the game freely. Video Games create immersive world simulations enhanced by depictions of God, Gods, metaphysical thought, cosmology, mythology, theology and so on. Then it is knitted in detail using religious symbols and rituals

Several Open World Video Games are given many spiritual touches, by presenting objects with visible or hidden religious content. (Cengiz 2023; Wildt 2023) Objects that appear real are presented in the construction of places of worship such as mosques, churches, temples or implied objects are presented in dialogue or missions in the game. Then character development in the game also places players in morality-based action choices. Carrying out actions that influence the formation of good or bad character. In this case, the storyline in the game also has an influence on players to explore ideas about being good or evil.

According to the Barkley Center Website (2019), Religion in Video Games has the potential to influence the offline lives of its players. According to Liel Leibovitz, human



constructions that have similarities with video games are not television shows, literary works or war, but religion...are ritual practices, ethics, morality and metaphysics. The video game creates a virtual simulation of a sacred altar, a platform for an inline community that finds spiritual satisfaction through gaming. Patrick Crogan also explained that religion can be both a positive and negative force, where in certain games players are accompanied by religion as a solution or party that provides assistance in fighting evil enemies. In several other games, players can also have enemies with a certain religious basis, which are constructed as antagonists.

This research takes open world video games as the object of study because this type of video game provides accessibility for players to explore the entire map or world in the game freely. The tendency for open world games to also place religious locations or symbols as a medium for relaxation. This free roaming game has become a memory for players of games made by Rockstar, such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA), Red Dead Redemption or games made by Ubi Soft such as Far Cry and Assassin's Creed, for example, the Free Roam game which can do anything. freely in a city – apart from carrying out missions to complete the storyline/game plot. In the game Assassins Creed Mirage, set in the city of Baghdad during the golden age of Islam in 861 AD, it displays a mosque and the sound of the call to prayer, as it enters Muslim prayer time. Another game that displays religious elements in detail is Red Dead Redemption II. Game set in America in 1899. Features rich religious elements in the game, with valid historical accuracy. This game features certain religious characters as NPCs (Non Playable Characters), such as priests, monks, rabbis, etc. Apart from that, this game also has several churches which were created to arouse curiosity by wrapping it in mystery. The essence of the sociology of religion is very thick in this game.

There are also many religious representations displayed in games in horror genre games. Most horror games come from America and Europe. So the religion background in the game is often covered with church elements as a holy place to fight the devil or evil spirits in these horror games. Apart from that, the symbol of the cross, holy cup, holy water is also used as a medium to defeat the demons who are the main enemies in the plot of the video game.

These games provide religious content in the form of exploration, which ultimately ends with a religious ritual or the discovery of something sacred, which describes the characters in the game as having a certain spiritual background. For example, the game Ghost Of Tsushima displays the sacred altars of Japanese beliefs. To achieve this, players must find a way to the sacred altar, with instructions for the Torii Gate (a traditional Japanese entrance marking a sacred location). The path to get to the holy altar must be traversed using a slightly complicated process and using several puzzles such as puzzles that must be solved to find the way. Following the gates on various paths on the Tsushima island map will take players to the Shinto Shrine. The Shinto shrine is a big secret that requires players to climb cliffs, climb paths, overcome obstacles to a secret path to a hidden sacred altar.

Some games also present religious symbols in narrative form. The narratives presented in video games, whether presented in dialogue or presented visually, encourage collective memory or moral content that moves the players' minds to certain moral ethics or religious philosophies. Apart from being a form of character development in video games. The religious rituals presented can be used by players as "stress relief", after repeatedly trying to experience difficulties in completing missions in the game or as a feature to reduce boredom when playing the game. The ritual simulation in the game seems to bring players to join in worship or feel the atmosphere

of carrying out a real ritual. This simulation constructs meaning for the players in reflecting themselves into certain religious values or as a return to morality after violating general norms simulated in video games. Video games have the potential to define new religions, new religious movements and video games provide motivation for spirituality and religiosity or vice versa, video games degrade spirituality and religiosity.

### **Research Method**

This research uses a narrative qualitative approach with literature study. (Cresswell 2009) The data used in this research is secondary data originating from journal articles and website articles which are studies or research on the relationship between religion and video games. The literature used in developing this research explains the relationship between religion and games, whether in the form of ritual practices and moral ethics, religious symbols simulated in games or the development of religion – based ideologies reproduced by the gaming industry.

### **The Dominance of Religious Symbols**

The representation of religious symbols carried by the video game becomes a form of simulacrum of religion itself. Formed due to rituals carried out by players and also players absorb religious images and signs brought in by the game. Players carry out the ritual through a series of simulations. This falls into the Third Order of Simulacra, where the religious reality that is copied into the game has a different interpretation from the actual religious reality. This is caused by modifications created to make religious symbols and forms of religious rituals in video games more interesting. The religious simulation is not the main substance of the player's process of playing a game, but the religious rituals or symbols become a complement that makes the player closer to social reality, namely religious reality. Spirituality does not have to be felt with a religion that suits the players. This representation of religious symbols can be played by players with various religions in different contexts from the religions or beliefs simulated in the video game.

The dominance of religious signs displayed in the game makes players appreciate the process of how the characters in the game are developing religious character. How deeply the character is tied to a particular religious culture. Shows that the characters in the game have a level of faith and belief in the religion they adhere to or the religious context that grows in the world of the game over a period of time that is adjusted to the history of the development of the religion itself.

The simulation in this game was created for several purposes, the goal of the game industry developers themselves, namely to bring players closer to the real world of the players. Game industry developers carry out research to integrate the plot, setting, history in the game so that it becomes a complete open world game world that can be explored close to the real world that the players have experienced or have never experienced (Johnson & Luo 2019; Murphy 2004; Parsayi 2021). For example, the game Red Dead Redemption II, which was released in 2018, is set in 1899, which of course is a world at that time that players of this game have never experienced in the current era. The church era at that time was of course different from the church era today. It is the touch of religious depictions in the classical era that is interesting for players to explore. The Red Dead Redemption game also inserts several phrases with religious content, for example in the inscription on the grave of Arthur Morgan, the main protagonist in the Red Dead Redemption II game, using the phrase "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (blessed are those who are hungry and thirst for truth taken

from the Gospel of Matthew 5:6. This narrative completes the journey of building the moral and character of the main character throughout the game.

### **Deconstruction of Mythology in the God of War Game**

Apart from religious symbols and representations, video games also provide mythological content in the development of stories and settings. There is a deflection or deconstruction of previously existing mythological history. For example, the God of War game takes the background of Greek mythology and Norse mythology. The story of this game tells the story of the main character Kratos who slaughtered all the gods in the game. This is a deconstruction of the mythology that existed in Greek society and Scandinavian countries. There is a twist in the mythology that is far different from what has been told.

Simulations of religiosity are not only displayed through building forms or rituals that are presented vividly, but also through narratives in which it is implied that there are forces outside of humans. The dialogues woven into the plot of the story make religion an intrinsic element that needs to be inserted. This is the definition of religion from the perspective of the sociology of religion.

Religious symbols are not only presented as positive cultures, but in some games are also negated in the representation of religious organizations which appear as a layering to the conditions of crime that dominate society. For example, in the game Ghost Recon Wild Lands, the church is part of a drug trafficking syndicate. Used as a tool of social control to protect drug cartel networks so that they run without interference. The situation in society can be controlled, because the church pastor is involved in the drug cartel network.

Another symbol in Assassin's Creed is shown through the Knights Templar, which in the Christian history map, is a symbol of the order protecting Christian holy places in the Crusades, formed in 1119. In the Assassin's Creed storyline, the Knights Templar are shown as an antagonistic group, tasked with hunting down Pieces of Eden which is guarded by Assassins. The conflict between the Assassin's and the Knights Templar is the main storyline of Assassin's Creed across every historical period that forms the background of the game's story. Religion, as a form of culture in social life, is experiencing commodification. How the mania of a culture that was formed in the past then transformed into a commodity in the hands of video game industry developers (Wildt 2023).

### **Symbolization of the Period of World History in the Assassin's Creed Game**

A game with a big narrative from Ubisoft, a developer that has industrial networks in various countries, presents a game based on a historical timeline with the title Assassin's Creed. The fictional background is a feud between the Assassin Family who protects the family secret in the form of a "Piece of Eden", which has a big influence on the stability of the world for generations, by keeping them away from their big enemy, namely the descendants of the Knights Templar, who are trying to find the "Piece of Eden". in order to control the world. Assassin's Creed produces historical settings from time to time, so the production of this game seems to have no limits, along with the development of human civilization. The first Assassin's Creed was set in 12th century Persia, then Assassin's Creed II, Brotherhood and Revelation were set in Renaissance Italy. Assassin's Creed III is set during the American Revolutionary War; Assassin's Creed Unity is set in the political revolution in France. Assassin's Creed Syndicate is set in the industrial revolution in England. In 2017, Assassin's Creed took a step back to the time of Egyptian civilization, with the title Assassin's Creed Origin. In 2018, we stepped

back into the era of Spartan Greece with the release of Assassin's Creed Odyssey. The Origin and Odyssey series contain the civilization and beliefs of the people of that era with the power of the mythology of the gods. Then finally in 2021, Ubisoft released Assassin's Creed Valhalla by presenting the setting of the Vikings, as the history of the Norse people. Each historical period is represented by different figures and characters. In 2023, Assassin's Creed Mirage will be released, set in the city of Baghdad with a virtual space simulation that is strong with Islamic religious elements. This project, which relies on a historical map of the world, is the big idea behind the creation of this Assassin's Creed Game. Every game produced by Assassin's Creed packaged by inserting historical figures in the storyline or game missions.

Examples include the presence of Karl Marx in Assassin's Creed Syndicate, Napoleon Bonaparte in Assassin's Creed Unity, Leonardo Da Vinci in Assassin's Creed II, Abraham Lincoln in Assassin's Creed III, or Cleopatra in Assassin's Creed Origin. The association of the Assassins Creed game with this historical period of course implies the religious cultures of each era of that period. Like the attachment of several historical figures who had a big basis in thinking about religion. Like Karl Marx (Assassin's Creed Syndicate) with his criticism of religion in the industrial revolution that gave birth to communism, Leonardo Da Vinci (Assassin's Creed II) is a historical artistic figure whose religious beliefs are still a big debate behind his great works about the representation of God.

Assassin's Creed is an example of a game with a large simulacra project in it. A form of game that has a single universe but is broad in historical period production. Meanwhile, outside of them, many other game developers are developing their universe into a multiverse. Bridging the world between games that are no longer limited by the principles or ideals they instill in the identity of the games they develop. All of this is in order to survive and adapt amidst the competition in game development. Incorporating religious symbols as a form of popular culture and to be attached to their games. The overlapping and widespread reproduction of signs in this simulacrum universe becomes hypersemiotics. A universe of signs that exceeds the signifiers and signifieds of the sign itself.

Baudrillard's views on simulacra and simulation (1994) can be used to see how people who consume digital video games enter a space of simulacrum (reduplication of reality) which is reproduced continuously, thus encouraging their desire to become a consumer society. If drawn from Baurillard's thinking, it will produce an implication of meaning. Namely, the increasing number of unlimited symbols and information that humans receive, results in an explosion of meaning within humans, until humans can no longer accommodate the meaning of each piece of information (Baudrillard 1985), like a black hole, humans suck information into meaningless again, creating a vacuum of meaning, because hundreds of these games will become implosions of meaning in the media.

### **Religion as a Return to Morality in the Game**

Imaginative spaces that have no reference or reference can be produced through game simulations. For example, a small child who has never committed violence, killed or acted criminally in the real world and has never even held a weapon, can do it in the game, just by pressing a few button combinations. In the game everything feels easy, light and fun. Banality is very easy to create in games. Any imagination or fantasy as complex as anything can be simulated in the game. For example, teenagers or children who play Grand Theft Auto V or Red Dead Redemption 2 games where they can kill people in the game freely, or destroy cities without any restrictions (Tassi 2018). Then



they can repeat the game many times. When violence and brutality occur in the game, "divine morality" is an option to control or return players to human values. The religiosity feature is one of the designs in the game that can be used to restore morality.

Children can also use violence as a means of satisfying and entertaining through the online game Point Blank.

"As it happens to the children, they in the real world do not know how to operate guns or have never committed murder just like they do when playing games. But killing is an entertainment that can satisfy their desires. They play with various forms of violence by killing by firing rifles, shooting in the head (Headshot), or killing with a knife (Sluggger) from close range with a scene full of blood. These children enjoy greatly when they can kill many people at once from close range, with blood splattered, this becomes an extension beyond their reality as a child. The children play with people they mostly do not know in them, whether they are children, teenagers, or adults, whether they are male or female. The kids make the game at Point Blank as an arena of competition and hostility that they never really did as in the real world" (Wilujeng 2019)

Once the simulacrum in the game is blurred, it also has the potential to encourage aggressive behavior by players in the simulation. Freedom is entertainment in itself that makes gamers imagine beyond the boundaries of norms that they cannot penetrate in the real world. Games are an outlet for the constraints of the real world.

Once the simulacrum is blurred in the game, it also has the potential to encourage aggressive behavior by players in the simulation. Games provide a stimulus for players to engage in sexual harassment and sexist behavior (Fox 2016). Freedom is entertainment in itself that makes gamers imagine beyond the boundaries of norms that they cannot penetrate in the real world. Games are an outlet for the constraints of the real world. Such as committing acts of violence or sexual harassment.

Religiosity in the game is built as a balance to the moral side. Religious rituals are used for players to withdraw from virtual "sins" committed in the game. Current games develop the "moral choice" side where players are given the option to choose their own moral path to take in the game. Then, what if *paragamer* are you bored? This is the task of the games industry which always employs professionals to carry out development. You can release Downloadable Content (DLC) in the form of additional gameplay, missions, maps, characters or weapons in the game. In addition, obviously, the gaming industry will develop storylines, graphics or produce newer games (Svelch 2022).

Baudrillard saw that there was a shift in the logic of society, — the society in question is — consumption society, namely from the logic of need to the logic of desire. In other words, people no longer consume the use value of a product, good, commodity or service, but the value of the symbol or sign (*symbolic value*). Media through television technology (TV), mass media, social media, films, advertisements, music, *digital art* and *game* considered as a means of forming awareness, taste, taste, enjoyment, beauty and human discourse in the form of imaging signs, through animation or simulation. Another logic formed by Postmodernism is the logic of simulation (simulacra). A shift from the cycle of modern society which operates in the field of production, to a postmodern society which is confined to simulation, image play and sign manipulation. Humans can no longer differentiate between what is reality (*real*) and pseudo virtual simulations. Cannot differentiate between desires, desires and needs, and it is difficult to differentiate between the natural, the artificial and beyond reality (hyperreality).

## The Cult of Open World Video Game Exclusivity

Playstation produces exclusive games such as *The Last Of Us*, *Uncharted*, *God Of War* and *Ghost Of Tsushima*. Exclusive because this game can only be played on the Playstation console. The goal is that gamers who play the game have a "standard" or "taste" that has a distinction or "gap" from those who don't have a Playstation. A strategy to encourage people to buy Playstation consoles while excluding and becoming symbolic violence against other console users. This competitive gaming industry rivalry means that the gaming community has many preferences for which game to choose, and there can be hundreds of games that can be played for hours. This competition between the gaming industry has led to unlimited simulation, which increasingly grips consumers to sit down and feel at home in living every point of life in the game. Such as following the storyline, exploring the vast world map in the game, exploring the characters in the game, discussing with fellow gaming communities on social media. This explains how the gaming industry has grown into a limitless simulacrum universe, because it continuously produces and reproduces games, game events and discussion spaces that continue to enlarge and expand their reach.

As is currently being done by Playstation, which founded Playstation Studios by collaborating with big game developers such as Santa Monica Studios, Naughty Dog, and Sucker Punch, to strengthen its bargaining position amidst competition and rivalry with other big game developers. Playstation Studios has a big mission to become a gaming giant in the world. Not only in games but also in other larger industries, such as Film, Music, Technology, Comics, YouTube Channels and others. Playstation will create a bigger universe as one of the capitalistic giants in the gaming world. Playstation as a giant industry in video game development has the potential to become a "God" in the video game universe itself.

With the establishment of Playstation Studios, this industry expanded its reach by reproducing these exclusive games so that they could be played by users of other media, namely PCs or personal computers, which of course were more massive in number than Playstation console users. Will this end symbolic violence? Of course not, it will actually prolong the chain of symbolic violence because the games released on PC are only old games that have previously been played by Playstation users. This worship of game exclusivity is also a form of commodity fetishism from Karl Marx and the successors of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Adorno, 1991), explaining the worship of objects because there is exclusivity behind them. Playstation exclusivity becomes a cultural industry that controls players into a cage of symbolic domination. This becomes a form of worship that exists outside of the video game simulation itself. If we refer to Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Form of Religious Life* (1912), the representation of religion shown in video games can be a form of morality and also totemism. Emile Durkheim was the founder of the sociological view of religion as having its own perspective in looking at forms of religion. Durkheim's sociological perspective of religion in looking at the context of religion is broader and more critical than the general definition of religion itself. When a community or society carries out a collective consciousness together, it can be called a form of religion. Video games have become a place of virtual ritual accompanied by the growth of the gaming industry which continues to grip its consumers or players to continue to worship the updates of games that are continuously reproduced. Video games continue to appear with as much sophistication as idols worshiped by the players. Players are constantly given a feeling of "thirst" waiting for the arrival of the newest open world games. Teased curiosity through trailers, release schedules, online events that offer a wider and more

complicated level of exploration of the world in the game. Players can sit for hours to explore the world in the open world game for hours. hours so that he forgets the real life around him.

### **Jean Baudrillard's Thoughts on Simulation and Simulacrum**

Baudrillard turns to how postmodern society is no longer influenced by production, but by media, computers, control systems, information technology, cybernetic systems and others. How does a society that was previously dominated by the mode of production become dominated by the mode of production (Kellner 1989). Baudrillard's thinking cannot be separated from the influence of linguistics and semiotics, which directs Baurillarn's views to a perspective that focuses on "domination and manipulation of signs" packaged by the media, especially in consuming society. Baudrillard saw society no longer as a subject, but as an object. The function of consumer objects is not the use value or benefits of an item, but rather signs or symbols that are disseminated through advertising and lifestyle.

The dominance of signs by the media blurs the boundaries between the reality simulated by the media and the actual reality, which then places humans in simulated spaces (Baudrillard 1989), one of which is video games. Baudrillard's view is used to analyze how video games reproduce and manipulate signs to dominate humans in the reproduction of consumer society through simulation and simulacrum. One of Baudrillard's thoughts that explains the influence of media such as video games is Simulacra, which is defined as the imaginary construction of a reality, without essentially representing that reality. A simulacrum is the recycling or reproduction of objects and events. Production of pseudo-reality. The blurring of real reality with pseudo reality (Baudrillard 1891). If a simulation is a copy or image representation of something real, then a simulacra is a copy of a copy, which is not even from a real entity. Simulacra formation goes through three stages:

- 1.Symbolic Order: Society has a definite and inherent sign system according to its status
- 2.First Order of Simulacra : The Early Modern Era, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution. Simulacra imitate natural images, the original underlies the fake (plagiarism)
- 3.Second Order of Simulacra: from the era of the Industrial Revolution until the mid-20th century. Massive production of imitations, imitations, whose shape is exactly the same as the original
- 4.Third Order of Simulacra: The Present, which is dominated by simulations, everything without any original reference. The Death of Reality: Hyperreality

Representations or images of religious symbols that construct players in the game to develop moral structures are a form of simulacrum that blurs the boundaries of real and player moral simulation. Video games present ritual, ethical, moral and metaphysical practices based on religious values and norms that relate to the real world. Video games create a virtual simulation of a holy altar, a forum for an online community that finds satisfaction in spirituality and religiosity through games.

The blurring of reality is also getting stronger with the interference of the gaming industry in gathering information, updates on the development and growth of video games which are continuously reproduced which makes players continuously curious, tempted and feel "thirsty" for open world explorations that are more complex and more sophisticated. Video games exist as a form of commodity that is adored by its players through a sea of image and sign manipulation. Video games become totemism and fetishism from the perspective of the sociology of religion.



## Conclusion

The world created by the gaming industry is not as simple as we imagine. The world of gaming is not only "Start Game-Play-Game Over/End Game" then entertained. But how do the players of this game explore and become part of a historical period and live a religion-based morality. Either the religious morality that is the player's background or the religion that is presented in these games. The simulacra that are created are not only embedded in the imaginative spaces and universe of symbols created in the game, but also virtual spaces such as social media which become public spaces for discussing and discussing the development of the game world itself. Like Religiosity in the game. Game Religiosity is part of the history of power relations between Game Industry Developers, Game Content Industry, Game Communities and Game Consumers reproducing their respective simulacrum which culminate in the creation of religious simulacrum in games, forming currents like ocean waves that never stop and become a chain that never breaks. This simulacra will continue to develop along with the discourse that is currently being created. It is very difficult to feel where the end is.

The players of this game explore and become part of the historical period of religion and design the moral development of characters in the game with the religion in the world of these games. Formation of Religion Simulacrum not only embedded in the imaginative spaces and universe of symbols created in the game, but also virtual spaces such as social media which have become public spaces for discussing and discussing the development of the world of game religiosity itself. Religious themes make the gaming industry more adaptive to expand the game development discourse by entering the niches of digital channels. Video games also expand the fan community who build virtual holy altars. Religion as a history of power relations between Game Industry Developers, Game Content Industry, Game Communities and Game Consumers reproduce their respective simulacrum which culminate in the creation of a game simulacrum universe, forming a current like an ocean wave that never stops and becomes a chain that never breaks. This simulacra continues to develop in line with the current discourse. It is very difficult to feel where the end is. Placing religion in the game as a form of new religious life, a new religious movement and has the potential to provide spiritual motivation and religiosity or degrade it

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