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Special Issue

Peripheral Religions and Games

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Creating Cult Controversies. Peripheral Religions in the Video Game *Baldur's Gate 3*[i]

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the creation of peripheral religions, religions on the margins of society, in the video game *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023). The roleplaying game *Baldur's Gate 3* prominently features religious places, aesthetics, language, and narratives in its worldbuilding based on the classic TTRPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). In *Baldur's Gate 3*, *D&D*'s elaborate religious and mythological world is brought to life through a rich and interactive storyline and audiovisual design. It features a party on an adventure through temples, shrines, cults, rituals, religious quarrels, and divine blessings, while on their way through the fantasy continent of Faerûn to find a cure for a deadly infection. Religion is no mere background, but an essential part of the main quest, side quests and the design of the game. By studying the audio-visual design of the in-game peripheral religion Cult of the Absolute, I demonstrate how religions are positioned on the periphery of the religious landscape of the game. Building on theoretical considerations of religious landscape, peripheral religions, stereotypes, and religious contact situations, I explore the socio-spatial positioning explicated and implicated in the audio-visual design and narration in reference to perceptions of religion in the real world.

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In the roleplaying video game *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) religions occupy a central role.

In light of this special issue's focus on religions on the periphery, meaning religions

on the margins of society, this article is concerned with the socio-spatial positioning of peripheral religions within the game-immanent religious landscape. I take the so-called Cult of the Absolute (CotA) as an example. It occupies a central role in the game as a threat to the established social order. While *cult* already suggests a peripheral position within the religious landscape of *Baldur's Gate 3* (hereafter *BG3*), its position is cemented not by explicit ascriptions but through its audio-visual and narrative design that draws on established societal stereotypes of *cults*. These stereotypes are conveyed through the audio-visual and narrative portrayal of the CotA *implicitly*.

It is therefore necessary to study the implicit structures of the CotA's design. I do so by employing sequence analysis, a reconstructive hermeneutic method that uncovers implicit structures of meaning within the studied material. Due to its reconstructive focus, sequence analysis allows researchers to consider both the explicit, manifest meaning, as well as the implicit structures upon which video game design and narration are built.

Put differently, I will demonstrate how the audio-visual and narrative design of the CotA positions it *on the periphery* of the religious landscape of *BG3*, both explicitly and, more importantly, implicitly.

Theoretical Considerations

Religions in video games have been studied from different perspectives (Campbell and Grieve 2014, Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, 2015, 2016). Due to the changing conditions of religion and spirituality (Heelas 2011) and the crucial importance of the digital in our (deeply) mediatised

society (Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon 2019, Hepp 2019), the study of religion in video games not only focuses on game-immanent religions (Heidbrink et al. 2014), representations of religions in video games (e.g., Zeiler 2014, Masso 2016, Rautalahti 2018a), and religions as mechanical game elements (Šisler 2017), but also includes discussions of implicit religion (Waltemathe 2014, Asimos 2018), and religious worldbuilding (e.g., Geraci 2012, Gregory 2014). The study of religion in video games also extends to the players and their religious worldviews (e.g., Bainbridge 2013, de Wildt and Aupers 2018) and to the developer's perspectives (de Wildt 2023), among other topics.

Religions are an integral part of many video games' narrative, visual, ludic and audio design. In many cases, specifically in story-based games, religions appear as part of the in-game society and they play a central role in the game's narration, the game world's history, society, architecture, character design and game mechanics (Campbell and Grieve 2014, Rautalahti 2018b). Oftentimes, players are confronted not only with one, but with a variety of different religious traditions.

In *BG3*, there are many religions. These are usually centred around a deity, who has power over a specific domain. According to the *Player's Handbook* (2014), the version Larian Studios used as the basis for the rules in *BG3*, there are at least 30 widely known deities and more are locally venerated in the Forgotten Realms, in which *BG3* is set (Mearls and Crawford 2014, 239). According to an in-game book collection, there are at least 21 deities in *BG3*, including the plot-relevant Bhaal (god of murder), Loviatar (goddess of pain), Selûne (goddess of knowledge and the moon), Shar (goddess of loss and darkness), and Silvanus (god of wild nature) (Forgotten Realms Wiki n.d., Baldur's Gate Wiki n.d.). In addition to these, the player encounters deities and local traditions either through their followers, literature, or materiality (e.g., divine

weapons, shrines, temples etc.) including the goblinoid deity Maglubiyet, and the Absolute (goddess of the CotA) (Baldur's Gate Wiki n.d.).

In games like *BG3*, religions interact with each other and their contact situations contribute heavily to forming the religious landscape of the game world. In the following, I briefly present four concepts that make up my theoretical approach to studying the CotA's peripheral positioning in *BG3*. These concepts are the religious landscape, peripheral religions, the cult stereotype, and religious contact situations.

Religious Landscape

Definitions for religious landscape can be found in different disciplines, e.g., architecture, urban planning, (human) geography and sociology of religion (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2013, Olson, Hopkins and Kong 2013, Cecil 2020, Finke and Scheitle 2012, Knippenberg 2018). The term religious landscape has often been used arbitrarily. As Michael Pasquier (2013, 138) elucidates, many scholarly works fail to properly define what they mean when they use the term "landscape" and "religion" in combination. In order to understand how physical places are navigated in cultural practices, Pasquier (2013, 145) advises us to take the nature, climate, topography, geology, and infrastructure of them into consideration when defining landscape. This perspective is particularly crucial when studying the interrelations of religion and nature. In my paper, I use religious landscape to define the situatedness of religions in both a *social* and *material* way. The social situatedness of religions often manifests in the (built) landscape and similarly draws upon the natural landscape, but in order to study peripheral religions in *BG3*, the socio-spatial positioning of religions rather than their references to natural phenomena and scenery must be studied.

Against the backdrop of the spatial and material turn, which put emphasis on the materiality and spatial embeddedness of culture and religion (Warf and Arias 2009,

Hazard 2013, Vásquez 2011, Vásquez and Knott 2014), I understand the social, spatial, and material configurations of religions in a certain area as religious landscape that is created through religious contacts and in exchange with society. It is not fully distinguishable from the social landscape of said area, but rather a result of it. Put differently, I understand landscape as both the material and social situatedness of religions in exchange with each other and in relation to each other. That means understanding the religious landscape requires considering the expressions of the religious lives in manifest, material forms as much as the ideological debates, social conflicts, and members and their religious practice.

In *BG3*, there is a plethora of religions that are not isolated, but that all contribute to forming the religious landscape of *BG3*. While some religions like the worship of the moon goddess Selûne are more prominent and ubiquitously encountered within the game, other traditions like the Cult of Bhaal, revolving around Bhaal, the god of murder, are seen as divergent and problematic (Mearls and Crawford 2014, Gürtler and Tretter 2024).

Peripheral Religion

Religions like the CotA or the Cult of Bhaal appear on the fringes of *BG3* society. They exist in the periphery, even if they sometimes narratively take centre stage for the plot of *BG3*, as they become a questline or main foe in the game. Fred Kniss (2014, 361) understands peripheral religions as "religious groups or phenomena that may be part of the broad religious system but challenge mainstream currents in some significant way. [...] Peripheral religious phenomena challenge the dominant ideas and structures of the mainstream or core religion, producing change in the system as a whole". Kniss (2014, 361) differentiates "core" from "periphery", arguing that the core represents the mainstream concepts, ideas, and morale that is widely accepted in a given society, while the periphery challenges these mainstream ideas. Despite

their peripheral and outside position, Kniss shows how such groups can still significantly influence society.

Edward Shils (1975) differentiates between the *centre* and periphery rather than core and periphery. Cristían Parker (2024) refers to Shils (1975) in his works, when he denotes that since peripheral religions exist within the greater context of religious plurality, they "will always be seen as 'divergent', even when they are situated and reproduced immediately adjacent to the center and power" (Parker 2024). Oftentimes, peripheral religions are connected to colonialism, dependency, and social peripheries. This circumstance is also apparent e.g., in the contemporary German religious architectural discourse, where newly built mosques with so-called typical architecture are positioned in the outskirts of town, rather than in the centre. The centre is still often occupied by Christian architecture. However, secular buildings (skyscrapers) are increasingly dominating the skylines. This demonstrates how religions develop rivalries regarding architectural visibility, ground, and social acceptance through their building endeavours and positioning (Parker 2024, Löffler and Sharbat Dar 2022).

Indigenous or ethnic religions are often situated in the periphery (Parker 2024), and so are new religious movements (NRMs), an umbrella term that, in the real world, includes various newer religious movements such as Scientology or the Unification Church.[ii] What counts as an NRM is a question of definition, thus in this paper, I follow Barker (2015, 241-242), who introduces various characteristics emphasising the importance of first-generation believers. NRMs often have a charismatic leader and deploy a rather strong dichotomy between good and evil. Barker says that NRMs have often been subject to suspicion and antagonism. They are not isolated from society, but belong to society, even if they are confined to specific spaces within

society (Barker 2015, 242). Put differently, one must study the religious landscape of a society to understand how NRMs are socially positioned within it.

Placed, nurtured, and developed within the broader context of society, NRMs are peripheral religions, as they create alternative ways of understanding the world, the self, and other people (Wilson 1970). They often actively position themselves as divergent and alternative to the religious centre or core, the mainstream morale, and take up fringe spaces of the religious landscape. Peripheral religions like NRMs and other smaller religions can be found in *BG3*, and how they are integrated into the game is insightful as their depiction is related to how peripheral religions are viewed in our society (Feldt 2016).

The CotA is called a *cult* in-game, a term used to describe NRMs in the media (Barker 2015). This terminology already puts the CotA in a peripheral position. Moreover, the CotA is a newly formed religion that mainly consists of new followers, fulfilling another of Barker's criteria for NRMs. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how the CotA's portrayal in-game mirrors the societal understanding of cults in its narrative, audio-visual design, clearly positioning it as peripheral religion in distinction from other religions in *BG3*.

The Cult Stereotype

In video games, stereotypes are commonly used to depict several kinds of groups of people and communities, race and ethnicities, and religions (Mou and Peng 2009, Burgess et al. 2011, Podvalnyi 2020). The portrayal of peripheral religions, and more specifically, of NRMs in works of fiction heavily draws on real-world conceptions of diverging religions, prejudice and stereotypes of cults. Stereotypes are generalisations and simplifications. They connect a group of people with certain traits. They are often implicit and together with implicit attitudes towards certain

groups they inform implicit biases that foster discriminatory dynamics (Greenwald and Krieger 2006, 950). Stereotypes exist regarding all kinds of social groups, and thus there are stereotypes for religions that influence societal views of these religions and their interreligious relations with other religions (Bloomfield 1982, Svartvik and Wirén 2013, Göthling-Zimpel 2020).

The cult stereotype is widely used and is based on contemporaneous understandings of cults in society (Beckford 1978, Ginzburg 2008, Neal 2011). The cult stereotype is connected to violence, fraud, and sexual depravity (Neal 2011, 83). Aggressiveness, absolute power of the leaders, submission, and brainwashing are also part of it, as the "cult wars" show (Gallagher 2016). Stereotypes are shortcuts that help us understand the world, but they are often based on imaginations that shape our perception. "Emerging from specific cultural contexts and historical locations, stereotypes often reflect dimensions of the real world, but at the same time they provide us with seemingly simple and natural ways to make order out of chaos, give purpose to our beliefs, and create rationales for our behaviors" (Neal 2011, 84). Stereotyping has significant individual and cultural impact, specifically in situations of power dynamics, in which they influence how certain groups are viewed and treated. In boundary making processes, stereotypes are used to separate what is acceptable from the unacceptable (ibid.).

Neal summarises common elements of the cult stereotype in fictional television[iii] that position them at the margins of society, as divergent, problematic and dangerous, sometimes also as laughable. However, stereotypes are very powerful and inform public discourse tremendously. Examples are discourses on Scientology as a power-oriented group (Beit-Hallahmi 2003), discourses on Satanism as diverging and mysterious (Martin and Fine 2017), debates about danger and fear (Baffelli and

Reader 2012) as well as portrayals of various NRMs as dangerous or exotic (Zablocki and Robbins 2001, McCloud 2007).

Therefore, the cult stereotype shapes, reproduces, and perpetuates cultural understandings of acceptable and unacceptable religion, just as it contributes to drawing the line between legitimate and illegitimate religion. It can also influence the audience's perceptions of events (Neal 2011, 88-95). Since stereotypes reveal societal views and perceptions of cults, it is useful to investigate in what way this cult stereotype also applies to the CotA as peripheral religion by analysing the implicit structures that underlie the CotA's depiction.

Religious Contact Situations

Religious contact situations are "mutual encounters in the formation, development, and internal differentiation of religious traditions, assuming that the interconnections between self-perception and perception by the other, and of adaptation and demarcation are indispensable factors in the historical dynamics active in the religious field" (Stünkel 2025, 2). Encounters can happen between religious people, groups, through interactions with texts, architecture, or rituals. They are not characterised as conversations, but as complex moments of engagement, divergence, distinction, cooperation, or debate through different kind of media.

Religious contact situations are typical examples of how religions are established within our society (Stünkel 2025, 4), as interreligious and intrareligious exchange contribute to the making of religions, boundary making processes, and religious self-identification. Dogmas are formed and contested, perspectives are compared and inform identification with one or another. In the religious contact situation, religions become religions by distinguishing themselves from other religions. This dynamic process can be found in fantasy literature as well. Discussing George R. R. Martin's

famous series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-2011), Knut Stünkel (2024, 106-109) analyses both the synchronic interreligious and diachronic intrareligious contact situations of *made-up religions* in fantasy literature. His work demonstrates that even though fantasy religions are not real, they illustrate the complex dynamics and intricate interrelations that are caused by religious contacts in the real-world well. Video game religions in roleplaying games like *BG3* are influenced by the real world, but also draw on fantastical ideas, narrations, and myths (Feldt 2016, Cowan 2019). Therefore, video games allow similar insights into religious contact situations.

Summary of Theoretical Approach

Religions in video games are positioned in the religious landscape by relating religions to one another through creating narrative, aural and visual interactions between religions. These religious contact situations establish the religious centre and periphery through explicit narration, but also through implicit design choices that reproduce stereotypes. These stereotypes serve as shortcuts to position one religion to another through perceptions and ascriptions that are dominant in society. Against this theoretical backdrop, the religious contact situation is a helpful theoretical lens through which the audio-visual and narrative design of religions in *BG3* can be explored. How the contact situation is crafted and orchestrated furthermore is based on implicit structures and understandings of religions in our society.

These four perspectives serve as the theoretical approach to the analysis of how the audio-visual and narrative design of the CotA positions it as peripheral religion through stereotypes, and in religious contact situations. I use these concepts in a combinatory approach.

Methodological Remarks

To analyse the socio-spatial positioning of the CotA in *BG3*'s religious landscape through the investigation of implicit structures that are based on stereotypes, it is crucial to play the game, in order to know the visual and sound design and narrative of the game. Thus, I used a game-immanent approach, which Heidbrink et al. (2015, 74) also call "playing as method", which is similar to Oliver Steffen's (2017) *spielende Beobachtung*, observation through playing. Steffen (2017, 41-45) also suggests gathering adjacent data from the game, from online sources or other publications. Similarly, Heidbrink et al. (2015, 76) argue that documentation is crucial in properly conducting research of video game religions due to the complexity of the video game medium that includes audio, visuals, narrations, and gameplay. They suggest using, e.g., textual documentation, screenshots, and recordings.

For data evaluation, I use sequence analysis as a tool to analyse text and image material that was gathered in-game, because video games are multimedia phenomena that require a multilayered methodological approach (Heidbrink et al. 2015, 76). Sequence analysis as a method for text and, later, image analysis was first introduced within the framework of the so-called objective hermeneutics by Ulrich Oevermann and his colleagues from the field of sociopsychology. It is often used in qualitative social research but can also be applied to image and film (Oevermann 2004, 2013, 2014, Wernet 2014, Betz and Kirchner 2016, Reichertz and Engler 2021). In film studies, sequence analysis is mostly valued for its sequentiality, which allows the detailed analysis of certain scenes and sequences (Reichertz and Engler 2021, 46).

In the most basic terms, the goal of sequence analysis is to reconstruct latent, implicit social structures' meaning. It is used mostly in the context of social sciences to understand how interactions and communication are shaped by social order, context,

and constructs that are not always obvious. Volkhard Krech and Martin Radermacher (2021, 445) summarise the method as follows:

> "It seeks to reconstruct the latent structure of meaning of a protocol (e.g., transcribed data). These implicit structures or patterns are understood to be independent of individual and psychological, conscious understandings which are also described as explicit structures of meaning. The basic operations to uncover these structures are to proceed sequentially and to conduct 'context-free thought-experiments', ideally in a group of scholars well acquainted with the method."

Following Krech and Radermacher (2021, 446), I use sequence analysis without the broader theoretical framework of Oevermann and colleagues because the method is widely applicable without Oevermann's theorisation. The goal of sequence analysis is to analyse data, called protocols, in small portions to artificially slow down the analysis and avoid jumping to conclusions. In lieu of a contextual perspective right at the beginning of the analysis, e.g., a whole sentence or a whole picture, the research group advances in small steps to develop context variants to later explicate the implicit structure of meaning of the data. I also refer to Gregor J. Betz' and Babette Kirchner's (2016) image analysis, which combines sequence analysis and knowledge sociological hermeneutics with image analysis. Both analytical procedures, for text and image, work sequentially, which means the researcher covers up much of the data and leads the group through small sequences, uncovering new sequences, as they go (Betz and Kirchner 2016, 266-270). In the end, the sequence analysis is used to "reconstruct the meaningful structures of a case being represented in a protocol" (Krech and Radermacher 2021, 450). Accordingly, the researcher is able to understand what lies beyond the manifest meaning, e.g., with regard to undertones, connotations, and construction of meaning.

Transferred to the realm of video games, it is possible to reveal what structures of meaning, or social patterns, are at the basis of the created scenes, visuals, mechanics, and narratives. Although sequence analysis was developed for qualitative social research, it can be applied to other materials than interviews or photographs to reveal latent structures of meaning (Radermacher 2024, Andermann and Zizek 2022, Sharbat Dar 2021).

Through sequence analysis, it is possible to reveal what kind of social patterns and structures facilitate or possibly foster specific design choices, styles, and texts. Similarly to comics, video games often have a mixed interface (Caroux et al. 2015) with textual and image elements.[iv] In addition to that, there are sound and music, the haptics of controlling the games, etc.[v] In this paper, I focus on audio, text, and imagery in *BG3* due to space limitations. Instead of doing separate analyses for image and textual data, I analyse my data in a combinatory way, using mainly screenshots as protocols, which include text and imagery. The combinatory analysis is fruitful, because the analysis stays close to the medium, but still slows down the process of viewing and reading, which allows the researcher to develop separate and combined modes of reading. This methodological decision proved helpful in my own analysis (Sharbat Dar 2021) but was also similarly done by Andermann and Zizek (2022). For the sound analysis, I replayed the scenes multiple times and developed context variations during this time, following the principles of video sequence analysis (Reichertz and Engler 2021).

The proposed methodological approach aims at reconstructing the latent structures, or hidden social patterns, of the section of the video game in order to understand how the CotA is created as peripheral in the religious landscape of *BG3*. Combined with a thorough participant observation in-game and additional information, as

explicated below, I aim to show how the CotA's position in-game is visually, narratively, and aurally created in religious contact situations.

Methodical Procedure

Applying Heidbrink et al.'s playing as method and Steffen's *spielende Beobachtung*, I chose a specific section from Act I of *BG3*, in which multiple religious contact situations happen during a visit to the first headquarters of the CotA. Since *BG3* has a very dense and complex religious landscape which is illustrated well in the selected section, I focused on it for an in-depth analysis. This section consists of multiple scenes, which include the arrival at the goblin camp, a cut scene in which the goddess called the Absolute talks to the player's party, a meeting with a priestess of the Absolute, and an interaction with a prisoner who believes in another religion. This game section is situated in the Shattered Sanctum, a defiled temple of the goddess Selûne, one of the main deities from *D&D*. This scene is also one of the first player interactions with followers of the Absolute.

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I was able to decide on an appropriate game section and classify the events within the greater narrative of the game, because I know the game's story and questlines surrounding the CotA from playing the game. I conducted four hours of fieldwork replaying the section multiple times. I played the section in multiple sessions, I also reloaded some dialogue sequences and scenes to receive as much information as possible about certain religious interactions, e.g., different dialogue options, interactions, visuals, and storylines. Additionally, I wrote a detailed field diary documenting my observations, descriptions of the scenes, dialogues, and further information on characters, the audio-visual design, and the religious contact situations. Moreover, I took several screenshots of conversations, cut scenes, and the environment of the game. I primarily used these screenshots for my sequence analysis.

Both the imagery and the texts visible on these screenshots were analysed. For the text analysis, I also included an analysis of dialogues that I had recorded in my field diary. Lastly, I drew information from so-called fan wikis on *BG3* (Baldur's Gate Wiki) and *D&D* (Forgotten Realms Wiki). As these webpages are fan-made material, I always cross-referenced the game and the official *D&D* books to avoid any errors.

Background: *Baldur's Gate 3* and Religion

Based on the famed tabletop-roleplaying game (TTRPG) *D&D*, *BG3* is the third main game of the *Baldur's Gate* video game series.[vi] Designed as roleplaying game, the player takes on the role of an adventurer and plays through a complex story divided in three acts, fights in turn-based combat, and impactss major storylines through dialogue choices and interactions. *BG3* is known for queer storylines and more inclusive character creation options like having a non-binary player character (Meenen 2024). Recent studies have looked at AI recognition of religious elements in *BG3* (Gürtler and Tretter 2024), *BG3*'s religious diversity (Sharbat Dar 2023), digital narration (Nawrocki 2024), language and linguistic advantages (Cacho Corpuz 2024), and the emphasis on player's choice (Smith 2024).

In *BG3*, the player-character is infected with a tadpole, a small parasite that may turn them into a monstrous creature. On their quest to get rid of the unwelcome visitor, the player and their companions discover that they and others can hear a voice speaking to them. Over the course of the game, the player meets more non-player characters (NPCs) that think the voice belongs to a goddess called the Absolute. They learn of the Cult of the Absolute, which is feared by many residents in the area. The player either needs to confront, destroy, or (pretend to) join the CotA to deal with their tadpole.

BG3 is built on an existing canon of rules, narratives, characters, and ideologies from *D&D* in its 5th edition (Mearls and Crawford 2014). The game's developer, Larian Studios, added their own ideas, designs, and narratives that are partially explored in the official artbook of the game (Larian Studios 2023). *BG3* has a vivid religious landscape, which is an adaption and interpretation of religions in *D&D*. In the *D&D* multiverse, religions have always been substantial. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, the founders of *D&D*, were "devout Christians and were deliberately engaged in importing dimensions of Christian sense-making about the world into the fantasy frame of their creation" (Hollander 2021, 320, see also Laycock 2015).

From its inception, *D&D* included religious narratives and characters in its world building. Among these religious elements and characters were and still are deities, gods, religious traditions of different sorts, and playable character classes like the Cleric or Druid. Adrian Hermann (2024, 152) convincingly demonstrates how in *D&D* religions, theology, and the player class of the Cleric shifted and transformed over time. In earlier versions of the game, religions were inspired by mythological, historical (e.g., Greek, Egyptian) and fictional traditions, while later players were encouraged to create their own gods, which "corresponds to the increasing focus on fictional pantheons in published [*D&D*] campaign settings over the years."

In *D&D*, deities usually appear to the people in their avatar forms (Martin and Boyd 1996).[vii] In *BG3*, these avatars vary depending on the gods, the situation, and the deity's relationship to the player characters or NPCs. Within the game world of *BG3*, religion is a tangible and very real phenomenon, which evidently influences, e.g., the powers of Clerics through their divine magic. Religions give buffs to the players (e.g., after the player gives an offering), deities appear and interact with the player, and religious dogma, traditions, and quarrels are often referenced in the architecture, dialogues, and books one can find.

This does not mean, however, that the NPCs in *BG3 believe* in religion, nor that every religion is equally accepted within the game society. The worship of Shar (the goddess of secrecy) is often considered dangerous, and therefore when talking to a Cleric of Shar, their faith is addressed as problematic, since the player has the choice to criticise them for their devotion. Furthermore, religious contact situations occur when interacting with religious NPCs. In Act I, the player meets Brakkal, a goblin prisoner who follows his deity Maglubiyet. He criticises the other goblins for following the Absolute. The player can unlock a dialogue option about the realness of gods, to which the goblin replies: "Good on ya – don't matter to me if it's Shar, Gond, or my boy Maglubiyet; it's about tradition. This upstart [the Absolute] everyone's praisin' is gonna trample all over our gods and our faith… makes me sick" (*Baldur's Gate 3* 2023). This shows that some religions are accepted more openly than others, while in other situations, the worship of Shar or Maglubiyet is considered dangerous.

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Analysis: Creating Cult Controversies

How is the CotA, as an NRM, narratively, visually, and sonically integrated in the periphery of the religious landscape of *BG3*? The implicit structure of meaning in the analysed protocols can be outlined as follows: The CotA is portrayed as divergent, destructive, and mysterious in the religious landscape of *BG3* through narrative, visual, and auditive design. The CotA's depiction draws on real-world stereotypes and motives of NRMs and indigenous religions as peripheral religions, to distinguish them from established, central religions with long traditions that are depicted similarly to established religions in the real world (e.g., Islam, Buddhism, Christianity). Religious contact situations classify the CotA as NRM, situated in the periphery. Through the use of audiovisual effects such as purple swirls and distorted sounds, the CotA in

particular presents a counter-aesthetic to widely accepted and venerated religions such as the church of Selûne.

The CotA is clearly distinguished from other religions in the religious landscape of *BG3*, as its display, the narrative surrounding the group, and its auditive design diverges from established religions in many ways. One key element is the use of the defiled sanctum as meeting place for its followers. The former sanctum is situated in the mountains, somewhat secluded and hidden. The remaining structures of the defiled sanctum consist of massive stone towers, walls, and gates.

Upon entering the goblin camp, which is the name given to the former garden and entryway area, the destroyed, painted on, and partly unusable structures suggest that this place used to be a stronghold or important building of some sort. While it could have been a fortress, a castle, a graveyard, or a mansion, the destroyed statues of a woman lead to the idea that this place used to be connected to a specific person. Since the design seems to be inspired by medieval, European architecture, it is reasonable to assume that it requires a lot of work by many builders to construct such a durable fortress and craft detailed statues. The combination of the strong structures and the statue leads to the idea of it being a sort of sacred or sanctified space that is connected to an important figure. Later the player learns from a dialogue with a companion who is a Cleric of Shar, that the temple used to belong to Selûne, the goddess of the moon and knowledge, Shar's rival.

The destruction of the temple alongside the scribblings and the condition of the statues (one is broken, the other's face is hidden behind a totemic construct that displays the Absolute's symbol) lead to the idea that the place is either old and unused or was destroyed on purpose. The scribblings and the purposeful hiding and ruining of the statues of the woman allow the assumption that this former sacred

place was indeed demolished for a specific reason; possibly the desecration of it. This perfectly fits the social (real-world) stereotype of either divergent or new religions demolishing the places, artifacts, and structures of established groups to destroy their longstanding traditions to demonstrate dominance (Jurczyk et al. 2023). Against the background of iconoclasm and vandalism that are historically linked to religious quarrels and power struggles, the statues and the defiled sanctum already portray the CotA as a dominating, diverging group that overthrows old traditions narratively and literally, as it penetrates a sacred space to establish its own camp there. This is a religious contact situation that serves the purpose to position the CotA in the religious landscape through materiality. The CotA overpowers an old, powerful religion (church of Selûne), demarcating it as new, lacking tradition, violent and dangerous.

This audio-visual analysis of the scene is supported by the explicit comments of the developers. According to the official artbook, the defiled temple is explicitly described as a "once-grand structure that has since fallen to ruin under the watch of goblins, ogres, and cultists who call it home. But [...] you'll find an underlying softness in its architecture, inspired by the Romantic aesthetics of 19th-century gardens and the detailed stonework found in mediaeval European architecture" (Larian Studios 2023, 48). The statement highlights that Larian Studios intentionally implied that the building's ruination is a result of the CotA's domination.

The aspect of dominance and manipulation is also tied to the CotA's visual, narrative, and sonic portrayal in *BG3*. The followers present themselves as strong, brutal, and powerful, always working for and in hopes of receiving the favour of their goddess, the Absolute, and its worldly leaders such as Priestess Gut. The dialogues with the Absolute's followers and the player party reveal a very rough tone, colloquial language, and ideas of anti-establishment and overruling. Even when the Absolute's

voice speaks to the player directly in a cut scene, the whole scene is depicted as dominating.

Firstly, the voice of the Absolute is described as a "Disembodied Voice" (*Baldur's Gate* 2023) by the narration[viii] of the game, and, secondly, the aural dimension supports this uncertainty, as the voice seems to be coming from everywhere. It is a composite of many different voices, and in the cutscene, which appears to be a vision, the voice drowns out all other noise from the outside world. The only audible noise apart from the voice is a pulsing sound. Thirdly, the visuals of the scene demonstrate how meeting the Absolute is a very extraordinary, almost magical experience that pains and dominates the player party. In the scene, the player-character and their companions hold their heads, as the voice apparently speaks right into their minds. They look like they are in pain, as they squint their eyes, contort their faces, and fall to their knees. While the surroundings of the goblin camp fade away into black, the characters crawl on four legs. For the player, the whole scene is blurry except for the face of their character. This scene could mean that the characters fall into a slumber, or that their surroundings are destroyed. But due to the sudden shift, it is more reasonable to think of it as a vision they are having in their mind rather than a change of environment. The blur expands from the character's head in a circular motion, and the rest of their body is chromatically aberrated, leading to colour fringing. As the voice speaks and a vision appears to the player party that shows the black silhouette of three important figures, the so-called Chosen[ix] by the Absolute, the Chosen are bathed in a purple-coloured fog, setting them apart from the black background. As one of the three figures moves their hand toward the player character, which the player sees from behind, the hand reaches from the fog toward the character. The vision is stopped through the use of a prism, an artifact carried by a companion, that pulsates with red light, floating in the air with red swirls and light flurries emanating

from within. As the black background fades, the characters are able to get back up and talk about the situation.

The voice is interpreted as the Absolute's in the story. The visual design supports the mysterious source of the Absolute, as it presents not itself, but only its voice, in a void of dark. This could either mean that the characters only hear the Absolute's voice in their minds, or that the voice is so permeating that its point of origin is unknown. Visions are usually connected to something religious or supernatural but can also be a sign for insanity or drug use. In the context of the scene, specifically regarding the narration that takes place simultaneously, the vision is most likely a product of the Absolute's dominance and powerful influence over the player party. Moreover, the purple fog and the purple swirls that pulse from the character's head evoke associations of the meaning of the colour. Since games have some overlap with film, it is useful to look up the practise of special effects in films to understand the purple in this scene. Typically, as film researcher Patti Bellantoni (2012, 193-216) delineates, the colour purple is used in movies for a variety of things, including asexuality, illusion, fantasy, mysticality, things that are ominous or ethereal. In the context of the entire game, it became apparent that purple was most often used in scenes of magic that are not connected to deities or nature, but rather to what is called *arcane* magic in the *D&D* universe. As this magic is fantastical, and out of this world, the use of the same colour in this scene underscores the ominous, fantastical, and mystical nature of the vision, foreshadowing that what is called the goddess Absolute is not a deity, but a fantastical creature (an elder brain, a very powerful and ancient creature, that was ascribed godly status by its followers because of its magical abilities). Additionally, this exposes the CotA as a supposedly fake religion with a supposedly fake god, a stereotypical understanding of NRMs in our society.

The narrative dimension of this scene includes the Absolute's dominating way of speaking, as it continuously speaks through commands like "*Hear my voice. Obey my command*" (*Baldur's Gate 3* 2023). This creates the narrative tension that the Absolute demands the player to follow, as a servant, slave, or devotee. This dominating demeanour is repeated in the way that Priestess Gut holds a short sermon or lecture for a few followers, which the player can hear after entering the defiled sanctum. Priestess Gut, who is also the one that brands followers of the Absolute with the symbol of the CotA for easier recognition, speaks in a commanding voice to the goblins in front of her. She stands on a higher, shrine-like totemic structure, teaching the Absolute's doctrine to the goblins. In the dialogues that these NPCs have with each other and with the player party, the CotA is constructed narratively as a dominating force. The Absolute's followers need to obey the leaders at the camp; they are required to serve to be chosen by the Absolute. Due to the portrayal of the CotA as brutal and aggressive (destroying an inn, killing members of the Baldur's Gate city guard, and destroying a sacred space), it becomes apparent that the soteriology is closely connected to doing what the followers are told by the leaders.

Since "Faith is obedience!", as Priestess Gut declares in her speech, a specific power relationship is constructed narratively. The followers are mostly goblins who are already feared in the world of *BG3*, as they raid and kill. Goblins are designed based on a tribal stereotype (crude outfits, primitive structures, and totems).[x] They are considered to be cruel, seem to only follow the leaders, yearning to be chosen by demonstrating their devotion to the CotA through obedient behaviour. Instead of having autonomy and deciding their actions on their own, the followers of the CotA are constructed as subservient to their leaders. Service, the act of doing something for someone else, often from a lower position, is not alien in religious language (e.g., serving is a common term used in Christianity). Yet, in the context of the dominant leaders and the dominating way in which the goblins talk about the Absolute, the

followers are clearly required to do something in order to receive something, and if they do not, they suffer the consequences, which will be brutal. The dominating position of the leaders and the submissive position of the followers are connected to the portrayal of power dynamics in the cult stereotype in our society.

Another way in which the CotA is constructed as peripheral is in the religious contact situations that the player character encounters in the defiled sanctum. The player party meets the goblin Brakkal suspended from the ceiling and caught in a cage over a black abyss. In the dialogue, Brakkal's situation is narratively defined as being caused by his condemnation of the Absolute. He condemns the Absolute as an "upstart" (*Baldur's Gate 3* 2023) without tradition, merely a new and false god, which cannot compete with his god Maglubiyet, and other gods like Shar or Gond who have traditions and "kept us in line. That's wot a god's s'pposed to do [*sic*]" (*Baldur's Gate 3* 2023). This dialogue represents an interreligious contact situation, in which the CotA is compared to other religions with long traditions, and doctrines that supposedly give moral guidance. The comment on what gods are supposed to do furthermore underscores the understanding of deities as taking on a specific role in the followers' life. However, the Absolute does not fill this role appropriately. Instead of giving direction in life, the Absolute is described as a chaotic, worldly benefits-oriented deity that supports "feastin', fightin', and fornicatin'" (*Baldur's Gate 3* 2023) – all things that, in excess, are considered morally questionable or outright evil in our and *BG3*'s society. This takes up the cult stereotype implicitly. This situation is particularly noteworthy because Maglubiyet, Brakkal's god, is classified as "hungry for blood and conquest" (*Baldur's Gate 3* 2023) by the Narrator. Thus, even though the player (and player character) is informed about the evil nature of Maglubiyet, the Absolute is constructed as even worse because of being a new, not yet established goddess without noticeable or respectable tradition. Diverging from what religions are known for – a long history, providing a moral compass – the CotA's success is not due to its

doctrine or power, but caused by responding to amoral and carnal desires. This dialogue hints at discussions of appropriate behaviour, doctrine, and communal life in religions, and is also reminiscent of the condemnation of carnal desires by religions such as Christianity and Islam.

The CotA takes centre stage in the progression of the video game, as it grows to a threatening and dangerous group that could potentially destroy the city of Baldur's Gate and the whole continent. In the narrative of the game, the player can choose to lead, condemn, overrule, or overpower the CotA and its supposed goddess at the end of the game. The visuals that are used to depict the Absolute's followers are often connected to death (e.g., a skull as symbol), blood (red as colour of the symbol), dominance and cruelty (the CotA holds many innocent people as prisoners, kills many, and intends to turn people into monsters), as well as magic and illusion (use of the colour purple, visions, swirls). Alongside the narrative of a threatening and mysterious, dangerous, evil cult, the aural depiction of the CotA involves rough sounds, but also a constant pulsating as it mimics a living organism. There are many such examples in *BG3* that position the CotA as an NRM in the periphery – specifically in juxtaposition to more established, older, and bigger religious traditions like the worship of Shar, Selûne, or Helm.

In *BG3*, the CotA's portrayal takes up strings of the narratives surrounding NRMs and minority religions, as well as exaggerated or simplified indigenous traditions (e.g., the visual design of the goblins and their totems displayed everywhere in the defiled sanctum). The CotA's peripheral position in the landscape of *BG3* implicitly draws on the cult stereotype, as the CotA is supposed to create a sense of urgency, danger and mystery for the player. Although the player can join up with the Absolute, the evilness of the religion is obvious, and often addressed indirectly or directly in the game. Only by distinguishing the CotA from other religions, the game achieves the creation of a

diverse landscape of religions, in which some are central, socially accepted in the in-game society as valid religions, while others like the CotA are constructed as peripheral, outsiders, due to their brutality or their diverging alignment from what is often considered good within the world of *BG3*.[xi] Through the efficient use of the cult stereotype as a shortcut, the player is informed of the social position of the CotA even before learning of its evil doings over the course of the game. The use of stereotypes hence builds on the implicit understandings of NRMs as peripheral religions that are a threat to the established order.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I investigated how in the video game *BG3*, the CotA is constructed as an NRM and as peripheral religion within the religious landscape of the game. By analysing the audio-visual and narrative design of the CotA with a game-immanent approach and with sequence analysis, I reconstructed the socio-spatial positioning of it as situated in the periphery of the religious landscape of *BG3*. The analysis of its design in religious contact situations with other diegetic religions demonstrates that the CotA is designed as disruptive, dominating and diverging from common traditions. Explicitly and implicitly, the CotA's place is at the margins of *BG3* society as an opponent and countermovement to established religions and as opponent. Its portrayal is intended to construct it as an NRM. This portrayal is informed by the cult stereotype, which mirrors societal understanding of so-called cults in our world, including corresponding debates about NRMs.

The analysis was based on dialogues, screenshots and in-game observation. Due to the complexity of the medium video game, the design of peripheral religions in *BG3* also draws on music and haptics to bring the religious landscape to life. Although my

approach includes image, aural and text analysis, the lack of analysis of the musical and haptic dimensions is problematic and should be studied more thoroughly at another time.

With the analysis of peripheral religions through an investigation of the religious landscape, religious contact situations and stereotypes, I point to the crucial importance of the religious landscape as a theoretical tool with which the portrayal of religions can be analysed in video games. Not only can the relation of religions in contact situations be traced to understand narratives in video games, but the analysis of implicit structures that facilitate portrayals of religions can be investigated and related to how we perceive and understand religion. Through the analysis of in-game religions, researchers can reconstruct societal understandings and stereotypes of religion that are present at a certain time in our society.

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[i] Thanks to the special issue editors, the anonymous reviewer, as well as Kai Maaßen, Mareike Ritter, and Tom Grießner for the comments on previous versions that greatly improved the article.

[ii] Trying to avoid the negatively connotated term *cult* when writing about these groups, researchers started to use New Religious Movements (NRMs) instead. But the term NRM has also been fiercely debated in scholarly discourse over decades, creating uncertainty about what groups may or may not fall under this category (Barker 2015, 237, Laycock 2022, 14-15).

[iii] The common elements are: clothing (that signifies the divergence from normal to abnormal); setting (that separates cultic ritual from daily life); communal living; delusional beliefs; and visibility (Neal 2011, 88-93).

[iv] I was inspired to use sequence analysis by my colleagues Anna Kira Hippert and Jessica Wagner who invited me to participate in their analytical sessions on video games.

[v] There is, for instance, the possibility of recording yourself playing the game and then using a video hermeneutical analysis (Joller, Raab, and Stanisavljevic 2016). However, due to the length of such an analysis, I chose to instead use image and text analysis.

[vi] There are several *Baldur's Gate* games that were developed by BioWare and published by Interplay Entertainment since 1998. Aside from the *Baldur's Gate* series, *D&D* was adopted in many other video games as well.

[vii] In *D&D*, deities (also called powers in *D&D* 2nd edition) use avatars to enter the realms. According to the 1996 book *Faith & Avatars*, an avatar is a "manifestation of a deity" that "is not nearly as powerful as a power and is merely a projection of a deity's power" (Martin and Boyd 1996).

[viii] As *BG3* simulates a *D&D* tabletop roleplaying game scenario, the so-called game or dungeon master is played by the Narrator, a voice that guides the player through the story, gives background information, and delineates scenery, characters, story events.

[ix] The Chosen are here understood as the Absolute's honoured fighters and leaders that fulfil Her vision.

[x] The portrayal of the goblins as the main followers of the Absolute uses stereotypes of tribal cultures and indigenous people (e.g., Rath 1989, Crepelle 2021), juxtaposing the CotA not only to other established religions, but the goblins as an ethnic group to others (humans, elves etc.) with advanced civilisation. This portrayal is highly problematic, however, common in the world of *D&D*, and fantasy, for that matter (Strzelczyk 2022, 2024). In the official artbook, Larian Studios commented on the tribes of the Absolute that can be found all over the defiled sanctum: "Embellished with bones, wooden pikes, and bloodstained palm prints that adorn its war-like banners, the ruined temple is a place for those devoted to the Absolute to congregate in worship and where the unchosen are sentenced to a grim and bloody end" (Larian Studios 2023, 51).

[xi] There are many examples of peripheral religions in *BG3* that cannot all be named here. Not all portrayals are necessarily evil or dangerous, but there are examples that present a group as joke, or in a funny way. One example is the worship of BOOOAL by the Kuo-toa people, a fish people that are deceived by a fey creature that acts as if it were a god. Even though the situation can escalate into a brutal fight quickly, the Kuo-toa people and their rituals are designed in a funny manner, implicitly using the cult stereotype as a laughable group.