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Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat.
Paradise Lost: John Milton (1674)

In the *Far Cry 5* mission, *Paradise Lost* (2018), the player wakes in a misty dream scene induced by the ingame drug Bliss. The screen is muted with a misty light green fog, and sparkly hallucinogenic traces float by. A spiritually creepy instrumental version of the song "Help me Faith" echoes softly in the background (Romer 2018). In front of the player is an elaborate black wrought-iron gate decorated with the symbol for The Project at Eden's Gate, the doomsday cult at the center of the game. The gate sits all alone with no accompanying fence. With the sound of rusty hinges, the gate swings open of its own accord. Faith Seed, the sub-boss of this region, says, in a sweet but scolding tone: "Now you can see what we can do" (*Far Cry 5* 2018). The controller shakes. An electronic beat marks the start of a new mission, and the title "Paradise Lost" appears on the screen, and Faith beckons: "Come to me and I'll show you a world you never dreamed of" (*Far Cry 5* 2018).

What theoretical lens should *gameenvironments* researchers use to investigate the significance of such things as the drug Bliss, the sub-boss Faith Seed, and the theme of cult? If one only focuses on the content of a game one might assume that the analytic category of religion would be best. Actual gameplay and players' own reactions, however, make evident that religion misses the mark. This article offers an alternative model and argues that a better way to investigate *gameenvironments* (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014) is the analytic category of *value formations*. We theorize value as a second order category (Smith 1988) used to investigate what actors find worthy or unworthy in a specific social field. Therefore,

While moral decision making in and via games has attracted some attention in academic circles lately,ⁱ our *value formations* approach differs in two ways. First, we are concerned with how value occurs during times of cultural ferment, such as our own. Accordingly, we can see that the concept of value currently plays an important role in politics, particularly in the rise of populism. Ironically, however, just when its use as an analytic category could be most helpful, as a theoretical concept value as an analytic category has been all but forgotten (Joas 2000, 134, 161). Second, and what we will make evident in this article, is that *value formations* is a better analytic concept than religion to understand how cultural meanings are constituted in *gameenvironments*. As a broader analytical concept, *value formations* offers the possibility to go beyond simply researching content and explicit discussions of religion by gamers, and to include the more subtle way players respond to, are provoked by, and speak about religion within *gameenvironments*.

As Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler have made evident, even if religion as a topic is missing in gamers' discussions, religious content often "intensively stimulates the discussion of ethical and moral behavior and, as such, of value formations" (2014, 25). In short, using *value formations* as an analytic category, allows researchers to widen our lens beyond simply ingame religious content, beyond just gamers, to the impact of religion on the larger cultural and social environment of games (Zeiler 2018, 18).

Value Formations. A Working Definition

Values are closely connected with worthwhileness (and unworthiness), with what is regarded as good (or bad), beautiful (or ugly), right (and wrong), and typical (or deviant). We approach the concept of value as a second order analytic term which

Since its genesis in the late 19th century, value’s genealogy can be divided into normative and critical approaches. The normative approach seeks the “ultimate source of value,” and can be seen most clearly in the field of Axiology (Bush 2019, 2; Findlay 1970, 1). This normative concept of value is implied, if not explicit, in many early sociological studies (von Mering 1961, 5). The critical conceptions of value had become conceptual common coin by the early 1930’s, and its use was key to the projects of such diverse thinkers as the radical German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and American pragmatist William James. By the 1930’s, the normative concept of value fell out of favor (Joas 2000, 12). A further wave of its use, however, occurs in the early 1970’s, as scholars attempted to stay afloat in the turbulence of the late 1960’s. For example, a politically liberal use of the normative approach occurs in such work as the Polish-American social psychologist Milton Rokeach’s *The Nature of Human Values* (1973). A conservative use of the concept of value can be seen from the same period in sources such as *Value and Valuation: Axiological Studies in Honor of Robert S. Hartman* (Davis 1972). The critical value approach is also still with us camouflaged under theories of identity and subject formation (Taylor 1989). It is in these moral spaces involved in identity formations that the current value maps are most readily apparent.

Value Formations in Relation to Ethics, Aesthetics, and Norms

Because they can be understood as the goal as well as outcomes of norms that are given to reach the *good*, the first way a value can be analyzed as worthy is through its being ethically right or wrong. *Ethics*, which derives from the Greek “*ēthikós*”, “relating to one’s character,” which in term derives from *ēthos*, which can be translated as habit, convention or custom. As is first seen in Aristotle, where it indicated the structured reflection on such habits. The presumption of ethics as a philosophical concept is “the

games? Is there a connection between fun and morals? The aesthetics of games have often been expressed with the somewhat ambiguous term *gameplay*, the overall experience of playing a video game. Because of the importance of gameplay, it is no surprise then that game studies have tried to understand the nature of these aesthetic experiences and judgments, and they have also wanted to know whether these experiences and judgments were legitimate.

The third way to analyze values in *gameviroments* is through the normal and deviant. Largely, norms are non-legally binding but nevertheless widely accepted and expected which a community or society has negotiated over long periods of time, and essentially agreed upon to regulate social life. That is, norms have historically grown and been transmitted, often over the *longue durée*, to become standardized expectations of social behavior. Not following social norms usually results in disapproval, or even sanctions. By definition, norms differ in various communities and societies. Norms are considered as usual, even typical or standard arrangements and behavior patterns by large parts of a group or society. Not surprisingly, norms are related to social hierarchies – for example, higher social classes have more influence on what is considered normative. Norms are constantly renegotiated. Given their importance for social ordering, norms have been the focus of study especially in Social Sciences including Anthropology (e.g., Geertz 1973, Durkheim 1958, Parsons 1937). Functioning as social ordering devices and tools, norms exert (moral, ethical) pressure on individuals. If ethics is the purposive frame to conceptualize the good or bad doing of humans, norms can be seen as guidelines for humans to be able to have good behavior. Values are then the positive guiding principles, based on these norms.

As cultural scientists interested in video games, we understand our academic work not as determining what is universally good, right, beautiful or even normal, but as

investigating how, within particular *gamevironments*, *value formations* exert social force and are constituted by actors. We maintain that a value's force – how it attracts and repels – is fueled by its perceived ethical, aesthetic and normative worthiness within a particular social field. As an analytic term, then, value does not replace these three categories but rather allows researchers to understand how actors influence and are influenced by them. In other words, values are the positive and negatively charged social forces, and ethics, aesthetics, and norms are ways to describe and understand their cultural labor and social force. By using the concept of *value formations*, we are able to evaluate how values are (re)defined and why, and furthermore, how this is connected to religion.

Value Formations in Relation to Religion

The main thrust of this article is that *value formations*, rather than religion, is a better way to understand how meaning in *gamevironments* is generated and reflected, and how specific these are connected to broader social and cultural discourses. Furthermore, it addresses how values are connected to religion in gaming. In recent years, much ink has been spilled (or at least keyboards clicked) on the relation between religion and video gaming. Early studies often dealt with the importance, relevance, and legitimization of this research (for a detailed literature review, see Campbell and Grieve 2014, Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). Other studies explored how religion and video games interacted: gaming as religion (Wagner 2012), religious gamers (e.g., Luft 2014) or religious narratives within video games (e.g., Geraci 2014). The remaining studies focused on specific case studies (e.g., Šisler 2009, Zeiler 2014), and possible systematizations of the field or on the reflection on methods (Šisler, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2018).

We ourselves played a large part in these pioneering studies. Yet, for two reasons these earlier studies were never completely intellectually palatable, and left us and others still hungry for both understanding and explanation. The main point, which we will address more below, is that gamers almost never discuss religion themselves, and do so only hesitantly if prodded by researchers. In *gamevironments* religion is simply not that important to the gamers and other actors, and they also seem hesitant to speak about it in public. Second, as we argue here, the relation between religion and games begs the question of what exactly religion consists. As any student of religion soon learns, defining religion is quite complicated because there are as many definitions as there are stars in the sky (or at least professors in the academy). Whereas some definitions refer to discourses, institutions, and practices that make claims about supernatural realities, others such as Jonathan Z. Smith stress: "there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study" (1988, xxii). While Smith's approach is rhetorically hyperbolic (the invention of concepts are never made in a cultural vacuum), he is of course right in that the concept of religion is historically and geographically dependent, as it stemmed from 19th century European society.

In other words, as scholars of religion and video games, when we talk about religion: *what are we actually studying?* From our perspective, today's research takes three main approaches, all of which dilute the category of religion to such a degree that it has little to no actual analytic power. The first approach refuses to define religion at all, and seems to operate with the understanding that *when we see religion we know what it is*. Just describe, do not analyze. Such undefined unscientific use of the concept cannot help but reinscribe biases. The second approach presupposes religion as a universal phenomenon, a *conditio humana*, that in its basic structure is the same worldwide and for every part of every human life. This includes *gamevironments*. The

This brings us to the crux of the problem, the absence of religion in *gameenvironments*. Obviously, in some games we find important examples of religious *topoi*, symbols and narratives, but no actual religious practice. What does that mean – especially regarding the huge and growing number of academic books and articles? Not surprisingly, the majority of research on religion and video gaming is focused on game-immanent narratives. However, gamer-related studies show that these elements are not necessarily recognized as religious by the gamers themselves (e.g., Zeiler 2018 and Radde-Antweiler 2018a). A possible way of explaining these phenomena is to refer to Luckman’s concept of invisible religion (Luckmann 1967), which refers to the de-institutionalization of religion and links religion to the individuals’ constitution of meaning in relation to transcendence. In addition, even Bailey’s concept (Bailey 1983) of implicit religion seems to fit, because these phenomena refer to actors’ commitment, which can be defined as religious or not by them. Both concepts such as others have been used to handle phenomena that appear to be like religion, but are not religion, or the other way around.

The *Gameenvironment* of *Far Cry 5*’s Mission *Paradise Lost*. Three Case Studies

How can *value formations* help researchers understand how religion plays into video gaming and allows for a broader and overarching perspective that shows the interrelation between religion and other values? Now that we have named our case study, and sketched a theory of *value formations*, we will next turn to analyzing *value formations* in a specific *gameenvironment*. Our analysis consists of three case studies, which while they may all differ in methodological approach, all analyze the same *Far Cry 5* Mission – *Paradise Lost*. The first case study consists of a ludographic closeplay, which critically analyzes the mission by focusing on significant details of the *Far Cry*

all-white uniforms, with filthy face-masks. Angels can be recognized by the Bliss vapors that float over their heads, as well as by their use of only what is called melee equipment, such as shovels and hoes. They stumble along, zombie-like, and when attacking opponents by turns mumble incoherently and scream loudly. Narratively, after you have engaged enough forces in the Henbane River region, you will become surrounded by Bliss and pass out. Again, and again at key points you will be transported to this hazy-heavenly bliss meadow. Audibly the value of Bliss is played out through differently haunting versions of songs, the chief one being *Amazing Grace*, a Christian hymn first published in 1779. Bliss also is displayed through the heavy use of reverb. Visually, Bliss is depicted in the white mist, fades to white, chromatic disturbances and white tracers. Bliss is also marked haptically, with liminal shaking of the controller that marks when you enter in and out of a bliss state. Finally, when in the Bliss, gameplay is often interrupted with cutscenes and is accompanied by sluggish control of your character. In contrast to a research focus on religion, the focus on *value formations* shows that bliss as a technique refers implicitly to religion, but in a judgmental, and ultimately negative, way.

Case Study 2. Value Formations Investigated in Far Cry 5's Let's Play Comments

This second case study uses content analysis to discuss *value formations* related to the *Far Cry 5* Mission *Paradise Lost*, by analyzing the comments of YouTube Let's Plays. Content analysis is a research method that aims to understand how language is used by studying human communication in relation to specific social contexts. A Let's Play is a player-created gaming video that shows a playthrough of a video game, most often including a narration by the player. Let's Plays are as much about the gamer as they are about the game. Using the coding comments for gaming videos Let's Plays method (Zeiler 2018), this section offers a structured framework for studying the immediate vicinity of gamer-generated content. By applying this

qualitative method, the analysis reveals what the commenters themselves deem noteworthy and what themes trigger debates among the persons who watch Let's Plays: instead of focusing on the rather dominant theme of religion in this mission's game narrative and aesthetics, commenters discuss specific ethical and moral choices.

The aim is to decipher the central themes and values discussed in our data sample, based on the research questions: What do the commenters choose to share? What themes do they discuss? The sample for this study was collected on 28 January 2020, by entering into the YouTube search engine "far cry 5 let's play paradise lost." The country setting because of the researcher's (Xenia Zeiler's) geographical location at the time of taking the sample was Finland, the preferred language the author's mother tongue German, the search words were given in English. For acquiring the sample material, the first 200 shows of Let's Plays were consulted (these practically also included some gaming videos titled Walkthrough and Playthrough; their language was almost exclusively English). Out of these, all Let's Plays with more than 10 comments were selected, leading to a sample of four English and one Hindi Let's Plays and their comments (with the Hindi language Let's Play likely being a result of my search history patterns on YouTube). For the sake of this study, language consistency was required and thus all four English videos and their comments formed the final sample. This happened to create a sample whose content was diverse in high and low subscriber numbers and in watcher and commenter numbers, for example, the comments numbers were very diverse: 709 (sample 1); 15 (sample 2); 21 (sample 3); 58 (sample 4).

The majority of the Let's Plays were uploaded very soon after *Far Cry 5's* 2018 release. The views and comments of the respective Let's Plays ranged from 397,425 views with 709 comments (sample 1, titled *FAR CRY 5 Walkthrough Gameplay Part 43 – FAITH*

SEED BOSS (PS4 Pro), uploaded by the very popular Let's Player theRadBrad who has more than 11 million subscribers) over 31,154 views and 58 comments (sample 4, titled FAR CRY 5 Gameplay Walkthrough Part 20 [1080p HD Xbox One X] – No Commentary, uploaded by MKIceAndFire with 1.93 million subscribers) and 11,254 views with 21 comments (sample 3, titled Far Cry 5 – Paradise Lost – Kill Faith Seed – Boss Fight, uploaded by Trophygamers with 33,500 subscribers), to 12,091 views with 15 comments (sample 2, titled Far Cry 5 w/ Jericho – Part 21 "PARADISE LOST" (Gameplay/Walkthrough), uploaded by GoldGlove Let's Plays with 450,000 subscribers).

The contextualization of the comments showed that the entire sample consisted of 803 comments (exclusively in English), and that in terms of the time frame, date and frequency of the comments, the last comment was posted two months before archiving the sample and that the vast majority of all comments was posted soon after the respective Let's Play uploads, that is 12 months or more before archiving the sample. Particularities and characteristics of the sample instantly revealed a particular focus, namely the sub-boss, Faith Seed. This was similar to the findings from investigating the gameplay. One striking difference was how the Let's Player (TheRad)Brad was valued by commenters. When it comes to the commenters, the contextualization showed that commenters numbers were almost identical with comments numbers.

I began the analysis with *in vivo coding* (for coding based analyses, see, e.g., Saldaña 2016), the practice of labeling the key terms as verbally uttered in the data. The first 15 *in vivo* codes of the entire sample were, in this order: Faith(-'s, - Seed) (mentioned 103 times in the sample); game(-s, -r, -ing, -play) (68); (TheRad)Brad (56); vid(-eo, -eos) (33); kill(-ed,-ing, -s) (29); boss + boss fight (26); lov(-e,-ing) (25); die(-s,-d) (19);

end(-s, -ing) (18); play(-er, -ed, -ing), Far Cry (3, 4, 5), drug(-s, -ged) (each mentioned 17 times); bliss and sad(-dest) (each mentioned 14 times); and great (12). Other often mentioned *in vivo* codes included (game) character(-s) (11) and (game) story (10), as well as many terms denoting praise and enthusiasm (all in a context relating the term to either the game character Faith, the Let's Players and their gameplay skills), such as amazing (10), good and awesome (both 9).

1.	this LP related (e.g., Let's Players name, gamer, YouTuber, video, play(-ing,-ed), watch(-ing, -ed), channel)
2.	this game's mission character names (Faith, very seldom Jacob, Joseph, father)
3.	this game's mission related, excl. game character names (e.g., mission, boss + boss fight, bliss, end(-ing), drug(s), kill(-ing, -ed), die/dying, explosives)
4.	emotion/evaluation (e.g., lov(-e,-ing), sad, awesome, crazy, great, feel bad for, sorry)
5.	games in general (e.g., other game's names, story, PS4)

Table 1. Axial codes of the sample.

Out of all *in vivo* codes, I deduced the axial codes of the sample (table 1). Axial coding involves combining *in vivo* codes together in order to reveal higher order categories, which ground participants' voices within the collected data. Five categories were selected for this sample. Out of these, I collected the final code for this case study (derived by repeatedly reviewing and relating the axial codes); it is *enthusiasm*. Enthusiasm is the overarching theme which regards most comments and includes enthusiasm for the main game character of this game episode (Faith), for a Let's Player (TheRadBrad), the particular Let's Play (gameplay etc.), games in general, and so on. Both the religious and values-related content, which are intensively elaborated in the narrative, are infrequently reflected in the comments. Nevertheless, out of the two, value-related content is much more often talked about, and in more detail (while religion is almost nowhere commented on). In more detail and for example, this

sample included repeated long comments on drug consumption and the morality of killing (here: related to the game character Faith). The game narrative thus leads to repeated comments on the overall ethics of drugging a person without their consent, of misusing drugs to control a person and of killing, even in self-defense. However, while the game narrative clearly places all these happenings in a religious context, not one comment in the entire sample does so.

That is, religion plays no role at all as a theme in the comments, even though the game narrative would seem to strongly invite this – making religion a less helpful analytical category than *value formations* in order to analyze a sample as presented here. *Value formations*, on the other hand, do very well provide the context to understand what is on the commenters’ mind, as the comments rather explicitly discuss the overall value of self-determination and the right to make own decisions in life (for example, they uniformly condemn Faith’s drugging by her father), as well as the overall value of life (for example, they repeatedly debate on whether it is justified to kill Faith). These direct references to and debates about values (above other concepts which might be understood as part of implicit religion) again exemplify why the category of *value formations* excels in researching many *gameenvironments*.

Case Study 3. Value Formations on the Steam Platform

As we have seen in the previous two sections, games present values, evoke values in players, as well as provoke discussion of values among gamers. Such discussions can be analyzed on internet platforms where gamers discuss game-relevant content. This section investigates gamer discussion on Steam, a gaming service created in 2003 by Valve. Recent statistics show that in 2019, Steam had more than one billion accounts and, at any one time, 14 million concurrent users were online (Arif 2019, Gough 2019). Steam offers the possibility to download and upkeep games, distribute games and

discussions with characteristics such as *white, supremacy* or *right-wing* republicans. These presentations trigger heated discussions on the *right* or *wrong* presentation of Christianity.

Discourse analysis made clear that Christianity is mostly understood as *us*, especially if the discussion concerns Christianity being shown as a *sect, cult*, and *fundamentalism*, e.g. "What will stay in most of the player's head will be that a) the cultists are Christians b) the Christian religion is dangerous because cultists. That's how propaganda works..." (PXC20172605_34). This was often contrasted to how Islam (or also Russians) were seen as obvious game-immanent enemies. These discussions on the right or wrong representation of Christianity show that the gamers have certain values that constitute the criteria for this evaluation, namely good or bad religions. As in the case of the game-immanent values, we can observe an underlying distinction between religions that are described as worthy or unworthy, namely ethically *right* or *wrong*. For example, the *Far Cry 5's* religion – the so-called cult or sect Project at Eden's Gate – in the game is judged as a bad religion because of their followers' unethical behavior. Interestingly in contrast to the game-immanent values, in the majority of the discussions there is no explicit attribution of *bad religion* to sects or cults, but more broadly to Christianity – sometimes restricted to American Christianity – or sometimes to religion in general. Therefore, the distinction between sects/cults in contrast to Christian denominations is not transferred into the Steam discussion.

Furthermore, these values are closely linked to politics. Specific religious traditions as well as particular political strands and parties are directly equated, in the majority of the discussions also relate to specific ways of thinking and acting towards people or population groups as well as to nationalism, e.g. "Also a conservative, this game just

gives liberals the satisfaction of killing their fellow Americans that don't share their political views (...) And they call themselves 'tolerant'" (TTX20182603_55). The analysis shows that the value of *not right* or *bad* is linked to a certain religious group. However, at second glance, it can be observed that religion, politics, nationalism, and racism are equated. The interesting question now is, whether the discussion really concerns religion as such (that would be the result from an approach focusing solely on religion), or if religion is used as label or characteristic for something bigger, an overall criticism of American nationality, whose characteristics also include religion, nationalism, a specific political and racist attitude etc. Using a broader perspective on *values formations* we are able to show how certain values that are sometimes implicitly or explicitly connected to religion or not are interrelated.

Conclusion

This article has made evident that it is time for researchers of religion and *gamevironments* to expand their initial and in hindsight possibly naïve use of the category of religion by employing instead the theoretical category of *value formations*. Our argument has been based on an analysis of the *Far Cry 5* mission, *Paradise Lost*. The name of this mission echoes Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In this poem, Milton argues that humans can only become mature when they lose the myth of paradise. "With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man / Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat" (1674). Similarly, for our field to further mature, we must lose our attachment to the category of religion. Ironically, our attachment to the theoretical category of religion, might actually be keeping us from explaining and understanding how religion operates in *gamevironments*. While religion might work for interpreting explicit religious elements in the content of a video game, it misses the majority of underlying or implicit religious topics within the game as well as in gameplay and

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