Digital Religion: Religion in the neomythological worlds of Video Games*

By Ioannis Xidakis**

Introduction

In the plots of contemporary Western entertainment products, such as science fiction movies, comics, and video games, one observes a combination of fantasy and reality, as well as logical and illogical elements. This combination is traditionally found in the human spirit's creation known as myth. Based on this assumption, we can say that mythological elements are dominant in contemporary entertainment products, and their plots constitute modern mythologies.

However, their mythologies are reconstructed, based on a central motif: religious terms, symbols and religious and mythical figures from world history are removed from their natural environment, that is, from their religion, and are reinterpreted by creating a new mythology. In this sense, neomythology forms part of the diffused religiosity, which in turn forms part of the New Religiosity[1].

1. I. Xidakis, *Τὸ Καλὸ καὶ τὸ Κακὸ στὸν Κόσμο τῶν Βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν: Θρησκειολογικὴ Μελέτη* [*Good and Evil in the World of Video Games: A Religious Studies Essay*], PhD Thesis, National and Kapodistian University of Athens, Athens 2018, https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/43668, 22.09.2023, p. 30 *et seq.*

The New Religiosity is the non-traditional religiosity which is being formed through the teachings and practices of New Religions[2]. These religions are related –in terms of their occurrence and development– to the new, the "modern", modernity and postmodernity, in other words, to all those changes that took place in the western world after the 19th (modernity) and 20th centuries, and especially after the 1960s (postmodernity).

As part of this New Religiosity, diffused religiosity, as opposed to the New Religions, which generally have specific teachings and structure, consists of freely spreading ideas and practices, which are expressed through various media. Based on the above definition, it becomes clear that diffused religiosity, forming part of the New Religiosity and having the ability to permeate, that is, the ability to be expressed in multiple ways, started out as a phenomenon before the period of postmodernity. However, after the 1960s and 1970s, through the widespread use of new media, such as television and comic books, and in the framework of new social and cultural fermentations in the above decades, diffused religiosity gained a new dynamic. This form of new religiosity basically developed in parallel with postmodernity or often under its influence, and can be defined as the contemporary diffused religiosity.

Neomythology, this modern trend of reinterpreting religious terms, symbols as well as religious and mythical figures from world history, and reshaping them through comics, movies, etc., into a new mythology, constitutes the most popular expression of contemporary diffused religiosity.

As far as the fluidity and inclusiveness of this neomythological space allows, the main motifs of this contemporary mythology, namely the

---

2. St. Papalexandropoulos, «Οἱ Νέες Θρησκεῖες: Ἱστορικὴ ἐπισκόπηση καὶ συστηματικὴ θεώρηση» [The New Religions: A Historical Overview and a Systematic View], in: St. Papalexandropoulos (ed.), *Δοκίμια Ἱστορίας τῶν Θρησκειῶν* [*Essays on the History of Religions*], Ellinika Grammata Press, Athens 1997, pp. 143-179; Irv. Hexham & Karla Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred*, Westview Press, Colorado 1997; Steven J. Sutcliffe refers to "popular religion" and "alternative religion", which appears after the 1960s. St. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A history of spiritual practices*, Routledge, London – New York 2003, pp. 11, 29, 30, 42 *et seq.*

mythology which developed in western societies after the 1970s and 1980s, are:

The integration of the absolute, i.e. the divine which various neo-mythological products include in their plots, in the boundaries of the world. Under no condition does the divine constitute something different as well, different referring to something that is completely outside of history, matter, the world.

We are thus dealing with a framework of "cosmotheism", a term used by the religious studies scholar Stelios Papalexandropoulos to describe the realm of New Religiosity, that is, with a practice involving the secularisation of the divine, and also with its identification and restriction to the realm of the physical world.

In the same way, in neomythology, and this is also clearly observed in diffused religiosity, the expressions of secular elements (a global energy), supernatural heroes (Superman, etc.), extra-terrestrial creatures (angels, gods, space beings, etc.), discussions about the existence of other dimensions (fourth dimension), a higher form (the inner self or the real person), their powers, and the magical and supernatural appearance of these beings and situations, undergo "scientification", as he himself has termed it, i.e. they are explained in logical, "scientific" terms and they always identify with physical space and its elements[3].

The result of this cosmotheism, of this integration of the divine and transcendental element in the material and explainable world, is the objectification of the divine, in other words, god is treated like an object that will enhance a positive situation or create a negative one, which will help one person or harm another. As a result of this perspective, the supernatural – in the sense of magic – is treated as a tool.

This is why in video games, which are essentially neomythological products, we similarly see: deities divided into levels of a greater or lesser

---

3. Papalexandropoulos, «Νέα Ἐποχή: Ἡ θρησκειολογικὴ ταυτότητα ἑνὸς κινήματος (δεύτερο μέρος)» [New Age: The religious identity of a movement. Part II], *Exodos*, Vol. 7 (1992), pp. 41-61, 50-51; Papalexandropoulos, "The New Religions: A Historical Overview and a Systematic View", ibid., pp. 168-169; W. J. Hanegraaff, "New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: a Historian's Perspective", *Social Compass* 46, 2 (1999), pp. 145-160, 153, 158, http://scp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/46/2/145 [19.09.2023].

nature as in the *Mortal Kombat* or *Street Fighter series*[4], and generally dragons and crystals, temples and laboratories, living planets identifying with the absolute. In these fantasy worlds the absolute is sometimes presented as supernatural, superior, stronger, purer, wiser and is placed above the hero; at times it is presented as something material that shares the same world as the hero; and at other times it is presented as a means to save the protagonist.

Within this cosmotheism, religion, as in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), is presented as an organisation, as a multinational and oftentimes faceless corporation[5]. On the other hand, in several video games, magic is identified with science, in the sense that, mainly in terms of their effects, there is no difference between magic and technology, but rather both form two sides of the same coin, that of magical technology or scientific magic[6].

Especially based on the above outlook on science and technology, we see that in neomythology, and generally in the diffused religiosity, complex and multilateral correlations between the religious and scientific element develop.

Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe have identified this osmosis of the religious and the scientific and, by extension, of the magical and technological element, within the limits of contemporary diffused religiosity, and they therefore speak of: a. A new mythology, the mythology of evolution, which is essentially presented as having rules and tangible results, much like science[7], b. A new science, which is based on foresight, magic, communication with other non-human creatures[8],

---

4. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Characters of the Mortal Kombat series", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Characters_of_the_Mortal_Kombat_series, 20.09.2023. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Characters of the Street Fighter series", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Characters_of_the_Street_Fighter_series [20.09.2023].
5. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Deus Ex: Human Revolution", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_Ex:_Human_Revolution [20.09.2023].
6. Aspects of neomythology within the digital reality of video games are described in Xidakis, *Τὸ Καλὸ καὶ τὸ Κακὸ στὸν Κόσμο τῶν Βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν: Θρησκειολογικὴ Μελέτη [Good and Evil in the World of Video Games: A Religious Studies Essay]*, *ibid*.
7. Hexham & Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred*, *ibid*., pp. 92, 93.
8. *Ibid*., p. 93.

c. A mythological, pseudo-scientific space where everything is possible: the human species can become a god, as a process of evolution and improvement, since the universe moves in a similar fashion[9].

Similarly, Wouter J. Hanegraaff talks about a "new science" and a "mythology of science", he, too, referring to the inclination and desire of contemporary individuals, and mainly those inspired by the messages of diffused religiosity: a. To question formal science, b. To support the existence of a new science, which will not simply study the relations of causality between natural phenomena, but will be able to familiarise itself with the very divine element that is contained in the world, c. To treat science like people in past centuries treated magic, i.e. like a space where everything is connected to everything[10]; in this way, not only the secrets of matter, but also of the spirit or conscience, can be explained through logic (as if we are dealing with physical knowledge)[11].

Based on the previous motif, the image of the supernatural hero is promoted, who –after recognising and accepting the divine element in the world and its aspects– will effect change: through their actions, the hero will create a new social, technological, planetary and ecological future for the mythological world[12]. It thus dominates alongside the motif of the chosen hero and the vision of another world, of a new space and time, of a new historical period[13].

The history of civilisation, the mythology of the past and religious teachings are used each time within the multi-prismatic space of neo-mythology in a new way[14]. To put it differently, everything is determined

---

9. *Ibid.*, p. 95

10. W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age religion and Western culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*, E. J. Brill, New York 1996, pp. 62, 63, 398, 407, 421, 423, 517; Hanegraaff, "New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: a Historian's Perspective", ibid., pp. 153, 154.

11. Hanegraaff, "New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian's Perspective", *ibid.*, pp. 155, 156, 158.

12. Ioannis Xidakis, *Οἱ Περὶ ΑΤΙΑ Θρησκεῖες [UFO Religions]*, Postgraduate dissertation. National and Kapodistian University of Athens, Athens 2006, p. 34, https://independent. academia.edu/IOANNISXIDAKIS [22.09.2023].

13. Stelios Papalexandropoulos, «Νέα Ἐποχή: Ἡ θρησκειολογικὴ ταυτότητα ἑνὸς κινήματος (πρῶτο μέρος)» [New Age: The religious identity of a movement. Part I], *Exodos*, Vol. 6 (1991), pp. 17-29, 18-19.

14. Hexham & Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred, ibid.*,

from the start and is adapted depending on the plot of each contemporary mythological product. In neomythology, the history of civilisation, as a sequence of events, along with everything it contains, namely its whole set of myths, legends and traditions, becomes the material for telling another, alternative version thereof, through which a different history of humankind is revealed.

A typical example of this is that a gamer of the video game *Guilty Gear* (Arc System Works, 1998), views the Testament not as a holy book of traditional religiosity, but as a superhuman being[15], while a gamer of *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997-2020) views the Sephiroth not as a divine emanation[16], but as a creature manufactured by gene technology (Jenova Project)[17]. The same gamer can experience the victory of the Germans in World War II (in the alternative universe of *Wolfenstein series*)[18]. So, within the world of video games, all mythical and religious elements, i.e. elements of mythologies of the past and of traditional religiosity, are indeed present, however they are reformulated from scratch and placed in a different mythical context.

Neomythological Religion in Video Games

In video games, especially in the genres of action, adventure/role-playing, and strategy games, religion as a term and concept occupies a dominant position. However, it is presented in an altered form compared to its traditional representation. In other words, although in several video game plots, the term "religion" is used, priests and monks are mentioned

pp. 94, 95, 150, 153; D. E. Cowan & D. G. Bromley, *Cults and new religions: a brief history*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester ²2015, p. 9; Xidakis, *ibid*., pp. 19, 21, 27, 36, 42, 53-54, 59-60, 78-89.

15. *Fandom*, s.v. "Testament", n.d., https://guiltygear.fandom.com/wiki/Testament [23.09.2023].

16. M. Idel, "Qabbalah" in: Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, v. 11, Thomson Gale, New York ²2005, pp. 7533-7539, 7537.

17. *Fandom*, s.v. "Sephiroth", n.d., https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Sephiroth [23.09.2023].

18. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Wolfenstein", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfenstein [23.09.2023].

and depicted, temples and various holy places are shown[19], all of these are reframed and portrayed in new ways. The ways in which religion appears in various video games, although numerous, can be classified into certain motifs due to their repetition from the inception of this medium in the 1970s until today.

More specifically, in action games, that is, in those where the player controls a virtual character on the screen, we can see religion combined with magic and technology. The "religion-magic-technology" triptych is recognized as a characteristic of the "corporation", i.e. a multinational corporate organization that operates economically, politically and militarily.

For example, according to the scenarios of the *Guilty Gear* games (1998-2022): a. "Modern man" discovers a source of inexhaustible energy, b. The new technology that arises thanks to this source of energy is called "magic", "divine power" and "Divine Steps", because contact with it mutates its carrier into a super-human, c. The mutants led by the superman named Justice, and the one named Testament, turn as a global organization and at the same time as a new religion against humanity[20].

In *Deus Ex* (Eidos Interactive 2002), the company *VersaLife* is the hero's adversary. It is essentially a new religion, or to be precise, it hides behind it a religious group, that of the *Illuminati*, even though it is not explicitly mentioned as such. So, in this game the corporation acts as a religion, but it is not called a religion[21]. And it is precisely here that a common element between the mythology of this action video game and the new religiosity is revealed: new religious groups, like the company *VersaLife*, avoid being associated with anything that resembles traditional religiosity. Thus, in both cases, in the real and the virtual world, there is the phenomenon of questioning, discrediting or criticizing traditional religiosity, but also that of avoiding even associating the "new religious-corporate group" with anything traditionally religious, even with the word "religion" itself[22].

---

19. I. Xidakis, "Sacred places in the world of video games", *Theologia* 94, 1 (2022), pp. 51-83.

20. *Fandom*, s.v. "Guilty Gear: Magic", n.d., https://guiltygear.fandom.com/wiki/Magic [25.09.2023].

21. *Fandom*, s.v. "Deus Ex: Illuminati", n.d., https://deusex.fandom.com/wiki/Illuminati [25.09.2023].

22. Hanegraaff, *New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: a Historian's Perspective*, *ibid*.,

That is why, regarding the New Religions, they display a particular variety in terms of the names they choose for their group's titles, and which often do not contain the word in question, that is, "religion"[23]. But even if they use it, they define it based on their own worldview, and distinguish between an internal dimension, that is, its spiritual essence, and an external, formal covering, that is, its ritual, organized, institutional content[24].

In *Deus Ex: Invisible War* (2003), this image of the corporation as religion, or religion as corporation, which simultaneously defends the interests of the elite, promotes hyper-technology, and develops social and political action, is much more pronounced. The religion of *the Order*, *the order of the Knights Templar*, *the community of Omar*, the group called *ApostleCorp* are characteristically mentioned[25].

The axis of corporation-magic-technology-religion is so dominant in the choices of script for action games, that even if a religion/religious community is presented, usually as the enemy of a hero, it will operate as a corporation; in other words, it will have believers who will not be referred to merely as believers, but as members of a group, a race, a closed community, and will have a hierarchical order going from the lowest-ranking member to the CEO.

In *Ninja Gaiden Sigma* (Tecmo, 2004), Ryu Hayabusa, a ninja of the Dragon Ninja Clan, is called upon to face *the Vigoor Empire*, a theocratic community that aims to conquer the world. What is noteworthy is that the *Vigoor Empire*, although using powerful items such as "the Dragon Blade" or "the evil Dark Dragon Blade", resorts to magic and is mainly

---

p. 152; Hexham & Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred*, *ibid.*, 161-162; Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A history of spiritual practices*, *ibid.*, p. 214; Cowan & Bromley, *Cults and new religions: a brief history*, pp. 7, 9, 166; P. B. Clarke, *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, Routledge, New York 2006, p. ix; Xidakis, *Οἱ Περὶ ΑΤΙΑ Θρησκεῖες [UFO Religions]*, *ibid.*, p. 55; Papalexandropoulos, "The New Religions: A Historical Overview and a Systematic View", *ibid.*, p. 151.

23. C. Slee, "New Religious Movements and the Churches" in: Br. Wilson & J. Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, Routledge, London ²2001, pp. 165-180, 176.

24. Papalexandropoulos, *ibid.*, pp. 157 *et seq.*

25. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Deus Ex: Invisible War", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_Ex:_Invisible_War [26.09.2023].

composed of supernatural beings, such as its members called "Ancient Tribes", has a strict hierarchy of its members starting from junior to senior executives. The gameplay includes supporting members of the team such as soldiers who in turn have a defined hierarchy and use modern weapons, intermediate members with a specific and defined framework of work such as the Four Greater Fiends and Zedonius, i.e. the Ruler of Flames, while a divine duo placed at the top of the hierarchy of this religious community: the goddess of creation (Ishtaros – the goddess of creation) and the goddess of destruction (Nicchae – the goddess of destruction), "high-ranking officials" before the "CEO", the Holy Vigoor Emperor[26].

It also worth noting that the corporations described in *Deus Ex*, as well as groups that emulate their mechanism such as the *Vigoor Empire* in *Ninja Gaiden*, differ in their totalitarian or less totalitarian character, in their use of technology and its purpose, in the favor they show to their chosen members or to the rest of the people. But they have one thing in common: they use technology as an almost metaphysical tool that will be able to provide answers to humanity's problems, usher in a new era, or punish the unworthy and honor the worthy.

In adventure/role-playing games, where the player controls a group of virtual characters, we see similar motifs in the way religion is presented:

First of all, magic is not an inferior or negative preoccupation with supernatural powers; it is the religion of virtual space; wizards are its legislators and priests, as for example seen in *The Elder Scrolls* games (Bethesda Softworks, 1994-2023)[27].

Second, religion is depicted and described as an organized system of principles, teachings and practices. Sometimes, as in the game *Ultima VII* (Origin Systems, 1992), this very feature of religion and its depiction as an organized and structured community takes on a negative meaning[28].

---

26. *Fandom*, s.v. "Vigoor Empire", n.d., https://ninjagaiden.fandom.com/wiki/Vigoor_Empire, 27.09.2023. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Ninja Gaiden", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ninja_Gaiden_(2004_video_game) [27.09.2023].
27. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "The Elder Scrolls", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elder_Scrolls [28.09.2023].
28. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Ultima VII: The Black Gate", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultima_VII:_The_Black_Gate [28.09.2023].

Third, as shown by the term *sage*, which usually denotes both a cleric and a sorcerer, both practitioners of religion and magic appear to use supernatural powers, i.e. to resort to supernatural ways to solve their problems.

In general, the rule in role-playing and adventure games is that the priest heals the virtual people, while the wizard destroys them; this does not mean, of course, that the priest does not fight their opponents, and that the wizard does not heal the wounds of their companions. It is no coincidence that in many role-playing games, both together, i.e. priests and wizards constitute the class of healers. For example, in *EverQuest I* (989 Studios, 1999), Clerics, Druids, Monks and Shamans are collectively referred to as healer classes. All these healers use empowering spells, which are called "buff spells" or simply "buffs"[29]. In *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) both clerics and wizards, such as Druids and Shamans, can act as healers; the difference lies in the way they heal and the source from which they draw their power[30]. In the *Final Fantasy* games (1987-2022) the healers are called "White Mages", and they have the role of the priest of the other games of this genre, i.e. they are always good, healing and empowering the characters[31].

Fourth, deities are divided into benevolent and malevolent ones. However, both magic and faith, which are related to one of these deities or to an abstract, impersonal, higher god of the virtual realm, so long as both the "magic-faith" combination is perceived and manifested as

---

29. "EQ: Classes", https://everquest.allakhazam.com/wiki/EQ:Classes [29.09.2023]. *Fandom*, *s.v.* "Healers", n.d., https://eqoa.fandom.com/wiki/Healers [29.09.2023]. For "buff spells": W. Sims Bainbridge, *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*, Oxford University Press 2013, p. 110; Sc. Rogers, *Level Up!: The Guide to Great Video Game Design*, Wiley, Chichester 2010, p. 302; T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 35.
30. "Advanced Healing Guide: Classic WoW Edition", https://www.wowhead.com/classic/guide/healing-classic-wow-tips [29.09.2023]. *Fandom*, *s.v.* "Healer class", n.d., https://wowwiki-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Healer_class [29.09.2023]. Bainbridge, *ibid.*, pp. 167, 179. W. S. Bainbridge, *Online Multiplayer Games – Synthesis Lectures on Information Concepts, Retrieval, and Services*, *Lecture #13*, Morgan & Claypool, 2010, p. 63.
31. *Fandom*, s.v. "White Mage", n.d., https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/White_Mage [29.09. 2023].

power, can be used for good or evil, by both a heroic avatar/virtual character and their adversary.

Fifthly, magic and religion, especially the element of faith, are understood in a naturalistic way; this is shown by the fact that: a. Both, that is, magic and faith, are treated as "energies", as natural forces; for example in *Sakura Wars* (1996-2019), in relation to the evolving abilities and skills of the central character, reference is made to "bible reading", to "prayer" and to "spiritual power"[32]; in *Final Fantasy VI* (1994) magic as an impersonal energy is called Magitek[33], while in *World of Warcraft* (2004), it is identified as mana[34], a term, which in strategy game *Populous* (1989) denotes an abstract power-energy[35] and which with a similar content is known from Marett's classical anthropology of religion[36], b. Above the virtual body of the sorcerer and the priest appears a digital indicator that counts their energy, c. The energy of wizard-clerics is increased using devices, potions, crystals.

In the series *The Elder Scrolls* (1994-2022), magic perceived as controlling the invisible forces of space-time is institutionalized and functions as a religion, an organized system of beliefs and rituals. In this context, the knowledge of the so-called ancient scrolls leads to the development of a magical science and is determined by a higher council

---

32. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Sakura Wars: Characters", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Sakura_Wars_characters [29.09.2023].
33. *Fandom*, s.v. "Magitek", n.d., https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Magitek [30.09.2023].
34. *Fandom*, s.v. "Mana", n.d., https://wowpedia.fandom.com/wiki/Mana [30.09.2023].
35. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Populous (video game), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Populous_(video_game) [30.09.2023].
36. R. R. Marett, "Mana" in: J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. viii, T. & T. Clark, New York 1915, pp. 375-380; E. J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London ²1986, pp. 67-70; M. Eliade, "The History of Religions in Retrospect: 1912-1962", *Journal of Bible and Religion* 31, 2 (Apr., 1963), Oxford University Press, pp. 98-109, 98-99, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1459344 [30.09.2023]; M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams & Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality*, Translated by Ph. Mairet, Harper & Row, Publishers New York 1967, pp. 126, 127, 128, 129.

of "magician-priests"[37]. Here, magic takes the form of the scientific process and institutional religion, and indeed this identification is not characterized by the plot as evil or dangerous.

The same is seen in the early role-playing game, *Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire* (Sierra On-Line, 1990), where the hero of the adventure receives the title of Wizard. And while in *The Elder Scrolls*, we have the Arcane University attesting to magical knowledge, *Quest for Glory II*, has the Wizards' Institute of Technocery to authenticate the title bestowed upon the hero[38].

However, not every game presents magic as a religion in a positive light. We have mentioned that the second motif in role-playing and adventure games, concerning magic and religion, is that religion, when structured, is often viewed negatively as an agent of formalism and totalitarianism. Therefore, many times, when role-playing adventure games equate magic with religion, they align it with this motif. For example, in the role-playing game *Final Fantasy X* (2001), the heroes must deal with the prejudices and biases of the theocratic society of Spira, which follows the religion of the *Yevon Order*, that is, the teachings of the wizard Yevon[39]. And in *Phantasy Star IV: The End of the Millennium* (1993), the organization, led by the Black Mage Zio, is called a religion. This group reveals as totalitarian group and even develops a strictly diarchic teaching of the relationship between the "Great Light" and "Profound Darkness", technology and magic, civilization and nature, the variety of

---

37. *Fandom*, s.v. "Elder Scrolls: Nature", *n.d.*, https://elderscrolls.fandom.com/wiki/Elder_Scrolls#Nature [30.09.2023]; "Arcane University", https://elderscrolls.neoseeker.com/wiki/Arcane_University [30.09.2023]; *Fandom*, s.v. "Aedra", n.d., https://elderscrolls.fandom.com/wiki/Aedra [30.09.2023]; Bainbridge, *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*, *ibid*., p. 170.
38. *Fandom*, s.v. "Quest for Glory: Wizard's Institute of Technocery", n.d., https://questforglory.fandom.com/wiki/Wizard%27s_Institute_of_Technocery [02.10.2023]; *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quest_for_Glory_II:_Trial_by_Fire [02.10.2023]; "Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire – manual", Sierra On-Line, 1990, p. 2, 6, 11 (magic), http://www.lemonamiga.com/games/docs.php?id=1308 [02.10.2023].
39. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Final Fantasy X", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Final_Fantasy_X [02.10.2023].

forms of life and the unity of God. The Magician's religion accepts the Darkness as the god of creation, while it sees the Light, the people who worship it and their technology as insults to that dark, God-like figure[40].

Of course, there are also video games that present religion as the center of virtual life, without necessarily associating it with magic. Thus, in *Shin Megami Tensei II* (Atlus, 1994), the *Order of Messiah* controls the virtual environment, pitting the citizens of an alternate Tokyo against each other while promising entry into the elite community of the "Thousand Year Kingdom". Religion operates as a strict group, which shapes an illiberal society, and completely determines the present and future of virtual reality. At the top of its hierarchy is a scientific aristocracy, whose members use names derived from the Jewish tradition and alphabet. The entity YHVH, the technologist-warrior Aleph and the templar-scientist Beth have a prominent position and a significant role in this virtual reality. The latter two were genetically engineered to be the "divine couple", that is, the eternal pair of saviors[41].

At this point, as expected, we can observe the presence of familiar motifs of neomythology. Specifically, we see: a. The use of traditional terms and schemata, such as the name "YHVH", alongside the mythological concept of the holy couple; b. How the divine is presented as explicable and worldlified; and c. The tendency to portray the traditionally religious in an alternative and usually negative way, since "YHVH" also has the role of the antagonist of the heroes.

In *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II* (Black Isle Studios, 2003), every cleric-warrior in the game world belongs to a religious system, which is structured hierarchically. The mission of the religions of the game is to fight by any means against any rival religion, but also to spread the

---

40. *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Phantasy Star IV", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phantasy_Star_IV [02.10.2023]. *Fandom*, s.v. "Zio", *n.d.*, https://villains.fandom.com/wiki/Zio, 02.10.2023. *Fandom*, s.v. "The Profound Darkness", *n.d.*, https://phantasystar.fandom.com/wiki/The_Profound_Darkness_(Original_Series) [02.10.2023].
41. *Fandom*, s.v. "Order of Messiah", *n.d.*, https://megamitensei.fandom.com/wiki/Order_of_Messiah [03.10.2023]; *Fandom*, s.v. "YHVH", *n.d.*, https://megamitensei.fandom.com/wiki/YHVH [03.10.2023]; *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Shin Megami Tensei II", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shin_Megami_Tensei_II [03.10.2023].

word of their own god. This way, the virtual characters, especially the cleric, such as the protagonist Alessia, can advance in the ranks of their digital religions[42].

As the third and fourth motifs, we defined the similarity between the behavior of both wizards and priests, and the fact that magic, like faith, can be directed towards good or evil, to serve a good purpose or its opposite. Thus, wizards and clerics can be "good" or "bad", align with the hero or with his opponent, but in any case, they work in a similar way; they heal and damage.

Similarly, in strategy games, religion functions in two forms – either as one of the means available to the player to defeat the opposing army or, on the other hand, to strengthen their people, nation, or state as an eternal general or ruler. Typical examples are the display of religion in the video game series *Civilization* (1990-2022)[43] and *Age of Empires* (1997-2022)[44].

In these we find that: a) religion is one of the player/hero's superweapons; b) because it actually works in this way, it is possible within sacred spaces, such as shrines and temples, to manufacture super-technological weapons, such as tanks, aircraft, etc., as shown in the game *Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends* (Big Huge Games, 2006)[45]; or c) since it is one of the means constantly available to the player/virtual character, we see the elements of religion, such as temples, religious ceremonies, the behavior of the believers, always remain unchanged, even though the virtual time

---

42. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Baldur' s Gate: Dark Alliance II", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baldur%27s_Gate:_Dark_Alliance_II [03.10.2023].
43. *Fandom*, s.v. "Civilization: Temple", *n.d.*, https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Temple_(Civ6) [04.10.2023]; *Fandom, s.v.* "Civilization: Religion", n.d., https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Religion_(Civ6) [04.10.2023].
44. "Religion (Age of Empires IV)", https://breezewiki.com/ageofempires/wiki/Religion_(Age_of_Empires_IV) [04.10.2023]; *Fandom, s.v.* "Age of Empires: Religion", *n.d.*, https://ageofempires.fandom.com/wiki/Religion_(Age_of_Empires) [04.10.2023]; *Fandom, s.v.* "Age of Empires: Temple", *n.d.*, https://ageofempires.fandom.com/wiki/Temple_(Age_of_Empires) [04.10.2023].
45. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rise_of_Nations:_Rise_of_Legends [04.10.2023]; "Rise of Legends Heaven: Cuotl units", https://rol.heavengames.com/gameinfo/units/cuotl/ [04.10.2023].

advances, that is, even though according to the virtual time of the game, centuries may have passed since their initial appearance.

Therefore, in the digital world of video games, mythical and religious elements –those of past mythologies and traditional religiosity– are present but also retold from the beginning. Indeed, the way in which they are reformulated to adapt to the demands of video game plots and mechanics is not accidental but consistent with the characteristic features of the diffused new religiosity and its popular and influential expression, neomythology.

Conclusion

A contemporary mythology is developing within the context of diffused new religiosity. The neomythological schemata are influenced by the mythology of the New Religions and diffused religiosity and reproduce their basic distinctive features.

This neomythology, as it is portrayed through video games, comic books, fantasy movies, etc., presents beings and worlds that have supernatural and imaginary characteristics, and attempts to present their qualities as logical and scientific.

In video games, which constitute one of the most contemporary and influential expression of neomythology, religion, as a set of theories and practices related to belief in a divine, supernatural or metaphysical being, is incorporated into their various plots having specific forms:

A. it is presented in its traditional form as an organized system of designated behaviours and practices, beliefs, texts, sacred places, but

B. at the same time it functions as a tool that serves the virtual characters in their mission, and as such is sometimes associated with either "digital good" or "digital evil". In other words, it acquires a positive but, and this is common, negative meaning.

Sometimes it identified with magic but also with a new form of technology, with divine or magical technology emerging as a super-technology, it is even recognized as an eternal superweapon, which exists to defeat the player/hero's enemies.

In any case, within the digital environment, religion loses any trans-cendental reference: the religious group itself, its priests, its holy places,

religious elements such as faith, are presented completely naturalistically, in a believable and possible framework.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΉ

Ἡ ψηφιακὴ θρησκεία: Ἡ θρησκεία
στοὺς νεομυθολογικοὺς κόσμους τῶν βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν

Ἰωάννη Ξυδάκη, δρ.
Ἐθνικὸ καὶ Καποδιστριακὸ Πανεπιστήμιο Ἀθηνῶν

Σκοπὸς αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἄρθρου εἶναι νὰ ἀναδειχθεῖ ὁ τρόπος μὲ τὸν ὁποῖον ἡ θρησκεία προσδιορίζεται στὶς πλοκὲς τῶν πιὸ ἐπιδραστικῶν σύγχρονων προϊόντων ψυχαγωγίας, ποὺ εἶναι τὰ βιντεοπαιχνίδια. Ὁ προσδιορισμὸς τῆς θρησκείας ἐντὸς τῶν ποικίλων ψηφιακῶν κόσμων καὶ ἡ ἐκ νέου κατανόησή της δὲν γίνεται τυχαῖα, ἀλλὰ ἀκολουθεῖ τὰ τυπικὰ χαρακτηριστικὰ τῆς διάχυτης νέας θρησκευτικότητας. Πρόκειται γιὰ τὴ μὴ ὀργανωμένη ὄψη τῆς Νέας Θρησκευτικότητας, ἡ ὁποία, κυρίως λόγω αὐτοῦ τοῦ χαρακτηριστικοῦ της, βρίσκει νέους τρόπους ἔκφρασης μέσω προϊόντων διασκέδασης. Στὸ πλαίσιο τῆς διάχυτης θρησκευτικότητας καὶ ἀνάλογα μὲ τὴ δυναμικὴ τῶν ποικίλων νέων μέσων δημιουργεῖται, κυρίως μετὰ ἀπὸ τὶς δεκαετίες 1970-1980, μία νέα, διάχυτη καὶ διαπερατὴ μυθολογία, ἡ ὁποία μὲ τὴ μορφὴ τῶν κόμικς ἢ τῶν βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν κ.ἄ. ἐμφανίζει ὑπερφυσικὰ ὄντα καὶ φαντασιακοὺς κόσμους ποὺ φέρουν συγκεκριμένα χαρακτηριστικὰ γνωρίσματα.

Συγκεκριμένα στὸν νεομυθολογικὸ χῶρο τῶν βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν, ἡ θρησκεία, ὡς σύνολο θεωριῶν καὶ πρακτικῶν ποὺ σχετίζονται μὲ τὴν πίστη σὲ ἕνα θεϊκό, ὑπερφυσικὸ ἢ μεταφυσικὸ ὄν, ἐνσωματώνεται στὶς διάφορες πλοκές τους μὲ συγκεκριμένες μορφές. Παρουσιάζεται ὡς ἕνα ὀργανωμένο σύστημα πεποιθήσεων καὶ πρακτικῶν, ἀλλὰ παράλληλα – καὶ αὐτὸ εἶναι τὸ πιὸ συνηθισμένο– λειτουργεῖ ὡς ἐργαλεῖο ποὺ ἐξ-υπηρετεῖ τοὺς εἰκονικοὺς χαρακτῆρες στὴν ἀποστολή τους, καὶ μὲ βάση αὐτὴ τὴ θεώρησή της συνδέεται εἴτε μὲ τό «ψηφιακὸ καλό» ἢ μὲ τό «ψηφιακὸ κακό». Ἀποκτᾶ δηλαδὴ ἕνα θετικό, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀρκετὲς φορές,

ἕνα ἀρνητικὸ νόημα. Ἄλλοτε ταυτίζεται μὲ τὴ μαγεία ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲ μία νέα μορφὴ τεχνολογίας, μὲ τὴ θεϊκὴ ἢ μαγικὴ τεχνολογία ποὺ ἀναδύεται ὡς ὑπερτεχνολογία. Κατ' αὐτὸν τὸν τρόπο, ἀναγνωρίζεται ὡς ἕνα ἀκόμη ὑπερόπλο, ποὺ ὑπάρχει γιὰ νὰ νικήσει τοὺς ἐχθροὺς τοῦ παίκτη/ἥρωα.

Σὲ κάθε περίπτωση, μέσα στὸ ψηφιακὸ περιβάλλον, ἡ θρησκεία χάνει κάθε ὑπερβατικὴ ἀναφορά: Ἡ ἴδια ἡ θρησκευτικὴ ὁμάδα, οἱ ἱερεῖς της, οἱ ἱεροί της τόποι, θρησκευτικὰ στοιχεῖα ὅπως ἡ πίστη παρουσιάζονται ἐντελῶς ἐνδοκοσμικά, προσαρμοσμένα στὶς ἀπαιτήσεις μιᾶς πιστευτῆς καὶ πιθανῆς εἰκονικῆς πραγματικότητας.