										uungeon	
global network niav	r authority	owDie Di	iel milr 9	od II n	et s Pla	angel	und	ead with	Inentic	mediatize on SKIL PV/	
global network niay game rule system religion gamer aralysis Th simulation lot aralysis Th	arned av av ata	INAL-NAL	hlesirn	ഫന്	lle doi	oria	CE 10	field	popé spe	ing me Staisussion	
ren ren	esentation	VVUV					ass trac	Con CKD	ience	Twitch POINT	
religion gameraralysis		neaung	Oficialo	-scabe	Uule	10	a virt	uali ident	itv huf	fpriest genesis coali	
simulation lo ludology Int	e Last ot Us	death	resurrec	tionii	unerain	lies	mersion	communit	V symbols	salvation TAQ XBox.	360PVE

el

Issue 20 (2024)

articles

The Subject of Games. Cartesian Anxiety in Game Cultures, Game Studies, and Gameplay by Gerald Voorhees, 1

Pirating Platform Studies. The Historical Impact of Latin American Clone Consoles, 1973-1994 by Phillip Penix-Tadsen, 35

Gamification. A Conceptual Critique to Move Forwards by Lobna Hassan, 88

Role-Playing Games in the Classroom. Engaging Students with Ethics, Religion, and Games as Explorations of Society by Christine Tomlinson, 114

reports

Understanding Modern Views on the Middle Ages Through Research-led Learning. A Teaching Report by Philipp Frey and Joana Hansen, 153

IASGAR PhD day reports

"Fear the Old Blood." *Bloodborne*, Christian Concepts of Communion, and Theological Reflection by Ed Watson, 169

Blessed Are the Geek. Christian Gaming Content Creators and Digital Discipleship by Sophia Rosenberg, 179

Fanatical Alien Monsters. *Halo* and Religion in Fan-Forum Discourse by Emma Milerud Sundström, 189

"Blood for the Blood God!" Engaging with Gods and Religion in the *Warhammer 40K* Universe by Tara B. M. Smith, 201

reviews

Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling: The Dynamic Game Character (2023) by Joleen Blom. A Book Review by Gia Coturri Sorenson, 212

Fanatical Alien Monsters. Halo and Religion in Fan-Forum

Discourse

Emma Milerud Sundström

Abstract

Despite *Halo's* extensive cultural footprint since its 2001 debut, its religious themes have largely been overlooked academically, an oversite this project attempts to address. Utilizing thematic analysis of forum discussions from 2018 to 2023 on the r/halo subreddit, this small-scale research project aims to explore how fans of the *Halo* franchise utilize and discuss the term *religion*. Preliminary findings of this study indicate that fans critically engage with the portrayal of religion in *Halo*, often drawing parallels between the franchise's alien antagonists and real-world religious groups, where religiosity and monstrosity commonly become intertwined. This dialogue extends beyond gameplay, touching on broader societal and existential issues. This project contributes to the understanding of how video games like *Halo* can influence players' perceptions of religion and offer a platform for exploring complex moral and existential questions, and how players can perceive video game monsters in a manner that transcends simple game mechanics.

Keywords: Halo, FPS, Fan Discourse, Fan-Forums, Monsters, gamevironments

To cite this article: Milerud Sundström, E., 2024. Fanatical alien monsters. *Halo* and religion in fan-forum discourse. *Gamevironments* 20, 189-200. Available at <u>https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/</u>.

IASGAR PhD Day Report: Introduction by Gregory Price Grieve

The 2nd Annual Summer Graduate Workshop hosted by UNCG's Network for Cultural Study of Video Gaming and the International Academy for Study of Gaming and Religion, titled *Videogaming and Cultural Values*, was held on 27 and 28 July 2023. Tailored for early-stage researchers and doctoral students, the workshop focused on media-centered approaches, perspectives from game developers and publishers, and insights from gamers. Participants engaged in discussions and debates on theoretical frameworks for exploring the intersection of religion, culture, and video gaming. Due to their outstanding quality, select presentations from the workshop have been chosen for publication in this issue as *Emerging Voices in the Field*.

Introduction

"*Halo* both gives a sense of wonder and beauty of things beyond our understanding, but also tells a cautionary tale about blindly trusting leaders and dogma." (Anon 1 2021)

Since the release of the first *Halo* game, *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001) in November 2001, the franchise has developed into a popular cultural phenomenon, spawning (among other things) TV-series, books, graphic novels, and tie-in games. The titular hero of the franchise, and the central protagonist of these first-person shooter (FPS) games, being the Master Chief, a green-armored super-soldier who fights to protect humanity against the monstrous alien threat seeking to destroy it. The alien terror in question is the Covenant, a theocratic conglomerate of various alien species who follow the leadership of the Prophets, an alien religious elite. Despite the *Halo* franchise's popularity and its notable religious themes, the franchise has garnered little attention from scholars studying video games and religion (Paulissen 2018). Even with such minimal academic attention, players and fans of *Halo* actively engage in discussions and reflections on these themes within the games. They frequently comment on them and make connections between *religion* as depicted in the games' universe and in the real world.

This project represents a small article-based research endeavor I am pursuing alongside my doctoral studies at Uppsala University's Theological Faculty in Mission Studies, driven by my fascination with the intersection of video games and religion. It aligns with my broader interest in the thematic trio of monsters, video games, and

et network ntay, personality within the start of their solution in network to the solution of the solution of

religion, which I hope to continue pursuing in the future.

In this project I aim to explore the ways in which fans of the *Halo* videogames, within a demarcated fan-forum, discuss the position of what they categorize as *religion* within the franchise. In order to examine this inquiry, this project aims to answer the following research question:

How do current fans of the *Halo* videogame franchise utilize, discuss, and contemplate the concepts *religion* and *religious* in connection to these games?

An intriguing aspect of these discussions is how they frequently connect religion to the franchise's monstrous alien antagonists, a tendency which I contend is worth further examination, not least of all due to the popularity of the *Halo* franchise. The *Halo* franchise is one of many videogame series which has served to produce fanreflections relating to the position of religion within the games, which in turn results in discussions involving the position of religion in the world outside of the games. Moreover, although one could consider videogame monsters the objects of "informatic control" (Švelch 2013, 195), the *Halo* videogame franchise provides interesting examples of how monsters in videogames can be understood by players in a way that goes beyond mere game mechanics. A working hypothesis of this project is that a noteworthy aspect of this franchise is in the manner in which religiosity and monstrosity become intertwined – specifically in relation to the term religion – both within the narrative of the games, as well as fan-forum discourse.

Method

A videogame is not something which, once released, exists in a vacuum. A person

191

who plays videogames, i.e., a *player*, plays the games either by themselves or together with others, and they often discuss their favorite games with other players. As argued by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Michael Waltemathe and Xenia Zeiler (2014), when studying games, one should also consider different forms of player generated content (such forum discussions, fanart and the like). This is due to the simple reason that they constitute a part of the gamevironments (Zeiler 2018, 7). The gamevironment can be described as the larger media environment of the game, and it consists of both the technical environment of the game, the players, as well as the cultural environments of videogames and gaming. The theoretical framework itself takes an actor-centered approach, which is grounded in socio-constructivist mediatization theory. Player perceptions and player-generated content therefore arguably remain a fundamental aspect of the game itself even if they are not necessarily a part of the gameplay. For example, the developers of the game may have had certain ambitions regarding the game's narrative, or intentionally use certain imagery within the game. Yet, there is no certainty that these understandings will be mirrored or even recognized by the players (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, 21-23). Players will at times form their own readings of narratives, symbols, or characters in videogames, which are often beyond the control of the game developers (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, 14-17). These interpretations arguably become of interest as they constitute a part of the media environment of the game. Therefore, I would contend that it is of interest to study how, if at all, players and fans of specific games reflect upon themes presented within those games.

The research methodology of the study presented in this text consists of an examination of player perceptions in relation to the Covenant within the *Halo* franchise, wherein I examine a corpus of forum posts – gathered from the fan forum

<u>192</u>

r/halo – analyzed through the aid of thematic analysis. For this study I have collected content published between the years 2018 to 2023, in order to ascertain how fans in the last six years discuss these topics. I have chosen to demarcate my study to the Reddit subreddit r/halo, largely due to the size and popularity of the community. To find relevant threads and posts, I utilized SocialGrep, a web-based social analytics search tool, employing the keywords "religion" and "religious" to search comments and posts from the chosen fan-forum. The reason for choosing these specific years is simply that I want to study how these terms are discussed in the present day. This resulted in a corpus of 3.736 posts, which I have sorted and coded using thematic analysis. My approach to thematic analysis guided by the work of Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun (2017). Using this method, I argue that we can understand the way these fans view the role of religion in these games by recognizing recurring themes related to the application of these terms. In the present project, the primary focus is on the term *religion* and its use within fan-forum discussions. Questions involving the ethics of dealing with material of this sort, especially pertaining to the anonymity and integrity of the forum users, are ones I will need to reflect upon and address. For the time being, I have chosen not to mention specific users or include links to the posts in question. Looking ahead, expanding this project's scope to encompass additional related terms could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. It would be intriguing to investigate how other terms like spirituality are perceived in contrast.

Preliminary Results and Significance

It's important to highlight that most conversations in this forum revolve around gameplay and news, with discussions about religion forming only a minor part. However, a noteworthy discovery in my project is that when the term *religion* is mentioned, it is often in relation to the alien Covenant, where the purported negative attributes of *religion* are emphasized. Of all of the 3.736 posts examined that contained the words "religion" or "religious", the word "Covenant" was also used in 1.790 (47%) in the same posts. In most of the other posts, although the Covenant is not explicitly mentioned, there are indirect references to it – such as the use of the term "aliens" or the mention of alien non-player characters. There seems to be a consensus among fans that Halo as a franchise portrays religion in a critical light. Or at least what the fans in question categorize as *religion*, with fans arguing that the overall narrative of *Halo* is one which presents religion – or what they perceive to be certain aspects of religion, such as fanaticism, extremism, and blind faith - in a critical manner. Yet, there are nuanced perspectives to consider. For example, in a debate about whether the Halo video games are inherently anti-religious, one user noted: "I never got the idea that 'Religion Bad' was one of the main themes," "*Blind Faith* is bad seems more likely especially with Halo 2 and Arbiter's story" (Anon 5 2020). In a similar vein, another user contended that Halo 2 (2004), "in particular," was "meant as a critique for blind obedience to any organised religion, Christianity, Islam, etc. Included" (Anon 3 2022). Thus, it is not always religion in and of itself that is viewed negatively, but rather certain aspects attributed to religion. Nevertheless, in these forum discussions, the Covenant frequently serve as an illustration of the possible dangers connected to religious extremism or blind obedience to organized religion. As argued by Kathrin Trattner (2016), it is not uncommon for videogames to display simplistic and stereotypical portrayals within their narratives, and religious identity can serve as one such element of Othering. In this regard, Halo is not an outlier, and may serve as a representative example. Within the narrative of the Halo games up until the release of Halo 5: Guardians (2015), the Covenant are depicted as a faction that employs their religious beliefs to legitimize their efforts to annihilate humanity. In the games, their religious beliefs are portrayed as a core aspect of the Covenant's

identity, setting them apart from human forces as a distinct opposite. Given this portrayal, it's understandable that fans of the series have observed and noted these themes.

What is perhaps more significant, however, is that fans use the Covenant to draw parallels to various allegedly religious extremist groups in our reality. *Religious extremism* is defined here as violence committed in the name of religion by an individual or group (Appleby 2000). Some of the groups mentioned, like Al-Qaeda, were contemporary to the release of the first games, and others - such as ISIS - did not exist when the first games were developed. For instance, the comments from Anon 6 (2020) and Anon 7 (2022) offer interesting perspectives in this regard. Anon 6 (2020) characterized the remnants of the Covenant as "religious extremists, like ISIS. Basically space wort worty terrorists" and Anon 7 (2022) who stated that the Covenant "is basically al gaeda who believe that humanity (the United States) very existence is an offense to their perversion of religion." However, parallels are not only drawn between these aliens and Islamist groups. The Medieval Crusades and the Catholic church are similarly presented as real-world examples of the Covenant. "I see religion in general," as one forum user put it, "Christianity has its own history of Crusades and religious motivated wars and genocide" (Anon 2 2022), adding: "Plus the Hierarchs seem more like Popes" (Anon 2 2022). In general, the majority of the parallels drawn are between the Abrahamic religions, with Christianity and Islam being most commonly referenced. It is, however, much more common to refer to religion in a general sense without identifying any particular religious tradition. Nevertheless, a general trend is to associate the Covenant, and by extension religion, with extremism.

As argued by Jefferey Jerome Cohen (1996) in Monster Theory: Reading Culture,

<u>195</u>

196

depending on context, monsters can embody variety of different meanings. However, it a general trend is that a monster stands as a symbolic representation of the Other. This appears to be particularly true for the Covenant, as depicted in the games, where they represent a fanatically religious Other that poses a threat to the very existence of humankind. Within the study of videogame monsters a general focus has been placed on the function of these creatures within games, and how they can be understood in relation to the medium. This has for example been the central subject matter in the work of Jaroslav Švelch (2013, 2023), who at present is one of the leading scholars on the topic of videogames and monsters. Nonetheless, Švelch has also conducted research into player perceptions of monsters in video games. In one article, for instance, Švelch (2020) discusses player perceptions of the monster AI in the game Alien: Isolation (2014). His focus, however, is more on the players' perceptions of the monster's in-game behavior, rather than the symbolic meaning of the monster or its role within the narrative. Here there exists a considerable research gap in relation to how player reflections relating to videogame monsters can be connected to thoughts about religion, morality, and other existential concerns.

While I cannot speak for *Alien: Isolation* players, in my analysis of the forum posts from r/halo, it quickly became clear that numerous fans contemplate the role of the Covenant as antagonists within the games. These alien monsters are not seen merely as simple targets. While they function mechanically as such within the games, a typical role for non-player characters in FPS games (Trattner 2020), they are perceived as more than that by the players. Within the forum, fans often explore and debate the motivations and rationales behind the Covenant's actions. Certainly, there can be a sense of catharsis attained in battling hordes of monsters in a videogame (Geraci, Recine and Fox 2016), yet these monsters can also act as catalysts for deeper reflections on topics such as religion, faith, and religious extremism. Moreover, these encounters can potentially lead to transformations of one's own beliefs.

"Halo changed my life legitimately. I was raised in a religion I did not agree with but did not do anything to separate myself with it due to fear of what would happen if I did. Until I played Halo 2. Halo 2 genuinely inspired me to create my own beliefs, and not follow with blind faith just because it is all I [ever] knew before." (Anon 4 2022)

My current research suggests that a key characteristic of *Halo* fan discourse, in relation to the position of *religion*, is the association between religiosity and monstrosity. This is primarily due to the connections established between the alien Covenant and what players identify as religion. Examining specific fan forum posts reveals a notable demonization of certain purported aspects of religion. I would argue that these preliminary findings can be of interest in the larger discussion relating to the fields of videogames and religion, stereotypes and Othering within games, as well as the study of monsters in popular culture and media. Finally, I'd like to emphasize that even though some of the games discussed are nearly two decades old, discussions about them persist to this day. This ongoing engagement arguably underscores the enduring impact of *Halo* as a video game franchise and highlights the importance of continued research in this area.

References

Alien: Isolation, 2014. [video game] (multiplatform) Creative Assembly, Sega.

Anon 1, 2021. #5. Anonymized Post. *r/halo* [forum] October 2021. Accessed 20 May 2024.

Anon 2, 2022. #27. Anonymized Post. r/halo [forum] April 2022. Accessed 20 May

<u>197</u>

2024.

Anon 3, 2022. #34. Anonymized Post. *r/halo* [forum] November 2022. Accessed 20 May 2024.

Anon 4, 2022. #202. Anonymized Post. *r/halo* [forum] January 2022. Accessed 20 May 2024.

Anon 5, 2020. #26. Anonymized Post. *r/halo* [forum] August 2020. Accessed 20 May 2024.

Anon 6, 2020. #8. Anonymized Post. *r/halo* [forum] March 2020. Accessed 20 May 2024.

Anon 7, 2022. #26. Anonymized Post. *r/halo* [forum] April 2022. Accessed 20 May 2024.

Appleby, R. S., 2000. *The ambivalence of the sacred: Religion, violence, and reconciliation*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Clarke, V. and Braun, V., 2017. Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12, 297-298. DOI: <u>https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613</u>.

Cohen, J. J., ed., 1996. *Monster theory: Reading culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Geraci, R. M., Recine, N. and Fox, S., 2016. Grotesque gaming: The monstrous in

<u>198</u>

online worlds. *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, 5(2), 213-236. DOI: <u>https://doi.org/10.5325/preternature.5.2.0213</u>.

Halo: Combat Evolved, 2001. [video game] (Xbox, PC) Bungie, Microsoft Game Studios.

Halo 2, 2004. [video game] (Xbox, PC) Bungie, Microsoft Game Studios.

Halo 5: Guardians, 2015. [video game] (Xbox One) 343 Industries, Microsoft Studios.

Paulissen, J., 2018. The dark of the covenant: Christian imagery, fundamentalism, and the relationship between science and religion in the *Halo* video game series. *Religions*, 9(4). DOI: <u>https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9040126</u>.

Radde-Antweiler, K., Waltemathe, M. and Zeiler, X., 2014. Video gaming, Let's Plays, and religion: The relevance of researching gamevironments. *Gamevironments*, 1, 1-36. Available at <u>http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-00104169-12</u>, accessed 13 May 2024.

Švelch, J., 2013. Monsters by the numbers: Controlling monstrosity in video games. In: Levina, M. and Bui, D.-M. T., ed. *Monster culture in the 21st century: A reader*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 193-208.

Švelch, J., 2020. Should the monster play fair? Reception of artificial intelligence in *Alien: Isolation. Game Studies*, 20. Available at

https://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jaroslav_svelch, accessed 3 March 2024.

et a production of the second second

Švelch, J., 2023. *Player vs. monster: The making and breaking of video game monstrosity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Trattner, K., 2016. Religion, games, and othering: An intersectional approach. *Gamevironments*, 4, 24-60. Available at <u>http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-</u> <u>00105343-12</u>, accessed 13 May 2024.

Trattner, K., 2020. On enemy grounds: Representations of Islam and the Middle East in post-9/11 US-American digital games [PhD dissertation], Graz: University of Graz.

Zeiler, X., 2018. Level up: Methods for studying video games and religion. In: Zeiler, X., Šisler, V. and Radde-Antweiler, K., eds. *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*. New York: Routledge, 3-13.

<u>200</u>