VIDEO GAMES AND RELIGION: APOCALYPSE AND UTOPIA

19 November 2020

09:45-10:00	Welcome
10:00-11:00	Encountering the Apocalyptic
11:10-12:10	Understanding the Utopic
12:20-13:00	Reframed Methodologies
13:00-13:50	BREAK
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15:00-15:45	Interrogating Depictions of Ultimacy
15:55-16:55	American Visions
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(All timings are UK-based)

The symposium is hosted by the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements, it will take place via *Zoom*, details will be provided to participants in advance.

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- Mute your microphone when you are not speaking, this will ensure any background noise is not transmitted to the group. (Remember to turn it on again when you wish to speak.)
- When you are speaking, please be mindful of activities that can interfere with your microphone (shuffling papers, typing, sipping tea, etc.)

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Welcome	Alastair Lockhart and James Crossley	9.45

Encountering the Apocalyptic

Shyam Sriram and William Chavez	Apocalyptic Irruption into Aboriginal Culture: Discourse and Game Analysis of Mad Max (2015)	10:00-11:00
David Stevenson	Where Demons Gather: Tokyo's Pluralistic Apocalypse in Shin Megami Tensei	
Catherine Appleford	Interpretations of Spirituality in a Textless World	
Matt Horrigan	Apocalyptic Fictions, Thanatic Simulations: Videogames and the Figuration of Death	

Understanding the Utopic

Philipp-Thomas Wehage	Popular Utopias – Fantasy Video Games and the Imagination of Religion	11:10-12:10
Scott Paeth	"Even God Is Entitled to a Do-Over": Utopia, Dystopia, and Realism in Bioshock Infinite	
Christopher Porter	"Would you kindly … brings us the girl and wipe away the debt" – Puppets and Choice in the Devolution of Utopia to Apocalypse in Ken Levine's BioShock Series	

Reframed Methodologies

Daniel Houlberg	Man, Culture, and End-Time Narratives – A biocultural approach	12:20-13:00
Joscha Steffens and Michiel van Elk	Making the Imaginary Real: Online Virtual Gaming as the Emergence of New Religion	

BREAK

Disruption and Theologization

Greg Grieve	The Confession: Video Games, Violence, and the Problem of Evil in the Video Game Far Cry 5	13:50-14:50
Madelaine Caritas Longman	The Metaphysics of Missingno: Ritual, Glitch, and the Quest for Ontological Truth in Pokémon: Red and Blue	
Benjamin Parks	Thus Spake Tom Nook: Animal Crossing, Nietzsche, and Immanent Apocalypticism	

Interrogating Depictions of Ultimacy

Taylor Weaver	JRPGs and Apocalypse: Aliens, Evil, and Christ-Types	15:00-15:45
Robert Houghton	There Will be a Reckoning: Galactic Apocalypse as Endgame in Stellaris	

American Visions

Isaac May and Spencer Wells	Anti-Nephi-Lehies in the Land of Zion: Latter-Day Saints and the Construction of Race in Fallout New Vegas: Honest Hearts	15:55-16:55
Rachel Wagner	A Sense of Presence: Transmediating an American Apocalypse	

Close	Alastair Lockhart - Round Up: Computational and Gaming Approaches James Crossley - Close	16:55-17:30

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Abstracts

Catherine Appleford, Lancaster University, UK
Interpretations of Spirituality in a Textless World

Released in 2012, the Indie Adventure video game Journey, developed by thatgamecompany, explores motifs of life, theology, and interpersonal relationships, through the use of an unnamed cloaked figure that is guided in a desert environment by the player. This paper aims to unpack the thematic roles that are presented throughout the game, and how this short piece of media – roughly two hours in length – garnered so much attention. Much of the narrative is up to the player's own interpretation, with the final scene in particular focusing on the life journey; reincarnation/rebirth, ideas of a cyclical beginning and end, as well as the player's personal utopia. An element that will be explored are the antagonistic opponents. Named the 'Guardians', they are fashioned in the form of stoic, machine-like stone creatures that provide a stark contrast to the brightly coloured robes of the protagonist. However, unlike their hardened exterior, they are able to glide and move in such a way that are reminiscent of dragons and snakes, bringing forth symbolism of the Edenic serpentine during the Book of Genesis, and Leviathans in a variety of Books, in the Christian Bible. One of the more distinctive elements that is offered in Journey is the option to interact with another player, who remains anonymous. Neither party can talk or speak to one another, save for a musical chime that brings up unknown symbols unique to game, and their usernames are only revealed once the end credits are shown. This subtraction of traditional forms of conversation allows for visual stimuli within the environment to become the forefront of attention, coaxing the player to dive into the spiritual messages that are illustrated, and to reflect upon their own beliefs of faiths and utopia.

Greg Grieve, University of North Carolina, USA
The Confession: Video Games, Violence, and the Problem of Evil in the Video Game Far Cry 5

This talk investigates the mission, "the Confession," from the video game, Far Cry 5(Ubisoft 2018). Part of the Far Cry franchise Far Cry 5 takes place in the fictional town of Hope Valley, Montana, which has been overrun by a religious doomsday cult called Eden's Gate. They believe the world is going to end, and they are preparing for its imminent collapse, by stocking piling guns and kidnapping new recruits in a place free from government intervention. In this talk I ask "why are video games so violent?" It argues that one of the reasons video games use violence is to engage with evil as it relates to utopia and the apocalypse. Evil is not merely what is very bad, but rather are the malevolencies that stain human understanding. To be clear the paper approaches "evil" as a product of human history, and not as a normative or ontological essence. In other words, video games play a role in popular culture as vernacular theodicies, any popular discourse that attempts to understand why there is evil in the world. Video games make for effective vernacular theodicies because their interactive nature affords immersion. Immersion is significant for vernacular theodicies, because it allows players, not just to see and hear evil, or to just engage stories about evil, but to experience and play with notions of evil as embodied moral agents. You as a player embedded in the video game cosmos make the choices.

Matt Horrigan, Simon Fraser University, Canada
Apocalyptic Fictions, Thanatic Simulations: Videogames and the Figuration of Death

The moment of death is pivotal to both the larger event of the apocalypse and the mechanics of many videogames. This essay focusses on the thanatic in gaming—named for the Greek god of death Thanatos—to offer a framework for discussing how games figure the theme and moment of death. Of primary interest here is the perspective each game presents upon death. Third-person death distances the player from the moment of death, both in terms of virtual space and chain of events; it is central to real-time strategy. In second person death, an interaction between a player character and another character involves the death of the other; this interaction type characterizes first-person shooters. First-person death is characterized by a diversity of depictions and effects within the gameworld. It can effect a form of permadeath involving the closure of the entire world, as in Minecraft's Hardcore Mode; it can also effect a cycle of reincarnation within

a persistent gameworld (e.g. Super Mario), or a rollback of in-game chronological time as a player restarts from a save point (e.g. Wolfenstein). The diversity of scope and effect in game renderings of first-person death reflects the conundrum of death as an epistemic obstacle for phenomenology: we know how death appears, and how to cause it, but we do not know what happens on the other side of it. Does a world cease with each individual death, reflecting a convergence between the thanatic and the apocalyptic? Or is death cyclical, or private and inconsequential? The apocalyptic implications of first-person death show how it moves the thanatic in gaming from a concrete event to a distributed theme. Thus this essay concludes by presenting the neo-surrealist glitch aesthetics of Kitty Horrorshow's Anatomy as revelling in the thanatic horror of the breakdown of the world.

Robert Houghton, University of Winchester, UK
There Will be a Reckoning: Galactic Apocalypse as Endgame in Stellaris
The end of a world is an alarmingly common element within science fiction strategy games. Games from Master of Orion to Space Empires provide the player with a plethora of means to obliterate planets and stars. But these extinction events generally pass without fanfare. When an empire spans multiple star systems, the destruction of a planet can become a quiet inconvenience rather than an apocalyptic culmination of revelations, plot and lore. The creators of Stellaris (Paradox Interactive, 2016) have taken a different approach to apocalypse through their endgame crisis events. These events provide a range of possible galaxy-wide threats ranging from swarms of alien locusts, ancient omnicidal machines, invaders from another dimension, and an interstellar Faustian entity. But it's not simply the scale of these cataclysms which sets them apart from those more typical of this genre. These events are apocalypses in the traditional sense: calamitous events preceded by a series of revelations of hidden – and typically forbidden – knowledge often with inherently religious undertones. These complex and nuanced events are firmly embedded within the mechanics and design of the game rather than simply the inevitable consequence of an interstellar arms race. This paper addresses the use of apocalypse within Stellaris and within strategy games more generally. It argues that the revelations of the late game not only support the depth of the game world and the stories produced through play, but also act as a means to overcome the endgame boredom common within of the genre. On this basis, the paper will consider the potential and limitations of this approach within historical strategy games.

Daniel Houlberg, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
Man, Culture, and End-Time Narratives – A biocultural approach
Scholarship has long sought to explain why the end of the world fascinates and attracts spectators. This dissertation answers this question by combining a humanistic approach with the natural sciences. The studies aim is to salvage the study of end-time narratives in contemporary media from psychoanalysis and radical constructivism. "ETN" is a term for all representations about the end-times whether apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic. The study will conduct an analysis of some well-known ETN visual fictions. One of them will be the highly successful post-apocalyptic video game The Last of Us (2013). Focus will be analyzing the story, although gameplay also will be part to show how a combined biocultural approach to ETN. The approach supports a current in religious literature of evolution of religion, but it also alignes with cognitive film studies, religious media studies, but also burgeoning international research network ETN´s aim. The dissertation will engage in three different analysis one of film, television, and the video game The Last of Us. The analysis will be guided by Torben Grodals (2009) biocultural approach to audiovisual media. The analysis places the focus on interpreting the meanings and perspectives of spectator experience, from a biocultural standpoint. The method will be literature review of the video game, film, and television where ETN and bioculturalism are discussed. The findings will flesh-out three different media analysis of the different products. The dissertation is meant to explore some different main hypothesis about ETN from different angles, which in the end should make clear, that the study of ETN would greatly benefit placed within a larger evolutionary framework. The project dissertation will be conducted over a period of 3 years from June

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2021 to August 2024. The project is not a complete or all-encompassing investigation of the biocultural framework of ETN.

Madelaine Caritas Longman, Concordia University, Quebec, Canada
The Metaphysics of Missingno: Ritual, Glitch, and the Quest for Ontological Truth in Pokémon: Red and Blue

The original two Pokémon games, released in Japanese in 1996 and in English 1998, have garnered attention in fields as diverse as game studies, childhood development, and sociology. Scholars particularly note the games' emphasis on knowledge and learning; players may devote hundreds of hours to memorizing creatures' habitats and lifecycle stages in order to become a "Pokémon master." While some praise this encouragement to learn, others critique the games' implicit scientific positivism and masculinist approach in presenting a world in which all knowledge can be "mastered" (Sefton-Green). However, one of these games' most enduring legacies complicates this claim. Over twenty years later, the glitch "Missingno" continues to transfix players. A garbled arrangement of pixels, Missingno appears as an enemy encounter yet refuses to cohere into any definable creature. Similar to Old Testament avatars of the divine, Missingno is powerfully present even as it eludes sensory and intellectual comprehension. Even if captured, it cannot be recorded in players' Pokédex encyclopedia. Moreover, capturing Missingno can corrupt the save file and even render the game permanently unplayable. Nevertheless, players conduct elaborate rituals to summon this entity. This paper posits that Missingno's allure is not due to its unpredictability – on the contrary. As a quirk of programming, Missingno behaves according to definite rules, but these rules are difficult or impossible to fully grasp. Yet it is through Missingno's seemingly unpredictable behavior that the player is reminded these rules exist: when the game "breaks," the player must confront that it is a game – that the world they move through is governed by invisible systems of order. Players desire to understand Missingno is therefore more akin to the study of religion and metaphysics than to scientific positivism. In pursuing Missingno, players do not seek mastery but a glimpse into the workings of the world.

Isaac May (University of Virginia, USA) and Spencer Wells (University of Southern Utah, USA)
Anti-Nephi-Lehies in the Land of Zion: Latter-Day Saints and the Construction of Race in Fallout New Vegas: Honest Hearts

In 2011, Bethesda Software published a downloadable add-on called Honest Heart for their successful postapocalyptic roleplaying game Fallout New Vegas. Set in Zion National Park in Utah hundreds of years after a nuclear war between China and the United States, Honest Hearts saw players defending friendly American tribes from the onslaught of a third, genocidal group called the White Legs. Players were given a choice between two obvious paths, helping a pacifistic Latter-Day Saint missionary to assist the two tribes in fleeing Zion National Park, or aiding a more militant Latter-Day Saint missionary in killing the White Legs. Honest Hearts is the only portrayal of Mormonism in a mainstream videogame. Its plot draws heavily on thematic elements from the Book of Mormon, a text which emphasizes the need to convert Native Americans and includes the purported ancient Hebrew ancestors of Native peoples, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, engaged in extensive debates about the morality of warfare. Yet the game was intended for a largely non-Latter-Day Saint audience, and it did not make its religious message apparent for all players. In this paper, we argue that Honest Hearts presents a public intervention into Mormon theology. The game essentially tasks players with fulfilling Mormon eschatological conditions by aiding in the converting of Native tribes and resolving the theological debates about pacifism introduced in Mormon scripture. We contextualize the games plot in the light of other contemporary media portrayals of Latter-Day Saints. The game's script also subtly subverts older understandings of Mormon theological understandings of race. The tribes depicted in the Fallout series are an interracial group of survivors of nuclear conflict who have adapted tribal ways, rather than biological descendants of ancient Hebrews (as Native Americans are thought to be in Mormon scripture). Honest Heart thus imagines a world where the apocalypse parallels the Book of Mormon but is not beholden to traditional Mormon ideas about that text. Jointly authored: Isaac Barnes May and Spencer Wells.

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Scott Paeth, DePaul University Chicago, USA
"Even God Is Entitled to a Do-Over": Utopia, Dystopia, and Realism in Bioshock Infinite

The game Bioshock: Infinite explores the themes of apocalypse and utopia through its depiction of the flying city of Columbia, a Christian millenarian utopia founded by Zachary Hale Comstock. Columbia presents an image of the United States at the end of the 19 th century in which ideologies of "manifest destiny" and "American exceptionalism" have metastasized into a tyrannical form of authoritarianism. The game examines the contradictions of American nationalist hubris and the way in which utopian ideologies can devolve into dystopia. Through these ideas, the game engages in a critique of American naivety regarding its own innate virtue, recognizing that the reality of the United States has always been grounded in a blindness regarding the racism and genocide that indelibly mark American identity. Using the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and Jurgen Moltmann as lens, this paper will examine how the themes of apocalypse and utopia in Bioshock: Infinite offer resources for understanding the moral paradoxes that are present in American utopianism. Moltmann's theology provides a conception of human hope that motivates our utopian dreams. At the same time, Niebuhr's realist analysis can offer a vision of a form of "chastened nationalism" that can allow the United States to honestly reckon with the dystopian dimensions of our history. While Columbia depicts an American self-identity that has become irredeemably destructive, through its depiction of the Vox Populi, it also recognizes that even in tyrannical societies, it is possible to recognize and respond to tyranny, to imagine more democratic possibilities for society, and to redeem the utopian promise of America through the creation of new social realities grounded in the shared humanity of all people.

Benjamin Parks, Mercy College of Ohio, USA
Thus Spake Tom Nook: Animal Crossing, Nietzsche, and Immanent Apocalypticism

The purpose of this paper is to begin sketching out some ways in which Nintendo's Animal Crossing (AC) franchise can be read as kind of Nietzschean critique of apocalypticism in other video games. I will begin by giving an overview of AC and situate it within the broader gaming industry with an eye towards its most recent installment's – Animal Crossing: New Horizons – immense popularity during the ongoing pandemic. Then, I will describe Nietzsche's critique of the nihilism of "other worldly" thinking, of which apocalypticism typically understood is a kind. Next, I will argue that if we understand apocalypse in the original sense of "unveiling," then AC is an apocalypse of everyday "this worldly" life. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on how AC in both its content and game design resists becoming another form of "other worldly" escapism. In making my argument, I will draw on Bruce Benson's work on "de-cadence" in Pious Nietzsche and Nolen Gertz's work on "nihilism-technology relations" in Nihilism and Technology. Additionally, articles on game design and content will be referenced as needed.

Christopher Porter, Trinity College Theological School, Australia
"Would you kindly ... brings us the girl and wipe away the debt" - Puppets and Choice in the Devolution of Utopia to Apocalypse in Ken Levine's BioShock Series

Ken Levine's two entries in the BioShock series have proven fertile ground for the hypothetical exploration of attempted utopian societies as works of historical fiction. BioShock explores the Ayn Rand inspired Objectivist utopia of the Atlantean city of 'Rapture' in an alternate 1940s universe. While BioShock: Infinite introduces the floating utopia of 1912 'Columbia' motivated by an alternate vision of American exceptionalism and radical religiosity. In each of these utopias the player is given a reasonable degree of agency to explore the devolution of these societies into apocalyptic dystopias and are presented with an ongoing series of moral decisions that ostensibly influence the outcome of the game. In this environment the player is able to investigate their own actions within these alternate utopias, and the subsequent interlocking narratives that are built from these acts. However, in both games this much of this active choice making is revealed in the story arc to be an erroneous belief promoted by a puppet master, and the game actually proceeds on a far more linear path. Nevertheless, the 'morality-based storyline' and choice engaged outcomes of BioShock were regularly praised in the reviews (e.g Schiesel, 2007). While BioShock: Infinite

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continued on to actively explore questions of how choice and morality contribute to a utopia through the lens of multiverse theories. Therefore, this paper will examine the BioShock world as a model of human interaction with utopias. First, we will examine the depiction and narrative of the utopia with special focus on the aspects of religious engagement or eschewing in these worlds. Second, we will turn to the engagement of player choices in bringing that utopia to an apocalyptic conclusion, and how players processed these choices and inevitability. Finally, the paper will consider how these player engagements of choice may influence broader aims of aspirational utopias in our environment.

Shyam Sriram (Butler University, USA) and William Chavez (University of California, USA)
Apocalyptic Irruption into Aboriginal Culture: Discourse and Game Analysis of Mad Max (2015)
This study introduces original analysis of apocalyptic discourse and game design, arguing that the two are thematically intertwined in the videogame Mad Max (2015). Like the films, the game illustrates a modern decline into savagery, religious pragmatism, and tribalism following the global catastrophes of climate change and nuclear skirmish. Within this eschatological imagining of Australia (what we denote as "Maxtralia"), retrogression occurs in all major facets of civilization. The survivors of the "pox-eclipse" revert to mechanical and fuel-based technologies; fractured social structures like casteism, charismatic authorities, and warlordism; a pragmatic religious complex that fetishizes automobility through vehicle worship and ritualizes blood sport violence and combat; crude semiotics expressed through unconventional colloquialisms and sacred homologies; cultural transmission practices limited in scope like oral lore and tattoos; and a barter economy sustained by fuel sources, metal supplies, and human bodies. "Maxtralia" reflects the collective national nightmare of a society built by transported convicts and colonizers: an apocalyptic irruption into a previously censured aboriginal culture. This dreadful view of Australia extends into three components of gameplay. First, ownership is temporary. Max Rockatansky, law enforcer turned scavenger, is the vehicle by which we navigate the post-apocalyptic bedlam; players spend most of the game raiding enemy camps, destroying vehicles, pillaging resources, and hunting for sustenance. Second, the game has no plot, only short-term, exigent errands – echoing the cynicism of a world devoid of ultimate design. Finally, the "Maxtralian" pragmatic religious complex governs the game mechanics of avatar maintenance; the incremental adjustments made to Max, his transportation, and resources. Self-actualization is achieved through various rites of passage (the series of challenge-objectives within the game) and the alliances forged with Griffa (a "wandering mystic" who enhances Max's spiritual, mental, and physical capabilities) and Chumbucket (a deformed mechanic "destined" to construct the ultimate vehicle for the "Angel Combustion").

Joscha Steffens (Netherlands Institute of Advanced Study) and Michiel van Elk (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)
Making the Imaginary Real: Online Virtual Gaming as the Emergence of New Religion
Religion researcher Michiel van Elk and visual artist Joscha Steffens met as residents of the NIAS fellowship program 2020 in Amsterdam. Both dealt in their very own way with new phenomena and movements around religiousness and spirituality. While experiencing the very moment of the first pandemic wave that hit Europe, they decided to join forces, to combine and to share their methods of research. Together they moved their point of view on their work and the world it derived from to a still distanced but distinct moment in the future. A distance that is speculative but yet the only way to see through the mist of dynamic chaos that surrounds us. The project is about bringing art and science methods and their perspectives together, lifting them on a hyper level to allowing a sci-fi retrospective on our current layers of existence and perception. The format of the project that we are proposing is a 20 min video that can be streamed as a contribution to the conference. Joscha Steffens and Michiel van Elk are looking back in an interview setting moderated by Fenneke Wekker in the distant year 2081. Could they have seen it coming? Was it an inevitable movement that traditional religious organizations were about to be completely swept away? The 2081 project is based on the ongoing gamechurch research of artist Joscha Steffens that focuses on christian missionary movements within online gaming communities.

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David Stevenson, Queen's University Belfast, UK
Where Demons Gather: Tokyo's Pluralistic Apocalypse in Shin Megami Tensei

There are few video games that engage so deliberately with religion and theology than the Shin Megami Tensei (SMT) series. Created by Atlus in 1987, the series persists to this day, with numerous spin-off games, animations and manga that have formed a popular media enterprise. Unlike other games of the era, SMT eschews the common gaming trope of good and evil deeds, emphasising instead the player's relationship with more abstract notions of law, chaos, and neutrality. To elaborate, Law is the absolute obedience to God at the expense of free will, Chaos forsakes God for the sake of antinomianism, while Neutrality is the emancipation of humankind from the influence of all celestial and subterranean beings; a path significantly more difficult for the player than the alternatives. The SMT series predominantly uses Tokyo as the backdrop of the apocalypse, yet the 'demons' encountered within the series extensively draw from global myth and folklore alike; from Yōkai to Ars Goetia, the Trumpeter described in The Book of Revelation, Hecate guarding the crossroads of Yetzirah. The latter example demonstrates the development team's interest in both detailed representation of deific figures, and 'remixing' their identity in a pluralistic chronicle of the occult. Beyond this, the Apocalypse throughout the series is typically mediated through technology, from wrist-bound devices said to tame demons, to Messiahs forged by genetic engineering. In this discussion, I would like to examine the SMT series through the key examples of Shin Megami Tensei II (SNES, 1992) and Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers (Saturn, 1997), contrasting the nuanced manners in which the games confront the Apocalypse, and incorporate this reading into Japan's fascination with the mankind's end, a tale retold countlessly in video games throughout the 'Lost Decade' of the 1990's.

Rachel Wagner, Ithaca College, USA
A Sense of Presence: Transmediating an American Apocalypse

In this paper I build upon Robert Orsi's work on religious experience, particularly his interest in the sacraments as a mode of making otherworldly spaces "present" in our this-worldly experiences. Presence is a way of bringing worlds beyond into tangible form, of touching them and letting them touch you. For Birgit Meyer, the objects enabling this material mediation are "sensational forms," and might take the form of bones, shells, or other objects. I argue, drawing on Orsi, that we can see presence—and the longing for it—at work beyond the obvious spaces of religious practice. Presence is alive and well in mediated American apocalypticism, in the intense imagination of a post-apocalyptic future that preoccupies those who consume its narratives in film, games, and role-plays. It is in this sense that Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward observe the "re-emergence" of religion with a "new visibility" that is much more than "simple re-emergence of something that has been in decline in the past but is now manifesting itself once more." I propose that the "new awareness of religion" they posit includes the mediated worlds that enchant and empower us via deeply immersive fandoms-especially apocalyptic fandoms that feature the gun. Whereas religious institutions today may be suspicious of presence, it lives on in the thick of those media fandoms that invite embodied performance and make ultimate promises about the world to come. This paper is affiliated with a book project, nearly completed, called "Cowboy Apocalypse," about the virtual and material mediation of the gun in American media and mythos. For this talk I will center my attention on video games, but the point of the larger argument is to place games and virtual guns within an overarching conversation about the mediation of a gun-focused apocalypticism on screens and in real life in America.

Taylor Weaver, East Texas Baptist University, USA
JRPGs and Apocalypse: Aliens, Evil, and Christ-Types

Japanese Role Playing Games (JRPGs) often contain imagery that gestures to Christianity. Perhaps due to settings that are often riffs on broadly medieval settings (with a mixing, as well, of sci-fi, steampunk, and Victorian aesthetics), clergy, cathedrals, crosses, religious artifacts, and other broadly 'western' Christian aesthetics are weaved into the back and foregrounds of games like those in the Final Fantasy series, the Breathe of Fire series, Chrono Trigger, Star Ocean, and the SaGa series, among others. Heavily present as

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well are apocalyptic narratives, with many games primarily revolving around a single protagonist (often 'chosen' in some way) and cohorts saving the world from (or broadly participating in) some type of apocalypse, often characterised by other-worldly aliens, or primeval evils. In this paper I want to compare and contrast two influential games with divergent settings, paying attention to the explicitly messianic (even Christian) imagery present, as well as accounts of the otherworldly agents of apocalypse and final battles. Chrono Trigger and Earthbound are archetypes of the JRPG, both highly acclaimed, with Chrono Trigger considered by many gamers to be the best JRPG ever made. Earthbound was not circulated well at launch, but subsequently has been considered one of the best games of the SNES era. While Chrono Trigger retains a classic JRPG aesthetic, Earthbound is set in what contemporary parody of America. Both consider classic themes of evil, foreboding apocalypses, and, destiny; but, one can also find in them messianic gestures of various degrees, as well as resurrections of Christic figures. I hope by comparing and contrasting these games, I can note the prevalence of apocalyptic imagery in JRPGS (something seemingly inherent to the genre), while also noting the pockets of more Christian and religious aesthetics and imagery, which are more prevalent in a classic JRPG like Chrono Trigger than an Americanised JRPG, like Earthbound.

Philipp-Thomas Wehage, Heidelberg University, Germany
Popular Utopias – Fantasy Video Games and the Imagination of Religion
Games Studies and Religious Studies have much to offer each other in developing an understanding of contemporary culture, especially that critical of religion (Bosman 2019). Following work done during the writing of my Master's thesis at the University of Heidelberg, I would like to propose to the Symposium a reading of fantasy video games as inherently Utopian, and therefore political texts (Attebery 1991; Baker 2012; Bould und Vint 2012). I hypothesize that, due to their wide dissemination, fantasy texts form a particular genre of utopian text, which I would like to call „Popular Utopia". I further contend that this „popular Utopia" functions as a kind of historical counterfactual (Apperley 2013,2018) in the sense that it explicitly explores futures and pasts as possibilites for human action and their consequences in a spcace that is deliberately marked as non-real. Contrary to the interpretation of Bould and Vint, I assume that the often wide audience appeal of fantasy video games inherently limits their radical potential, while at the same time, forming a largely untapped reservoir of evidence for the study of utopian religious imaginations of public appeal (Campbell et al. 2015; Campbell 2014). I would like to explicate these theses in an analysis of the game-text of Dragon Age: Inquisition (BioWare 2014), specifically the scriptures of the monotheistic Anrastean Faith contained therein.