

SACRED SPACE EVADERS
RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY IN GAMING JOURNALISM

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The research that follows is inspired by daughters. Growing up as a child of the 1980s, video games were not uncommon. But in the world my daughters are growing up in, games are the air they will breathe. Will these games create a world of greater inclusivity? Or let the usual suspects retain their power? What role will journalism play? I'd say right now that there are no clear answers. May this research help us ask the right questions.

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Sacred Space Evaders: Religious Hegemony in Gaming Journalism

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Abstract

In the modernist paradigm, the news is assumed to be secular, or rather, devoid of religious content. Recent research implies that in actuality, journalism contains latent religious values (Silk, 1995; Underwood, 2002). This research aims to challenge the modernist paradigm by uncovering the religious hegemony operating in a niche area of journalism. This research explores the nature and operation of religious hegemony in gaming journalism through in-depth interviews with gaming journalists (n=17) and a narrative framing textual analysis of gaming journalism texts from 1993 and 2013 (n=116). Gaming journalism is a valuable resource for such research, in that much of digital gaming news still originates from outside of the American paradigm. Thus reporting on such content reveals normative conceptions about what American journalism considers normal and acceptable (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998). By looking at the development of gaming journalism over a 20-year period, it is also possible to explore the extent to which a paradigm shift has taken place (Kuhn, 1996). This study makes a case that Modernist Protestantism is what has been normalized in gaming journalism conceptions of religion. Such research addresses central scholarly journalism concerns regarding objectivity, societal normalization through media, and misrepresentation of minority perspectives.

CHAPTER 1- THE MODERNIST PARADIGM, RELIGION, AND GAMERGATE

In newsrooms around the country, and in living rooms around the country, it is taken for granted that the news is secular. A holdover ideological position of modernity, journalism is viewed as being irreligious and, if operating as it should, then it is objective and scientific (Underwood, 2002). The modernist paradigm exists as a foundational set of assumptions that shape how producers and audiences view the nation as it is and as it should be. This is a part of a paradigm that has been increasingly challenged over the years, as writers and scholars have challenged the basic foundation of modernity (Rosen, 2004; Silk, 1995; Taylor, 2007). Modernity is the foundation of the assumption that the *secular* and the *religious* exist in mutual exclusivity, but in reality this is not necessarily the case. Secularism itself is a necessary part of the modernist religious paradigm in terms of how it articulates itself, but this divide is no longer sufficiently explanatory regarding contemporary American religion (Taylor, 2007).

Applying the concept of secularism to gaming journalism is a fitting location in that there are few other types of journalism where journalists spend perhaps half of their time examining narrative content that is not from within an American cultural context (Seizing the computer, 1999). Gaming journalism itself is an interesting area of study in that for much of its existence, much of gaming journalism was not actually journalism but advertising—at its best it was editorial in content (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009).

Gaming journalism can be described as a niche that crosses the boundaries of technology and business journalism and that deals solely with topics related to digital games. The norms in such journalism include news about game development companies, news about

new technologies that may be used for digital games, reporting about current trends in gaming as well as largely editorial reviews and previews of upcoming digital games (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). Indeed, much of gaming journalism still is editorial in content, but journalists in this niche show an increasing degree of methodological rigor – quoting authoritative sources, referencing supplementary documents and generally expressing independence from the industry itself. As Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) imply, in many regards, gaming journalism is technology or business journalism with a hyper-niche focus. But the content examined can be a challenge as a result of its cross-cultural nature, in that many games for sale in America were developed in Japan.

American and Japanese games differ according to their narratives and their historical origins (Seizing the computer, 1999). Much of the structure of contemporary Japanese-made games originated from early consoles, while much of the structure of contemporary American-made games originated from early personal computers. Narratives in Japanese-made games tend to be lighter in nature and build on norms drawn from Japanese anime (Seizing the computer, 1999). The narratives that appear in this context appear strange in American cultural context, e.g. summoning demons to destroy other demons, and killing God or gods. Narratives in American-made games tend to be more serious with an emphasis on the war narratives, especially the Crusades and World War II (Wagner, 2013). These narratives come with religious values attached and gaming journalists have to find ways to report on them. How they discuss the religious values in games can be revealing of the religious normative framework from which they operate and thus can reveal the degree to which journalists operate from a form of religious normativity. This religious normativity has clear implications for the contemporary

religious paradigm in that it challenges a central tenant of modernism—the distinction between the secular and the religious.

The purpose of this multi-method qualitative study is to develop a deeper understanding of the hegemonic nature of religious normativity—in particular, Protestant normativity—as a journalistic perspective among gaming journalists at a number of organizations including *IGN*, *Kotaku*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Forbes*, *New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Joystiq*.

This study begins by laying the foundation on which it builds by describing the nature of the modernist paradigm of religion, hegemonic theory, and narrative theory. Then a review of the literature provides a sense of what is understood regarding the nature of the culturalist approach to exploring this topic, the nature of American religion, journalistic reporting of religion, gaming journalism, and finally, the phenomena journalists mediate: the religion in digital games. The method section lays out the nature of the qualitative approach to the study, and the research questions. Then, results of this study and the narrative frames identified are discussed. Finally, the study concludes by linking these results to their theoretical foundations, addressing the research questions and demonstrating how they address religious normativity in gaming journalism.

The GamerGate Controversy

This research was both greatly benefited and complicated by the development of the GamerGate controversy in late-2014. In the midst of the interviews with gaming journalists, an ethical scandal developed that made interviews more difficult to obtain but the scandal also made journalists feel obligated to affirm and revisit how they go about their work. This proved fortuitous for the purposes of understanding the normative values

of the field, even as the circumstances of the scandal proved troubling. Since this scandal occurred during the time of the research and helped inform the findings of this study, this section provides an overview of the circumstances of the scandal. This background may help shed light on the state of the field during journalists' involvement in the study and also provide context from the findings of the study.

The GamerGate controversy began an unusual way: with a personal attack from an ex-boyfriend. In August 2014, game developer Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriend wrote a blog post attacking Quinn (Kaplan, September 12, 2014). Eron Gjoni, the ex-boyfriend, accused Quinn of sleeping with a well-known gaming journalist, Nathan Grayson of *Kotaku*, in order to obtain better coverage (Kaplan, 2014, September 12). These accusations were investigated by *Kotaku* and quickly dismissed in that (1) while *Kotaku* confirmed the existence of a relationship between Quinn and Grayson, (2) Grayson only reported on Quinn once and prior to their relationship and finally, (3) Grayson never submitted any reviews related to Quinn's game (Totilo, August 20, 2014).¹ Nevertheless, these accusations struck a nerve online and the allegations went viral. GamerGate supporters argued that gaming journalists were too cozy with the gaming industry and that a growing number of reviews lacked "objectivity" (Dewey, January 29, 2015). As such, supporters argued that gaming journalists were using reviews to push a "social justice" agenda (Dewey, October 14, 2014)—in particular, by providing coverage to independent games by women and ethnic minorities. Many supporters see such games as subpar and get frustrated that reviewers point out issues related to gender and ethnic

¹ This researcher attempted to confirm *Kotaku's* findings and, indeed, there is at least no

depictions (Dewey, October 14, 2014). In short, the viral discussion online was concerned about journalistic bias (Totilo, August 20, 2014).

The scandal developed in two ways. First, in part through the attention of conservative pundits, it created a discussion about bias that gaming journalists largely engaged with and welcomed. Second, female game developers and critics suffered through a sustained campaign of misogynistic attacks (Dewey, October 14, 2014). The attacks initially began under the Twitter hashtag #gamergate and progressed on forums of Reddit, 4chan and 8chan (Dewey, October 14, 2014). Quinn and another game developer, Brianna Wu, both received death threats and had their personal information—address, phone number—published online (Dewey, October 14, 2014). Gaming critic Anita Sarkessian was scheduled to speak at Utah State University and the death threats, combined with the schools refusal to bar concealed weapons, forced her to cancel the speaking engagement (Alberty, October 16, 2014).

The ethics portion of the GamerGate controversy has implications for this study, in that, broadly speaking, this study concerns issues of journalistic bias and objectivity.

CHAPTER 2- REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Modernist Paradigm of Religion

Although much of Western civilization has moved on paradigmatically, the religious paradigm of America remains stubbornly entrenched in modernity (Taylor, 2007). The clearest indications of this are the broad religious surveys which still require people to self-identify as, for example, either Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim; this categorical approach to religion is emblematic of the either/or categories which exemplified modernity (Masuzawa, 2005). Modernity also emphasizes a clear demarcation between the secular and religious (Taylor, 2007).

The key assumption examined in this work is the separation of the secular and the religious. This separation is emblematic in the modernist paradigm. In America, the modernist paradigm of religion would support the idea that the secular is that which happens publicly and officially (Taylor, 2007). Furthermore, religion—or at least *good* religion—is private in nature (Scott & Stout, 2006). This section will discuss the nature of the paradigm and the ideas challenging that paradigm. Doing so will shed insight on the nature of religious hegemony and provide a sense of its role in media.

Kuhn (1996) teaches that paradigms are very basic predispositions that work on both macro and micro levels. Paradigms inform a society's worldviews and help scientists operate and progress. Over time, flaws emerge from a paradigm and the paradigm is overturned in favor of a different paradigm, one that is more explanatory

than the prior paradigm (Kuhn, 1996). If a new paradigm is adopted, Kuhn (1996) labels the transition a *paradigm shift*.

Paradigm shifts are episodes in which professional commitments shift—they shatter tradition in the tradition-bound activities of a given field (Kuhn, 1996). No one is outside a paradigm, Kuhn (1996) argues. Kuhn (1996) notes that everyone is educated within and operates from a paradigmatic perspective; individuals may not operate in the dominant paradigm, but they operate from a paradigm.

Normal science, or research that operates within the dominant paradigm (Kuhn, 1996), in media and religion research has operated within the modernist paradigm. This is evidenced in part by the body of media and religion research that emphasizes that journalists know too little about religion (Prothero, 2008; Marshall, Gilbert et al., 2008; Hoover, 1998). Through exploring the lack of religious literacy of reporters—the exploration of which often relies on traditional modernist conceptions of religion—the research reifies the existing conception of the *secular* journalist who is somehow separated from the religious activity on which he or she reports. This research often, but not always, ignores the degree to which participation in journalism itself constitutes a sort of religious activity (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007; Rosen, 2004).

In the modernist paradigm, secularism and religion tend to be defined in relationship to each other, indicating typically that secularism implies the absence of religion (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen, 2011). In fact, as Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen (2011) suggest, religion was not a term commonly used until after the modernist paradigm cemented a distinction between religion and secular. Under the modernist interpretation, *religion* is “used to demarcate the ideas,

practices, beliefs, and institutions that are related to particular faiths and traditions—such as Christianity, at once labeling these as religion and limiting religion’s scope” (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen, 2011, p. 7). Traditionally, *secular* was a term used to demarcate the “affairs of worldly existence” and was specifically intended to distinguish the clergy of religious orders from those who served in local parishes (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen, 2011, p. 8). Over time, the *secular* has come to simply describe the absence of religion. As Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen (2011) argue, this modernist pairing of definitions, as will be discussed further in the section on the religion of America, lacks the explanatory potential to address contemporary Western society, and carries a significant Western bias.

Yet, the modernist paradigm itself is in response to the previous paradigms that existed in world civilization. According to Taylor (2007), the prior paradigm could simply be described as the *enchanted world* paradigm. The basic understanding of the world was that everything in the world was miraculous and enchanted, thus religion and public life were tightly connected (Taylor, 2007). Everyday actions had religious significance (Taylor, 2007). Modernity, with its emphasis on the scientific method, objectivity and democracy, divorced religion from public life in the Western conception of religion. Tickle (2008) argues that religious paradigms of the West, have for at least a millennia, been separate from the East. As a result, the paradigm shifts in Western religion have largely corresponded with the paradigm shifts within Christianity, which, she implies, may be the world’s first experience of hegemony (Tickle, 2008). Tickle (2008) classifies that the last two paradigm shifts of Western religion as surrounding the Great Schism—which separated the Catholic Church from the Orthodox Church and led

to centuries of Catholic authority in the west—and the Great Reformation—which ushered in an emphasis on literacy, democracy and, eventually through modernity, the scientific method and the modernist paradigm of religion. It is possible, Tickle (2008) argues, that the development of communication technologies in many ways has facilitated massive changes in religion. She described the current paradigm shift in American religion as the *Great Emergence*:

It would, quite literally, be impossible to exaggerate the central importance to the Great Emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web. By the same token and in absolutely analogous ways, it would be impossible to overstate the importance to the Great Reformation of the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1440 and his subsequent development of movable type and oil-based inks. We laud today, almost to the point of tedium, Gutenberg and the fact that his inventiveness made Holy Writ more or less available to everyone, thereby enabling sola scriptura and the priesthood of all believers (Tickle, 2008, p. 53).

This Great Emergence in religion is part of a larger societal trend, in which national borders and loyalties are disintegrating and Americans are storing more of themselves outside of themselves in computers (Tickle, 2008). This is creating a “difficulty in differentiating ourselves from machines” (Tickle, 2008, p. 15). Yet it is necessary to emphasize that these changes are occurring in a Western conception of religion—the distinctions between religion and politics, religion and the public sphere, religion and technology do not exist elsewhere (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen, 2011).

This Western distinction is no longer descriptive of the current way in which religion works in America. The categorical approach to religion does not take into account the degree to which people poach different beliefs and practices from a wide variety of sources (Masuzawa, 2005).

Journalism and academia continue to reify and build on the modern paradigm and, while useful science can be obtained that way (Kuhn, 1996), it is worth considering whether alternative concepts would be more explanatory in describing the current state of religion in America.

The hallmark features of the modernist paradigm of religion are utopianism (Benhabib, 1986) particularly achieved through technology (Armstrong, 1996), secularism (Taylor, 2007), and, connected to that, pluralism (Bender & Klassen, 2010). Utopianism gives purpose to the paradigm, by providing a vision for a better world that can be accomplished through communitarianism and a focus on “community needs and solidarity” (Benhabib, 1986, p. 13). Modernism identified machines as the way of best addressing the needs of a community. Yet, Armstrong (1996) notes, as modernism gives way to post-modernism, signs emerge of a more reciprocal relationship between man and machine (Tickle, 2008). Secularism ensures that religion and public life remain separate (Taylor, 2007). Pluralism ensures tolerance for religious practices, in particular as long as they remain out of the public eye (Bender & Klassen, 2010). Bender and Klassen (2010) note that the two are substantially connected in the modern conception of religion, in that secularism is often exercised for the purposes of pluralism. Bender and Klassen (2010) describe the connection in this way: if religion does not take place in the public square, if a clear line is drawn between religion and secular, private and public, then the status quo

can be maintained and numerous religious parties feel free to participate in the public square. Despite the many advantages of this paradigm, it has flaws. These flaws will be discussed in more depth in pages that follow. The present research seeks to add to that conversation and challenge the assumptions of the modernist paradigm of American religion. As such, it is worth considering the assumptions that define the paradigm.

Secularism is a taken-for-granted assumption in understanding the nature of journalism both on a scholarly and a popular level (Silk, 1995; Underwood, 2002). While the modernist paradigm sees secularism as a way of explaining journalism work (Taylor, 2007; Underwood, 2002), there are indications that a new paradigm may be a better way of explaining media production and content. What this dissertation seeks to explore is the degree to which secularism exists in the public square—and in particular in journalism. Albanese (1999, 2007) argues that far from there existing a clear distinction between religion and the public, religion is the very air people breathe. It is a part of how Americans think about their nation, how they order their lives, the way they conceptualize their role in the world and how they entertain themselves (Albanese, 1999; Forbes & Mahan, 2000).

Yet as public mediators, journalists narrate a sense of what is normal, and what is acceptable (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998; Schudson, 2003). One religion has a substantial amount of power in informing how journalists narrate this order in America, according to Underwood (2002). Protestantism provides language, the sense of what is normal (Gramsci, 2012; Underwood, 2002), the appreciation for what is reasonable (Berdayes & Berdayes), and it highlights that which does not belong by making it appear “other” (Said, 1979). While prior researchers have described this phenomenon, they have not

ascribed it to a particular concept. Scholars in media and religion research have discussed the religious normativity of Protestantism in a largely implicit manner (Silk, 1995; Underwood, 2002; Nord, 1984, 2004). For the purposes of this research, it will be described as *Protestant normativity*. Protestant normativity is a form of religious hegemony that is informed by essentially post-Reformation doctrine and that may be operating even amidst continued claims and emphasis on secularism in American journalism, e.g. the distrust of authority, essential to the watchdog function of journalism (Craft & Davis, 2013), could be seen as emerging from historic Protestant distrust of Catholic hierarchy (MacCulloch, 2009).

The above indicates an interesting picture of media and religion scholarship: first, that religion is publicly perceived to derive essentially from the modernist paradigm (Taylor, 2007) and, second, that journalism may actually operate religiously from a Protestant normative standpoint (Underwood, 2002).

The origins of the modernist paradigm of religion owe its origin, ironically, to the Protestant Reformation (Dessler & Mandair, 2011; Tickle, 2008). Dessler and Mandair (2011) argue that secularism, far from being nonreligious, provides boundaries for religion and reifies the concept. Masuzawa (2005) notes that these boundaries are a result of the origins of religion as a European construction—it arose out of modernism and carries ideological bias in the labeling of what constitutes not just *religion* but a *world religion* (Masuzawa, 2005). Masuzawa (2005) argues that in distinguishing the secular and religious, Europeans looked for faiths that appeared similar to Protestantism—thus resulting in the granting of capital letters for Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, but lower-case letters for animism and shamanism. This occurs regardless of the size of the

adherent population, Masuzawa (2005) notes, since animism and shamanism both have a greater number of adherents worldwide than Judaism.

As a result of its origins, the concept of religion as oppositional to the secular has always applied poorly outside of the Western European context and this is important to note, in that much of gaming content still derives from Japan. It is difficult, for example, to separate the secular from the religious in Indian Hinduism (Halbfass, 1991). Yet as the concept of secular societies has spread throughout the world through the institutions of modernism such as journalism and democracy, the concept has carried with it ideas about religion (Katzenstein, 2011). This reifying process has cemented a modernist notion of religion and secularism as separate spheres of human society (Taylor, 2007).

Three main ideas are currently challenging the existing modernist paradigm, according to Dressler and Mandair (2011). The first is the idea of liberal secularism, which assumes religion as a cultural universal. This school of thought and critique examines shifts in the understanding of God, the understanding of self and the understanding of the natural world. The second is the idea of political theology that credits Martin Luther with religious emphasis on individualism and the dichotomy between religion and secular society. The third idea argues that Christianity created the blueprint for the world cultures, and thus has created the current dichotomy of religion and secularism that has spread across the globe through hegemony (Dressler & Mandair, 2011). Dressler and Mandair's (2011) third idea is not unlike the concept of Protestant normativity, except that Dressler and Mandair (2011) ascribe the dichotomy of religion and secularism to Protestantism. The dichotomy of the secular and the religious is more of a result of modernity than of Protestantism—after all, Protestantism existed before this

distinction was put in place. As Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen (2011) argue, the distinction between religion and secularism did not appear until the implementation of the modernist paradigm.

While these approaches challenge the current paradigm, they also carry hesitancy in their push for a post-secular world. Dressler and Mandair (2011) argue that post-secularism could simply be the equivalent of a return to overt Christian dominance. Yet this dominance could also be the acknowledgement of the structures and ideas already in place globally that could be attributed to Christianity. A new paradigm would see a more appreciated connection between the secular and the religious (Dressler & Mandair, 2011).

One of the foundational concepts of the modernist paradigm, pluralism, faces challenges as an increasing number of countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran, have restructured their societies in avowed non-secularity (Jakobsen, 2010). There are clashes that occur within pluralistic societies when religious systems have a legal system that discourages religious diversity. In some ways, Jakobsen (2010) argues, the embrace of post-pluralism may simultaneously be an indication of a rebound of pre-pluralism—a return to the idea of an *enchanted world* in which the actions of daily life are acknowledged to have embedded religious meaning (Taylor, 2007).

Bender and Klassen (2010) define pluralism as “a commitment to recognize others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference” (p. 2). This pluralism has its advantages in that it’s allowed for greater interreligious dialogue and understanding. Yet they note that pluralism is not naturally occurring. It’s an imposed doctrine into religious life. There is an irony that pluralism, which is designed to avoid the dominance of one perspective, has become a nearly hegemonic concept (p.8). In that way, Bender

and Klassen (2010) argue that the concept itself is set up for failure (p. 22). Pluralism works to reify religious difference to demarcate *otherness*. In a sense, by addressing the need to be pluralistic, there are *othered* groups, which are implied in such rhetoric and that continued to be *othered* as a result of rhetoric.

Bender and Klassen (2010) note that the doctrines of pluralism, of which tolerance and accommodation are key elements, do not constitute a theory of understanding religious interactions. Pluralism reflects the assumption that difference is a problem to be overcome (Bender & Klassen, 2010). Bender and Klassen (2010) argue that if a new paradigm is to look beyond these concepts within secularism, a new paradigm should embrace humility and fallibilism—in other words, accepting a more nominalist approach in rejecting universals and grappling with the possibility that even dearly held religious beliefs could be wrong.

Pluralism also suppresses difference in order to accomplish societal tasks, e.g. the operation of government. The conservative response to difference is to create a clear demarcation between “us” and “them” in order to protect theology (e.g. Christian Fundamentalism) and this can leave conservative voices out of pluralist discourse (Bender & Klassen, 2010). Pluralism elaborates differences based on the concept of sameness as in the phrase “we are all different.” Post-pluralism will require listening to voices rather than imposing a perspective (Bender & Klassen, 2010). Bender and Klassen (2010) argue that this requires inviting those to the table who do not celebrate pluralism, and also broadening the boundaries of religion to include practices and beliefs not traditionally considered *religion*.

The goal of this section was to introduce the dominant paradigm shaping American religious phenomena—the modernist paradigm—and explore an alternative paradigm that may be more explanatory. The concept of Protestant normativity was introduced as a phenomenon that will be explored as a mode with which American journalists operate, despite prevailing modernist notions.

The idea of a paradigm assumes a sort of ideological hegemony. If a paradigm is a dominant ideological mode that informs the assumptions from which research, work and play operates, then one can readily see how this corresponds with existing notions of hegemony. Thus hegemony serves as a useful theory with which to explore the operation and nature of religious hegemony.

Theoretical Framework: Hegemony

Cultural hegemony is a theory developed by Antonio Gramsci (1983) that describes the dominating power of culture in creating "sameness" throughout society and throughout the globe. Both the modernist paradigm of religion and the concept of Protestant normativity serve as types of religious hegemony, which could be said to operate among American journalists. Hegemony is a useful theory for the exploration of paradigms in that paradigms are by nature hegemonic (Reese, 1990). This section will detail the contemporary conversation regarding hegemony and its place in Western society.

Hegemony is often discussed as "hierarchical order among rival great powers" (Vitalis, 2006, p. 26), as the "process of philosophical and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other social groups" (Artz, 2003, p. 10), or as "the enrollment of others in the exercise of your power by convincing, cajoling

and coercing them that they should want what you want” (Agnew, 2005, p. 1-2). In this way, hegemony could be argued to be leadership by consent.

Gramsci (1983) argues that hegemony works by proliferating the perspectives and biases of the elites as common sense among the “masses.” Hegemony creates a sort of dominating sameness throughout America, and throughout the globe (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1963). Language is the primary carrier of hegemony, in that words have linguistic values that tend to favor the elites. Hegemony entrenches the dominant position of the already most powerful (Hurd, 2007; Clark, 2011). And the media play a key role in hegemony. Media take the language of elites and disseminate it on a global scale. Media organizations work to affirm and reaffirm the values and the status of elites and keep elites in power (Gramsci, 2012). If one accepts Gramsci’s (2012) argument that capitalism is a hegemonic concept, then one can see how this value is reified: media encourage a consumptive lifestyle few can afford, which leads to debt, and debt is in the best interests of a capitalist society in that it guarantees continued production.

While Gramsci (1983) was concerned about the hegemonic nature of capitalism, hegemony has significant implications in media and religion research for the degree to which certain religious views and perspectives are made normative in society. Underwood (2002) implicates hegemony without directly pinpointing this theory in his discussion of *prophetic journalism* in the mass media. Prophetic journalism operates with moral imperatives and makes moral judgments. Underwood (2002), building on years of experience as a newspaperman, argues that the press operates from an implicitly Protestant perspective, while remaining skeptical of religion and religious authority in particular. As Underwood (2002) describes it, this implicit Protestantness is by no means

conscious by news people. This perspective would be something Gramsci (1983) would describe as hegemonic in nature in that Protestant values are spread unconsciously, provide stability to the existing structure of American society through use of religious pluralism, and thereby entrench the powerful in a place of superiority.

While the concept of hegemony originated prior to that of the social construction of reality, in many ways the concept of hegemony is built on the social construction of reality. As such, Gramsci's concept of hegemony foreshadows the concept it assumes. If an existing power structure is reified and continually reinstated through institutions such as political parties, the media and language, it would make sense then to assume that the conception of reality is socially constructed. The social construction of reality is foundational to the interpretivist paradigm itself, in addition to innumerable mass communication theories (Berger & Luckmann, 1974). Berger and Luckmann (1974) argue that reality is socially constructed: from interacting with the world around them, people develop ideas that are processed into the reciprocal roles practiced in relation to others. Berger and Luckmann (1974) note that those roles become habits and eventually those habits are institutionalized and meaning is embedded into them. Mass media and journalism at once help create ideas regarding what the world is like and simultaneously reaffirm the conceptions of the world in play. If it is acknowledged that reality is socially constructed, and acknowledged that power can grant some more influence in society than others, then one can see how the concept of hegemony relies on the concept on an implicit basis.

Some challenge the unilateral nature of Gramsci's hegemony. Artz (2003) argues that Gramsci's articulation of the concept ignores the negotiation process that takes place.

The closest entity to Gramsci's hegemony in contemporary society may be Western power, but Artz (2003) notes that even this power should not be overstated in that Western leadership is unstable across the globe. Others challenge Gramsci's theory in that it is built on the idea of a *mass*, and as Carey (2008) notes, it is difficult to look at society in the midst of the current technological changes and identify anything as being a *mass*. Rather society is proliferating with a growing number of *glocal* niches organized around interests rather than proximity (Meyrowitz, 2005).² Furthermore, it is difficult to look at the diverse nature of the America and see *sameness* at an individual level. But Gramsci's (1983) argument is at a systems level although it certainly can be said to have trickle down effects. As Hall (1991) notes, the individual has a number of responses to hegemony in communication and one of those is to simply accept the dominant hegemonic position.

In hegemony, the focus of research is often on domination. Domination is measured by the aggregate resources possessed by a single actor across a wide range of capabilities and the degree of concentration of those resources (Clark, 2011). Dominance is rarely unilateral but is typically expressed through systemic rules. Gramsci's (1957, 1971) hegemony is often seen as negative, but others see forms of hegemony as offering stability in society. A liberal hegemon for instance "fosters an environment in which cooperation and liberal economic exchange are incentive compatible for national policy makers and their selectorates" (Sobel, 2012, p. 2). Hegemony can some times be benevolent. In this case, to apply Sobel (2012), Protestant normativity would likely be a

² *Glocal* is a term coined by Meyrowitz (2005) to refer to how groups form. Meyrowitz (2005) argues that people now orientate through niche interests and groups are formed globally via the Internet. This is in stark contrast to pre-internet group formation, in which people formed groups based on proximity.

liberal hegemon, in that it promotes pluralism. Such pluralism is integral to creating interfaith understanding.

It may be that cooperation, particularly during uncertain times, requires a hegemonic stabilizer (Sobel, 2012). Furthermore, hegemony gives rise to political morality—in that the power of the hegemon is dependent on the continued consent of the dominated (Clark, 2011). Some regard hegemony as relating as much to the constraint of the powerful as to the domination of the weak (Clark, 2011).

Understanding the different types of hegemony will help in identifying the nature of the religious hegemony this research seeks to uncover. There is no pure example of hegemony—nevertheless, there are a series of ideal types (Clark, 2011). In Clark's (2011) typology of types of hegemony, he distinguishes the types by composition, singular vs. collective, and constituency, inclusive vs. exclusive. A singular composition would mean just a single entity holds the power, whereas power is shared in a collective composition. In an inclusive constituency, the power is widespread and may even be considered to be inclusive of all international society. In exclusive constituency, the hegemony may be exclusive to a single group.

Clark's (2011) ideal types of hegemony include singular coalitional, singular inclusive, collective coalitional, and collective inclusive. In singular types of hegemony, the hegemon can be its own role model. In collective types of hegemony, the hegemon is constrained to be good (Clark, 2011). Collective hegemony derives legitimacy from reassurance from smaller entities but this entails an internal dispersal of power. The responsibilities and great powers of the hegemon are conferred by lesser powers (Clark, 2011). Since little research has explored Protestant normativity thus far, it is unclear how

it is composed. It is also unclear how it would correspond with the presented hegemony ideal types. The present research, in providing shape to Protestant normativity will seek to address how it might fit.

Hegemonic power is subject to two limitations: sufficiency of power and the willingness to exercise it (Clark, 2011). Yet even among individuals, hegemony is never absolute (Hall 1991). Hall (1991) argues that the world around us is composed of signs. Rather than a simple diagram of *sender* → *message* → *receiver*, Hall argues that message dissemination is more complex. Rather messages are *encoded* with cultural, historical and societal values that are then decoded. Hegemony provides the language necessary to draw the preferred meaning from a text, if an individual chooses to do so. But Hall (1991) notes that people can *read* messages in three different ways: through the dominant hegemonic position, a negotiated position or an oppositional position. This oppositional position implies that people can reject the dominant hegemonic approach and, Gramsci (2012) would add, even use the media to their advantage to spread oppositional messages.

Hegemony is often dismissed theoretically because of the wide array of differing perspectives that persist on an individual level. There may be an increasing diversity of opinion at an individual level, but on a higher level, there are a great number of *implicit* opinions on which many or most agree: that America should be capitalistic, that the continued stationing of American troops abroad ensures domestic stability and the like. Hegemonic theory remains salient because so much of it still holds true. While Carey (2008) is correct that there is no *mass* media but rather a series of niches, his point loses value if all the niches, including a niche such as gaming journalism, share the same

essential perspective. The public is not an indistinguishable mass but neither is it a collection of niches that are completely autonomous from the ideas of one another.

Altheide (1984), in an overview of the concept of media hegemony, notes that understanding hegemony means assessing the ideological orientations and professional practices of journalists to better understand how they are influenced. Altheide (1984) suggests that journalists' socialization involves guidelines, work routines, and orientations that support the dominant ideology, and journalists tend to cover topics and present news reports that reinforce the status quo. This is evident in how journalists gauge newsworthiness as well as the frames through which news stories are presented. Furthermore, journalists' work routines incorporate language that resonates with the dominant ideology (Mueller, 1973). As a result, journalists can unwittingly promote ideological hegemony by using their cultural categories and symbols as they do their work (Altheide, 1984).

Journalism does not operate outside of ideology and hegemony but is deeply embedded in them (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). The journalistic profession becomes a field of struggle, where hegemonic values can be contested (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). Altheide (1984) is left with the question of whether journalistic routines are influenced by a dominant ideology to such an extent that it can mitigate journalistic independence. Murdock and Golding (1979) argue that they are, in that the routines and bureaucratic procedures journalists' use are embedded with implicit and explicit references that consistently lead to the production of messages emphasizing specific values. Yet Evans (2002) indicates that journalists may be influenced to some degree, but are still able to serve as *mediators* between multiple powerful parties. Evans

(2002) proposes a revised model of Conduit's (1994) model of hegemony in which journalists act as *mediators*. In this model, journalists work to create a status quo that develops through "the active or passive acceptance of a given social policy or political framework as the best that can be negotiated under the given conditions" (Condit, 1994, p. 210). In this way, while journalists may be operating under the influence of dominant ideology, they play a role that embraces multiple perspectives (Evans, 2002).

Media hegemony indicates leadership and dominance—not control and domination (Artz, 2003). Popular culture modifies and renews the power of hegemonic forces (Goeddertz & Kraidy, 2003). Downing (2003) argues that media hegemony is evidenced by the existence of radical media. Radical media is "small-scale, low-budget, oppositional and horizontal media, typically related to social and political movements, sometimes ephemeral, sometimes not" (Downing, 2003, p. 283). Many gaming journalism blogs may fit this description if "social movement" is defined broadly.

Herman and Chomsky's (2002) propaganda model is in many ways an extension of Gramsci's concept of hegemony if the state officials are conceptualized as the "elite." What they argue is that at an unconscious level, journalists tend to reaffirm the dominance of the state. This happens through their definition of what is *newsworthy*, or their news values. What media decide is newsworthy often corresponds with what the state thinks is newsworthy (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). There are a number of reasons this is the case, not the least of which being the enormous presence of *parajournalists*—people who create news and information which supplements and complements journalism as well as steers journalism—in the state apparatus (Schudson, 2003). The connection in the understanding regarding the nature of newsworthiness between the media and the

state also happens as a result of the news values of “professional authority,” a value for quoting people with power, and “ethnocentrism,” a value that places America as the norm by which all other countries are judged (Gans, 2004).

These two values placed together help explain how Herman and Chomsky’s (2002) propaganda model works. Despite changes in technology and economic models, these values are still present in American news media both in traditional and new models. In fact, Herman and Chomsky’s (2002) propaganda model has greater salience today than in the past, in that with press power becoming increasingly decentralized, large media organizations shrinking and small media organizations proliferating, the state has more power than it may have in the past—yet that power is far from absolute (Price, 2004). Journalists have shorter deadlines and have to do more with less. Therefore, it makes sense that they would embrace pseudo-events as newsworthy and state authorities of title as sources—in that they are geared to allow journalists to efficiently get their work done (Boorstein, 2012). An authority of title is someone whose title makes his or her statements relevant to a news story. These authorities are used more frequently than authorities of experience, those whose experience makes them relevant to a news story.

In analyzing the hegemonic nature incumbent in Protestant normativity, it makes sense to examine the market more so than the state. The American market has done more to define worldwide social norms than American politics (Agnew, 2005). Agnew (2005) argues that one consequence of the American marketplace is that “desire” has been democratized—goods that were at one time only available to the rich are now available to everyone. Agnew (2005) argues that the United States is a marketplace society, which is increasingly defined by mass consumption. And the spread of this society defines the

core attributes of America hegemony. In turn this has led to a commodity society in which objects, people and ideas have all become commodifiable (Agnew, 2005). Agnew (2005) argues that this hegemonic commodifiability passes into the realm of religion, in that the *religion of America*—or the religion implicit in American culture—is by nature individualist. Individual choice is a sacred and not simply a profane imperative. Self-realization occurs through consumption (Agnew, 2005).

Hegemony, as has been noted here, is more than a method of ideological domination, but a product of give-and-take obtained through the consent of those operating from minority opinions (Artz, 2003). This study is most interested in the nature of religious hegemony in terms of how it operates among journalists. It is worth emphasizing that hegemony is not inherently negative, but can serve to stabilize and provide a sense of security in a time of great upheaval (Sobel, 2012). In detailing a religious hegemony, often the most telling features are related to those actions, behavior and ideas considered *normal* and *appropriate* (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998). That which is *normal* and *appropriate* is by nature defined by the dominant hegemonic ideology. For this reason, narrative theory, a theory that helps circumscribe attention to that which is considered *normal*, will supplement the theory of hegemony. Furthermore this secondary theoretical framework provides the foundation for the methodological choice for the current research.

Secondary Theoretical Perspective: Narrative Theory

So if one is to study something that is by nature hegemonic, how then is it possible to analyze Protestant normativity if the assumption is that Americans in general use and reify the paradigm through the very words we speak? Analyzing narratives

provides the answer in that narrative provides a medium through which minority ideas and worldviews can be examined in spite of hegemony (Boje, 2001). This section details the nature of narrative theory in order to demonstrate its features for a study of religious hegemony. “In the interplay between grand and local narrative we can begin to recognize hegemony and posit the dynamics of the relationship....Each [narrative] is an intertextual network, a system of other texts and values referencing other stories” (Boje, 2001, p. 35).

Narrative provides the tools through which humanity makes sense of itself (Schudson, 2003). News is a tool for narratives and public discourse in America and can be seen as vital to community and democracy in the modern world through the depictive power that the press holds (Schudson, 1988, 2003). News constructs narratives that influence how people view certain groups, institutions and ideas (Schudson, 2003). The media provide “a site on which various social groups, institutions and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality” (Gurevitch & Levy, 1985, p. 19).

Exploring news from a perspective of narrative enables the analysis to lead “a critique, a determination of whether or not...discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy and desirable guide to thought and action” (Fisher, 1985, p. 351) and can help to reveal foundational opinions about the nature of reality and humanity (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005). Narratives order the flow of experience in order to make sense of events and actions (Foss, 1996). Plot-oriented narratives link events in meaningful ways (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005). Journalists play a substantial role in narratives in that they observe events and develop plotlines from these related experiences (Riessman, 1993). Most important for this analysis, narratives bring attention to what a society sees as reasonable and appropriate (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998). The researcher using narrative theory

explores settings, characters, narrators, heroes, and themes—in other words, the elements that contribute to a narrative frame.

It is also worth applying narrative theory as a tool in such media and religion research (Bal, 2001). Narrative theory (Fisher, 1985; Foss, 1996; Herman & Vervaek, 2005; Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998) emphasizes the degree to which human beings are storytelling animals and tend to conceptualize the world according to heroes, villains, and plotlines. Yet while humans are storytelling animals, humans rarely tell new stories. Humans naturally tend to retell stories but in new ways and by using new mediums (Bascom, 1965; Raglan, 1934). Narrative theory also helps identify the degree to which media make meaning out of events by applying culturally engrained stories to help explain what's happening (i.e. campaign horse race coverage may be narrated as a “tortoise and the hare” story). Applying narrative theory to this study is sensible in that finding what is considered “the norm” will reveal that which has become hegemonic.

Hegemony and narrative theory provide a useful lens for identifying the elements of society that contribute to creating a sense of sameness. This sameness informs the narratives of what is normal and acceptable in a society—understanding this will aid in identifying the ways in which gaming journalists operate with religious normativity. The topic itself contributes to understanding the relationship of media and religion—a topic, which has had substantial contributions. The following section will detail the culturalist approach to media and religion, the approach that will inform the present research.

Media and religion: The Culturalist Approach

Media and religion research is a fairly recent field that has arisen out of mass communication research. This field emerged as a result of a few trends: a

reconceptualization of religion as an analytical concept among researchers (Stout, 2012), the societal focus on religion that is written into the history of America (Nord, 1984; Underwood, 2002), and a broadening of the term of religion among researchers (Smith, 1998). This section introduces the cultural approach to media and religion research as an avenue with which to address the cultural phenomena of journalism coverage of religion in games.

The study of religion within the mass communication field makes sense in that religion is a useful analytical concept that points toward rituals and normative judgments (Stout, 2012). With the increased interest in the relationship between religion and media in the 1990s, Stewart Hoover, Mark Silk and others began contributing research on the topic as well. As opposed to Buddenbaum, who began her research out of the mass communication field, Hoover came out of the religious studies discipline where cultural studies was more widely accepted at the time. Hoover brought his cultural studies focus to media and religion research, particularly in his research on religion in the news (1998) and this approach became the dominant approach to media and religion research.

While the 1980s was a time in which American culture began to seriously discuss the portrayal and misportrayal of religion, to some degree, this discussion is the just the continuation of a much longer debate (Mattingly, 1983, 1993). In America, this debate arguably arose out of the perceived divide between religious institutions and the media that began with the birth of the penny press (Rodgers, 2010). Prior to the penny press, Rodgers (2010) argues, churches in particular saw the press as a high moral calling.

It was evangelical Christian publicists at Bible tract societies who first dreamed of *mass media* and they pursued mass media technology for theological reasons—to reach a

mass audience with their message, which they believed was divinely appointed through the Great Commission (Nord, 1984). Putnam and Campbell (2010) note that evangelical Christianity during this era would appear theologically and doctrinally quite different from the evangelical Christianity of today, in that it preceded the split between the camps of the “modernists” and the “fundamentalists.” And the lack of aversion to modern culture and society is implicit in the technological fervor of evangelical Christians during that time period. Nord (1984) notes that it was Bible tract societies who developed the modern printing and distribution techniques associated with the reading revolution in the 19th century: stereotyping, steam-powered printing and machine paper making. As the century progressed, the way evangelical Christians described Bible tracts would be transferred to how they described popular American journalism and fiction (Nord, 1984).

In the early 19th century, the press was explicitly operating under a model of prophetic journalism, making moral judgments on the issues of the day (Underwood, 2002). The essential belief was that religious institutions would save American civilization as well as American souls (Nord, 2004). Nord (2004) argues that Protestants in America believed in the power of the press and sought to harness it for social as well as theological reasons. However, during the market revolution of the 19th century, commercial markets exploded and market relations came to dominate economic and social life in America. It was at this time, Nord (2004) argues, that both religion and journalism became “commodities” in American society. The market revolution and the rise of the penny press made the moral judgments of prophetic journalism more difficult to make because the new business model necessitated selling newspapers to a wide variety of people—people who might not agree with a paper’s moral judgment (Nord,

2004; Underwood, 2002). As Underwood (2002) notes, newspapers instead began to emphasize investigations, particularly of authority figures—including those within the church. By the end of the 1800s, churches began to discuss starting their own newspapers, since they could no longer receive the moral instruction they needed from the mainstream press (Rodgers, 2010). This indicates the birth of the antagonist relationship that has only grown since the 20th century (Rodgers, 2010). In some ways the development of this relationship resulted from the proliferation and politicization of the fundamentalist wing of evangelical Christianity, which popularized the view of the press as an adversary (Smidt, 1987; Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

This discussion of media and religion only grew more urgent as researchers noted the widespread misrepresentations of Muslims surrounding the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001 and expressed concern about potential effects on the Muslims population in America (Poole, 2006). There are practical implications to media and religion research. Characterized by shrinking newsrooms and growing online resources, the digital age both provides a great challenge in continuing to report religion and a great opportunity to enhance religious depictions (Mason, 2010). At the same time, the definition of religion has broadened and observers noted that religion was no longer just appearing in Churches and synagogues, but in mass media (Stout, 2012). Not only was traditional religion appearing in mass media, but also mass media was increasingly serving a religious role in the lives of people—offering moral, spiritual and ethical guidance (Stout, 2012). As a consumptive activity, one could collapse the use of mass media for religion as being emblematic of an increasing American trend toward using the marketplace for religious purposes (Clark, 2007; Agnew, 2005). America has

had a historical tie between religion and the market at least since the 19th century (Nord, 2004), but what is new in American society is the degree to which the market is defining the nature of religion in America (Clark, 2007). In her research, Clark (2007) points toward an increased emphasis on branding and consumption in a number of religious traditions as evidence of the increased connection between religion and the market. Unpacking the connection between religion and the marketplace is integral in that gaming is an activity of the marketplace.

De Tocqueville (2004), in his writings about America, noted the robust nature of American religious life and media habits. While he thought it was possible religious observance could decline, De Tocqueville (2004) indicated that there was something innately religious about American culture. De Tocqueville's (2004) conception of an implicit *religion of America* both forecasts the current secularization paradigm in American society (Buddenbaum, 2002; De Tocqueville, 2004). De Tocqueville (2004) was referring to the religion implicit in the rhetoric and symbols of America (Gaustad & Schmidt, 2002). De Tocqueville (2004), along with Tonnies (2002), is considered foundational to the study of media and religion (Buddenbaum, 2002).

Tonnies (2002) in particular informs much of the culturalist approach to media and religion through his concepts of *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*. Originally writing in the late-1800s, Tonnies (2002) described a paradigmatic shift, which he argues resulted in part from the development of early mass media. This paradigmatic shift took society from being community-oriented, family-oriented to being more oriented toward the public sphere and nation-states (Tonnies, 2002). *Gemeinschaft*, or private community, is the cultural embodiment of the *enchanted worlds* paradigm noted earlier. In *Gemeinschaft*,

meaning is constructed locally and through community and greater authority is granted to heads of households and community leaders in the interpretation of this meaning (Tonnie, 2002). Tonnie (2002) argues that religion primarily has occurred through *Gemeinschaft* throughout history. The transition from a dominantly *Gemeinschaft* culture to *Gesellschaft*—which corresponds with the modernist paradigm described in this study—created an orientation toward the nation state and thus, created a degree of unity across a public society and deemphasized community (Tonnie, 2002). This required a new, public shape for religion and new values emerged from this paradigmatic change: in particular, the emphasis on science, objectivity and powerful national authority structures (Tonnie, 2002). While national authority structures had existed prior to this shift, mass media gave these structures a means of communication with their entire constituency—whereas in the past, Tonnie (2002) argued they would have relied on local representatives to maintain national loyalty. The mass media cemented their power (Tonnie, 2002). Yet Tonnie (2002) forecasted an eventual dissolution of *Gesellschaft*, and a reempowering of *Gemeinschaft*—and this may be descriptive of the paradigmatic change in American religion witnessed today. Buddenbaum (2002) argues that Tonnie's (2002) observations inform the basis of the culturalist approach and much of media and religion research in general.

Cultural studies has done much to strengthen the understanding of media and religion. As Hoover (2002) argues, cultural studies enhanced the theoretical understanding of religion and mass media through the increasing degree to which religion is seen as culture. In the religion studies discipline, for instance, there is an increasing emphasis from Albanese (1999) on the study of *ordinary religion*, or the study of the

ways in which culture itself is essentially religion. Dividing culture and religion for research purposes and when looking at society has become increasingly difficult (Hoover, 2002). Religion is increasingly seen as a cultural construction that is a product of European Protestant thought and European imperialism (Hoover, 2002; Masuzawa, 2005; Underwood, 2002). In addition, religion is an exceptionally complex topic (Stout & Buddenbaum, 2002) and Hoover (2002) argues that there is danger and little to be gained from simplifying it.

Orsi (2005) argues that it is far more valuable to explore the ways in which people are living their religion as opposed to just exploring how that religion says they are living. People pick and choose elements of their personal beliefs not just from other religions, but also from nationalism, folk culture, and popular culture. If the public approaches religion in the same manner it approaches journalism, through a sort of *textual poaching* (Jenkins, 2006), then it is worth examining some of the sources of those texts. Digital games are increasingly a place where people derive religious meanings (Wagner, 2012; Campbell & Grieve, 2014) and thus exploring the dimensions of religion in gaming could be helpful in understanding American religion holistically.

It should be acknowledged that there are some weaknesses in the culturalist approach to media and religion research. The primary question worth asking is what the goal of such research is. Religious literacy and media literacy are both abysmally low (Silk, 1995), and so one can ask what the potential value is in leaving the complex nature of religion “as it is.” Does such research help increase literacy on media and religion (Buddenbaum, 2002)? Or does it contribute to further misunderstandings? And if religion is a cultural construction—so what? As with any research in cultural studies, many

practitioners tend to ask what the practical value of the research is (Orsi, 2005). Cultural studies abandons the need to simplify and to generalize and while its stated goal is to enhance understanding regarding religion (Hoover, 2002) such increased understanding could be argued to be limited. As opposed to other avenues of media and religion research, it can be difficult to demonstrate a clear value.

This section explored the nature of the culturalist approach to media and religion research. As Hoover (2002) notes, one of the strengths of cultural studies is that, by allowing researchers to look at religion “as it is” in media, research can emphasize better understanding of religion. Cultural studies sheds any need to predict future findings or to provide findings that are generalizable (Hoover, 2002). On the contrary, in this approach, the researcher serves as the research instrument and while research should be reflexive, it is generally acknowledged that one researcher’s experience with media and religion data will not be exactly like another researcher’s experience with media and religion data (Creswell, 2012). In many ways, this is emblematic of the nature of religion itself—there are some trends that can be found among individual experiences of religion but in general, the experience of religion differs from person to person (Albanese, 1999). If that is the case, understanding the larger trends in religion can be helpful in contextualizing individual religious phenomena, but in general, approaching religion from an interpretivist lens could be most informative. The following section will explore several key strands of American religion, problematize the concept of religion and how American religion has changed in recent years.

Religion in America. Religion is a non-organic category, in that as a concept of categorization it comes with values attached (Chidester, 1995; Masuzawa, 2005). Yet the

common usage of religion in America makes it seem as if religious categories were hard-and-fast, whereas in reality, the categories are much more fluid (Smith, 1998). Since religion is a central concept to this study, this section will explore the key strands of scholarship regarding American religion, problematize the concept and explore how the concept has developed over the years.

As discussed earlier, with the implementation of the modernist paradigm of religion in the 19th century, the secular and the religious were divided as mutually exclusive (Taylor, 2007). In addition, in order to be firmly identifiable, European scholars needed to identify what—besides Christianity—classified as religion (Masuzawa, 2005). Then it is not all that surprising that the great world religions identified at the time were religions that European Protestants thought looked much like their own religion: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Shinto (Masuzawa, 2005). However, there are problems with these identifications. For example, those practicing Hinduism at the time in India never considered what they were doing *religion*. Hinduism was a collection of rituals, practices and beliefs that had been past down through family and society (Halbfass, 1991). Religion was a category imposed on the actions they were conducting (Renou, 1965). However, Indians used this category to their own advantage during colonization. If they were just practicing customs, then the British could prevent them from conducting them, but if they were practicing *religion* then the British had a greater obligation to allow them to practice their religion (Halbfass, 1991). By assuming the category of religion, Indians managed to protect their culture and practices throughout British colonialism (Halbfass, 1991). Another problem with this classificatory system is that it does contain hierarchy, which mainly seems to privilege the degree to which

religions look like Protestantism (Masuzawa, 2005). For example, Judaism is given a capital letter and is a religious tradition with perhaps one million adherents; animism and shamanism each have several million adherents yet the religious traditions are not given a capital letter (Masuzawa, 2005). This indicates the degree to which the classificatory system of *religion* itself has biases rooted in its history.

Chidester (1996) argues that Europeans historically used the concept of religion to provide a vocabulary of difference—a way of differentiating their own practices from the *savage* practices performed by other peoples. In his study of religion in South Africa, Chidester (1996) argues that religion served as a means of domination. Europeans reaffirmed the value of their colonization efforts through arguing they were performing an essential function of proselytization. Europeans used Christianity as a means to dominate the people of South Africa (Chidester, 1996).

More recently, the problem rooted in the classificatory system of religion has involved the degree to which it provides the illusion of equivalency. One of the great misunderstandings of religion in the contemporary age of pluralism is this belief that religions are all essentially the same. Prothero (2008) argues that the only similarity shared across religions is a shared starting place: the assumption that there is something wrong with the world. And there the similarities end. Religions differ on what the problem is, how to address the problem, and what the solution looks like. Christianity, for example, would say that the problem with the world is sin, and the solution is in salvation provided through the person of Jesus Christ. Islam on the contrary would argue that the problem with the world is chaos and the solution is in creating order—a system provided through Islam’s extensive cultural and legal guidelines (Prothero 2008).

In addition, Moore (1986) argues that what has typically classified as *normal* in American religion has actually been what is dominant—an argument which reaffirms the connection between hegemony and narrative. Moore (1986) notes that what has happened on the fringes of religion is what is actually typical of American religion. Moore (1986) reconceptualizes American religion not as what was most common, but by what was essentially American in terms values and origin. Under this way of thinking, Mormonism is remarkably normal in terms of American religion—in that the religious tradition sought to stake out a new understanding of their faith based on “getting back to the way things were”—revisiting an imagined early Christian society—and Mormons also emphasized individualism and American exceptionalism (Moore, 1986). In the current journalistic classificatory system, what happens at the fringes of religion is more often ignored or dismissed as a “cult.”

To problematize the concept of religion does not prevent religion from being a useful concept—and religion is an integral concept to the present research in that the hegemony under the microscope is a religious hegemony. Even with the baggage associated with the word *religion*, the term remains valuable, but what is essential to scholars is that they recognize the degree to which religion is a constructed category (Smith, 1998). And while Smith (1998) argued that scholars needed to understand the constructed nature of the concept of religion, it is equally important for journalists. Reporting on religion is absolutely valuable and essential—there is information in religion reporting that cannot be found in on any other beat and there are issues dealt with in religion reporting that are left untouched on other beats (Mason, 2010).

An essential shift in religious practice happened mid-way through the 20th Century (Wuthnow, 1996). Prior to that point, spirituality in America was essentially dwelling-oriented—religious experiences happened in a place. Thus this corresponded with an emphasis on the local church. In the early-20th century, particularly in urban areas, churches made themselves a resource for the community, offering food, and recreation to the people who passed by its doors. This is emblematic of the degree to which religion was something that happened in a dwelling. However, after this shift Wuthnow (1996) discussed, spirituality became more practice-oriented—religious experiences happened through practices. Thus people felt less attached to houses of worship and more attached to the practices that brought them religious fulfillment. This shift corresponded with changes in all manner of American life—a greater degree of tourism, more travel, more roads, the proliferation of telephones and, most recently, the rise of the internet. American spirituality and American lives ceased to be defined locally, but rather were defined by connections that could span the globe (Wuthnow, 1996).

What precipitated this shift? Wuthnow (1996) identifies a few culprits of this shift, but prominent among them was the rise of mass media. Wuthnow (1996) argues that it would be difficult for people to be content with their dwelling-oriented lifestyle when the television brought images of the world around them right into their living room.

At this point is worth pointing out explicitly what has been noted numerous times by scholars discussing religious paradigms: in each of the cases pointed out by Toennes (2002), Tickle (2008) and Wuthnow (1996), a paradigm shift in religion was precipitated at least in part by developments in media technology. Toennes (1996) pointed to the penny press, Tickle (2008) to movable type in one shift and the arrival of internet

technology in, presumably a future shift, and Wuthnow (1996) to television and the telephone. Such shifts in media technology make gaming, which has been a driver for technological change since its origins in the 1970s (Harris, 2014), an ideal topic to probe for indicators of fundamental paradigmatic change.

Wuthnow's (1996) indicated shift in religious practice had a particularly strong effect on the history of American Protestantism. Hutchinson (1992) traces the rise and disintegration of the *modernist impulse of Protestantism* and notes that in the early-part of the twentieth century, there existed a Protestant modernist movement. This movement had, among its values: cultural immanentism or "the conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture"; religious-based progressivism or "the idea that God is immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it"; and Protestant utopianism or "a belief that human society is moving toward realization...of the Kingdom of God" (Hutchinson, 1992, p. 2). Yet Hutchinson (1992) noted that the movement disappeared in the wake of World War II, under attack on the one side from *secular humanism* and on the other from *fundamentalism*. Although never stated explicitly by Hutchinson (1992), it seems likely, in consideration of Wuthnow (1996) that Protestant modernist thinkers just didn't utilize mass media as well as competing thinkers.

Wuthnow's (1996) shift has caused some to begin to forecast the inevitable end of the modernist paradigm of religion. Putnam and Campbell (2010) note that America is potentially the greatest religious battlefield in history in that it combines great religious diversity, the array of religious traditions, with great religious pluralism, the connections between religious traditions. Yet they argue that what has historically allowed America to

thrive is a web of interconnected relationships across religious traditions (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). For example, despite the fact that many religious traditions believe heaven is exclusive to their tradition, a high percentage of Americans believe that people outside of their tradition can go to heaven. This indicates how this web of interconnected relationships has defined personal religious belief (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Tickle (2008) argues that these interconnected relationships will shape the future of religion in America, perhaps producing a future which sees national barriers break down and produces religion that is in a “relational, non-hierarchal, a-democratized form” (p. 153).

Mass media have given way to niche media and social networks are increasingly self-selected, so this raises questions about whether this web of interconnected relationships has a long-term future. Bender and Klassen (2010), in their collection of essays on pluralism, indicate what one would expect from the end of pluralism—that there is no shared understanding of what comes next. Pluralism has been historically practiced through tolerance and accommodation. While those practices have served society well, there are problems with the paradigm. The underlying assumption of pluralism is that difference is a problem to be solved and it has been solved historically by gathering more liberally oriented religious traditions around a common cause. The problem is that this leaves out certain groups that do not believe in coming to the table. Diminishing differences, as often happens in inter-faith talks, does not lead to greater interfaith understanding (Prothero, 2008). Bender and Klassen (2010) are hesitant to offer an assessment of what comes next, but they argue that whatever paradigm follows pluralism will be characterized by a greater emphasis on learning and listening and fallibilism—an understanding that we may be wrong in our beliefs.

Habermas (2006) offers a less optimistic vision of the future after the modernist paradigm. He argues that religious fundamentalism is on the rise across the globe—implicitly linking Islamic fundamentalists with the Religious Right in America. He argues that the future discourse in America and elsewhere will rest on the degree to which the religiously devout are willing to listen to others. While less optimistic than Bender and Klassen (2010), in some ways this does align with their assessment about bringing people to the table who do not want to come to the table under the terms of pluralism.

This paradigmatic shift away from pluralism has implications for journalistic reporting on religion on an organizational level. A higher degree of religious literacy in the journalistic workplace would be valuable so that journalists reporting on other beats—politics, health, entertainment—can recognize and report stories related to religion that appear tangentially as a part of what they do (Prothero, 2008). Prothero (2008) argues that religious literacy requires a basic understanding of religious norms and an understanding of the current trends in religious practices. This level of understanding regarding norms and values is something journalists are more likely to possess regarding topics that more traditionally part of the public sphere like politics, health and entertainment (Toennes, 2002).

Hoover (1998) explored the reporting of religion in the news and identified a number of areas of normative concern in the study of religion in the news, among them issues of journalistic professionalism and issues related to the changing nature of what classifies as religion. This second normative concern by Hoover (1998) remain especially relevant, particularly as people increasingly find ways to address human needs—

traditionally met through religious institutions—outside of traditionally religious environments.

The practice and operation of American religion has never occurred in a vacuum but has rather been consistently mediated by the press. Understanding press coverage of religion will help provide context for the specific religious phenomena to be explored here, the religion of digital games.

Journalism and Reporting Religion

Covering American religion is not, and perhaps never has been, an easy task for journalists (Rodgers, 2010; Hoover, 1998). If the public is conceived of active (Dewey, 1954), and the public is conceived of as diverse as Calhoun (2002) argues it should be, then this creates both an opportunity and a danger for public discourse on religion in American democracy. In addition, as Putnam and Campbell (2010) argue, America has “volatile” mixture of a high degree of religious pluralism (people of different faiths in close contact) and a high degree of religious diversity (a wide array of religions) (p. 494). This section explores the role of American journalism in the reporting of religion.

Berkowitz and Eko (2007) detail such a danger and opportunity of reporting religion in their study of controversial decision-making processes surrounding the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in *Le Monde* and *The New York Times*. In the cartoons, the Prophet Mohammed is shown with a bomb strapped to his chest. *The New York Times* declined to publish the cartoons and *Le Monde* chose to publish them. The difference in decision making between the two news organizations emphasized that they operate under two different journalistic paradigms and in reports where they detailed why they decided what they decided, Berkowitz and Eko (2007) note that the journalism

organizations engaged in *paradigm maintenance*. In other words, journalists took the opportunity provided by the Mohammed cartoon controversy to remind readers of the purpose of journalism and by doing so, reaffirmed their journalistic paradigm. This was essential, Berkowitz and Eko (2007) argue, in that the battle between those who wanted to keep the cartoons from publishing and those who wanted them to be published was in both cases a battle of religions: Islam and the religion of journalism. They both have sacred rituals, sacred rights, ideals, and creation stories. Berkowitz and Eko's (2007) broad conception of religion builds on the contemporary understanding of religion in American religious studies. If religion is defined in broad way as in Berkowitz and Eko (2007), then exploring the intersection of religion and journalism is in many ways exploring a conversation between two religions (Rosen, 2004, 19 January).

Berkowitz and Eko (2007) argue that the running of the cartoon was a danger in that it represented a volatile issue and a worse-case scenario in relations between religion and the press—any decision made would result in a right being infringed on. Yet the opportunity lay in the paradigm maintenance that took place. Berkowitz and Eko (2007) detail a great moment of public discourse in that those different perspectives had a chance to be heard as to why their right matters. In both cases, a right was infringed upon--by Muslims in France and by journalists in America—but it would be hard to argue that those who followed the story did not come away with a better understanding of why journalism is the way it is and why Islam is the way it is. The active and diverse public, which protested in France and wrote letters to the editor in America, provides a challenge for journalists (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007). On the one hand, if everyone is involved in the public, this presents a great opportunity for journalism to act as a marketplace of ideas,

but if everyone is involved, it is also a great danger in that there is always someone that can be offended (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). An active public is not shy about tweeting, blogging, and Facebooking to let journalists know when they've been offensive (Jenkins, 2006).

As Berkowitz and Eko (2007) argue, journalism is not value-free. Journalism provides a normative lens in making judgments about what constitutes *good* religion as opposed to *bad* religion. The way journalists make these judgments is in part through their work as an interpretive community (Zelizer, 1993). As a community, journalists make sense of stories regarding religion for the public. Considering that journalists tend to be more politically savvy than religiously savvy, this may explain why religion is often collapsed onto politics (Winston, 2012). Through this interpretive community, journalists often make unconscious normative judgments in their coverage.

How does an active and diverse public respond to such messages? If the press is conceived of as Protestant normative and expressive of essentially Protestant values (Silk, 1995; Underwood, 2002), what happens in the depiction of minority perspectives? It's worth noting that in recent years, who is considered a *journalist* has broadened, in that the tools of journalism have been democratized (Knight, 2008). This is important to note in the present study in that many of the individuals labeled as gaming journalists do not work for traditional news entities (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). There are a number of gaming journalists who do not even draw a paycheck from a news organization but rather aggregate information for their specific niche following, and editorialize on aggregated information. This is a trend not just confined to gaming journalism but rather is a trend throughout the industry (Knight, 2008).

Journalism now is often defined more in regards to a method as opposed to solely an occupation (Craft & Davis, 2013). In some ways, this digital era of content aggregation and content repurposing seems to address many of Dewey's (1954) desires for a more *collaborative* form of democracy. A broader and more diverse public than ever is a part of the conversation and this public uses an increasing degree of agency in developing an information diet, not just from news, but also from social media.

Jenkins (2006) discussed this trend in society through his concept of textual poaching, which he applied broadly to how the public responds to popular culture in general. People unconsciously take material from all kinds of sources—news, social media, church, Oprah—in order to make meaning in their lives. They feel completely comfortable taking information out of its context if it serves the cultural meaning they are trying to develop (Jenkins, 2006). This has implications for how the public gathers information regarding religion.

Traditionally, journalistic practice aims toward simple classifications that can grant the citizen the greatest amount of information condensed in the least amount of words; e.g. conservative, liberal, socialist, catholic, evangelical, fundamentalist (Zelizer, 2004). While these classifications could be argued to have value in that they provide a general understanding of where a person, idea, or belief is situated, the classificatory system used by journalists glosses over an array of differences in the religion world—differences that are as important as the similarities used to place people in these categories (Prothero, 2008).

These categories used by journalists help shape the perceived reality of America (Schudson, 2003). Journalism has long been considered an essential tool of public

discourse and for that reason discussion of religion is of great concern in America (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Journalists have a largely impossible task in reporting on religion (Hoover, 1998). Religion is an exceptionally complex topic that is integral to the lives of many in America (Hoover, 1998; Putnam & Campbell, 2010), and journalists are expected to take stories within this topic and distill it to 700 words on a generous day in print news or 30 seconds in broadcast news (Hoover, 1998). Furthermore, journalists are expected to make their work understandable, balanced, and fair despite a high degree of religious illiteracy among both journalists and the public (Hoover, 1998).

While many niche areas of journalism, such as crime, sports and business, have received attention for their coverage of religion, gaming journalism has received little attention (e.g. Wilson, 2011; Price, 2012; Anderson, 2004). This is a result of research gap regarding gaming journalism itself. This is likely a result of how gaming journalism has historically been perceived—a mixture somewhere between editorial, advertising and technology reporting (Williams, 2003).

Gaming Journalism. Among both traditional journalists and gaming journalists, the use of the word *journalism* has been uncomfortable when applied to the gaming press (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). As Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) note, gaming journalism is often accused of having problems related to its organizational structure and its ethics—problems raised publicly in the midst of the GamerGate controversy. That said, it must be acknowledged that these are not problems isolated from other forms of American journalism (McChesney & Nichols, 2010). This section introduces the journalism niche of digital game reporting in order to provide shape to how religious hegemony might be mediated through this source.

Despite the difficulty in assigning a clear moniker to gaming journalism, it is worth noting here that this research will identify all participants in the study as *journalists* as opposed to *critics* or the like. This decision is in part structural in that, while gaming journalists may write in different ways and perform different functions within the niche, they are still within the same niche. In some ways this is similar to the way entertainment reporters are distinguished from movie critics (Haberski, 2001). Yet distinguishing between *journalism* and *criticism*, hard news and soft news, serious news and frivolous news is a clear indication of a modernist bias in journalism (Deuze, 2008). In that this research is interested in challenging the modernist paradigm by revealing hidden assumptions and values—such as the need to separate the *objective* role of journalism from the *subjective* role of criticism—this research will adopt the term *journalism* to identify all of the activities taking place (Deuze, 2008). In addition, even criticism, fulfills the facilitative function of journalism by mediating social commentary (Christians et al., 2009). As such, the use of the term *journalism* by extension reflects a conceptualization of the field broadly as including everyone from infographic developers, editorialists, podcasters, critics and hard news reporters.

Contemporary gaming journalism is a niche that emerged out of business and technology journalism as a result of the unique nature of the medium (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). As mentioned, much of gaming journalism is oriented toward the facilitative role. In addition, the press also gives voice to the voiceless. In the 1980s and 1990s, digital games suffered the same dismissal and disregard with which journalists treated television and movies during their early years (Williams, 2003).

Even though moving pictures began to circulate in the early 1900s, serious mainstream journalistic film criticism did not take hold until the 1940s (Haberski, 2001). The lack of criticism made sense to journalists in the early 1900s—criticism was meant for art. In that era, most labeled theater and music as art, but movies were lowbrow (Haberski, 2001). With digital games, the population of players grew rapidly and with intensity (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). As Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) note, early gaming enthusiasts unsurprisingly were drawn to early gaming magazines, which provided previews, reviews, trend stories and even how-to computer programming information they could find nowhere else.

Early gaming journalism appeared similar to the largely editorial content in television or movie criticism (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). In some cases, as in the case of the early *Nintendo Power*, gaming journalism was simply the marketing arm of digital game developers who were eager to create awareness for specific games (Sheff, 1993). *Nintendo Power* was the first digital game magazine to achieve a mass audience³ and thus it is not surprising that many journalists characterized gaming journalism as essentially marketing (Sheff, 1993; Gillen, 2004, March 23). But *Nintendo Power* was not the only digital game magazine at the time.

GamePro magazine debuted in 1989, covering digital games on all platforms, computers and even arcade cabinets. As Reilly (2011) reported for *Game Informer*, this diverse array of content is in contrast to its main competition at the time, *Nintendo Power*, which only covered Nintendo products. *GamePro* gained a reputation for critical

³ *Nintendo Power* began as a mailing list for the Nintendo Fan Club. When the publishers announced *Nintendo Power* magazine in 1988, they immediately had 1.5 million mailing list readers who paid to subscribe to the magazine (Sheff, 1999).

reviews of poor games and for the “Buyers Beware” section in which readers could send complaints about issues with defective games (Reilly, 2011). In January 1995, *GamePro* shared that with more than 500,000 subscribers, *GamePro* was the most popular digital game magazine in the United States (Good Quality, 1995).⁴ There has always been some diversity among digital game players, but less so with *GamePro*’s readership. *GamePro* cultivated a highly desirable, niche audience: 97 percent of readers were male and 64 percent of readers were between the ages of 12 and 17 (Wanted, 1997). This is less representative of the gaming community today where women constitute 47 % of the gaming population (Industry Facts, 2013; Niebord & Sihvonen, 2009). *GamePro* in many ways set the standard for a number of other similar digital game magazines that spread in the 1990s—*Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *PC Gamer*. The magazine presented the first indication that independently verifiable reporting could take place in the digital game niche (Perreault, 2014a).

GamePro magazine closed in 2010 and *Nintendo Power* did as well in 2012—in many ways, they were both casualties of the development of the journalism niche they helped to create (Reilly, 2011). Now gaming journalism takes place largely in online contexts—*Entertainment Weekly*, *The New York Times*, *Forbes Magazine*, *Wired Magazine* and *IGN* all currently offer differing degrees of gaming journalism online (Niebord & Sihvonen, 2009). The shape of that journalism differs by publication, but in general, it follows a similar model to *GamePro* with reviews and previews that are largely editorial in nature, mixed with standard reported pieces on topics like gender

⁴ This claim also indicates that *GamePro*’s editorial staff did not consider *Nintendo Power* to be gaming journalism.

depictions in games, development in technology, and industry news featuring game companies (Niebord & Sihvonen, 2009).

Few studies examine the discourse in gaming journalism. Not only does gaming journalism narrate the development of gaming culture, but participates—serving as a forum for reader concerns and a central hub for readers interested in gaming (Perreault, 2014a). According to a previous study (Perreault, 2014a), even before the proliferation of the internet, gaming magazine readers were conceptualized as active and a great deal of space was provided to comment sections and to topics that emerged from reader questions and concerns. Thus gaming journalism would be fruitful area for exploration in terms of mediated religion in that, even in early years, such discourse would not be confined just to content creators but would be highly responsive to readership.

The content being mediated in this case is a phenomena of American religion that occurs within the digital game. Yet the digital game is still a new enough medium that bears explanation of the nature of what gaming journalists mediate and where the religion in those games appears.

Digital Games

What is a digital game and why is it worthy of a niche area of journalism? The statistics regarding digital games speak for themselves. Currently, 72 percent of households play digital games (Winslett, 2013). Fifty-two percent of people own a dedicated gaming console and those who do own a dedicated console own an average of two of them. Fifty-three percent of players are male and forty-seven percent are female (Industry Facts, 2013). Even back in the 1990s, two-thirds of households owned a Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES. To cast an eye toward the future, gaming is

nearly ubiquitous—97 percent of youth 14 to 18 play digital games regularly (Irvine, 2008).

In the following section, the digital game will be explored to make a case for the salience of the digital game as a journalistic topic to explore for both explicit and implicit religious values. As a fairly recent phenomena, it would be useful to explain the parameters of the digital game during its brief history, and to introduce the thin, though growing scholarship of religion as it has appeared in games.

First, it would be useful to parse the terminology used in discussing this topic because there are a few different terms used which could potentially refer to the same thing. *Digital game* is the parlance that is increasingly appealing the academy in that it accurately gets at the contemporary means of distribution and computing. Games are often distributed digitally, and, even when players purchase a physical disc, the files read by their personal computer or game console are digital files. As such, the term accurately describes the process but at times, the term is misunderstood to only refer to games that are distributed digitally—as is the case with mobile and social games. It is the term of choice for the Games Studies Division in the National Communication Association and the journal *Games & Culture*. *Video game* is the more historically inclusive term in that video games are simply games played with a video screen. So playing chess, Sudoku and *Super Mario Bros.* on a video screen would making them all video games, even if the former two have real world counter parts. It is worth noting that the term *video game* does have some utility in the academy in that it the term of choice for the Games Studies Division at the International Communication Association.

This aside should prove useful in that throughout the literature review, and throughout this study, different terms will be used by scholars and by study participants that all refer to the same medium. But as was noted above, the different terms have different emphases.

At the close of the 1990s, Mazzi Binasisa described the digital games in the following way.

In tracking the evolution of the digital game, I realize that it is not to blame for any dumbing-down of the youth. The games that people play are a reflection of their wants and also of our growing desire as a society to be preoccupied. Digital games are escapist, they do not challenge us in the way that many traditional games do...[Digital games] are no longer a luxury item or indeed the new cool. For millions globally they will simply be a footnote of their youth (Binasisa, 2002, p. 45).

The digital game is, at the very least, a lightning rod for debate (Williams, 2003). At one time, many derided digital games as child's play, dangerous for the brain and a hobby for computer geeks (Gee, 2003). In many ways paper-based games served as the prototype culture of the digital games culture that would come later (Vorderer & Bryant, 2006). In America, digital gaming by no means arose out of a time period with great disposable income and great free time. On the contrary, digital games developed mass popularity in the midst of a recession in the early 1990s. In 1987, a stock collapse began a period of financial recession that continued until 1992 (Browning, 2007).

Each year, digital games make more money than Hollywood—a trend that began after the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System in America in 1985 (Gee, 2003).

The movie industry continues to produce sequels and the television industry continues to remake old television shows, while the digital game industry provides some of the most innovative storytelling. The digital game medium has developed far beyond a way to waste time (Bogost, 2007).

The ascension of digital games to the pinnacle of media consumership has not been without setbacks. Since digital game technology went mainstream in the early-1990s, the American news media frequently condemned gaming culture (Williams, 2003).

Consistent with prior new media technologies, video games passed through marked phases of vilification followed by partial redemption.

Also consistent with prior media, games served as touchstones for larger struggles within the culture—so much so that perhaps ‘lightning rod’ is a better term (Williams, 2003, p. 9).

This concern about the games could be a result of the interactive nature of digital games (Ryan, 2001). Loftus and Loftus (1983) argue that a digital game is fundamentally different from all other types of games throughout history because of its reliance on computing technology. That said, the reliance on computers may not account for a *fundamental* difference in that humans have always used technology—broadly defined—for play; paper, books, and wheels are all technologies. Humans have always had rules-based systems of play and that is, in essence, what a digital game is: a structured method of digital play (Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008). Humans use games to connect with each other. Technology changes the means of those connections and that may cause concern (Raney, Smith & Baker, 2006).

A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome and consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (Juul, 2005, p. 6-7).

Games, both digital and physical, are composed of four primary features: *representation*, in that games are typically about something else besides the gaming experience; *interaction*, in that players can influence the world of the game and get a meaningful response; *conflict*, in that games have a goal blocked by obstacles; and *safety*, in that conflicts in a game do not carry the same consequences as those in the real world (Crawford, 1982). Understanding the nature of games will help provide context for the appearance and experience of religion in them as well as indicate the places where such religion may be mediated.

These features indicate that the digital game creates a learning environment (Gee, 2003). As education scholar James Paul Gee (2003) notes, digital games address a high number of learning principles. Learning brings about what Gee (2003) describes as an *embodied experience* in which meanings are discovered in the encountering of different signs—words, actions and objects (Gee, 2003). It indicates a degree of visceral presence in a digital space (Gee, 2003). This *embodied experience* is similar to that of a person interacting with other mass media, but in digital games, story narratives work differently. Choice characterizes the experience of learning through gaming. Crawford's (1982) four features extend from the two sides of the theoretical arc that run through digital game technology studies: how players affect their avatar and how avatars affect the player.

The player participates in the game through the avatar but also is a spectator of the game as well. The player experiences the avatar's world, and watches it as a sort of interactive movie. The player simultaneously wants to play the game but also see himself doing it (Rehak, 2003). Being a spectator is changed if the player takes part in the actions and similarly, being a participant is changed if the player watches himself doing it. Both actions are changed.

Gee (2003) argues that learning challenges, reinforces and/or hones cultural models. He notes that a good book or good speech can bring about this learning and thus there is reason to suggest that digital games can as well (Gee, 2003). If gaming educates, what does it educate about? That has been a topic hotly debated since digital games went mainstream in the early 1990s (Gee, 2003).

The playing of a game often encourages players to look inward (Bowman, 2010). As Bowman (2010) notes, a rising number of digital games, particularly among those created for mass audiences, fall broadly under the genre of *role-playing game*. Such games originally were connected solely with fantasy and science-fiction; but interpreted more broadly, most narratively-based games now encourage players to play a role. And many of them also encourage gamers to develop their own identity. The development of this fantasy identities is, first, necessary for a healthy psychic and social life and, second, a site in which a player's religious values can come through or religion may be encountered (Bowman, 2010). "Unlike the passive experience of watching a film or reading a book, these games encourage players to actively take part in the adventure, sometimes even developing their own stories and characters" (Bowman, 2010, p. 8).

Bowman (2010) argues that people use the fantasy in digital games as a method of self-expression. It is not necessarily an escape from reality, in that gamers never forget they are playing a game, but it is consequence-free space for gamers to explore both the digital world and themselves (Bowman, 2010).

At times, there are elements of games that are lost in translation—religion included (Likareh, 2014). Many digital games continue to be made in Japan and an increasing number of games are made in Europe (Tresca, 2011). Yet what makes games appealing to American audiences differs from other audiences (Street, 2013). According to the game designer from the popular Japanese game franchise *Dragon Quest*, Yuji Horii: “Japanese are very skill-motivated and easily drawn into processes, including games, where tireless diligence is rewarded. But in the US, for example, people tend to get irritated if the desired results are not immediate” (“Seizing the computer”, 1999). This difference in preferred modes of play is historically rooted in the paper games that preceded digital games. In Japan, for instance, long form games like *Go!* have been historically popular, whereas the US favors shorter games such as *Checkers* (Sheff, 1999; Vorderer & Bryant, 2006).

This section introduced the parameters of the digital game, what it is and the discourse regarding it. The following section will explore the specific religious phenomena of interest in an exploration of the religious hegemony of gaming journalists—the religion in the content on which they report. This next section will place religion in gaming within the larger context as a medium of consumption—building on the idea of the religious hegemony in the marketplace—and explore both the explicit and implicit religion in gaming.

Religion in Gaming. What is the difference between popular culture and media? This is a topic of some contention. According to Jenkins (2006), popular culture is a bit more inclusive than media in including things that could start out on an individual basis but gradually include a mass audience. Media is typically considered to have a mass audience. And on a conceptual level, the term popular culture tends to lend itself toward discussions of the consumption of content while the term media tends to lend itself toward discussions of the production of content (Forbes & Mahan, 2000; Jenkins, 2006). Popular culture is a lens that can be applied to digital games that focuses on consumption as opposed to media production (Jenkins, 2006). Considering consumption in digital games is useful if one is interested in the explicit and implicit religion of gaming. This section situates the religion in digital games as a mode of popular culture that expresses itself in both an explicit and implicit manner.

Popular culture and religion are interacting to an increasing degree: active churches in *Second Life*; religious beliefs being presented implicitly and explicitly in *LOST*, *Breaking Bad* and *The Lord of the Rings*; and mega churches using video clips from television shows and movies to help illustrate sermon points (Forbes and Mahan, 2000). Forbes and Mahan (2000) promote a typology of the ways in which religion and popular culture interact:

- 1-Religion in Popular Culture—explores depictions of religion in popular culture.
- 2-Popular Culture in Religion—explores the use of popular culture by religious institutions.
- 3-Religion is Popular Culture—explores how popular culture operates as religion.

4-Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue—explores the discourse between religion and popular culture on ethics and values.

What journalists have rarely done, but is worthy of exploration, is examine the conflation of religion and popular culture. From a journalistic perspective, it is easy to understand why journalists have not explored this more thoroughly. The existing norms and conceptions of religion in journalism see religion as something that can be easily categorized along the lines of traditional religious institutions (Masuzawa, 2005). This interaction is disruptive of that understanding.

People tend to find this line of inquiry odd in journalistic, and many times in public, circles. Drawing religion from popular culture is seen as somehow less “authentic” than religion in traditional religious institutions (Chidester, 2005). But as Chidester (2005) argues, even “fake” religions can serve authentic religious functions. So for example, in Bainbridge’s (2013) digital ethnography of the massively multiplayer online world, he found people engaging in the fictional religions of digital games. The fact that the religions were “fictional” made little difference in the function they served for people. Chidester (2005) would similarly argue that the religious devotion that surrounds media products (like *Star Trek*) and other products in the market place (such as Coca-Cola and Apple) serve a religious function in people’s lives (Robinson, 2013).

One reason for the continuing change in how people practice religion is related to the digital world in which they live (Wagner, 2012). Wagner (2012), like Bainbridge, studied the virtual world to develop her theory of “gaming as religion.” Since the 1990s, everyday practices are increasingly intertwined with new forms of media (Campbell, 2014). Campbell, building on the work of Walter Ong (1967), argues that different forms

of media allow for different forms of religiosity. So just as the printed book made Protestantism possible, the digital game makes new forms of religion possible. Looking at those media forms then can help reveal something about the religious environment of a culture (Campbell, 2014).

According to Wagner (2012), people are increasingly interfacing with virtual reality and in many ways, religion and virtual reality play a similar role—they create a “sacred space” for people where they can play, perform ritualistic functions (e.g. when a player’s avatar dies and the player knows to reset the game). While people generally do not consider what happens in religion to revolve around play, in some ways that is what occurs—play within a sacred atmosphere (Wagner, 2014). And people do not typically tend to think of what happens in games to be ritualistic, but in many ways that is what occurs. Ritual is play (Wagner, 2012).

Explicit religion in gaming. To say that religious activity and practice appears in gaming implies that a depiction has been created. Depiction is a concept that has rarely been explicated but for the purposes of this manuscript a depiction will be defined as “images, in both symbolic and non-symbolic form, which represent entities, people, institutions and ideas in both verbal and visual ways by the perceptual power granted by an audience grounded in culture and time” (Perreault, 2013, p. 16). This definition of depiction is of particular importance for both journalism and gaming in that if a “depiction” of religion is limited to just the visual (Goodman, 1976; Gombrich, 1977; Walton, 1973) or just the textual (Gathercole, 2000; Dickerman et al., 2008) much is lost. In both digital games and journalism about digital games, what creates a depiction has much to do with the interaction of the visual and the textual (Perreault, 2013). Media

forms are methods of communication, which never truly represent the reality of that which is being represented, but that does not decrease the value of the cooperative sharing of ideas that occurs (Peters, 2012). It is difficult to represent all the nuances, trends and traditions inherent in millennia of religion in a single digital game. Games, like all signs, go through an encoding/decoding process. The history, culture and context that inform the creation of a game can all be encoded. And all those things come into play in how a depiction is decoded (Hall, 1973).

And while the process of depiction is imperfect, there's a reason why there are blogs dedicated to coverage of religion in the press, there are books dedicated to images of religion in television (Kaye, 2008; Potter and Marshall, 2008; Seay, 2009; Winston, 2009; Wolf & Perron, 2003) and online message boards about images of religion in digital games (Nazifpour, 2010; Murdoch, 2010). Religion is exceptionally important in America in particular, not just to adherents but to the cultures it informs (Putnam and Campbell, 2010).

That said, religious depictions in American digital games are a largely new phenomenon (Likarish, 2014). In the 1980s and 1990s, the vast majority of popular games was published in Japan and went through a localization process before being published in America. As Likarish (2014) notes, the localization process of digital games is more than simply a translation. Themes, imagery and characters are altered, at times to a substantial degree. Games that share a name in Japan and America are nearly two different games after localization has occurred (Likarish, 2014). The localization process commonly involved suppressing or even censoring explicit religious depictions (Likarish, 2014). And while dictated censorship of religious imagery largely ceased in the mid-

1990s, it is only in recent years that digital games have eschewed the trend of avoiding religious topics (Likarish, 2014).

Few have explored explicit religious depictions in games, but two studies in particular have emphasized the degree to which religious depictions in games tend to emphasize conflict. In exploring depictions of religion in games, an earlier study (Perreault, 2013) found that narratives in games heavily emphasized crusader motifs, which, as a result, ended up linking religion to violence. Players often play as a hero who must exercise force in order to accomplish some sort of divine task; so in a sense, the depicted God figure requires the players to fight. Visual indicators of religion—the sign of the cross, color schemes and Pope-like garb—made for an explicit depiction of religion when contextualized by textual information in the form of archives and character names (Perreault, 2013).

Wagner (2013) similarly found a wide array of crusader narratives in digital games, but also found that the structure of the game helped support the narrative. Game designers present a *narrative architecture* for game play and story with which gamers can interact (Jenkins, 2002). Wagner (2013) argues that the narrative architecture of digital games imposes order: there are clear winners and losers, friends and enemies. This is especially true in first-person shooter games. Thus Wagner (2013) argues that the nature of games privileges the depiction of religions that support a clear order, which explains the emphasis on crusader and the black-and-white theology implicit in such narratives.

As gaming technology has grown more powerful and the ability to provide more realistic representations, representations of the real world in digital games have increased, and thus, there have been representations of religion (Sisler, 2014). That said, the

representations examined often fall in line with the representations noted in much of media and religion literature—overly simplified with exaggerations of sensation-worthy features (Sisler, 2014).

However, digital games do not simply mirror culture, but alter the assumptions about it as well, providing the potential to inform and interpret religious practice (Campbell, 2014). The discussions about religion in games are not just about what is on the surface of the games, but also about the practice of game play itself.

Implicit Religion of Gaming. According to Wagner (2012), American religion is undergoing rapid changes as a result of interfacing with virtual reality. This section will explore the implications of this for understanding the *religious* nature of game play itself. These experiences raise important questions about what makes a place sacred. What makes a game *religious* is more than just the scattered use of religious terminology (Waltemathe, 2014).

Wagner (2012) argues that virtual reality serves as an ordered space and as a site where players can take part in world building, or cosmos construction. Both religion and virtual reality are concerned with a “mode of being that lies beyond our ordinary day-to-day experiences” (p. 2). Wagner (2012) likens play to ritual in that both are forms of order-making designed around stepping out of real life. Digital game play is the most poignant component of the virtual world in that it is the one most easily conceived of as ritual (Wagner, 2012). First there are the tasks of turning on the console, loading the game, playing the game, saving the game and then turning off the console. But then there is also what takes place during the game, e.g. a repetition of button pressing tasks, the player killing his/her avatar and then bringing it back to life by reloading the game.

Digital games and ritual serve similar tasks in persons' lives, even if digital game play is not traditionally seen as religious (Wagner, 2012).

The key misconception in understanding gaming as religion is by placing them in binary opposition where gaming is considered *fun*, and religion is considered *serious* (Wagner, 2014). This binary ignores the playful aspects of religion and the serious depictive and experiential power of games.

If one is to consider gaming as a religion, then it has a religious history, it has tenets and it has foundational stories from which it operates (Smart, 1996). Furthermore, if one is to look at how people practice religion as opposed to what a religious text prescribes for a religion, then one finds a number of dimensions can work together to create a religion phenomenon. In Smart's (1996) typology, he identifies (1) a doctrinal, philosophical dimension, (2) a ritual dimension, (3) an ethical, legal dimension, (4) a materialist dimension, (5) a mythic, narrative dimension, (6) an experiential, emotional dimension, (7) a social dimension and (8) a political dimension.

The social dimension is of particular concern in discussions of "religion as gaming." There are, after all, religious communities that exist only online, if that's the case then could not one argue that the online world could serve as a communal space? The Internet serves as a spiritual network. People use cyberspace to transcend space and time, a religious act in and of itself (Campbell, 2005, 2010; Dawson & Cowan, 2004). This online space could be argued to serve as a public sphere. Both academics and non-academics should be concerned about the role of religion in the public sphere as religion plays a role in political deliberation (Habermas, 2006). So understanding the religion in gaming is exceptionally salient. Wagner (2012) argues that the depictions, operation and

experience of digital game play can serve the same functions as a religious tradition.

Religion as a game expresses how “we wish things would be” (Wagner, 2014, p. 210).

So the mediation of such cultural longing through digital games at once raises questions about how these human wishes are mediated and reinforces that such mediation may be informed a religious hegemony. Exploring such mediation through a hegemony and narrative theoretical framework will help identify the degree to which journalistic coverage of such “wishes” tells us about what is normal and what is reasonable in a society. This exploration has implications for the nature of American religion, the nature of the modernist paradigm of religion, and journalistic coverage of religion.

CHAPTER 3- QUALITATIVE MULTI-METHOD STUDY DESIGN

Religion has never been a topic that is easy to nail down. It is complex, multi-faceted and how it functions can differ from person to person (Hoover, 1998; Buddenbaum, 2002). Furthermore, even as traditional religion has declined, there's been an increasing awareness of the degree to which people use media for religious purposes, religion has been using media to reaffirm its values, and even media has served as a religion for some. In America, religion has historically been dwelling-oriented—about bringing individuals to sacred spaces (Wuthnow, 1986). That has changed. In an age of Oculus Rift virtual reality headsets, massively multiplayer online gaming, online dating apps for smartphones and social media, the virtual world is increasingly becoming a sacred space (Wagner, 2012). The current religious landscape is ripe for confusion and there resides the value of the qualitative approach with its emphasis on developing greater understanding (Yin, 2011).

This research developed out of the interpretivist scholarly tradition and does not claim generalizability of findings. Interpretive theory has “the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted,’ and thereby to generate fresh alternatives for social action” (Gergen, 1982, 109). Interpretivism serves as a research paradigm that helps inform a number of theories in research, yet as was discussed earlier, the social construction of reality is foundational to interpretivism. In this way, theories both spring from and can help explore paradigms. In

the same way, this study seeks to apply hegemony and narrative theory, which have their own paradigmatic origins, to explore the modernist paradigm of religion.

The present study explores the existence of religious hegemony and how this is evidenced in gaming journalism. Examining how gaming journalists discuss the religion and values presented in digital games addresses Protestant normativity in that many of the most popular narratively oriented games continue to come from Japan, which is not a Protestant normative culture. Based on preliminary reading of American gaming journalism, American gaming journalists seem to have trouble knowing how to address the Japanese gaming emphasis on collecting demons, unrealistic displays of violence, killing God (or gods) and being placed in ethical scenarios where the player is granted little or no agency. Yet such anecdotal evidence is hardly substantive and the literature of religion in gaming—particularly related to the process of localization (Likaresh, 2014)—indicates that such empirical analysis in this area would be welcome.

Gaming journalism is an ideal location for paradigmatic research in that change often occurs at the fringes. While eventually Galileo would upend the scientific establishment, during much of his career the heliocentrism was a fringe concern—most scientists believed that the Earth was the center of the universe (Kuhn, 1996). And in journalism, there is a history of fringe journalism techniques becoming mainstream. After all, literary journalism began as a fringe part of journalism that was influential in the development of narrative in mainstream journalism (Hartsock, 2000). Even web reporting began as a fringe activity in journalism that developed into the central activity of contemporary journalism (Scott, 2005). In a similar manner, gaming journalism represents a uncomfortable journalistic fringe for a few reasons: a troublingly close

relationship with the marketplace (Sheff, 1999), an emphasis on first-person, experiential reporting (Carless, 2007, April 12; Gillen, 2004, March 23), the sharing of at-times unverified rumors (Mannion, 2013, December 24), and the low-brow nature of the subject matter analyzed (Mannion, 2013, December 24). Taken together, these place gaming journalism at the fringe of the journalistic world—yet one can acknowledge that the concerns noted about gaming journalism are hardly nonexistent throughout other areas of journalism. Furthermore, what these concerns speak to is interdisciplinarity—journalism mixing with marketing and memoir (Moran, 2010). Locating interdisciplinary lines of inquiry is another way in which explore paradigms, in that the interaction between disciplines can challenge aspects of existing paradigms while providing explanatory content for future paradigms (Moran, 2010).

Pluralism is the dominant religious approach in our current religion paradigm, a paradigm that is beginning to show signs of shifting. Broadly speaking, this data builds on theoretical research into hegemony. The analysis of hegemony occurs through the central research questions of this study. The other research questions should help address these first three.

RQ 1: How does religious hegemony operate in gaming journalism?

RQ 2a: What is the nature of religious hegemony in gaming journalism?

RQ 2b: What are the ways in which religious hegemony affirms or challenges the modernist paradigm of religion?

In classic media gatekeeping terms, hegemony occurs at a media system and media institutional level—in which case the key unit of analysis is article, which provides the evidence of what has occurred at these levels (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In order to

explore that production, two types of data were collected—interviews from the gaming journalists, and gaming journalism articles. The two types of data were analyzed simultaneously and findings from the data were used in the continued research of the other. Interviews with journalists indicated the hegemonic nature of what is in the text.

The analysis of the production was informed by semi-structured interviews with gaming journalists from a variety of publications—*Joystiq*, *Kotaku*, *VICE*, *GamePro Magazine*, *Forbes*, *IGN*, *Polygon*, *RPGFan*, *RPGamer*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *Entertainment Weekly*. In these interviews, journalists were asked how they found stories, collected stories, what went into a “good” games journalism article, and specific questions about coverage as related to their own work. These interviews were coded for initial narrative frames.

The interviews informed a set of narrative frames then applied to the textual analysis. In addition, the research remained aware of additional frames that arose from the textual analysis but were limited to the produced content. The narrative framing analysis was conducted on news game journalism reviews from many of above publications in the year 2013. *Game Informer* was examined in addition although journalists refused to participate as a result of the GamerGate controversy. The year 2013 presented a unique emphasis on religion in the games released (Fahey, 2010, 5 April).

Reviews are an effective journalistic product to explore for religious hegemony in that they serve as a sort “evaluative journalism” (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009, p. 3).

Reviews are a place where, naturally, journalists execute a normative approach in telling readers what they should or should not purchase (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009) and where they are most likely to have to play a game as a part of their research. In a sense, reviews

operate as a sort of *prophetic journalism* except that the journalists would likely not consider their judgments as having any sort of moral basis or moral judgment (Underwood, 2002) and so this is a sensible location to examine for elements of religious hegemony as expressed through narrative frameworks.

For example, a hypothetical review of an American-made digital game may be more detailed in its description of the world presented and read almost like a piece of digital tourism. This displays a degree of identification with the subject of the journalist's analysis. If lesser description is offered, or if description is couched in a tone of distaste, this could indicate a lesser degree of identification, which could indicate a different hegemonic framework has been encountered.

Interviews

The interviews with gaming journalists address the following research questions:

RQ 3: What narrative frames emerge from interviews with gaming journalists?

RQ 4: How do gaming journalists conceptualize the digital game?

RQ 5: What do these frames and conceptualizations imply in regards to an implicit religious framework?

The interview is valuable because it gives research subjects a voice, and some degree of agency in the research process (Yin, 2011). The key for researchers conducting interviews is not to conceive of those interviewed as subjects or participants but as people with a story to tell and a lesson to teach (Yin, 2011). Those interviewed are informants in that they teach the researcher how to understand the phenomena analyzed and how an interviewee views the world (McCracken, 1988; Weiss, 1994).

Weiss (1994) presented three primary functions of interviews: interpretation, summary and integration. In addition, interviews help researchers in describing a culture and understanding complicated processes. In the interview process, people can provide stories, accounts and explanations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). A key strength of the interview method is in the “wealth of detail that it provides” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 139). Interviews are especially valuable in studying journalists in that it provides clarity in understanding their work production process as well as the content they produce (Gans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978).

This dissertation research aimed for approximately 20 semi-structured interviews and 17 were obtained. Interview ranged in duration from 45 minutes to nearly an hour and a half. The number of interviews allowed the researcher to perform multiple interviews at some gaming journalism outlets and this ensured that a single person does not carry too much weight in speaking for their organization. Furthermore, journalists who reviewed digital games or edited reviews of digital games were privileged and this helped to limit the number of journalists. In that a given outlet has a limited number of reporters assigned to this task. Interviewees were conducted until theoretical saturation is achieved. Interviews were gathered via the snowball method with the researcher asking initial contacts for assistance in connecting with journalists at other publications.

Semi-structured interviews attempt to achieve a balance between asking uniform questions that address research questions and being open to follow-up questions and other concepts that may emerge during the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). These interviews were conducted via Skype and phone and drew journalists from *IGN*, *Kotaku*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Forbes*, *Polygon*, *The Guardian*, *VICE*, *RPGFan*,

RPGamer, *The New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Joystiq*. The number of outlets selected reflects an array of different media models, journalistic approaches, and a general sense of gaming journalism. *Electronic Gaming Monthly* represents the old guard of fan-oriented magazines, which are heavily subsidized by advertisements from digital game companies. *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* are international newspapers that in recent years have begun reviewing video games both online and in print through its personal technology and arts departments. *Forbes* is a traditional business magazine that has spawned a lively “geek” blog on its website dedicated to television, movies and digital games. *Entertainment Weekly* has long covered games from an entertainment standpoint. *IGN*, *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, *Joystiq*,⁵ *RPGFan* and *RPGamer* represent a new wave of gaming journalism that is online-only, emphasizing aggregation, a mixture of short news briefs, longer reviews and first-person reflections. Each utilizes a wide base of freelancers as well as a small staff of prolific bloggers.

Per the approval of the Institutional Review Board, journalists all received a cover letter and were told that their names and affiliations may be used in the dissertation study. However, in the wake of the GamerGate controversy, the researcher reassessed the risks to participants and judged that it would be wise to grant them anonymity. Since this study is most interested in the religious normativity operating at an institutional level, the identity of individual journalists was deemed to be largely immaterial to the study. That said, it is worth stating that the individuals included represent a large body of experience in gaming journalism, often with significant mainstream journalistic credentials, and

⁵ *Joystiq* was the first among these to appear on the Internet in June 2004. During the time of this study, in February 2015, *Joystiq* closed due to declining readership (Crescente, January 30, 2015). The interviews from *Joystiq* were conducted prior to the closure of the website.

many of whom are well known in the field. In the analysis that follows, participants are labeled solely by letter as is the recommended ethical approach, according to the American Psychological Association.

Of the journalists interviewed, 15 were male and 2 were female with an average of 8.6 years experience writing and reporting on games. While more men than women inhabit the niche, the exaggerated difference in the sample is owed to the Gamergate controversy, which will be discussed in the more depth in the conclusion. Yet, this by no means implies a uniformity in the sample in that substantial differences in background and experience exist. The vast majority of gaming journalists operate in New York and San Francisco, which are hubs for the gaming industry. This was represented in the sample with 6 gaming journalists stationed in New York, 5 in San Francisco, and the rest in various places in the United States and even one journalist abroad. The journalists interviewed were in a variety of places on the employment ladder. Of the journalists interviewed, 4 were editor-in-chief, 3 were reviews editor, 3 were senior reporters/writers, and other journalists included 3 freelance journalists (with regular homes for their writing), a senior editor, a managing editor, a news editor and a senior art director who serves as the authority for games at his or her publication. Journalists were also socialized in different manners in that while 9 interview subjects attended major, ranked journalism schools (such as Columbia University, Arizona State University, University of California Berkley and Missouri School of Journalism), the 8 others attended lesser-known schools for journalism. This speaks to a variety in the journalistic training. These backgrounds also exemplify the fact that gaming journalism falls within the field of journalism, as opposed to being a distinct field of criticism.

Interviews were conducted over a three-month period beginning August 2014 and concluding November 2014. The length of time takes into account the high number of game releases and consumer technology conferences that take place during the beginning of a year and near the holidays—making it difficult to reach gaming journalists for an interview. Furthermore, stretching out the period of interview collection allowed the textual portion of the study to begin, which helped shaped questions to inform the interviews.

All journalists were asked the same basic set of questions (see Appendix A), however, differences will exist—primarily, in that journalists will be asked about some of their own specific game coverage and the researcher may ask follow-up questions in order to clarify or pursue a line of inquiry which may be relevant to the study at hand (Weiss, 1994).

Narrative Framing Text Analysis

The narrative framing text analysis analyzed two sets of gaming journalism. The first set was drawn from publications in 2013 and the second set was drawn from a similar list of publications from 1993. First, the texts were looked at as a collective whole of 116 articles and then the coverage between the two time frames were compared. Seventy-four articles were drawn from the 2013 text study and forty-two were drawn from 1993. Articles were collected aiming to explore one article from every publication each month. Reviews on the same games were privileged to be able to give attention to the underlying narratives when the topic discussed would be relatively similar. More details regarding the selection of reviews will be discussed below. The narrative framing text analysis was implemented to address the following research questions:

RQ 6: How does American gaming journalism narrate “difference” in regards to Japanese and American made games?

RQ 7: How does American gaming journalism narrate explicit ethics, values and religious beliefs presented in games?

RQ 8: How does American gaming journalism narrate the implicit values regarding technology and society?

RQ 9: How does American gaming journalism narrate independence from (a) the market (digital game industry) and (b) the state (America)?

RQ 10: What narrative frames are most privileged in gaming journalism?

This set of questions relies most heavily on the 2013 set of articles as it is most relevant in revealing the current state of the gaming journalism niche. The narrative framing approach was chosen because it allows analytical categories to arise naturally. Johnstone (2008) noted that this approach highlights the ways in which people decide their identity and behavior and as well as use their identity as a discursive practice. This approach is fitting since there are few aspects of identity more influential than that of religion (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). This approach also pinpoints linguistic “politeness”—the ways that journalists indicate that the people they are describing are human beings too. The press has learned to tiptoe around issues of religion (Mattingly, 1983; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Marshall, Gilbert, Ahmanson et al., 2008). In this study, many of the most telling depictions of religion are subtle, hidden beneath the veil of “politeness” (Mattingly, 1983). So a method that allowed for that was beneficial to the study. Furthermore, narrative framing applies the foundation of narrative theory to reveal that which a society finds reasonable and acceptable (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998).

As in Hertog and McLeod (2001), this study regards narrative frames as ‘structures of meaning made up of a number of concepts and the relations among those concepts’ (p. 140). This approach employs the dynamic nature of frames as a means with which to assimilate and understand new information. They are the more tangible expression of the master narratives that structure the connections between broad concepts and content (Reese & Lewis, 2009).

Reese (2001) identifies two essential paths to framing analysis: the “how” and the “what.” The “how” path is concerned with how journalists, policy makers in the like leverage frames in order to accomplish some predetermined path (Reese, 2001). As the literature for this study suggests, the “how” path could be disadvantageous in that the frames that appearing here—far from being strategic—are nearly unconscious. What is more useful in addressing the concerns of this study is the “what” path, which is concerned with frame-building and the content of the frame (Reese, 2001). An important step in framing analysis is in identifying the framing devices employed—in particular by watching for the linguistic structures such as metaphors, visual icons, and catchphrases that indicate a particular frame (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Such structures are identified during the course of the study and help inform frame identification. Furthermore, such linguistic structures, Gramsci (2012) argues, serves as the basic building blocks of hegemony. Utilizing narrative framing, which can break down the hegemonic to its most basic level, would be of substantial value to the study.

In order to demonstrate the utility of narrative framing analysis and to explain its utility to this study, an article from *Forbes* will be analyzed and probed for connections to research questions.

The year is 1912. The place, a floating city that has seceded from the United States. The protagonist, Booker DeWitt, a likable man with a violent past that he is presently failing to escape from. The objective: To clear a gambling debt, Booker must liberate a young woman, Elizabeth, from her captivity in Columbia. But she is held in the very firm clutches of the prophet Zachary Comstock and her monstrous protector, Songbird.

It won't be easy. Columbia is a city that, despite breaking free from the U.S. of A., is infused with patriotic and religious fervor. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin are sacred here...but not Abraham Lincoln, because eff that guy for abolishing slavery.

Meanwhile, Booker is walking around Columbia with two letters, "AD," scarified onto his hand. And from the warning posters around town, it seems that all citizens should "know the false shepherd by his mark," meaning the mark "AD." Glove yourself up, Booker. Don't say I didn't warn you.[...]

Much of [*Bioshock Infinite*]'s plot is revealed slowly in the form of voxophones, voice recorders with messages from the various characters in this opera of a tale. Miss a voxophone, and you miss some of the plot; you don't need to find all of them, but unless you pick up most, you'll likely finish the game in some confusion. Of course, the voxophones with the most important plot points are more prominently placed.

Just consider voxophones another reason to take your time during your visit to Columbia. [...]

B:I is filled to the brim with racism straight outta 1912, and frankly, some of it

was so over the top that it made me laugh (or cry. The racism was pretty accurately depicted here): The Yellow Peril. The Red Menace. The Jewish tailor (oy, gevalt!). I was half expecting a minstrel show.

But in a way, I'm actually glad to have seen this. Irrational should be commended for not glorifying "the good old days." Despite its beauty, it's apparent that Columbia is an uglier world than the one we live in here (Pinchefskey, April 5, 2013).

This text demonstrates a strong connection between the narrator, the gaming journalist, and the digital game (as evidenced by the inclusion of the journalist's feelings about the game's depicted racism). The article indicates that the review itself is a story as evidenced by the order of the text, which begins with the setting, the historical background, the protagonists and antagonists. Furthermore, as the article progresses important elements about the game narrative are revealed—that the religious society is also racist in orientation and that the game challenges the utopian vision of America *as it was*.

There are several tropes of gaming journalism that are missing from this review and they are telling in regards to the nature of the narrative presented here:

(1) The lack of a clear rubric- Particularly in articles in 1993, game reviews follow a clear rubric much like what is applied to performers in individual sports. Just as divers are judged on adherence to the basic form of the dive (e.g. starting position, take off, entry) as well as the difficulty of the dive, early game reviews assessed games largely by gameplay, controls, music and graphics. These four elements in many cases are neatly divided in a digital game review as if to work as a buyer's guide if game players were

curious about the music in a given game. But in the above sample, such a rubric is eschewed with the article taking a more literary journalistic approach to introduce readers to the topic at hand.

(2) The lack of numerical values- Another common trope in gaming journalism is numerical values for different elements of a game: story, gameplay mechanics, visuals, music. In many cases, this is done in such a way as to mirror film reviews with a certain number of stars being used to indicate the relative merits of a game. This review refuses to quantify the experience of the game with numerical values and instead explores the quality of the game experiences.

(3) The text expresses a degree of familiarity with the story of the digital game- This is in part because the culture being analyzed—a faux American culture circa 1920—contains cultural touchstones that are a part of American public discourse: the founding fathers, cultural Christianity and U.S. presidents. This indicated by the conversational nature of the discussion regarding the exclusion of Abraham Lincoln from the game’s sainthood (“not Abraham Lincoln, because eff that guy for abolishing slavery”). This familiarity is also indicated by the mark on the protagonist “Booker’s” hand when it reads: “Glove yourself up, Booker. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Here the text’s narrator changes audience from addressing the reader to addressing the digital game. Narratively it indicates she is on a first-name basis with the game’s protagonist. This subtle change in narrative orientation changes the focus of the story from what readers may experience to what the reviewer has experienced.

Taken together, this text takes the form of a travel diary in that it takes the reader into the world of the game, as if introducing a new vacation destination. The text

indicates a form of institutionalized civil religion at play in the game and various elements of that religion are discussed here (e.g. the sacred status of the founding fathers, the existence of a prophet, the racial inequity built into the religion/society). This religion contains some aspects of American Christianity, and the use of the term “prophet” to describe a contemporary figure is rare outside of Pentecostalism or Mormonism. The fact that it is discussed to this degree indicates that it was understood. Yet, this does not indicate agreement with the religion, in that various terms are used to distance it from the status quo. Furthermore, the placement of the religious information, early on in the textual narrative and then connected back near the end, indicates that the religious element of the game was deemed important and salient to evaluating the game. This is similar to how a travel diary might include details of a local religion to enhance its exoticism but emphasizing the features that would be understood by the general readership: the existence of a leader (a prophet), the existence of saints (the founding fathers), the existence of a dark power (a false shepherd) and the culture of the religion (patriotic and racist). This is just one sample, however and frames will emerge from readings across a series of articles, but this sample indicates the insights that can be drawn from the narrative framing approach in order to address the research questions. For example, the analysis could help address research questions RQ 4, 6, 7 and 10. The narrative framing analysis was conducted on a total of 116 digital game reviews at which point theoretical saturation was achieved.

In the about 30 years of gaming journalism, the shape of the marketplace shifted dramatically. That said, it should be noted that paradigm shifts happen quite slowly (Kuhn, 1996). Analyzing just a few years prior might not be sufficient for recognizing

changes in paradigm. So in order to address the final two research questions, an additional set of articles will undergo textual analysis from 1993. That said, in 1993, *IGN*, *Kotaku*, and *Joystiq* did not exist and the *New York Times* and *Forbes* did not cover games. In some ways, the inclusion of these mainstream publications during that time period speaks for itself. So a different set of publications will be included to examine paradigm change.

RQ 11: How do narratives in the 1993 coverage compare with 2013 coverage?

RQ 12: To what degree do the narratives indicate paradigmatic change?

The 2013 set of publications included 74 articles from *Game Informer*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *IGN*, *Kotaku*, *Forbes*, *New York Times* and *Joystiq*. In each month that year, a single review was drawn from each of the publications. The review's were selected based on (1) whether or not the game in question is narratively-oriented—as it may be harder to get a sense of religion in *Tetris* compared with *Dante's Inferno*—and (2) on the prominence of the game reviewed, as prominence, big budget games are likely to gather more evaluative attention from journalists.

This same method of sampling was applied to 42 articles from the 1993 set of publications, which included *Game Informer*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *GamePro Magazine*, *Nintendo Power* and *Sega Visions*. The sample size from 1993 was smaller for two reasons: gaming journalism was less prevalent in 1993 so there were fewer publications reviewing digital games, and digital game publications also published less often (*Game Informer* and *Sega Visions* published once every two

months). Furthermore, archives for gaming journalism are nearly non-existent making the collection of even these reviews significantly challenging.

Currently, no professional organizations archive gaming magazines and this includes the magazine publishers themselves. On gaming magazine websites, the “archives” typically only present a few years of issues. In 2011, *GamePro* closed and finding early issues of the 1993 publications is exceptionally difficult. However, the website RetroMags digitally archives video game magazines in comic book reader format (.cbr). RetroMags makes the digital files available for free as long as the magazines are not used for profit. The magazines come from crowdsourcing. Fans work as a community to locate, scan, and share the most complete collection of videogame magazines.

GamePro Magazine and *Nintendo Power* are almost entirely complete collections. By itself, the fact that a fan community works to reconstruct the historical archives of these magazines is indicative of the substantial role digital games plays in the lives of many. Many magazine archives are still incomplete. Despite the fact that collection was done through crowdsourcing, the fans scan the magazines with astounding thoroughness—even down to strategy guide inserts, advertisements and the back cover. As a result of the relative completeness of archives, the popularity of the magazines, and the presence of digital game reviews, this researcher selected to supplement the 1993 list with *GamePro*, *Nintendo Power* and *Sega Visions*.

CHAPTER 4- THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY

In the review of the literature, scholars have supported two different and seemingly contradictory observations about the orientation of journalism: first, that the perception of religion in the public is essentially from the modernist paradigm (Taylor, 2007) and, second, that journalism in actuality operates religiously from a Protestant normative standpoint (Underwood, 2002; Silk, 1995). The modernist paradigm has been classically challenged in numerous areas of academic scholarship and is known for its emphasis on journalistic objectivity, a reliance on science to create utopia, and a belief in the intellectual power of the societal collective among other ideals (Taylor, 2007). In religion, the paradigm is known for an emphasis on delineating neat categories for religion and, by extension, considering media to be a secular force—in that the media is assumed to operate outside of the realm of religion. Protestantism is known for its innate pluralism—a result of the divided nature of the faith, its belief in the priesthood of the laity, and its use of mass media in order to proliferate and spread (Nord, 1984, 2004; Underwood, 2002).

Building on the work of Gramsci (2012), Artz (2003), and Agnew (2005), this researcher agrees that there is media hegemony at work. This chapter seeks to understand what this hegemony looks like in reference to religion by addressing: “What is the nature of religious hegemony in gaming journalism?” (RQ 2a). Addressing this research question was largely done through an analysis of gaming journalism texts, although interviews were also considered as the observations made by journalists can illicit a deeper understanding regarding hegemony. A number of the other research questions,

regarding the texts in particular, will be considered in order to help address this central research question. Observations about how these other questions help address the central question of the nature of religious hegemony will be discussed at the conclusion of the chapter.

Narrative Frames of Gaming Journalism

“What narrative frames are most privileged in gaming journalism?” (RQ 10). The use of the word “privilege” in the question here indicates not only the relative frequency of the frames in stories but also the relative value of the frame, as indicated by thorough use of structures, protagonists/antagonists, settings, and key terminology that stems from the frame. Three primary frames emerged that help gaming journalists narrate their coverage, and all of them focus on a definition of gaming. This definition of gaming operates at the level of assumption in game reviews and gears the reviews toward different topics and narrative structures. Since this is gaming journalism, understanding what constitutes a *game* at the same time indicates what is considered *newsworthy*. The three narrative frames will be introduced below, along with indicators from both interviews and game review texts in which such frames appeared.

Gaming as a Family Activity. In interviews gaming journalists often conceptualized gaming as a method of play tied to their family. One participant noted that she grew up playing digital games with her brothers and as she grew older, games continued to be important to her—in that it connected her with her family (Participant D). Many journalists had similar stories. When asked how they became interested in digital games, some talked at some length about being introduced to games as a child: playing *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* with their father, *Tetris* with their mother or fighting with older siblings for

the chance to play *Contra III*. Such responses express a level of nostalgia for the social activity of gaming, which gives the activity value beyond that of the game itself. As a result of these personal experiences, the activity takes on an additional dimension and this is evidenced in texts.

Another journalist noted that while he began playing games in kindergarten and had vivid memories of playing prior to school in the mornings, it was something he wanted to introduce in a meaningful way to his newborn son.

I am certainly looking forward to sharing a hobby with him at some point, not until he gets a little older. I think there are some people who maybe put too much importance in games, maybe identify themselves with games a little too much and I think it's very easy to forget the importance of people and going out and doing things (Participant E).

The editor stressed the importance of the social elements of play. He noted that he and his wife play a lot of board games and praised the social elements of those games, while indicating his desire that this social element be integral in how his son is introduced to games.

In another example, Colin Moriarty of *IGN* opened his review of *The Puppeteer* by noting that his girlfriend, who observes him playing games for work frequently but does not play games herself, stopped what she was doing to see the game. By using this personal experience as an opening anecdote, he is revealing something he found to be a unique aspect of the game—that it appeals to family members who don't typically play games (Moriarty, September 6, 2013).

In a review by Robertson (November, 14, 2013), the writer similarly effusively praises *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds* for its ability to unite generations. He argues that brilliance of the game is in its ability to use an older game character that both honors the nostalgia of early games while experimenting with the game's narrative structure in a way that appeals to new players.

But playing games is not always about the experience of the other people in the room, but at times about the experience in one's own mind.

Gaming as Embodied Experience. Stories privileging this narrative frame tend to be heavily narrative from the outset. Typically, the protagonist of such stories is the author, and by extension the game player, who is experiencing a new world through the game. Stories tend to use language indicating that a game takes you to different places; e.g., it transports or travels.

This narrative was indicated through interviews with journalists who frequently emphasized the power of the digital game in providing the sort of *embodied experiences* discussed by Gee (2003)—that a game can not only mentally immerse you in a place, but through the mediated haptic interactivity of a controller or keyboard, allow players to experience something new. These new experiences are often tied to different worlds in journalistic texts, but in interviews, gaming journalists also thought of these new experiences as being tied to choices in identity and encountered ideas.

This is the sort of frame indicated by Pinchefskey (April 5, 2013) in that the writer is expounding on a level of immersion in the game's world. And this is a frame that has existed for sometime. In a review of *The Secret of Monkey Island* for *GamePro Magazine*, a reviewer noted that players should “prepare for a voyage” (Otter Mattic,

February 1993, p. 56). The article is written in second person, e.g. "You navigate Guybrush through this sea faring adventure via a point-and-click interface that's easy to learn and familiar to PC and video game players alike" (p. 56). In the case of *Otter Mattic* (February 1993), its clear that there is a line that exists between player and avatar in that it is the avatar that is on a digital journey—the player is simply making that journey possible.

In other cases within this frame, the line between avatar and player is diminished. In a review of *Equinoix* from *GamePro Magazine*, the author notes, "As you traverse each kingdom...." (Unknown Gamer, May 1993, pg. 80). It is just a brief statement but the sentiment reveals an assumption rooted in the narrative in the article, that the player and avatar are one. The player is not of course, physically traversing anything—the player is holding a controller and looking at a television screen, but the digital character is doing quite a bit. The assumption in the embodied experience frame, many times, is that the avatar and the player are one: the avatar has the benefit of the players experiences in other games, and the player is able to see a new game through the eyes of the avatar.

Such experience is not always about location, but about the personalities encountered in the game's narrative. In Martin (January 30, 1993), he reviews *Fire Emblem: Awakening* for *Joystiq* and compares the game to a soap opera. He argues that what brings the game to life are the stories and characters. In the review, he introduces the characters by first name without providing the reader any information about the character—it expresses and anticipates a degree of familiarity with the story. It assumes perhaps that the reader is already sharing in the same narrative and encountering the same

personalities. The review in this sense provides context for the experience the player is already having.

Awakening's story is also textbook soap opera. There are mysterious pasts, secret twins, surprising deaths, even more surprising resurrections, a charismatic but creepy villain, and those kids basically grow up overnight. Chrom essentially fights to keep the family business alive from a number of intruders, but instead of oil or a medical practice that business is ruling over the fantasy kingdom of Ylisse...

Most importantly, though, *Fire Emblem: Awakening* resembles a soap opera in how thoroughly addictive it can be. Once you get hooked on the combat and these characters and their stories, you'll feel the overpowering need to keep checking in on them. Instead of an hour a day, though, you can visit *Fire Emblem* at any time, pulling out your 3DS on the bus or on your lunch break or before dozing off at night (Martin, January 30, 1993).

These first two frames couch an idea of what game *is* in what it can *do*—serve as a method of travel or as a family social activity. But the last frame emphasizes the game's identity as a business product.

Gaming as Business. In these stories, the protagonist is the game developer who has either excelled or failed to create a financially successful game. The stories typically start out off with financial information about the status of a game developer and these stories typically tend to revolve around large budget console or personal computer game releases. Since the text here is reviews, the existence of this frame would make sense for such releases in that these are cases where either the relative success or failure of the

game would be easily apparent e.g. pre-orders selling out. In this case, the review of the game is given an additional layer of meaning in that the game is seen as fitting in with some larger story about the financial viability of a company as a whole, the business practices of a company, or the vitality of the gaming industry.

In a review of *The Sorcerer's Kingdom* in *GamePro Magazine* (Staff, June 1993), the reviewer steps into the review by initially talking about the game developer. In this case, the company that made this game went without releasing a new title for years, but in 1993 produced one of the few role-playing genre games available for the console system. After contextualizing the review from the standpoint of the game developer, the reviewer then goes through a standard rubric of addressing sound, gameplay, and graphics.

Yet the clearest indication of this frame is in the existence of a reviewing rubric. In 1993, a rubric that addresses sound, gameplay and graphics was explicit, often with ratings granted to each individual category. Yet such a rubric persists in some publications even in 2013. At times that rubric is implicit—only noticeable by the topics addressed in the review—and at times explicit with paragraphs set aside for each category. But why is such a rubric necessary? If gaming is business, then the elements of a new business product need to be dissected in order for potential customers to know whether they should buy. Additional implications for this rubric will be discussed later.

The audience for articles in this frame is often not the game player, but the game *consumer*, in that the assumption is that the player is purchasing games and as an investor in a particular product, they are stakeholders in the news about the company.

Narrating Difference

Building on the narrative frames identified, the question was posed “How does American gaming journalism narrate “difference” in regards to Japanese and American made games?” (RQ 6) The narration of difference is integral in that it is a subtle *othering* device that can be used to limit the importance of a given media message (Said, 1979). Furthermore, it reveals whether there are perceived values written into Japanese and American games beyond the language that gaming journalism can identify.

American games, it must be noted, are never referred to as such. It is a subtle indicator of a form of ideological hegemony in gaming journalism, but important nonetheless—Japanese games and games from other countries are often indicated to be such in reviews, but in this sample, games were never referred to as American. This is a result of the fact these are largely American gaming journalists, operating in America, and speaking to a, at least perceived, largely American audience.

First, it is worth noting that there are two different types of Japanese games, as identified by gaming journalists: there are games that need to be described as “Japanese” and those that do not, in that their appeal is deemed to be more universal. The narrative frame of *gaming as a family activity* tends to be used with games that are deemed to have some universal appeal. This frame appears in particular among reviews of Nintendo games—and this in part falls in line with corporate media planning. A Japanese company, Nintendo is perhaps the best known console producer in that, even in 1991, two-thirds of American households owned a Nintendo console. From the earliest days of Nintendo’s gaming software, the intention was to produce games that everyone, everywhere would be able to play (Sheff, 1993). Nintendo has always emphasized easily-digestible, family-

friendly releases like *Super Mario Bros.*, *Tetris*, and *Donkey Kong*. As a result, in-depth narratives were often eschewed in favor of gameplay heavy games. And in games with some degree of narrative, Nintendo maintained—particularly until the late 1990s—a strict censorship policy that altered depictions of religion, sex, and drug use to appeal to what executives perceived as a puritanical American audience (Likarish, 2014).

While this censorship policy is no longer in effect on the books, it could be that Nintendo practices a degree of self-censorship in the products they produce—in that most of their products, as perceived by gaming journalists, still eschew the topics of religion, sex, and drug use. Gaming journalism in this sample rarely commented on anything of a controversial nature that was produced by Nintendo Corporation and it was never acknowledged that Nintendo was a Japanese company. Similar games that were discussed within the frame of *gaming as a family activity* were also not described as “Japanese” in reviews. This is only worth noting in that, many other reviews of Japanese games seen in this sample explicitly point out that the game is from Japan.

The purpose narratively of pointing out that a game was made in Japan is to identify an audience of the game. Implicit is the idea that Japanese games—at least those labeled as such—will have a niche following in America. For example, in a review of *Tales of Xilla*, Daniel Griffiths of *Forbes* routinely refers to the game frequently by its a genre—a Japanese role-playing game—something that is not done often in reference to other types of games, e.g. first-person shooters, survival horror, and that denotes the country of origin. Griffiths described it as a “connoisseur’s series in the West” (Griffiths, August, 7, 2013). Similarly, Susan Arendt of *Joystiq* noted,

As a fan of Japanese role-playing games, you kind of have to get used to overwrought stories. There's some kind of meteor, or reborn god, or a god reborn as a meteor, and the hero has amnesia/a mysterious past/a tortured soul/a tragic destiny (Arendt, August 6, 2013).

Arendt's (August 6, 2013) description of the game as "overwrought" in reference to the narrative is an indication of why the game might have a limited audience. This limited audience is also referred to directly, in that the assumption of the article—as indicated by the use of second-person—is that, if you're reading the review then you're likely already a "fan of Japanese role-playing games." Arendt (August 6, 2013) proceeds to indicate in a tongue-in-cheek manner some of the narrative elements that give such a games a limited audience, including a reference to religion within it. This likely emerged in the review for *Tales of Xilla* because the premise of the game is that one of the two protagonists is a god that has taken human form. The narrative's playful spin on the incarnation is that instead of taking the form of a man, the god takes the form of an attractive, scantily-clad female (Fahey, August 16, 2013). The narration of this difference between American games and Japanese is important, in that it is in reference to Japanese games that the most explicit discussions of religion occurred in game reviews.

In interviews, gaming journalists quickly identified differences between Japanese games and American games. In an interview, a participant noted that in game narratives, Japanese games tended to privilege depictions of monotheistic traditions whereas American games tended to privilege depictions polytheistic traditions (Participant L). He noted that the narratives differ from the historical religious roots of the country—in that Japan has had a higher adherence to polytheism, whereas America has had a higher

adherence to monotheism (Davis, 1992). Journalists noted that Japanese games tend to involve religion a bit more actively in a game, in particular, with religious authorities or gods often appearing as enemies. Another journalist noted, “I guess...in recent times, a lot of games that originated from Japan have, you know, involved an evil God in some ways” (Participant I). By distinguishing certain types of Japanese games from American games, journalism simultaneously indicates that certain types of religion are normal while others are not.

Narrating Religion, Ethics and Morals

It can be challenging to differentiate religion, ethics and morals in that they are quite interrelated (Albanese, 1999; Parboteeah, Hoegl, and Cullen, 2008). However, from the standpoint of gaming journalism, the three terms are used in slightly different—if at times overlapping—ways. The question was posed “How does American gaming journalism narrate explicit religious beliefs, ethics and values presented in games?” (RQ 7)

Gaming journalism approaches religion in games in three predominant ways: **Religion as Backdrop.** This is predominantly a technology reporting approach in that the emphasis is on reporting gameplay mechanics and so narratives are less important. Kat Bailey provides an example of this in her *IGN* review of *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, a Japanese role-playing game. This particular franchise is known an emphasis on demons. “Each game in the *Shin Megami Tensei* series features a menagerie of cuddly, bizarre, and occasionally terrifying demons, all with their own distinct dialects and personalities” (Bailey, July 10, 2013).

The player not only must combat with demons in the game, but recruit them to help (Bailey, July 10, 2013). Throughout the game, two friends who represent two different approaches to the world—order and chaos—surround the main character (Wallace, July 16, 2013). This would seem to be a hallmark example of the sort of game where the religious elements might be discussed. But Bailey (July 10, 2013) makes an integral observation that indicates why the interaction with demons in *Shin Megami Tensei IV* is only lightly discussed in game reviews. Bailey (July 10, 2013) identifies the game as a part of the “monster-collecting” genre—not unlike *Pokemon*. So instead of adopting the name demon, she collapses it as a gameplay feature hosted by other games. In short, Bailey sees the use of the term *demon* as a largely incidental religious term that is not descriptive of the actual narrative and largely unimportant in terms of the actual experience of playing the game. So as a result, Bailey (July 10, 2013) spends little time discussing the concept of demons in the game and more time discussing the gameplay features.

Similarly, one study participant argued that explicit depictions of religion are not all that prevalent in games in that religious elements tend to be used as background material in a game. He noted that after playing the game *Wolfenstein*, a first-person shooter game in which the enemies are Nazis, he got the sense that the main character EJ Vlaskiewicz was Jewish. The creators of the current game in the franchise said they wanted the main character’s background to be an unanswered question. Yet the original creators of *Wolfenstein* confirmed that the character was intended to be Jewish.

Whether he was Jewish or not had something to do with the experience of the game and I found [the creator’s reticence to confirm the character’s faith] strange

because this could be a compelling aspect of the game, to have a game where you're machine-gunning Nazis to know that the character that you're playing is Jewish or not, would add an extra level of interest. This has nothing to do with...the ten parts of his faith (Participant A).

He notes that religion is most often “wallpaper” that has little impact on the interactivity (Participant A). He raised the question of whether religion was the sort of aspect a game developer would feel compelled to include in a game and whether that would make a game more fun.

A senior writer noted that this “wallpaper” often serves a purpose in that it is meant to communicate “comfort.”

I mean I think it's set dressing a lot of the time. It's made to communicate a certain either “this is uncomfortable, I am in a scary house and there are crucifixes.” Or “this is a good area” like in *Diablo*, there are crosses now and you've made into the good spot (Participant G).

Religion as a Spoiler. This is predominantly a movie critique approach in that religion becomes ignored because it is related to a plot point that would "spoil" the game.

In a review of *Devil May Cry*, Jess Conditt of *Joystiq* places the setting of the story as the Internet since the this game received significant negative feedback initially from an online, reactionary fan base. She then describes the heritage of the main character Dante but prods little further:

Dante, a Nephilim (the product of an angel and demon's unholy union), is humankind's only chance at freedom from demonic enslavement, since he has the

ability to enter Limbo and to use abilities from both sides of Heaven's and Hell's armies (Conditt, January 15, 2013).

She mentions the gameplay feature of “swapping angel and demon weapons on a whim” (Conditt, January 15, 2013)—this phrase implies that the religious elements of the game are innately tied to gameplay and thus unavoidable for discussion. Yet she does not go any further in describing the religion of the narrative in that—like a movie review—it might spoil something about the game to know more about who Dante is fighting and why.

Similarly, in the review of *Bioshock: Infinite*, Xav de Matos of *Joystiq* alluded to the major topics discussed in the game: race, religion, and class. Yet de Matos here again, avoids spoiling the ending.

But the ending is marvelous, and you'll have to trust me when I say that *BioShock Infinite's* final section – dedicated entirely to its narrative – handily disposes of any minor gripes. There is not only one twist to the tale, but many entrances and exits to a wide array of secrets, diving deeper into the past of the primary cast of characters and the world of Columbia itself (de Matos, March 25, 2013).

Religion is the Experience- This is more of a self-revelatory writing approach, in that it explores the mystical experience of *gameplay* itself. This is approach appears very rarely—and not at all in the current sample—yet in interviews several gaming journalists indicated that they had written from this frame in regards to specific games.

In an interview with a senior writer at *GamesBeat*, he described the game *Journey* produced by thatgamecompany in 2012. *Journey* is an award-winning game that drew

attention for its artistic style, and its clear religious message (Parker, August 2, 2012).

The *GamesBeat* journalist noted:

So thatgamecompany has a game *Journey*. It has that in its heart sort of a very religious message about how you start on a journey, stick with it, it gets hard, you may die and you may be reborn and along the way, you are going to sort of come out of your journey, but ultimately the experience is solitary or discrete. I think there have been some very creative approaches to weaving religious belief into games (Participant P).

Similarly, in an interview, an editor introduced a game he considered “mystical” (Participant L): *Dark Souls*, which has been discussed often in regards to its near-legendary difficulty (Dahlen, January 9, 2012). The editor noted that the experience of playing the game is mystical in that “it is a path to enlightenment” (Participant L). He noted that there was a “release” in completing the game because it is so challenging (Participant L).

Religion is discussed most explicitly in Religion is the Experience, which as noted earlier, appears much more rarely as opposed to Religion as Backdrop or Religion as a Spoiler.

Religion is Ethics and Values. While religion may not appear commonly, ethics and values appear quite frequently and largely because of the mechanics of gaming journalism identified in these three frames. Both an ethics system and a moral value system were reported on in the sample—each system appeared in reference to discrete games. Gaming journalists largely acknowledge that those are systems that, as they influence gameplay directly, they need to report on more commonly than religion.

Yet it should be noted, that in the broad definition of the word *religion*, it can be inclusive of terms such as ethics and values particularly in that some religious traditions include no delineation between the camps (Albanese, 1999; Smith 1998). There are some religious traditions where ethics and values are the predominant emphasis of the tradition (Pals, 2006). As such, for the purposes of this study, it is worth considering ethics and values as a part of religion.

In gaming journalism, discussions of ethics tend to revolve around games where the choices have significant consequences. In the game *The Walking Dead* for instance, the choices made in the game have a role in the plot—whether given characters live or die, whether characters help you or hinder you, and on the survival of the protagonist. An increasing number of games include some form of ethical mechanic in the plot, which makes the narrative unfold a bit more like a choose-your-own-story (Carsillo, December 17, 2013). This falls inline with a technology reporting approach to gaming journalism in that the emphasis is on mechanics the propel the game and ethics often do.

Beyond discussion of the ethical situations in games, gaming journalism does similarly tend to rely on standard mainstream journalistic ethics. For example, most gaming journalism organizations examined tended to have ethics policies. These policies provide an explanation for what exchanges of information—if any—occur and what the situations would be for such an exchange. One common ethical hotspot for gaming journalists tends to happen in regards to acquiring review copies of games. Reviewing games often requires the good will of public relations professionals to send early copies. In their ethics policy, gaming journalism news organizations tended to outline (1) how they acquire copies of games, (2) whether they review games if there is an expected quid

pro quo, (3) how they decided what games to review, and (4) how they decide on review scores or grades. Gaming journalists tended to have a clear understanding of what was ethically appropriate for their publication. The key difference found in this sample was whether gaming journalism organizations found it ethically appropriate to keep review copies of games after they completed their review. *Joystiq* for example, does not think it is appropriate (Joystiq Editorial, 2015), whereas *Game Informer* does famously keep a large library of 11,719 games they use as an in-house library (The Vault, 2015). Other publications leave this particular part of their policy more nebulous.

Similarly, discussions of moral values do appear and they would differ from discussions of ethics in that while ethics would be choice-based, moral values would be oriented around the way a player plays the game. A common example of a moral value system in a game is in the *Mass Effect* franchise, in which conversations, gunfights, missions chosen all go into deciding whether a character is a “paragon” or a “renegade” (Senior, March 1, 2012). In *Shin Megami Tensei IV* for instance, the protagonist goes on a journey with two friends who are intended to be largely symbolic of having an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other (Wallace, July 16, 2013). As was discussed earlier, in *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, one friend urges the protagonist to conduct his actions in pursuit of law and order in society, whereas another friend urges the protagonist to embrace chaos. In each case, the morals behind how to pursue those goals are frequently called into question (Wallace, July 16, 2013). Yet reviewers noted that the game was not explicit enough in letting players know that the game included a moral system: “Indeed, the choice over whether to follow the Chaos or Law path will almost certainly slip past players not familiar with the series or paying close attention” (Kain, July 14, 2013).

As acknowledged above, religion, as an academic term, certainly can encompass terms like ethics and morals. Yet gaming journalists created delineations between religion, ethics, and morals in interviews and in their reviews. Such delineations reaffirm the modernist paradigm in that it creates a picture of religion that is neat and orderly. Yet it simultaneously affirms a Protestant normative approach in that Protestantism's conception of religion includes much more than ethics and morals. Ethics and morals may emerge from Protestantism but it does not define the religion and as such Protestantism also affirms those conceptual and terminological delineations.

Narrating Value of Technology and Society

Much as with religion, ethics, and moral values, gaming journalism is not value-free in regards to its approach to technology and society. With that in mind, the following section will address: "How does American gaming journalism narrate implicit values regarding technology and society?" (RQ 8)

First, the obvious should be stated. Technology journalists tend to emphasize hardware, gaming journalists tend to emphasize software. Yet the two tend to become interrelated in that more powerful hardware and more developer-friendly hardware creates the ability for more graphically heavy, and, at times, narratively-heavy games. Throughout the reviews in gaming journalism, there's a continued preoccupation with *graphics*.

For example, in a 1993 *Electronic Gaming Monthly* staff review of the game *Gods*, the review used a numerical rating. And in this case, the game lost points in its rating because of the graphics of the game, which staff didn't feel matched the interactive elements of the game (Staff, January 1993).

Graphics here typically refers to ‘art direction,’ in that a game with flawed graphics on more powerful hardware typically is reviewed less favorably than a very clean, beautiful game on less powerful hardware (Participant G). According to one participant at the *Verge*, when writing a piece of gaming journalism there is a basic rubric gaming journalists tend to use. Depending on the game, the review need not hit on every element of the rubric. He noted that reviews typically need to provide (1) a basic understanding of the plot, (2) a sense of how the game plays, (3) how does it match the style of similar games, (4) are there technical problems with the game? and (5) how does the game look?

Technically, the new Mario games have less impressive graphics in games than on, say, my PC because there is a very little sense to have cubic polygons, it can’t pull off as many fancy post-processing techniques as my PC but the game I think, I think the new *Mario Kart* looks superior to almost any other game coming out this fall (2014). The reason for that is it’s because art direction. They know how to make the most of the technology they have and it’s really beautiful art, it’s very colorful. I think that’s more interesting to talk about too is right there we are talking about more interesting words that people are familiar with (Participant G).

This explanation on the gaming journalism rubric explains why *graphics* are a preoccupation. Gaming reviews are meant to assess whether the graphics/art direction of a game fits the game itself and makes use of the technology available to best create the experience it intends to create. But furthermore, in reviewing a game’s mechanics, gaming journalists also assess the artificial intelligence of the games. The implicit value here, as with graphics, are for more developed artificial intelligence.

In a review of *Metro: Last Light*, Jeff Marchiafava of *Game Informer* notes that the game is designed to appeal to fans that want a challenge—a result of a developed AI in the games so that the enemies can out-think the player.

The real threat to mankind's survival, however, comes from the various armed factions inhabiting the railway stations, which are poised for all-out war over the Metro... Human enemies exhibit improved AI as they patrol areas and investigate noises. They're particularly deadly in groups and are quick to call for reinforcements, providing a formidable threat and incentive to remain unseen. (Machiafava, May 13, 2013).

In a way, gaming journalism's values regarding technology tend to match those of the games. Many games tend to have science fiction elements with apocalypse stories, cautionary robotics stories and the like. Technology is often an inherent focus of game narratives, in that science fiction is a popular genre in games (Bowman, 2010). Similarly, the values of gaming journalism on society at times match those that appear in games. This could be in part because part of the role of gaming journalism is in connecting the narratives of games with those in society.

This is exemplified in Jess Conditt's review of *Devil May Cry* for *Joystiq*, where she connects the narrative of the game with a, at least perceived, reality of society.

DMC's world is as much a funhouse mirror of our own reality as the game itself is to its previous installments. It's a neon, urban landscape ruled over, in secret, by demons bent on controlling the human race through hypnotic soft drinks and manipulative news networks (Conditt, January 15, 2013).

Her commentary about the game's world connects her review with critiques of the American news system and the addictive nature of sugar foods and processed food. This also falls in line with fears of strong institutions, which are, in this case of this game, literally demonized.

At other times, however, gaming journalists indicate some distance from the values in games. In Kirk Hamilton's *Kotaku* review of *Metro: Last Light*, for example, he takes issue with the representation of women in the game.

Life in the Metro isn't a holiday for the fairer sex, and neither is *Metro: Last Light*. This is a world filled with men and sexual violence, and almost every female character is either a prostitute, a stripper, or a potential rape victim. I don't mean to suggest that a post-apocalyptic underground society wouldn't reveal this sort of barbarism, but the game doesn't handle any of it particularly deftly (Hamilton, May 13, 2013).

This seems to indicate a value for egalitarianism, in that the writer indicates that the treatment of women in this society is unfair. It is also worth noting here, that Hamilton's willingness to critique the games treatment of gender depictions is precisely the sort of social justice mindset that many GamerGate critiques took issue with in gaming journalism.

Similarly, in Danielle Riendeau's *Polygon* review of *Dragon's Crown*, Riendeau (July 31, 2013) calls the game "fantasy-obsessed teenaged boy's dream: crazy, violent and full of impossibly large breasts." While her review quickly transitions into a largely glowing review of the game's mechanics, experience and the like, she does return to the depictions of women at the bottom of the story:

Dragon's Crown's serious liberties with female anatomy are distracting. Two player characters — the Amazon and the Sorceress — are explicitly sexualized, with breasts literally bigger than their heads with rear ends to match, and plenty of the screen real estate is dedicated to their respective jiggles and sashays. But at least these characters are powerful women, with agency and a penchant for destroying rooms full of bad guys. The same can't be said for the female NPCs that fill *Dragon's Crown's* dungeons and other environments. Most of the women in the game are barely clothed, with heaving chests, backs twisted into suggestive positions, some with their legs spread almost as wide as the screen. They're presented as helpless objects, usually in need of rescue. It's obvious, one-sided and gross (Riendeau, July 31, 2013).

Here again, her critique of the game indicates a value for society, in that she challenges society's treatment of women in media. As indicated, the narration of the societal value of egalitarianism is fairly common if only because games have a history of poor representations of women (Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClain, 2008). This is another case where gaming journalism is narrating a societal value. This section explored how gaming journalism narrates values for technology and society. The next section will continue this line of inquiry by exploring how gaming journalism expresses independence from the market and the state.

Gaming Journalism, the Market, and the State

Gaming journalism has developed ways of expressing independence from the market and the state that are tied to both the content produced as well as to the structure of the presentation of digital content. The question was posed, "how does American

gaming journalism narrate independence from (a) the market (digital game industry) and (b) the state (America)?” (RQ 9) Independence from the market is mainly expressed through the presentation of digital content, while independence from the state is predominantly expressed through content.

As the 2014 GamerGate controversy illustrated, gaming journalism readers highly value ethics in gaming journalism and are concerned that journalists are operating from the pocket of gaming developers. This concern is expressed primarily in two ways and it influences the ways gaming journalists express their independence. First, in order to review a game in a manner that is timely for readers as well as consumers, gaming journalists must have access to the game prior to its release. This requires the good will of game developers, who, as several participants noted in interviews, now can use social media to directly access their central audience. However, journalists also noted that when developers submit their work to timely review by gaming journalists they have a few potential benefits: it introduces the game to an audience potentially larger than the consumers already interested in the product and, if the game receives a positive review, this could potentially enhance sales. As a result, the norm is that most major game developers tend to provide review copies to at least the most well-established gaming journalism outlets. In cases where no review copies are made available to gaming journalism outlets, games tend to be viewed with some suspicion. However, the relationship remains tenuous in that public relations professionals have a great deal of power to potentially act as a king-maker—providing copies of their games or providing them in a timely manner only to outlets that have provided positive reviews in the past.

While gaming journalists noted the reality of this concern, they largely agreed that it is rare for public relations professionals at game developers to use their power in this way.

A second ethical concern related to the market's pull on gaming journalism has to do with access to news about upcoming games. This largely happens through relationships between gaming journalists and public relations professionals and, more commonly, through large scale game reveals at gaming expos. Such expos, again, largely put the power in the hands of game developers in that they can choose what to reveal. And in the page view-driven finances of much of gaming journalism, this can be tricky in that readers will be interested in a reading about a new product and they will go to the news source that provides that information.

These ethical concerns are ones that are continually implicit in how gaming journalism narrates independence. As an enthusiast form of journalism, gaming journalism tends to focus on upcoming games and then provide less coverage of games after their release. Although he noted that *Joystiq* has improved in this arena, one editor noted that early on *Joystiq* was like many other gaming journalism websites in that it was too focused on obtaining viewers through breaking news ahead of competing sites.

Certainly *Joystiq*, back when I started it was – and I think a lot of game blogs in general were—focused on getting the news up as quickly as possible, making sure that you published as many stories as you could in a day to help get viewers and to keep those numbers up. People do tend to forget that it is a business and that we do need eyeballs (Participant E).

Kotaku's Editor in Chief Stephen Totilo criticized this approach in a 2014 column in the midst of GamerGate, in which he discussed the reorganization of the

Kotaku newsroom to largely focus on news about people playing games rather than games that have not yet been released (Totilo, 2014). By focusing on players rather than products, *Kotaku* shifted the flow of the power from the market to journalism—and by extension to the public.

Gaming journalism also narrates independence from the market through refusing coverage of certain products. One gaming journalist noted that he continues to attend gaming expos but he refuses to write about, or even view, games that he is unable to play at the expo—that is, games with which only a video is available (Participant J). He said that while this is a gamble for game developers to share an unfinished product, this could potentially be a boon. At the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) 2014, he played a, at the time, little-known game called *Shadow of Mordor*, based the lore of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, that he and other journalists covered with enthusiasm. It drew attention to the game which then went on to receive largely positive reviews, win numerous awards, and sell exceptionally well (Participant J).

In gaming journalism, a common ethical norm is for journalists to share how a review was conducted at the bottom of the review. For example, on the bottom of every review *Joystiq* included a sentence in which they provide the means with which the review was done. This is important in that if gaming journalists reviewed the gaming using an unfinished digital copy, the experience could potentially differ from that of the retail copy. Here is the sentence that followed the review of *Diablo 3* by *Joystiq*'s De Mato: “This review is based on a retail copy of *Diablo 3*, provided by Activision Blizzard. *Diablo 3* launches today for Xbox 360 and PS3. A next-gen version is also in the works” (de Matos, September 3, 2013). Many gaming journalism outlets provide

similar information at the bottom of their reviews. Often news organizations also provide explicit ethics policies that state what happens to review copies of games, e.g. whether they are returned to the developers if it is a physical copy or deleted from their hard drive if it is a digital copy. This rhetorical device is used express independence in that the gaming journalist does not have a product he would not have otherwise had prior to his or her review, no gift has been received.

Independence from the state is expressed more subtly—largely through content coverage. On a surface level, it is worth noting that games are developed in a variety of foreign countries including Japan, Canada, Great Britain, and France. Gaming journalism largely ignores information about the developer of a game in reviews and—if included—it may appear in a sidebar. So, thus, information about the nation where a game was developed is rarely included. It could be excluded because the assumption is, and this is often correct, that the game was developed in the United States. It could also be excluded simply because it is assumed that the information has little interest for readers.

Furthermore, as with independence from the market, it is noteworthy to consider games that are neglected by gaming journalism. In this case, the American military released a new game in 2013 *America's Army: Proving Grounds*, which is a first-person shooter offered for free online that serves as propaganda for the American military. While gaming journalism does, on occasion, offer reviews of free-to-play games and certainly offers reviews regularly of first-person shooters, this game was largely ignored. While that fact alone is certainly noteworthy, it is likely that need to express independence in this case was largely unconscious and occurred as a result of journalistic norms. Gaming journalists cannot cover every game and games that are released that do not go through

the typical channels of sending review copies and press releases are unlikely to get in the review pipeline. Furthermore, gaming journalists could look at such a game and judge that, since they have sensed little interest from readers, it is perhaps not worth the investment necessary for a review.

Yet it must be acknowledged that beyond the two facts noted here—a wide variety of content and a case of neglected state content—little expression of independence exists. The review of media content is an essentially subjective activity (Niebord & Sihvonen, 2009) and as such, gaming journalists largely agree that the goal of a review is to share their experience of the game. Yet, their experience comes through the filter of their experience and, as such, being an American may be an essential (and unavoidable) bias in the review process. Furthermore, they work for American media outlets with an ideal reader that is largely American. As such, expressing independence from the state may not seem as essential of a value as expressing independence from the market.

These findings build on Herman and Chomsky's (2002) concept of the propaganda model. Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue that a form of ideological hegemony is at play in American media regarding the U.S. military. Journalists and media professionals tend to take the word of the U.S. military and write in ways that serve the U.S. military. The fact that the game was excluded from review could be seen as a challenge to that hegemony, but if it is a challenge it is a silent challenge. It is a transgressive act that may only work within the hegemony of the propaganda model because of the particular niche in which it occurred. The aim of gaming journalism is not to talk about the military but to talk about games—and, in particular—the games people

are largely playing. If *America's Army: Proving Grounds* were a more popular game, it may be that news organizations would feel compelled to review it.

This section discussed how gaming journalism expresses independence from the market and from the state. The next section will connect the various research questions of this study in order to explore the nature of religious hegemony.

Questioning the Modernist Paradigm

The introduction to this chapter provided a sense of context for why these preceding research questions are integral to the study. They help provide shape in understanding the nature of religious hegemony. So what integral lessons did we learn about the nature of religious hegemony?

First, gaming journalists privilege distinct classifications of material and denote that through the use of rubric in their reviews. As such, this rubric appears at first to emerge from the modernist paradigm. Gaming journalists, employing different frames in addressing what gaming is, largely tend to use a rubric in addressing different aspects of a game. Gaming journalists use this to address different aspects of the experience of the game and to ensure that different aspects of a game—like the sound, the gameplay and graphics/art direction are addressed. This use of the rubric is shared across the gaming journalism field. This rubric, if structurally employed, could shape the sorts of topics addressed as well as the topics that go unaddressed. As a such, a rubric at once provides a simplistic, reader-friendly way of sharing complex information while simultaneously limiting all that may be presented. As such the use of a rubric in this study appears to be used to maintain the status quo in the presentation of religion.

Second, American games are taken as the normative type of narrative. Japanese games by contrast undergo some degree of *othering* despite the fact that they have been *localized* for an American audience (Likarish, 2014). In interviews, gaming journalists pointed out that there are integral depicted religious differences between American games and Japanese games. This indicates that there is an ideological difference so integral to the narrative and gameplay of Japanese games that it bears pointing out that such games are “Japanese” and indicating that these games are for a particular niche audience (Farokhmanesh, December 29, 2014) when writing for Americans. This seems to indicate some degree of Protestant normativity, in that Japanese games and their narratives are *othered*. Japanese games paint religion in a playful manner with cute females acting as deities, a fascination with demons, and the lack of spiritual hierarchy, with an intermixing of the divine and the temporal. This is reflective of Masuzawa’s (2005) emphasis on the way in which people tend to draw from different religious traditions in order to find meaning. In Japanese games, there is often no clear divide between the religious and the worldly (Allison, January 10, 2014). What makes such reporting Protestant normative is that journalists are quick to note this playful manner—which is more often described using terms that indicate strangeness (e.g. odd, weird)—which indicates that journalists are approaching the narratives they see from the outside. For example, in a review of the game *Guided Fate Paradox*, which is about a high schooler who receives divine powers, John Martin of *Arcade Sushi* notes: “The *Guided Fate Paradox*'s strange tale surrounds a young man named Renya” (Martin, November 4, 2013).⁶

⁶ Emphasis mine.

In a similar manner, Kat Bailey of *IGN* notes:

If you're uncomfortable with your angelic assistant wearing a costume that wouldn't be out of place in a Japanese maid cafe, you can always dress her in a fish head and put her in tank tread boots. The Guided Fate Paradox is strange (but fun) like that (Bailey, December 5, 2013).

In both cases, reviewers pointed to the “strange” nature of the tale. This emphasis on pinpointing the manner of religious depiction is hegemonic in that it is unacknowledged and shared across gaming journalism. Self-aware critiques of religion in Japanese games, as in Allison (January 10, 2014), and critiques of how religion is reported come more typically from outside of gaming journalism on message boards; e.g., Reddit. The aspects of religion denoted in Japanese games tend to deal with *strange* issues of religious practice as opposed to deeper questions about what that religion means in the narrative. In this way, it serves to be hegemonic in that religious depictions rarely merit in-depth discussion. That said, it should be noted there is clear journalistic reasoning behind this in that differences in religious practice could affect how the game plays, which gets at the interactivity so central to the gaming medium and which are a part of the way in which games are reviewed.

Yet it must be noted that Protestantism is a pluralistic endeavor (Beaman, 2003). Japanese games are acknowledged to have an American audience but it is a niche audience. Thus the ideology incumbent in Japanese games are given a seat at the table—such games are still reviewed—but Protestant values remain at the head of the table.

Third, journalists address ethics, moral values and religion in gaming and this largely occurs in the context of the games they are reviewing. Gaming journalism does not identify explicit religion in games commonly—which is not to say that it is not there—but gaming journalists are most likely to discuss it in relation to gameplay. Gameplay is what makes games differ from books or movies, so the discussion of this element of games makes sense in that this is an emphasis for gaming journalism. This does appear to support a modernist paradigm in that by a lack of routine emphasis on appearances of religion in games, gaming journalism appears to be, by extension, secular and devoid of religious values since religion is often unaddressed. The modernist paradigm draws a strict delineation between religion and society, private and public (Toennes, 2002). Thus avoiding discussions of religion in games unless particularly pertinent does not just make clear sense journalistically, it also serves modernism. As Gramsci (2012) indicated, hegemony tends to be measured by the degree to which an approach has power and is shared across a given field. The approach in gaming journalism of addressing ethics and values is normal and acceptable way whereas addressing religion is less so. This acceptance builds on Toennes (2002) demarcation of the indicated features of the modernist paradigm—the *public* nature of society and the *private* nature of religion.

Taken as a complete picture with the previous point, gaming journalism does not tend to address religion in games often, but when addressed it tends to be addressed with Japanese games, which are depicted as *other*.

Fourth, gaming journalism, like gaming itself tends to have a great deal of faith in new technology. Gaming journalism tends to exhaustively report on new types of gaming

technology: improved visuals, improved processors, virtual reality, and augmented reality. This is an essentially modernist approach in that it takes a utopian perspective on advances in science as a method for addressing “community needs” (Benhabib, 1986, p. 13)—in this case need for better technology—yet at the same time, gaming journalism tends to be much like games in that it uses reviews to raise questions about powerful institutions and structures: male power, organized religion and capitalism. This is a Protestant approach, in that the assumption is that questioning powerful institutions and structures—as was the case with the Catholic Church—will lead to better institutions and structures and likely a better variety of them. This is not, of course, solely a Protestant approach as this is a perspective shared in the foundational idea of journalism as a watchdog (Hanitzsch, 2007). In this case it is possible that there could be other sources influencing this approach beyond just Protestantism. But that does not mean that the approach is not hegemonic. If one looks across American society in general, it’s readily apparent how much faith is placed in new technology. It comes across in the rush to get the newest phone, the fears of losing a phone, and, in the decision, day after day, to choose to spend time playing with technology when there’s the opportunity to interact with human beings (Turkle, 2012). This fits inline with Evans (2002) model of hegemony wherein the journalists act as mediators—in this case to reaffirm faith in technology.

Finally, gaming journalism does tend to negotiate some distance from the market and the state. Negotiating distance from the market largely occurs through pluralism in approaching to content: gaming journalism does not just cover major publishers, but also minor publishers and start-up ventures. This encourages major digital game publishers to continue working with gaming journalists lest their games be ignored. This situation

allows for a pluralistic display of content among gaming journalism outlets. Distance from the state has been less of a preoccupation among gaming journalists, as there haven't been many opportunities to express such distance, or to need to express such distance. Yet, as was noted earlier in the chapter, the release of the sequel to the popular game made by the American military—*America's Army*—was ignored by all gaming journalism outlets in this sample and in fact, to this day has too few reviews from established gaming journalism outlets to merit a Metacritic score (see *America's Army*, 2013). This desire to negotiate distance from the market is an essentially modernist notion, in that it addresses key modernist notions of journalism—objectivity in particular (Tonnie, 2002). While there is a clear connection to hegemony in general found through this question—in terms of the relationship between military and market—it seems less apparent what the connection is to religious hegemony. It could be that the essentially modernist approach implied in how journalists approach their relationship with the market and the state does speak to religious hegemony, but simply because journalism is operating from a modernist foundation. By drawing on a typically modernist approach to negotiating those relationships, gaming journalists also draw upon modernist's ideological foundation in how it operates. And modernist has its own assumptions and presuppositions regarding what is and what is not religion—in how it operates (Kuhn, 1957; Dessler & Mandair, 2011; Taylor, 2007).

A key aspect of the nature of the religious hegemony in gaming journalism is that it continues to rely on classificatory systems—for different religions, different types of games and even numerical values on the quality of games, in that each case reveals a modernist orientation that demonstrates an emphasis on the scientific method and

objectivity (Taylor, 2007). Taylor (2007) argues that this orientation divorced religion from public life in the West.

Yet that does not seem to be entirely true. While clear modernist classificatory systems persist, they continue to prize essentially Protestant expressions in gaming journalism. In interviews, gaming journalists often became most passionate and expressive when discussing indie games. These games from small developers often have smaller audiences, smaller profit margins and often experiment with bold new approaches to gameplay and narrative. The indie games mentioned by gaming journalists—*The Binding of Isaac*, *Papers please*, and *Train*—tended to promote minority opinions, which supports the pluralistic endeavor of Protestantism (Bender & Klassen, 2010). They evidence what Bender and Klassen (2010) describe as “a commitment to recognize others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference” (p. 2). And it must be acknowledged that modernism has made brilliant use of pluralism as well—democracy in and of itself is essentially a modernist, pluralistic exercise (Taylor, 2007). Similarly, gaming journalism does tend to prize independence as an extension of individuality, in that it is expressing a distance from authority (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). Independence means that journalism is classified as an institution separate from the market or the state, but one can also see how this aligns with Protestant and modernist perspectives on authority.

With this in mind, these findings call into question the delineation between the modernist paradigm and Protestantism. The next chapter will problematize that distinction further through a comparative analysis of the 2013 gaming journalism sample and the 1993 gaming journalism sample. It will also examine the degree to which

paradigmatic change has occurred through gaming journalism and illicit indicators of development in religious hegemony.

CHAPTER 5- HEGEMONY AND THE MODERNIST PARADIGM OF RELIGION

As Gramsci (2012) delineated, hegemony is by nature difficult to detect. Hegemony operates at a media systems level and an institutional level of analysis (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), with elements of it being indicated through the values, the norms, and routines of the field, and then the output (or texts) of the field. This is why in order to get at religious hegemony in gaming journalism, this research went beyond just exploring journalism content and also conducted interviews. This is a way in which the research could assess multiple levels of output from journalists. And in this research, journalists were asked in particular about the norms and routines of their newsroom to better assess elements of hegemony.

This chapter will explore the specifics of hegemony and the modernist paradigm of religion in particular. This will be done through a comparative analysis of the 1993 and 2013 gaming journalism content. The central research question will be considered, “What are the ways in which religious hegemony affirms or challenges the modernist paradigm of religion?” (RQ 2b) This question will be addressed in part through responding to the two research questions on paradigmatic change in gaming journalism from 1993 to 2013. By exploring content in both 1993 and 2013, it will be easier to assess whether there are common assumptions shared between the content separated by two decades. It also will be able to help us see the degree to which paradigmatic change occurred during that time frame, and indicate change that could create a shift in hegemony. Finally, in addressing the central research question, this analysis will continue to probe the delineation between Protestant normativity and modernism.

Narratives from Gaming Journalism in 1993

This part of the dissertation analysis explores the progression of gaming journalism by looking at its shape in 1993. Earlier in the study the question was posed, “How do narratives in the 1993 coverage compare with 2013 coverage?” (RQ 11) First, it is worth pinpointing a few narratives from 1993 that are less prevalent in 2013 coverage and then the coverage of the two data sets will be contrasted.

A very prevalent narrative in the 1993 dataset appears as the role of gaming journalism as a buyer’s guide. This narrative is less common in the present but does persist in some cases (see Chapter 5). Articles assume that the reader is considering buying a game and needs a guide to know what to expect from certain games. This was an important role prior to the Internet, in that there was no other way for gaming consumers to get answers to their questions except through gaming journalism. *GamePro Magazine* in 1993 even went so far as to have an explicit section titled Buyers Beware, even though the narrative was implicit in much of their reviews.

[*GamePro Magazine’s*] Buyers Beware feature was very informative, which would address new customer concerns every month on whatever software or hardware problems they may be having. It was particularly helpful whenever there was a new hardware being released. For example, a customer writes in issue 144 asking if the PS2 is compatible with PS1 accessories (Apathylad, 2011). *Nintendo Power* took their role as a buyer’s guide a step further into the marketplace in that their reviews of games bore no ratings, and in general, reviews lacked any sort of negative indicators. Only positive aspects of a game were shared—which is likely a result of the fact that *Nintendo Power* was funded by the game developer Nintendo of America

(Sheff, 1993). In a similar manner, game developer Sega of America funded *Sega Visions* (Harris, 2014). Yet *Nintendo Power* is the only gaming outlet in this sample set that published press releases from game developers.

The 1993 dataset relies heavily on a reviewing rubric that was discussed in chapter three, yet the rubric is far more explicit. In *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *Game Informer*, reviews were split up by different sections denoting the different elements by which the game was rated and in *GamePro Magazine*, a separate rating was noted for each element of the rubric.

The 1993 dataset's narrative frames regarding gaming are similar to the 2013 set. *Gaming as embodied experience* and *gaming as business* both appear in the texts but with less frequency in 1993. But *gaming as a family activity* appears more often but in a different manner. As opposed to appearing as a part of the narrative of the review, this frame is written into the structure of particular reviews and of the gaming journalism audience orientation. For example, this frame largely appears to be implicit in *Nintendo Power* and *Sega Visions*, two news outlets that were explicitly targeting a young audience for games. Furthermore, *Sega Visions* went so far as to explicitly include the age rating for violent games reviewed in the magazine. The magazine stories would also include a warning regarding the violence in the game. *Nintendo Power* never included age ratings or warnings so the way the magazine downplayed releases of violent games was through pushing such stories inside the magazine. However, the need to do so was relatively uncommon because the violence that did appear during this era was largely censored in Nintendo games (Likarish, 2014). In terms of gaming, 1993 was a significant year as a result of the release of *Mortal Kombat*, a violent fighting game that brought about Senate

hearings about violence in games and eventually a national games rating system, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (Perreault, 2014a). The game developer Nintendo famously censored *Mortal Kombat* to make it slightly less violent. When the game was brought from the arcades to Nintendo consoles, red blood was replaced by gray sweat (Larry, 1993; Perreault, 2014a). The release of *Mortal Kombat* on home consoles was big news, but Nintendo buried the *Nintendo Power* story pushing it deep into their magazine without featuring the title. The review only went so far as to gently describe the premise of the story and the characters.

Implicit in the decision to bury the *Mortal Kombat* story and the decision to include age ratings on the *Sega Visions* review is this idea of *gaming as a family activity*. For example, the *Sega Visions* review of *Mortal Kombat* noted that the game developer was making a code for a special game mode available if you called their toll number and they indicate that they're speaking to a family audience. "Arena is making the Arcade mode code available to interested gamers via a special phone number. This is a toll call, so get permission from whoever pays the phone bill before dialing" (*Mortal Kombat*, 1993, p. 23). So similar narratives regarding games appear in the 1993 coverage as opposed to the 2013 coverage, but *gaming as a family activity* appeared in a more subtle manner.

Religious narratives are treated far more playfully in 1993, even though the appearance of such narratives was rarer in 1993 because of the censorship guidelines discussed in chapter one (Likarish, 2014). This narrative approach does not appear in 2013 and appeared most explicitly in 1993 in reviews of the game *Gods*. *Gods* is a game drawn out of Greek mythology, yet the phrases used for puns and humor in review of the

game are all Christian. In the review for *GamePro Magazine*, one of the subheads reads “Gods help us” and the opening sentence is “your prayers have been answered and the Gods are with us” (Larry, 1993, p. 56). Christian phraseology is used to discuss Greek paganism with the conclusion of the review as “Gods is great! Gods is good!” (Larry, January 1993, p. 57).

As a result of the heavy emphasis on a rubric, which often split reviews into separate sections, narratively written reviews appeared infrequently. But in the case of *Gods*, *Game Informer* magazine employed a clear embodied experience frame which inserts the reader and author into the game:

We are at the twilight of classical mythology. It is said immortality breeds contempt, and the apathetic Gods have grown bored with the trifling’s of the human race. Lounging on Mount Olympus, they laid down a challenge to man without so much as a thought to the consequences (Staff, January 1993, p. 6). Yet, even still, after the initial introduction *Game Informer* conducts a point-by point review on the rubric of “concept, graphics & animation, entertainment value, sound, and playability” (Staff, January 1993, p. 6-7).

Similarly, *Electronic Gaming Monthly* reviewed *SimEarth* in March 1993, where the religion was more implicit but still treated playfully. *SimEarth* is in the genre of what are called *god games* because the player controls the development of a planet, the environment, the birth of life and the like (Review: *SimEarth*, March 1993). *Electronic Gaming Monthly* approaches the review to make the case that the game is educational, in that the player has to understand and apply scientific concepts in order to be successful.

This time around, you must create a planet, keeping in mind that you were

responsible for making it an environmentally safe place to live. Humans will eventually make their appearance and bring with them a multitude of modern-day problems. Try to preserve utopia while learning a lot about the environment!

(Review: SimEarth, March 1993, p. 26)

In the review, the protagonist is again the player who has godlike powers they will need to apply in the game.

Two key differences exist in the gaming journalism narratives between 1993 and 2013. First, the emphasis on the rubric is more explicit and implemented at even a structural level in 1993, which deteriorates the ability of gaming journalists to create a narrative. Instead reviews end up broken up by paragraphs with an emphasis being given to larger photographs and graphics. This trajectory showcases the development of journalistic professionalism in gaming journalism (Soloski, 1984). Yet this trajectory is counterintuitive in that one of the common complaints in journalism is the rising emphasis on creating entertainment value and less substantive stories (Mindich, 2005). Yet with gaming journalism, the transition from 1993 to 2013 shows decreasing emphasis on a tabloid orientation and a heavier emphasis on substantive stories. The reviews read differently than the 2013 dataset, largely because of the audience to which they are addressed. In 1993, the audience was largely young adolescent males (Wanted, 1997), yet the audience written for in 2013 is a general audience—a result of the changing gender and age distribution of those who play digital games. So the substantive nature of the stories may be a result of a perceived longer attention span and larger understanding of social context in their audience.

Second, the religious narratives changed overtime. They appeared quite rarely in

1993, in part because of the censorship in place (Likarish, 2014). Yet when it appeared—particularly in the case of reviews for *Gods* and *SimEarth*, religious narratives are treated lightly and playfully. The more serious and more frequent discussions of religion in 2013 could be a result of the changing tone regarding religion that followed 9/11 as well as the American George W. Bush presidency, which put conservative Protestantism in the spotlight. In both cultural landmarks, religion was understood to be serious as a potential (1) motivator for acts of violence or (2) motivator for political activity (Smart, 1996). In the next section, it will be discussed to what degree these two narrative changes are indicative of paradigmatic change.

Paradigmatic Change in Gaming Journalism

The previous section explored the gaming reviews from 1993 to contrast it with 2013 gaming reviews and found that there were changes in the narratives overtime. In particular, there were changes in narrative structure, the audience for the narrative, the use of protagonists, and the use of humor. The question posed was, “To what degree do the narratives indicate paradigmatic change?” (RQ 12) This section will seek to address what was indicated regarding such change.

A paradigm is nothing less than the very basic, foundational ideology operating from within institutions and that informs activities on both a macro- and micro-level (Kuhn, 1996). Kuhn (1996) notes that in a paradigm shift, professional commitments—such as the commitment to a particular audience and approach to reviewing—are reorganized and reconceptualized. With this in mind, it does seem as though the changing narratives from 1993 to 2013 indicate a fundamental change in professional orientation.

But it would be hard to argue that this is a paradigm shift since hegemony appears to be intact.

First, the narratives developed structurally and content wise. In 1993 reviews, no review contained a reference to current events or the broader social context, which was emphasized far more in 2013. Reviews—throughout all forms of arts criticism—tend to address some form of rubric (Carey, 1974; Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007), but in 1993 this rubric was explicit and, many times, enforced by the very structure of the page design. In 2013, gaming journalists tended to address many of the same topics, but they were written into the stories implicitly.

Furthermore, the conceptualization of what they were writing about changed in that in 1993, the game was reviewed as a piece of technology. Separate sections devoted to graphics, sound and gameplay then make sense as that would be how one might review a new music player—by denoting how well it travels, how well the sound transmits, how well it reads CDs, tapes, or mp3s. But in 2013, the game is conceptualized less by what it *does* but by what it *is*.

For example, in an interview, one editor discussed his reporting on blood minerals, the minerals used to create electronics:

In fact, over my history of covering games, I often have been chastised for how proudly I cover gaming. I've covered – not a ton but I've covered quite a bit the whole concept of blood minerals in the game industry and the importance of that impact and people have gotten super upset about it, but I think it's important to cover...Blood minerals are this era's blood diamonds. They are minerals used in most electronics or a lot of electronics, including game consoles and the iPhone

and other cell phones, that are mined from certain parts of the world where that money is often then used to pay for insurgency and war and armies that recruit children by force and so there is this whole struggle within the industry to try to verify that those minerals aren't mined that way or aren't connected to those issues. It is something that's slowly moving I think in the right direction but it's a volatile topic because it is about a very serious and very heartbreaking issue and it is tied very directly to that. I tend to not do opinion pieces. I've never written a story about that and said, "so you shouldn't buy game consoles" but I think people have gotten upset because they read those stories and realize there might be this very real connection between buying a Playstation 3 and some 12-year old being shot in the head because he is in a war he doesn't want to fight in (Participant C).

The editor here demonstrates the serious topics gaming journalism can address, by getting at the fact that games are a form of software that still rely on physical electronics, the creation of which have some unintended and unconsidered implications.

The narrative frames of gaming denoted in chapter three indicate that gaming is framed as a family activity, as embodied experience and as a business. The first two frames, family activity and embodied experience, are about the experience of a game. And in interviews, gaming journalists stressed that a good review does not attempt to be objective, but rather attempts to share what the personal experience of a game is like. For example, in an interview with a one journalist, he noted:

I think reviewers essentially try to be, when you treat it like a car, it has four wheels and the engine certainly hits this many miles per hour. Congratulations,

car. Nine out of ten. I think that is problematic because it doesn't recognize that this is a medium that is so unbelievably experiential, more so than really any other popular medium, in that it is different every time (Participant G).

As was noted in the prior chapter, the change in the level of substance of reviews is also indicative in a change of audience—which is evidence of a shift in professional commitment. Whereas the commitment in 1993 gaming reviews was to perhaps act as a buyer's guide for young adolescent males, in 2013 gaming reviews speak to a much larger audience and address a much larger variety of topics. As such, this also speaks to a broadening of the gaming journalists' role. Gaming journalism historically began as largely facilitative in nature, although some monitorial journalism took place—describing things occurring in the gaming marketplace (Christians et al., 2009). The 1993 gaming journalism texts were largely a marketplace product that aimed to facilitate conversation—which is not a role to be dismissed in that, as noted earlier, gaming was a largely dismissed medium by mainstream journalism until recent years (Nieborg, & Sihvonen, 2009; Perreault, 2014a). But in 2013, gaming journalism is taking more advantage of the monitorial role and, even more noteworthy, the radical role in that it “focuses on exposing abuses of power and aims to raise popular consciousness of wrongdoing, inequality, and the potential for change.” Christians et al., 2009, p. 126. This role was exemplified in the statement by Participant C regarding his coverage of blood minerals. Numerous other interview participants also discussed covering topics such as the culture of game development, which includes issues of mass hirings and firings, and latent sexism in the business. So following the narratives of gaming journalism through

this 20-year time period tells a story of the development of journalistic professionalism and the sort of roles developing journalistic niches embrace.

Second, narratives also changed in regards to religion. A number of factors went into the change. As was discussed earlier, there was a decreased degree of censorship (Likarish, 2014), but there was also a decreased barrier to creating games (Bakie, 2010). Thus games promoting minority religious perspectives might not have previously been able to be produced, let alone reviewed and now that is possible. There was a societal change in tone regarding religion in the 1980s in America that only became more explicit when the Religious Right came to political power most dominantly in the 2000s (Martin, 2005). Furthermore, there were numerous other events in American society that affected the tone regarding religion in the 2000s—the terrorists attacks by Al Qaeda on September 11th, the death of Pope John Paul II, the shifting power in Christianity from the Global North toward the Global South (Yelensky, 2011). The playful nature with which the 1993 religious content was treated was eschewed for a more serious tone regarding religion. It would be easy to see *GamePro Magazine*'s review of *Gods* as emblematic of a fading dominance of Protestant normativity—in that the review made use of explicit Protestant phraseology. The review represents only a single datapoint, and also consider that the language may have been so explicit simply because of the presumed audience.

While the narrative frame of *gaming as embodied experience* existed in 1993, it only became more common and more privileged in narratives in 2013. The embodied experience, described by Gee (2003) as the experience of humans feeling present in a digital space, harkens back to Tickle's (2008) description of what a new religious paradigm would likely include. Tickle (2008) argues that a future religious paradigm

would be characterized by humans' increasing difficulty in differentiating themselves from machines. This is the precise experience described in the narrative frame *gaming as embodied experience*. The presence of the frame itself is a contribution to Tickle's (2008) research in that it demonstrates that media is already narrating this interplay between man and machines. But the fact this frame increased in appearance and became more integrated into gaming journalism further provides a possible indication of a shift, yet there is no indication that this interplay between humanity and machines has shifted the paradigm in the religious hegemony appears to be intact.

There is a clear change in the writing and the structure of reviews, so there is a clear case for a paradigm shift in terms of a reconfiguration of who games are *for*. The broadened audience in digital games in 2013 by necessity also saw a more diverse array of content in story, more substance in the form of social commentary, and a wider array of types of games reviewed. Furthermore, this research does indicate Tickle's (2008) Great Emergence in that the narratives indicated a difficulty in differentiating humanity and machine, yet it does not appear, as of yet, that this great emergence is the paradigm shift Tickle (2008) indicates it will be.

What was expected in reading these texts is a clear paradigmatic change from the modernist paradigm to Protestant normativity. The texts make an implausible case for a paradigm shift from the modernist paradigm to Protestant normativity. The reason this case does not compel is because (1) the texts don't seem to support it, in that content changed but narratives about religion were affected in particular by the degree of seriousness with which they are discussed and the development of the *gaming as*

embodied experience narrative and (2) there is a more compelling case to be made that the paradigm in question is actually a mixture of modernism and Protestantism.

Modernist Protestantism

At this point, the question posed at the beginning of the chapter, regarding the role of religious hegemony in affirming or challenging the modernist paradigm, will be revisited. On the one hand, there are elements of this analysis both in chapter three and four that seem to clearly indicate that the public perception of the modernist paradigm of religion seems to be well founded in that elements of it persist in gaming journalism. Yet simultaneously, this analysis has uncovered elements of Protestantism that could be jarring for those who consider gaming journalism to be secular, objective, and devoid of religious values.

In exploring paradigmatic change in this chapter, it was found that the emphasis on the rubric was more heavily emphasized and even structurally imposed in 1993 but that the rubric were mostly implicit in 2013 gaming journalism. Furthermore, narratives regarding religion also changed, particularly in regards to the seriousness with which religion is treated. Between 1993 and 2013, there is a clear change in the content and structure of reviews, which seems to evidence a more foundational change—in this case regarding a conceptualization of who games are *for*. The potential audience for digital games broadened from largely young men to the whole of society in a period of 20 years (Wanted, 1997; Industry Facts, 2013).

I would like to argue that this research challenges the idea that our current paradigm is solely modernist, indicating that there may be essentially Protestant values written into the modernism in America. This supported by Hutchinson (1992) who, in his

study of the Protestant Modernist movement, identified three significant themes in modernism which, in turn, typify Protestantism: (1) “the conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture”; (2) “the idea that God is immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it”; and (3) “a belief that human society is moving toward realization...of the Kingdom of God” (Hutchinson, 1992, p. 2). This Protestant Modernist movement is best exemplified in the values of contemporary liberal mainline Protestantism (Smidt, den Dulk, Froehle, Penning et al., 2010). The first two elements were reflected in this research through the modernist system of classification and the emphasis on new technology where the overlap seems most explicit.

Cultural immanentism. A value in the current religious paradigm that is shared by both modernism and Protestantism is in “the idea that God is immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it” (Hutchinson, 1992, p. 2). This value of cultural immanentism comes through in the shared commitment in both modernism and Protestantism for pluralism. Pluralism is an implicit idea in cultural immanentism in that human culture has developed in diverse and divergent ways—thus, the value of pluralism is that the divine may be immanent in a variety of voices (Beaman, 2005).

The emphasis in the modernist paradigm on delineating different religions and different elements of the gaming experience has much to do with pluralism. By creating different categories for religion, which may or may not be helpful in reality, modernism perpetuates a level of pluralism by ensuring that a variety of religious voices are heard (Bender & Klassen, 2010). In journalism terms, relying on hard-and-fast terms like “Catholic” and “Sunni Muslim” at once denotes some degree of difference from that

which is normal and Protestant, while at once featuring these voices and indicating that they have a place in the public sphere.

In modernism, the development of culture—as evidenced through religious pluralism—is a form of progressivism that necessarily allows for a greater number of voices and ideas to be shared (Hutchinson, 1992, p. 2).

Religious-based progressivism. It is true that modernism historically has heralded new technologies. In studies of media and religion, often discussed to the point of tedium, is the role of movable type in the development of Protestantism (Underwood, 2002).

In turn, Protestantism supported literacy at a theological level by imposing doctrines such as the *sola Scriptura*, which ascribed sole theological authority onto the Bible, and the *priesthood of all believers*, which deemphasized the value of clergy and emphasized the leadership of the laity. By extension, the *priesthood of all believers* and *sola Scriptura* had the effect of requiring all congregants to have an understanding of the Bible that could only be gained through literacy—something that would have been impossible without movable type (Hutchinson, 1992). Similarly, Nord (1984; 2004) notes that evangelical Protestants were the early adopters of radio, attempting to use the technology to reach a larger audience.

This religious-based progressivism embedded in Protestantism is key distinguishing feature that separates indicates that the type of religious normativity seen in this sample is *Protestant normativity* as opposed to *Catholic normativity* or *Christian normativity* more broadly. This progressivism is unique in Christianity to Protestantism (MacCulloch, 2009). By contrast, both Catholicism and Orthodoxy place a heavy emphasis on the value of tradition—a value that is deemphasized in Protestantism

(MacCulloch, 2009). For example, in Orthodoxy, Christians still sing a set of chants that were arranged in the first millennia using only one or two notes. Yet when Martin Luther proposed changes that eventually developed into Protestantism, it involved adapting contemporary bar songs to become Christian hymns (MacCulloch, 2009).

Furthermore, and as Underwood (2002) indicates, the essential journalistic mistrust of authority is an essentially Protestant value. This value developed in reaction to the abuses of power by the Catholic Church that eventually led to the Protestant Reformation (MacCulloch, 2009; Underwood, 2002).

Hutchinson (1992) indicates that Modernist Protestantism disappeared in the middle of the Twentieth Century. Perhaps it is worth considering that Modernist Protestantism disappeared from explicit conversation not because it was dismissed but because it was accepted. In the coverage, the religious hegemony that appears is a sort of Modernist Protestantism operating at the level of assumption. This also provides some sense of why the terms *secular humanism* and *fundamentalism* still seem to offer a compelling distinction—the operating *normal* may be Modernist Protestantism (Hutchinson, 1992).

In modernism, new technology is important—not just for its ability to reach a larger audience, but as a method to reshape man into moral perfection. In modernism, technology is seen as creating a utopian vision of paradise (Armstrong, 1998). So in this sample the natural inclination in gaming journalism toward heralding new technologies is an example of an impulse built into both modernism and Protestantism.

It is also worth noting here that this progressivism, as indicated by the term itself, distinguishes the form of hegemony operating here from fundamentalist forms of

Protestantism. While the fundamentalist wing of Protestantism attempts to return to an *authentic* early Christianity—which would be exemplified by orthodoxy rather than what happens in fundamentalist congregations—contemporary mainline Protestantism is more interested in heralding and serving an integral role in societal progress (Hutchinson, 1992). Furthermore, cultural immanentism is similarly a value that would distinguish Modernist Protestantism from the fundamentalist wing of Protestantism, in that fundamentalism contains an innate mistrust of culture, and popular culture in particular (MacCulloch, 2009; Nord, 2004) and this mistrust takes place even though fundamentalist forms of Protestantism often attempt to use media to their own ends (Nord, 2004; Perreault, 2015).

The next chapter will build on what has been uncovered here in regards to the nature of religious hegemony by exploring the operation of religious hegemony. This will be done by probing interview data from gaming journalists and considering their description of the norms and routines of the journalistic field.

CHAPTER 6- THE OPERATION OF RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY

In this dissertation analysis, this researcher explored the nature of religious hegemony and probed history to look for signs of paradigmatic change, which helps answer whether this religious hegemony has existed for some time, or is a product of recent factors. Religious hegemony, as it appears in gaming journalism, is a mixture between the structural restraints of modernism and the norms and values of Protestantism. In the previous chapter, it was noted that as opposed to paradigmatic change—which there was evidence of, but less so in terms of approaches to religion—what was more interesting was the ways in which the data seemed to indicate this mixture in through the Protestant modernist perspectives. This chapter explores how this religious hegemony of modernist Protestantism operates.

This exploration occurred predominantly through an exploration of the data from long-form interviews with 17 gaming journalists. Other questions regarding the interview data will be probed in order to better address this central research question of the study, “How does religious hegemony operate in gaming journalism?” (RQ 1) This was done through identifying the narrative frames that emerged from the interviews with gaming journalists, eliciting their conceptualizations about what constitutes a *game*, and connecting the two to see what is implied regarding an implicit religious framework. At the conclusion of this chapter, this research question will be addressed by drawing together threads from throughout this chapter as well as from the rest of the analysis.

Narrative Frames from Gaming Journalists

Since hegemony operates at the level of the institution and the media system, one way in which to probe the operation of hegemony is through the way in which members of an institution discuss that institution and media system. This section will address the question, “What narrative frames emerge from interviews with gaming journalists?” (RQ 3) This will be done through identifying the narrative frames operating in the environment in which journalists work, and the routines and norms in those environments. These indicate how gaming journalists think of their work in relation the journalistic institution.

First, the environments throughout gaming journalism are different but similar in that the emphasis is on digital interaction. For example, at *Forbes*, journalists largely work remotely. *Forbes* does have offices where writers can work in New York City and San Francisco, but they aren’t big enough for their staff and so remote work is essential. Furthermore, *Forbes* tends to be selective in their choice of games writers in that they want to see skilled self-editing—this keeps them from needing to hire additional copy editors. So they pick employees carefully, with the knowledge that they will need to be self-motivated. Since journalists are located remotely, the way that they keep in touch consistently throughout the day is through some sort of digital system such as Slack, Campfire, or even Skype. Even when writers are working in the same office—such as is the case with *Kotaku* (which shares spaces with the rest of the Gawker media group), *The Verge*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Game Informer*, and *IGN*—often there is a sort of digital platform that writers use to communicate. At *The Verge*, digital interaction is

prized to such a degree that there is a robot with an iPad and the robot travels around the office so employees are encouraged to write notes to each other on the iPad.

What these environments indicate is that gaming journalists largely work in *post-newsroom* newsrooms, in that they are still maintaining much of the interaction they might in a traditional newsroom environment. But the interaction occurs digitally, with reporters physically separated by thousands of miles. This only works in gaming journalism because there is no emphasis on the news value of proximity in the news (Craft & Davis, 2013). Unlike sports journalism, which is rooted physically, much of game journalism reporting and criticism can occur anywhere with an accessible cell phone signal and internet. The digital emphasis in the gaming journalism newsroom in some ways matches the digital nature of the gaming medium itself. Games are created with digital technology, often distributed digitally and accessed digitally. So it makes sense that the location would be deemphasized, and that access to digital work would be privileged.

Yet it must be acknowledged that among those publications that do have offices, their offices tend to be close to entertainment technology hubs, so either in San Francisco or New York City. Those also tend to be the locations where many gaming companies are located. Sometimes this is a result of journalistic integration (as is the case with Gawker media group and Vox media group—which owns *The Verge* and *Polygon*). So while proximity isn't a value in the concept of a story about games or a game review—or even consciously vital to the niche—it does remain valuable at an institutional level. And the location of these offices near tech centers links it to the larger journalistic tradition, which emphasizes the importance of proximity.

Second, it is worth discussing some of the routines and norms of newswork in gaming journalism newsrooms in that this will help us understand ways in which hegemony may operate.

One routine standard to the journalistic field revolves around a value for editing. Whereas *Forbes* prizes self-editing and allows their writers to largely post directly to the website, most other publications have an editing process with differing degrees of formality. *Entertainment Weekly* and the *New York Times* both put gaming journalism through a fairly standard print editing process. Initial stories go through an assignment editor, critiques are returned to the reporter, revised stories go through an assignment editor to a copy desk and then proceed to layout. In some cases, the journalist sees their story a second time, or more, during the process before publication. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are other publications with far less formality that still put stories through an editing process. At *RPGamer*, for instance, the newsroom is small and consists largely of part-time employees or volunteers. So, in their organization, whoever completes a game first (if the game is sent to multiple employees) will write the review. Anyone on the staff can complete the initial edit of the review, and then after the edit, it goes to one of eight senior reviewers. Finally, the game is given a score up to 5.0. High scores—those between 4.5 and 5.0—have to be approved by at least one other member of the team (Participant M).

Another fairly common routine in gaming journalism is the process of *scoring* games. This indicates a value of creating a sort of quantifiable value for a game, by which it can be measured against other similar games. This routine serves an important purpose in the contemporary entertainment in that just as many wait for the numerical assessment

from Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic to know whether or not to go see a movie, Metacritic is similarly of high value in the gaming community (Wingfield, September 20, 2007). A scored review will be calculated in Metacritic's formula, particularly if received early, and then serve as a method to syphon internet traffic from Metacritic to the gaming journalism website.

Much of gaming journalism story development happens through similar means. Stories evolve from public relations materials from the industry, large gaming industry conventions, quarterly business reports from relevant companies, identified trends of gameplay through intelligent use of the internet, and from a journalist's network of connections within the industry. How stories develop beyond that differs according to the publication—is hearsay appropriate? Should the journalist wait for substantiation before publishing the piece? Approaching the development process occurs differently through gaming journalism.

The process of reviewing games is fairly standard across the industry. Each news organization has a calendar of game release dates. At a certain time prior to release, the reviews editor contacts the game developer for a review copy of the game. Typically, games are (1) sent to reviewers close to the retail release of a game, (2) embargoed until near the retail release of the game and, at times, both occur. Games reviewers noted that the process is far from ideal in that rarely are reviewers given enough time to review games thoroughly. Journalists noted that some PR professionals send out the review copies so late that reviewers are left scrambling. Interview subjects noted that game developers would likely be dissatisfied that the project they've worked on for years is only given a few days for review.

One of the norms in the industry is the idea that reviewers must have completed the game in order to write the review. Interview subjects said there is some discussion about “how complete” a game needs to be, but most news organizations saw a completed games as the ideal. That said, there are some publications—in particular, *Kotaku*—where journalists don’t have the time to complete every game and so journalists just aim to get a comprehensive sense of the game before writing the review.

The newsroom environment and game journalism norms inform a few narrative frames that emerged in the interviews that help flesh out the role of gaming journalism.

Gaming Journalism as Buyers Beware. Some interview subjects emphasized the enthusiast nature of gaming journalism—it is aimed at people who purchase games. As such, gaming journalism then follows in the tradition of *GamePro Magazine*’s Buyers Beware section from 1993, providing information for gaming enthusiasts interested being affirmed or dissuaded from a given purchase. This is informed, in part, from the norm of scoring games, which seems largely driven from a Buyers Beware emphasis.

“Game journalism isn’t journalism. It’s too opinion driven. What drives it are opinion driven reviews and features” (Participant F). He noted that the most important job of a gaming journalist or critic is to “inform the consumer.” Furthermore, many people have already made their decision about whether they want to buy a game and his job is to “confirm or challenge that” (Participant F).

So here, the role of a journalist is, at least in part, to help consumers make purchasing decisions. Scores then serve as a useful measure to help consumers.

Gaming Journalism as “Just” Journalism. Other interview subjects expressed frustration that gaming journalism is described as such in that, they emphasized, good gaming journalism is just journalism. It is investigative, evaluative, thorough, and accurate. And indeed, many interview subjects had extensive journalistic credentials from newspapers, cable television, and online news websites. This is informed by a norm for thorough editing process in reviews and news—in that it indicates a value for accuracy in both substance and presentation.

One editor noted that he’s frustrated when gaming journalists choose to describe themselves as “bloggers.”

I have been pretty public about this, when people – for multiple reasons – when people define themselves as bloggers, meaning that they are not journalists, because I think...it lowers the expectations both of the audience and for the writer of their work, but ... it could allow people to do basically shoddy work. So it’s a two-edged sword and it’s completely unnecessary. If you look at the history of journalism, journalism doesn’t mean working for a newspaper. That’s not what journalism is. It is about reporting using method of reporting to give people information so they can make decisions based on that information (Participant C).

Note that in his comments, he refers to the news work of gaming journalists as a part of what makes a journalist. In particular, he defines it by denoting the standards that need to be upheld and drawing on the “method of reporting” (Participant C).

Gaming Journalism as Social Criticism. In particular, when talking about reviews, some gaming journalists noted that their responsibility is to put what is happening in games in their larger social context. This is informed by the emphasis on completing

games in that there are circumstances where the social critique in a game may not be clear until a game is completed or near-completed.

Some participants who drew from this narrative frame were uncomfortable using the word *journalism* to describe what they do. That said, one participant noted that they have never published a game that was not completed. “A good review is just personal interpretation backed up. There is no objective truth behind arts criticism” (participant, N).

Another editor argued that the word *critic* is often a better fit than *journalism*. “I think we’re more cultural critics than anything else...there’s a big call to pull political commentary from games” (Participant Q). In this quote, he’s noting the importance of pulling out commentary about politics in particular. Other interviews noted similar value for connecting the commentary in games to society.

It speaks to the hegemonic nature of the paradigm that these frames persisted throughout the sample in that, as was noted, differences persisted in experience, journalistic training, and residence. This implies that this hegemony may be operating through processes of socialization, which will be explored in more depth in the pages that follow.

In this section, the narrative frames of gaming journalists were identified and analyzed. Central to their role as gaming journalists is their conceptualization of games, and as such, it could prove useful in parsing the degree to which gaming journalists operate with a religious framework and it could prove useful in identifying the operation of religious hegemony in general. In the next section, this conceptualization of games will be explored.

Gaming Journalists on Gaming

One study participant described the role of gaming journalists succinctly: gaming journalism should be about games because “if it’s not about the game, you probably did it wrong” (Participant H). It may seem like an obvious statement, but it’s nonetheless important in that it indicates in part how gaming journalists conceptualize the digital game. The way gaming journalists conceptualize *games*, simultaneously describes what is considered *newsworthy*. Thus, parsing these conceptualizations may provide useful indications as to how religious hegemony operates.

The following section will explore the interviews in order to respond to the question, “How do gaming journalists conceptualize the digital game?” (RQ 4) In interviews, respondents were specifically asked the question “What is a digital game?” but their approach to this may have also emerged implicitly through discussion of their work.

First, it would be useful to revisit the terminology discussed earlier (see Chapter One) regarding games. As was noted, there is no one single term used. The terms *digital game*, *video game* and just, *game*, all have different emphases and imply different elements of the game are privileged more than others. Gaming journalists tend to use the term *video game* or shorten it to simply *game*. And using the term *game*, a participant provides a definition of games that indicates the overlap between the terms.

A game is a game is a game. If it’s chess, you know the game chess and someone happens to have rendered it in a 3D game engine with the same rules and the same imagery, and they put that onto a screen that you can play on tablet or you can play on TV or you can play on Xbox or you can play on DS, what makes it not

chess anymore? It's still chess. You just refer to it as 'chess, the video game' because it's in a video medium (Participant H).

This terminology is important in that interview respondents used differing terminology in talking about games and the interviewer responded to their terminology by adjusting the wording of my questions as necessary to try to avoid confusion. Also, the terms all emphasize different aspects of a game's identity. So in part, terminology was considered in identifying the conceptualizations of a game.

Gaming as Embodied Experience. In this conceptualization, the digital game is a space where experimentation can safely take place. It's a place where players can experiment with actions, identities, and roles that could be dangerous in reality but are safe in a game. This is the counterpart of the conceptualization of gaming that emerged from gaming journalism texts, but journalists talk about this frame also as if games serve as a digital playground for experimentation. One writer said games are environments "when actions have predictable outcomes" (Participant B). A senior writer noted:

A game is a safe experimental environment. It's a set of systems that allow you to experiment and I would say in a safe way... You can redefine safe however you like because obviously there are extreme games where people are at a danger spot. Realize that when I say "safe," I mean you are not literally choosing between life and death every time you do it, that's the difference between an environment that is a series of systems like going and fighting in war and going and fighting, doing paintball. You can still get injured playing paintball but the purpose is for it to be a safe environment from the test experiment and to have your experiences without getting killed and to a degree, that's chess (Participant G).

Like the prior participant, Participant G connected digital games with their analog counterparts—specifically, chess.

Gaming is an Interactive Narrative. This conceptualization of gaming did not appear in the gaming journalism sample, yet this appeared a few times in interviews. One editor described gaming as “an interactive narrative at the very least where the player makes decisions and controls actions” (Participant E). Another editor described it as “something that you play for fun or learning that requires direct input from the user” (Participant F). The editor further argued that the interactive element is particularly important to this type of entertainment—otherwise, the player is left feeling less of a player and more of a viewer (Participant F).

Gaming as a Family Activity. This conceptualization appeared at an implicit level in that, few journalists talked about their family when asked about games. But it came up frequently in interviews, much like it was evidenced in the textual analysis. Gaming journalists frequently discussed early memories of gaming with family members, currently playing games with children, or playing games at some point in the future with children.

Gaming is a Business. This conceptualization also appeared implicitly as few journalists defined games as a *product* or as a part of interactive media industry. Yet journalists delved deeply into the relationships between journalists, public relations professionals, and game developers in ways that indicated that games serve as a business. This occurred through journalists discussing business practices in the gaming industry—such as the environment of mass hiring and mass layoffs.

It is worth noting that in each case here, the narrative frame about conceptualizations of a game had an analog that emerged from the textual analysis except for that of the interactive narrative. This is noteworthy in that the sample clearly includes reviews of games that would be considered *interactive narrative* so their exclusion from the textual analysis is then interesting. A possible reason for their exclusion could simply be that it is an aspect of games that is so integral to the identity of games that it operates at the level of assumption in texts. As such journalists could see little reason to emphasize narrative interactivity when writing stories in that readers have come to expect their games to have it.

This section probed how gaming journalists conceptualize the digital game as a way to expose some of the implicit assumptions regarding *newsworthiness*. In doing so, it was found, not unexpectedly, that there were parallels to how digital games were conceptualized in gaming journalism texts. The next section will extrapolate from the frames and conceptualizations explored in both the interviews and textual analysis to probe them for the existence of an implicit religious framework.

Implicit Religious Framework

This section aims to draw together some of the findings from the prior two sections in order to pose the question of an implicit religious framework. As such, this section will address, “What do these frames and conceptualizations imply in regards to an implicit religious framework?” (RQ 5) This will be done through exposing the unconsidered religious elements in the narrative frames and conceptions identified.

First, it must be acknowledged that there *is* some form of religious framework. What has been learned in the review of prior literature is that religious hegemony

operates at the level of the institution and the social system (Gramsci, 2012; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). At the level of abstraction with which religious hegemony operates, it would then be tied to the paradigm, which informs the media system and through trickledown informs norms and routines, values, and professional ethics. Furthermore, various authors have suggested that it would be unlikely for a framework to not have some value regarding religion (Dressler & Mandair, 2011; Kuhn, 1996; Taylor, 2007).

Second, it is worth emphasizing that while such a framework likely exists at an individual level, what is most of interest is whether there is a framework operating in the journalistic institution. Gaming journalists most likely do not consciously operate considering the framework they have in their coverage of religion. That said, there may be institutional factors that help create said framework.

In order to assess an implicit religious framework, it is worth considering the implications of what did not emerge from the interviews and textual analysis as much as what did emerge. Near the end of every interview, interview subjects were asked whether playing games could be considered a form of religion. In each case, interviewees responded that it was something that they had not previously considered. Some offered reasons why games could not be considered forms of religion through offering their definition of religion, which in the case of some interview subjects involved the “worship of a deity” (Participant F; Participant N). Most found the concept compelling, often with the reference to the near-religious devotion some have to the identity of being a *gamer*, a result which emerged at least in part from the development of the GamerGate affair. One senior writer noted that there was a comparison to be made between a certain type of “dedicated gamer and a religious zealot” (Participant O).

That a Gaming is Religion frame did not emerge is not all that surprising, in that games are typically not thought of as being serious enough—or even important enough—to be religion and religion is typically not thought of as being playful enough as to occur through games. Yet it must be acknowledged that this frame did not appear even though most respondents found the concept compelling. This speaks to the implicit religious framework in that it operates at an unconscious level. Gaming religion—as is the case with all types of implicit religion—does not fit within the neat categories supplied by the modernist paradigm, nor does it match the norms and practices of Protestantism. As such, the existence of categories of what are acceptable and unacceptable practices of religion implies a religious framework.

The narrative frame of *gaming as embodied experience* does have some religious implication worth parsing. First, there is the transcendent nature of gameplay that some scholars have already noted (Wagner, 2012). Games take players—digitally and imaginatively—to other places. As such, many game reviews read like pieces that could come out a newspaper's tourism section. Similarly, in many interviews, interviewees referred to the experimental nature of the game, given the ability to try out different identities and ways of living. Games also provide the player the ability to die through their avatar, and then be reborn at the continue screen. This takes experience to an entirely new level in that player digitally experiences death and rebirth through the digital game. Yet in most cases, gaming journalists indicated that they had not considered the religious elements of the activity until asked about them. This again speaks to a sense of what are acceptable and unacceptable practices of religion that operate at an unconscious level.

It is also worth considering the conceptualization of *gaming journalism as social criticism*. Social criticism affirms the idea of a normative framework being employed because some sort of normative judgment would need to be employed in order to know what social issues with which to link it. The use of normative judgment is not an inherently religious action, but how it is used—or as helpfully, *not used*—can be helpful in pinpointing the existence of an implicit religious framework.

The role of a social commentator in some ways also has religious connotations. In that through reviews, gaming journalists are able to make judgments about what is *good* and what is *bad*, and to pinpoints the elements of a game that make them one way or the other. Journalists have shown remarkable restraint in preventing their normative judgment from affecting the scoring of a piece—for example, Danielle Riendeau’s scoring of *Dragon’s Crown* never alluded to the massive problems with gender depictions in the game (Riendeau, July 31, 2013). But scoring remains a clear indication of a gaming journalist’s ability to denote the *good* and the *bad*. In this way, gaming journalists, and all arts critics for that matter, serve a similar function historically to the parish pastor in that he provides guidance on that which is acceptable, unacceptable, morally repugnant, and morally uplifting in a society. Through many reviews and scores, gaming journalists do this with digital games. This is a function of the pastor that would be affirmed within Christianity in general, and, in Protestantism, through the Protestant concept of the *priesthood of all believers*, this would be a function shared with the laity. While there are Protestant implications for the journalists ability to identify good and bad, it should be noted that this could also be considered Catholic, in that the work of the parish pastor in this regard is similar to that of the priest.

But more helpful than simply assessing whether there is a normative judgment is what that normative judgment tends to be about. As was noted in the section on *narrating difference* (see Chapter three), Japanese games tend to be *othered*, with the possible exception of family-oriented games e.g. Super Mario Bros., Donkey Kong. Reviews reflect this and so when normative judgment is exercised to assess games from a different framework being of niche interest, this could imply something about what the games say. And as has already been noted, Japanese games tend to have tropes that do not fit in the Western paradigm (Fahey, April 5, 2010; Likarish, 2014; Tickle, 2008), such as killing God, summoning demons, and the playfulness with which religion is regarded. While scores were not assessed in the study, reviews of Japanese games tend to express an exhaustion with their repetitive narratives, which reviewers have already encountered before. The significance in this is that a wide variety of games have repetitive narratives: sports games, first-person shooters, and survival/horror games. In a sense, repetition is the norm in the industry, so that reviews of Japanese games would express this sense, when it is less expressed in regard to other types of games, is worth considering.

This exercise of normative judgment displays elements of the modernist paradigm in the disconnect between the exercise of this judgment and an attempt for objectivity in the scoring of a game.

Third, in interviews, as was noted earlier, journalists at times offered a definition of religion when asked about its presence in games. There was no single definition offered, but they all expressed similar sentiments:

-Religion involves *worship*—*worship* was a commonly used word. The term derives from Old English and it arose out of a Protestant Christian framework. The term indicates specific conceptions of religion and lay peoples.

-Religion involves *God*—there would at times be some reference to a *God* or *deity*. The idea being that religion involves some sort of higher power who plays a role in orchestrating events.

-Religion involves spiritual beings like angels and demons—these terms were used to describe creatures in games. Most times these are the terms used in the game as a result of localization (Likarish, 2014), whether they make sense or not. Recall Bailey’s (July 10, 2013) review about *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, in which she indicated that the use of the word *demon* in the game was a bit deceiving as the game itself is a monster-collecting game. But Bailey is the exception here, in that typically the use of such terms is used uncritically. The fact that there were shared understandings of religion and shared terminology regarding religion also speaks to an implicit religious framework.

In conclusion, what these frames and conceptualizations seem to imply is that gaming journalists are able to spot the implicit religion in games, although the framework for their professional practices doesn’t encourage it—nor would it be encouraged elsewhere in journalism. This is evidence at once of the persistence of the modernist paradigm as well as Protestant normativity. The connection between the two was dissected in more depth earlier (see Chapter Four).

In the final section of this chapter will seek to draw together the prior sections of this chapter in order to expound on the operation of religious hegemony.

The Operation of Religious Hegemony

This section will conclude the analysis of the dissertation by addressing the central research question, “How does religious hegemony operate in gaming journalism?” (RQ 1) Two primary processes, familiar to journalism scholarship, have been shown to indicate the operation of hegemony.

First, religious hegemony operates through the process of gatekeeping. Gatekeeping is the process by which journalists decide what’s a story, what is worthy of review and what is worth publishing. Yet the process of gatekeeping is employed at various levels of analysis—not solely at the level of the individual editor (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). So the decisions about what is a story and what is not a story often are written into an institution’s norms and values. It could also be that the gatekeeping occurs much earlier in the process—as through socialization. So the gatekeeping occurs when journalists are taught about the nature of a story and the purpose of journalism at academic institutions and at news organizations. In interviews, many gaming journalists described their work in different ways, but if gaming journalists are instructed that their work is *Buyers Beware* it would be reasonable to assume that they would see less value in extracting the details of religion in a game—unless it would affect a purchasing decision.

In the case of gaming journalism, a few editors noted that religion does not appear all that much in games. In some ways, this is a reality created by journalism through a choice of what games to review and how those games are reviewed—some of these religious elements end up being weeded out in the process. But the games with the most strident use of religious themes and terminology don’t tend to be in genres that are

currently popular. So in a sense, the gatekeeping occurs before the story arises by deciding what *kinds* of games are newsworthy. Thus the religious hegemony that occurs operates through the activities of gatekeeping to ensure that the same values and norms continue to be privileged.

The second way religious hegemony operates is through paradigm maintenance. Paradigm maintenance serves as a method to police the continuity of hegemony. In this study, GamerGate brought up ethical questions about gaming journalism that provided an opportunity for gaming journalists an opportunity to explain why they do what they do. In a similar manner, ethical scandals in journalism provide journalists with the opportunity to explain their role and through doing so, they engage in repairing the paradigm through which they operate (Berkowitz, 2000). In paradigm maintenance, journalists reaffirm the contemporary foundational assumptions and beliefs that explain their role (Steiner, Guo, McCaffrey and Hills, 2013). Paradigm repair fulfills the “double duty” of “outlining the boundaries of the community” and by reifying professional norms (Berkowitz, 2000, p. 127). So by extension, a paradigm polices the operation of hegemony and ensures its continuity.

In GamerGate, journalists were being questioned as to their role in serving as advocates of certain social justice issues in games—gender balanced games, accessible games for the disabled, and depictions of women, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities. Journalists throughout GamerGate largely asserted that (1) objectivity is largely impossible in game reviews in that criticism is by nature subjective but that (2) journalists attempt and are highly successful in reporting accurate information about games and the gaming community. So in the wake of that, in interviews, it is not at all surprising that

journalists largely asserted that reporting on games involving religion would not be any sort of different challenge from that which they already faced. In a sense, the questions asked regarding coverage of religion fit in line with questions journalists were currently being asked about sexuality and race. By responding, as they largely did, to questions about coverage of social issues, journalists worked to maintain the paradigm they were operating within professionally.

In doing so, they reified the paradigm and thus perpetuated the operation of hegemony. Gramsci (2012), in discussing capitalism, noted the cyclical nature of hegemony. In his study of capitalism as hegemonic, he noted that while it originated with elite institutions, it was reified through news media, the academy, and textbooks. At a very basic level, he argued that it is even reified through the use of language and it seeks to solidify the status quo (Gramsci, 2012; Hurd, 2007). With this in mind, journalists' attempts to repair their paradigm in interviews and in texts reaffirm the status quo. Paradigm maintenance operates as the police of religious hegemony by maintaining the values and operating procedures.

It is worth restating here what was originally noted regarding hegemony in chapter one: the operation of hegemony is an unconscious activity. There is no conscious conspiracy among games journalists to privilege certain types of depictions of religion as opposed to others. Certain types of depictions are privileged of course—ones that align with a Protestant framework—but this happens as a result of operations and processes that occur at a paradigmatic and institutional level.

This chapter explored the operation of religious hegemony through the identification of the narrative frames informing gaming journalism, through the different

conceptualizations of what defines a *game*, and through drawing out what those frames conceptualizations imply about a religious framework. It was argued that religious hegemony operates through the processes of gatekeeping and paradigm maintenance, which was informed by evidence in interviews and text. The narrative frames of gaming journalism and conceptions of what defines a *game*—which in gaming journalism, by extension, defines what is *newsworthy*—indicate the operation of a Protestant modernist framework.

In the conclusion, this dissertation will reassert the significance of this research, tie its implications to existing scholarly literature and indicate the limitations of the research.

CHAPTER 7- CONCLUSION

It may seem at first that the concerns of this dissertation are at the fringe of journalistic research in that the work looks at a niche area of journalism and issues of religion in its coverage. But the issues this work speaks to—the expression of journalistic ideology and the use of media to normalize certain modes of thought—are at the very heart of journalism scholarship. It builds and reshapes arguments in journalism studies literature in favor of viewing journalistic ideology as *catholic* (Sparks, 1992), or universal, *holistic* (Skinner, Gasher, & Compton, 2001) and *comprehensive* (Morgan, 1998). Furthermore, while gaming journalism may seem irrelevant for the serious topic under investigation, Deuze (2005) notes that the perceived differences between mainstream and niche media, serious and enthusiast journalism, and hard news and soft news are largely a part of journalists’ “modernist bias of its official self-presentation” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 112). Such binary oppositions, he argues are “increasingly untenable in our liquid modern times” (Deuze, 2005, p. 458).

This conclusion argues for the significance of this research by rooting the findings of this research back in scholarly literature and theory. In doing so, this section demonstrates how such this research builds on the scholars of the field, in particular on the theory of hegemony. In approaching this study, a number of questions were posed regarding the operation of, nature of, and persistence of religious hegemony in gaming journalism. This research demonstrated that religious hegemony operates through the processes of gatekeeping and paradigm maintenance (Agnew, 2005; Alteide, 1984; Gramsci, 2012). Religious hegemony was found to be modernist *and* Protestant (Silk,

1995; Underwood, 2002) in a way that harkens to the Protestant modernist movement in the early-twentieth century (Hutchinson, 1992). In exploring gaming journalism spanning 20 years of content, it became clear that some form of paradigm shift is likely underway—perhaps not in the broad way described by Toennes (2002), but it certainly connects with the Great Emergence discussed by Tickle (2008). The distinction between modernism and Protestantism was interrogated and this research makes a case, through the identified hegemonic behavior, that the religious hegemony identified is that of Modernist Protestantism (Bender & Klassen, 2010; Hutchinson, 1992; Taylor, 2007). It also indicates how journalists tend to cover religion when religion is ancillary topic to their beat, building on the work of Buddenbaum (2002) and Hoover (1998). Finally, this research provided a useful model for using narrative theory as a useful way to conduct empirical research on hegemony.

In the following sections, each of these broad findings from the analysis will tie back to how it builds on scholarly literature.

How religious hegemony operates

As discussed in the above, hegemony is “the enrollment of others in the exercise of your power by convincing, cajoling and coercing them that they should want what you want” (Agnew, 2005, p. 1-2). Prior media and religion literature has indicated the existence of a subtle form of religious hegemony in media (Silk, 1995; Underwood, 2002). This research sought to fill a gap in our understanding of hegemony in general and religious hegemony in particular by exploring how hegemony operates. Broadly, religious hegemony was found to operate through the processes of gatekeeping and paradigm maintenance. This is parsed more specifically below.

First, religious hegemony was found to operate through the prevailing definitions of *newsworthiness*. In gaming journalism, newsworthiness is largely centered around the definition of what is, or is not, a *game*. Recall that a number of narrative frames emerged from interviews in defining a game—embodied experience, business, family activity, and interactive narrative—but none of them included the idea that gaming is religion (Bainbridge, 2013; Wagner, 2012). It was foreign to the gaming journalism concept of newsworthiness. This is not surprising given the prevailing understanding of religion in the modernist paradigm of religion, which excludes implicit religion (Albanese, 1999).

Second, religious hegemony was found to operate through the language used. Gaming journalists, in discussing depictions of religion in games, frequently provided their definitions of religion as a result. In doing so, a number of participants used Christian normative terminology such as “God” and “worship.” This is perhaps an understandable location for the operation of religious hegemony in that Gramsci (2012) argued a century ago that cultural hegemony regarding notions of capitalism occurred through use of language. Language is a part of human communication that reifies and reaffirms prevailing notions, and rarely is parsed for underlying assumptions (Gramsci, 2012).

Third, hegemony was found to operate through the review rubric employed in gaming journalism. In gaming journalism texts from 1993, this rubric is even enforced on a structural level with separate sections for topics like gameplay, sound, and graphics. In doing so, the rubric directed the narratives about a game’s nature, while also ensuring that certain aspects of a game were not discussed. This rubric persisted in 2013 texts although it was no longer enforced structurally. Gaming journalists tended to speak broadly about

the purpose of the review, but in general, the same topics of the 1993 rubric tend to still be addressed and are even privileged in 2013. But in 2013, gaming journalists did tend to put more of an emphasis on social criticism through reviews, which broadens the available topics considerably. Religion—as with issues of gender, race, and class—is most likely to come up as a part of social criticism as opposed to appear in technical aspects of a game. So the rubric ensures that gaming journalism refrains from addressing religion all that frequently in that it circumscribes attention to gameplay elements.

Finally, hegemony was found to reify itself through addressing scandals. The GamerGate controversy, which was a complex mix of ethical charges and the online harassment of women, gave journalists an opportunity to reaffirm what they do and why they do what they do. With GamerGate in particular, journalists were criticized for being “social justice warriors” (Dewey, January 29, 2015), indicating that concerns about media bias came largely from conservative critics. Critics argued that gaming journalists were addressing many issues related to social justice—representations of women and ethnicity in particular, but by extension one can see how this would apply to representations of religion. As such, gaming writers articulated through interviews and through posted responses that they thought of themselves as journalists (Totilo, August 20, 2014) and/or cultural critics (Kuchera, November 17, 2014) and these orientations shaped how they addressed issues of representation in games. Responding to scandals in this way allows for paradigm maintenance, which simultaneously serves as hegemony maintenance in that it ensures the continuity of the status quo.

This builds on literature of hegemony by detailing how the operation of hegemony—and specifically religious hegemony—takes place. Literature on hegemony

is explicit on the method of identifying hegemony but less so on how it operates. Identifying hegemony can occur through noting which parties hold power currently, noting how long these parties have held power, and noting alternative—but at times silenced—voices in a societal conversation (Clark, 2011). This study indicated four places in media in which religious hegemony takes place—through definitions of newsworthiness, through terminology, through the review rubric and through addressing scandals—and by doing so, builds on the theory of hegemony.

So while much research has explored the existences of hegemony, this research has given shape to the operation of hegemony and how it continues to proliferate itself.

The nature of religious hegemony

This research also builds on media and religion literature by fleshing out the nature of religious hegemony. Throughout the literature of media and religion, scholars have pointed out that journalists tend to make certain kinds of mistakes when covering religion (Hoover, 1998); that there are certain *topoi*, or religious themes, that appear frequently in journalism coverage (Silk, 1995); that the mass media as we know it was developed and popularized by Protestants (Nord, 1984, 2004); and finally, that mass media tend to operate considering Protestantism to be *normal* (Underwood, 2002). This study builds on, clarifies and in some cases, challenges, the arguments above.

What this study adds onto media and religion literature is that as opposed to viewing modernism and Protestant normativity as separate entities—separate because modernism is, in theory, devoid of religious content (Taylor, 2007)—Protestantism and modernism appear to be reconciled in our hegemony through the shared values of the Protestant modernist movement. Protestantism is normalized in the coverage, but

modernism has not disappeared either. When describing their work journalists continue to draw on lofty concepts from modernism, such as objectivity. Furthermore, modernism provides methods of operation that journalists tend to employ—editing processes for greater accuracy, the use of categories to succinctly sum up much deeper concepts (e.g. Muslim, Christian), and the use of a rubric in the reviewing process. So while gaming journalism tends to favor Protestantism through language, story selection, and the approach to a review, the operations of gaming journalism continue to be distinctly modernist.

This builds on the theory of hegemony in that it provides shape to what religious hegemony looks like. Sobel (2012) makes the point that there are different kinds of hegemony in operation. In the literature review, this researcher postulated that if Protestant normativity was found it would be considered Sobel's (2012) *liberal hegemon*. A liberal hegemon “fosters an environment in which cooperation and liberal economic exchange are incentives compatible for national policy makers and their selectorates” (Sobel, 2012, p. 2). In other words, a liberal hegemon works as a stabilizing force that operates vis-à-vis the consent of minority approaches. And while the hegemony identified is a bit more complex than just Protestant normativity, the nature of the hegemony does appear to be one of a liberal hegemon. Note that in gaming journalism, Japanese games continue to be reviewed and scored even though the games are often considered niche products. This provides openness to minority opinion that is essentially one of a liberal hegemon.

Clark (2011) provides a typology of hegemony, in which religious hegemony has never been situated. Clark (2011) distinguishes the types by composition—singular vs.

collective—and constituency—inclusive vs. exclusive. A singular composition would mean just a single entity holds the power, whereas power is shared in a collective composition. In an inclusive constituency, the power is widespread and may even be inclusive of international society. In an exclusive constituency, hegemony may be exclusive to a single group. What this research argues and presents is religious hegemony as a *singular inclusive* in his typology—and this would be the closest equivalent to Sobel's (2012) liberal hegemon. It is a singular inclusive hegemony in that a single group does seem to hold power—Protestantism—but through Protestantism's emphasis on pluralism and modernism's emphasis on objectivity, a wide array of voices are allowed to enter the conversation. This would explain why gaming journalism has consented to the growing emphasis on reporting about indie games and Japanese games, despite the fact that they may have a smaller audience and they may not be the games in which readers clamor to have reviewed.

In media and religion scholarship, it was generally understood that some form of religious hegemony was in operation and Protestant normativity appeared to be the unopposed contender (Underwood, 2002). This research provides more shape to this concept by revealing the complicated nature of Protestantism's standing, in part by building on classic literature on hegemony. Hegemonic literature has little considered the existence of a religious hegemony. This research bridges the two literatures and showcases that, in terms of hegemonic literature, religious hegemony in gaming journalism operates as a singular inclusive hegemon/liberal hegemon.

A paradigm shift in religious hegemony?

This research explores the gaming journalism field historically by exploring the development of coverage from 1993 to 2013, with special emphasis paid to texts in those two years. Paradigmatic change occurs slowly, so it was deemed worthwhile to look at the coverage to see what had changed and what had not. The research did find an indication Tickle's (2008) Great Emergence largely in regards to the development of the narrative frame *gaming as embodied experience*, but as this frame does not profoundly challenge the contemporary paradigm it is hard to argue that a shift is under way. The analysis found that emphasis on the game review rubric was less emphasized in 2013 as opposed to 1993. The study also found that there was a clear change in the structure of the reviews as well as the seriousness of religious content. The change evidenced here is foundational in that it indicates a change in the conceptualization of the audience for whom games are intended. The audience for games broadened from largely male in the early 1990s to a nearly even gender split in 2013 (Wanted, 1997; Industry Facts, 2013). Yet Modernist Protestant values are exemplified and privileged throughout the sample.

This builds on the theory of hegemony by identifying how hegemony proliferates. If hegemony is acknowledged to exist on a paradigmatic level (Gramsci, 2012; Kuhn, 1996), then by extension, hegemony may be altered in the midst of a paradigm shift. Kuhn (1996) notes that paradigm shifts are those episodes that shatter tradition in tradition-bound activities of a field. A major shift in audience seems to be the sort of tradition-shattering change that might be the catalyst for a paradigm shift. In addition, the structural imposition of the rubric deteriorated and journalistic professionalism increased (Soloski, 1984), and religious narratives were treated more seriously. While the sample

did show evidence of Tickle's (2008) Great Emergence, which she labels as the emerging, alternative paradigm, the religious hegemony did not change necessarily. It may be that the paradigm shift noted here is still in progress and, as a result, the religious hegemony is still intact. It also may be that the shift of a journalistic audience and the increase in the narrative of the embodied experience is not substantial enough to shift a paradigm. In either case, this builds on the foundation of knowledge regarding hegemony.

Toennies (2002) described that paradigm shift from the *enchanted world* paradigm to modernism. The emphasis in culture shifted from community to society and from private religion to public (civil) religion (Toennies, 2002). In his work, Toennies (2002) postulates that at a certain point another shift would occur in which cultural attention would return to community—in other words, the *enchanted world* paradigm would return. This research does not evidence such a shift—which, again, could simply indicate that such a shift is still in progress—but rather it does uncover that even the religious normalization that was found seemed to have an emphasis on society. The Protestant values indicated in this study—religious-based progressivism and cultural immanentism—both serve the values of democratic society (Hutchinson, 1992).

Tickle (2008) argues above that Western Civilization has experienced two great paradigm shifts—the first was the Great Schism, which separated the Orthodox Church from Catholicism, and the second was the Great Reformation, which developed Protestantism and, in turn, led to mass media (Tickle, 2008). She views contemporary society as existing on the edge of another religious paradigm shift that will develop out of humans interfacing with internet technology. The key indication of this, Tickle (2008)

argues, is a “difficulty in differentiating ourselves from machines” (p. 15). With this in mind, this research does provide some evidence of this difficulty through the continued emphasis on new technologies that appears in the religious-based progressivism described by Hutchinson (1992). Furthermore, the narrative frame of *gaming as embodied experience* indicates what Gee (2003) describes as a visceral connection with technology. So there is some evidence of the Great Emergence through the narrative frame *gaming as embodied experience*, yet it is currently does not appear that this constitutes a paradigm shift.

Of course, evidence of this interplay between humanity and machines also exists in many aspects of contemporary society in how people discuss technology. For instance, when a phone runs out of battery people don’t say that it ran out of battery but that it *died*. That something can die means by extension that it has *life*. This example is just anecdotal, but the use of American language itself seems to support this interplay. But as Kuhn (1996) notes, what is integral to a paradigm is that it operates at a level of assumption and operates through media and journalism. The narrative frame of *gaming as embodied experience* shows exactly that. The 1993 texts showed less emphasis on this narrative frame, but it was more heavily privileged in 2013 journalism. Yet this interplay does not, in itself, challenge the Protestant modernist paradigm

So if one were to look for signs of paradigmatic change by probing for evidence of deeper emphasis on community or local religion (Toennes, 2002), little in this research would supports this idea. But there is clear emphasis of an increased connection between humans and machines (Tickle, 2008). This research most clearly presents a hegemonic picture of Modernist Protestantism.

The Modernist Protestant paradigm

This prior literature largely draws a distinction between modernism and Protestantism. Modernism is seen as secular, in that it is devoid of religious value (Taylor, 2007), and Protestantism as solely existing within the zone of religious practice—church on Sunday and potluck dinners on Wednesday (MacCulloch, 2009). This research challenges that distinction by indicating that modernism does include religious values—ones that tend to privilege Protestantism—and Protestantism similarly has adjusted, as a hegemon does, to serve the broader needs of society (Clark, 2011). As such, there is sufficient connection between the two perspectives for the Modernist Protestantism to be well rooted. This research showcases overlap between Protestantism and modernism in values of cultural immanentism and religious-based progressivism (Hutchinson, 1992).

Cultural immanentism communicates the idea that God is revealed through human cultural development. This appears in the commitment for pluralism in both modernism and Protestantism. Religious-based progressivism communicates the idea that progress is supported through religion. Protestantism supported the development of mass media from movable type (Underwood, 2002) to radio (Nord, 1984, 2004) to video games (Perreault, 2015). Modernism shares this progressivism in that new technology is seen as a method by which to perfect man and society (Armstrong, 1998). What this indicates is that, in terms of the religious hegemony operating in gaming journalism, the dominant perspective is Protestant modernist. While this study cannot speak for the connection outside of the gaming journalism field, this study and the scholarship it builds upon

indicate that this may not solely be isolated to gaming journalism. This builds upon our understanding of both the modernist paradigm of religion and hegemony.

Studies of the modernist paradigm of religion have already indicated that secularism is not value-free (Taylor, 2007). In fact as Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen (2011) argue, the term *religion* developed out of modernism as a way to demarcate it from public life. Yet what this research demonstrates is that the values of modernism in some cases actually match those of Protestantism.

The existence of this religious hegemony challenges a predominant notion of modernism—secularism (Taylor, 2007)—by demonstrating that there are religious values not only operating in gaming journalism but, on a higher level of abstraction, operating within modernism itself. Secularism ensures that religion and public life remain separate (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer & VanAntwerpen, 2011; Taylor, 2007). In conjunction with a contemporary understanding of religion (Smith, 1998), it raises the question of whether contemporary media can exist that is free of religious value. It certainly seems that in the operating paradigm, Modernist Protestantism is well entrenched. It is also worth noting, that although modernism values secularism, no journalist used the term “secular” during interviews.

In hegemony studies, little research has explored the concept of religious hegemony, yet this indicates that Underwood’s (2002) conception of a Protestant hegemony is not the complete picture. Modernism retains much of the power in gaming journalism. This may be because modernism and Protestant normativity are actually two terms describing elements of the same societal hegemon—Modernist Protestantism. The two modes of thought owe much to each other historically (Hutchinson, 1992), but that

fact alone would scarcely make the case for their connection. Rather, their connected identity is better evidenced through the research of this study that shows overlap in cultural immanentism and religious-based progressivism.

Coverage of religion by non-religion specialists

This research also provides shape to what coverage of religion looks like when conducted by specialists in other beats. Much research in journalism explores the coverage of religion by religion specialists (Buddenbaum, 1988; Hynds, 1999) or by generalists (Wright, 1997). The general consensus of such research is that a great deal of religious illiteracy persists among journalists (Hoover, 1998) and that the reporting of religion has developed over the years from being the dismissed area of journalism coverage to being a largely accepted part of the news agenda (Buddenbaum & Mason, 2000). This research provides a compelling case of coverage of religion by neither religion specialists or generalists, but by specialists on another beat. Gaming journalists were never trained to coverage religion, although many study participants were quite knowledgeable just from their own individual readings, and yet they were, at times, confronted with subject matter that showcased either explicit or implicit religion. This may not be a challenge, in that if the approach of the institution is *gaming journalism as a buyer's guide*, there may be little need to address such issues in a game. However, if the institutional approach is *gaming journalism as "just" journalism* or *gaming journalism as social criticism*, one can see how reporting religion could be a potentially challenging topic.

In general, the research here indicates that, as is true throughout journalism, there are some issues with religious literacy (Hoover, 1998; Prothero, 2008). This emerged in

interviews from definitions of religion, some of which were so Christian-centric that *religion* would not have included many Eastern religions. Again, this is not uncommon in journalism, but this does add to the growing degree of research that suggests that journalists require better education in religion on all beats.

This research also is hopeful in the sense that journalists in interviews and in texts largely saw the value in reporting on and commenting on issues of religion in their coverage. Buddenbaum (1988) noted a troubling trend of decreasing localism in religion reporting, which was only further supported by Hynds (1999). But it is worth considering that while religion may be reported on less as a solo topic, religion may be being reported on to an increasing degree in relation to other niches, in particular health, popular culture, and foreign affairs. All of these niches have challenges in covering religion which is why including some sort of training in religious literacy during journalistic socialization could be of value.

Gaming journalism has unique challenges to covering religion. While other beats are able to allow interview subjects to self-identify their religion and to root religion into how they practice it (Perreault, 2014b), games do not always identify the religion presented. This requires gaming journalists to use normative judgment. This, combined with a lack of training, potentially creates a worst-case scenario for journalists when confronted with explicitly religious games like *Binding of Isaac* or *Bioshock Infinite*. On a practical level, this research indicates that training with religious could potentially be useful for gaming journalists—particularly, if the future of gaming journalism will revolve, not around games, but around game players (Totilo, 2014, October 9). For many,

the practice of religion, or the community of religion, is a part of the appeal of a game (Perreault, 2015).

This research uncovered that hegemony operates through the processes of gatekeeping so if journalists were interested in ensuring that this hegemony doesn't exclude voices and doesn't miss crucial stories, the place where change would need to be made would be in the gatekeeping process. In particular, journalistic training would be of value during socialization. In addition, journalists are increasingly granting attention to indie games—games created by a smaller team that tend to have smaller profit margins, smaller audience, but also tend to be quite innovative narratively (e.g. *The Binding of Isaac*). This is a trend, which could lead to more coverage of religion in that deeply personal stories get told at times through such games. By granting further attention to such games, religion may receive more play in gaming journalism.

The utility of narrative theory in hegemonic research

This research builds on the theory of hegemony by clarifying a methodological approach through which one can see how hegemony occurs. By connecting hegemony with narrative theory and using a narrative framing analysis, this study helps uncover how journalism narrates religion. It also helps showcase power at play, identifying its operation through narratives.

Hegemony traditionally has been a difficult theory to use methodologically because while many can observe the existence of hegemony it is not always clear how, beyond solely identifying the dominant party (Clark, 2011), to use it in research. Narrative framing helps circumscribe attention to the interplay between majority and

minority narratives and the power dynamics between them (Boje, 2001) and thus serves as a useful method to pair with hegemony.

In this study, the analysis of narrative frames helped indicate that the interplay between modernist and Protestant narratives were, in actuality, narratives coming from a single source. The values of cultural immanentism and religious-based progressivism—the key shared values between Protestantism and modernism—motivated key narrative frames identified in the study: *gaming journalism as social criticism* and *gaming as embodied experience*. In *gaming as social criticism*, journalists connect the narratives in games with the concerns of society. This has implications for cultural immanentism in that God, and truth, is revealed through human society. *Gaming as embodied experience* explains how games allow players to digitally experience what is happening in a game. This is a feature of games due, at least in part to technology, in that it was not always possible in games (Snead, 2014).

Furthermore, the analysis of the use of narrative frames between two time frames, 1993 and 2013, helped make a case for a religious paradigm shift. By noting the development and increased privilege of the *gaming as embodied experience* narrative, this research was able to support the theoretical argument of Tickle (2008). Tickle (2008) argued that a paradigm shift was underway—a shift she labels the Great Emergence—and that she believes is characterized by the difficulty of humans in differentiating themselves from machines. And while this element of the Great Emergence was spotted, there was no further evidence of a shift away from Modernist Protestantism. So in this way, the narrative frames did not just help answer the narratively-oriented questions of the study, but also helped identify the nature and operating values of religious hegemony.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is rooted in the interpretivist tradition and, as such, no claims can be made as to the generalizability of the study. As this is a culturalist study, there is no need for replication of research in that the researcher is assumed to be a central part of the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Hesse-Biber (2010) notes that the qualitative cultural studies approach used in narrative framing research often suffers from issues of validity and reliability. However, the concerns were addressed through a thorough methodological description to ensure clarity regarding what went into the development of a given theme as well as to ensure that the coding was consistent as described by Yin (2011).

It also must be acknowledged that the development of GamerGate in the midst of the study, while fortuitous in many ways, also limited the interview sample size. Several gaming journalism organizations refused interviews during the scandal, and, as a result of the rampant harassment of women during the study, only two women consented to be interviewed. It is possible that the lack of involvement from female gaming journalists and the lack of input from journalists from a few key journalistic entities could have skewed responses in a particular way. Furthermore, while gaming journalists largely seemed to be responding from their own experience and opinions, the fact that this researcher has written and published on the topic of religion and games may be something they discovered. If so, it may be that their responses were guided to fit what they suspected this researcher would want to hear. This is not an uncommon limitation of interview research in that the presence of a researcher in some ways always affects the shape of responses (Yin, 2011).

Future research should further probe the religious hegemony of modernist Protestantism. While Hutchinson (1992) identifies modernist Protestantism as a historically based, short-term movement, this research indicates that this movement may not be explicit but still be operating implicitly. This could be done through a historical analysis—perhaps using other niche areas of journalism such as fashion journalism, and sports journalism. These are areas that, as Deuze (2005) argues, challenge the modernist bias of the binary opposition between hard and soft news, yet seem like locations where religion would appear rarely but religious bias could operate widely. Based on the findings of this study, it would be interesting to see whether a similar religious hegemony operates in terms of reporting on religious athletes (e.g. probing for orientalism in coverage of athletes) or shifts coverage away from trends in non-Protestant fashion (e.g. the hijab and veil of Islam). These are also niche areas where coverage would need to be given to subjects outside of the American paradigm—as would be the case in Islamic fashion or international sports such as soccer. The existence of such religious normativity in numerous niches would further confirm that notion that although America may no longer be a *mass society* (Carey, 2008), religious normativity can still exist if all niches hold the same basic foundational predispositions. Furthermore, fashion journalism and sports journalism likewise have their own share of questions regarding journalistic ethics, which would provide a lively source to probe paradigm maintenance as a means for the continued operation of religious hegemony. As such, future research might expand this research to see to what degree the religious hegemony operates beyond solely the gaming journalism niche.

This study, in its totality, contributes to the conversation regarding the ideology of our media and in particular, circumscribes attention to a religious hegemony operating through the gaming journalism field. It challenges the clear delineation between modernism and Protestantism, noting that, in some key ways relevant to this research—they are a singular hegemon. This research also provided a sense of how journalists on non-religion beats cover religion and indicated a need for greater religion training in non-specialist beats. This was guided by an analysis of the narrative frames of gaming journalism. It provides a model for methodologically building on hegemony by paring it with narrative theory.

This study also addressed vital research gaps that exist in journalism studies scholarship regarding gaming journalism and in gaming scholarship regarding the role of journalism and religion. Little research currently explores the gaming journalism niche and less explores journalistic ideology within the niche (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). Similarly, little literature in journalism studies explores the coverage of gaming (Williams, 2003). And while gaming scholarship is developing quickly, in that it is a scholarly field that has largely emerged in just the last two decades, some research has begun to explore the connection between religion in games (Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Wagner, 2013), but less so on the mediation of games by journalists. But beyond the topical research gaps, this research fleshes out the operation of hegemony while connecting it to the developing literature in journalism studies on paradigm maintenance and the well-established literature of gatekeeping. In some ways, this work serves to salvage the theory of hegemony for empirical research by providing a method for further research on the topic. Furthermore, this work seeks to draw attention to religious threads

in journalistic ideology that may be useful for a wide array of scholars in journalism studies interested in ideological normalization or paradigms. It also challenges and builds upon media and religion research that sees such normalization as being either solely Protestant or solely modernist. The reality of the situation, this research argues is that the two operate together. Finally, this work provides some evidence of paradigm shift many religion scholars have looked towards (Bender & Klassen, 2010; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer & VanAntwerpen, 2011; Taylor, 2007) and in particular, builds on Tickle's (2008) concept of the Great Emergence to showcase evidence of gaming journalists increasingly narrating threads of the new paradigm.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*Below is a sample set of questions asked of gaming journalists. Additional follow-up questions were asked based on unexpected, but relevant information that emerged from interviews. In brackets, the research question(s) that responses will likely address.

-How long have you been writing about digital games?

-How did you get there, e.g. did you attend journalism school, an English department, or work your way in?

-Do you consider what you do journalism? (If “no,” then additional questions will refer to digital game “writers/writing”) [RQ 1]

-What goes into creating a *good* piece of gaming journalism? [RQ 1]

-How do you find stories/reviews? What percentage of that is assigned as opposed to originated by you? [RQ 1]

-Are there certain types of games, or game related subjects, you don't report on? What are those? [RQ 2a]

-What games are the most difficult to review? Why? [RQ 2a]

-What topics are the most difficult to report on? Why? [RQ 2a]

-An increasing number of scholars have become interested in the religion in games. Are there games in recent history that stick out to you for the clear religion in them? What makes them stick out? [RQ 2b]

-Are there any complications with reporting on/reviewing games with religion that you don't face with other types of games? [RQ 2b]

-Some scholars argue that playing digital games itself could classify as a type of religious activity—what do you think about that? [RQ 2b]

-Are you an avid digital game player yourself? If so, how long have you been playing? And how do you separate your own feelings as a gamer from your responsibility as a journalist? [RQ 3]

-How did you get interested in gaming journalism? [RQ 3}

-What would you say is the most important job you have to do as a gaming journalist? [RQ 3]

-Historically, gaming journalism has been dismissed in some journalistic circles as being too tied to advertising, or just generally as being unprofessional. How do you think about the work you produce? [RQ 3]

-It used to be easy to pin down what a digital game was, but it seems as though it has gotten a bit more difficult? Do you agree? [RQ 4]

- How would define what a digital game is? [RQ 4]

-In 2013, a number of games came out that were highly critically-acclaimed for their stories. What games did you think had narratives that were unique in some way? And what made them unique? [RQ 4]

Note: RQ 5 will be addressed through the accumulated responses from the interview in how RQs 1-4 are answered.

*In addition, focused questions will be asked based on specific games the interviewees reviewed in 2013. Sample questions may look like:

-“In February 2013, you published a very positive review of the American game *Bioshock Infinite*, and granted it a 10. What made this game stand out?” (*Bioshock Infinite* has been discussed widely because of its religious content and in particular is seen as a critique on the religious perspectives of the Tea Party movement). [RQ 1]

-“In October 2013, you published a review of the Japanese game *Time & Eternity*, noting that playing the game was an “uncomfortable” experience. What about the game made it ‘uncomfortable’ to play. [RQ 2a]

VITA

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