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

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

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

value as a second order category is an etic term that researchers bring to the material under study as a way to describe, analyze, and understand it. Values are not necessarily freely chosen but can be forced on people and communities, can be strategically employed, and for better or worse often need to be defended.

A *value formation* indicates the collections and systematization of interdependent and entangled values, which are the production, product, and reproduction of values. We begin from the axiom that there is no preexisting good (or bad), beautiful (or ugly), or typical (or deviant). Our concept of *value formations* derives from a social-constructivist approach, which understands values as not timeless, essential, universal or static, but rather as constructed by specific social locations. Values are therefore discourses and practices that are constantly (re)defined and (re)negotiated by competing actors according to time, context, and skill. These actors can be individual persons, groups, or organizations. In contrast to a normative or critical perspective, we do not evaluate these values, but rather analyze how the different individual and collective actors (re)define and understand something as value. We conclude that *value formations* rather than religion, is a better way to understand how *gameenvironments* generate meaning and reflect broader social fields and cultural discourses.

To support our argument, we break this article into three parts. First, we describe our case study, the *gameenvironments* of *Far Cry 5's* mission *Paradise Lost*. Second, we offer a theory of *value formations*, which gives a working definition, a short genealogy, as well as relates value to the concepts of ethics, aesthetics, and norms. Third, we put these to work by investigating *value formations* in *Far Cry 5's gameenvironments*, which include both its gameplay as well as peripheral media platforms. We conclude by outlining how the concept of *value formations* adds to the study of *gameenvironments*.

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

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

**Value Formations. A Working Definition**

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





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

**Value Formations in Relation to Ethics, Aesthetics, and Norms**

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





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

**Value Formations in Relation to Religion**

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

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

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

third, deriving from a socio-constructivist perspective, does not presuppose a given entity or concept, but reverses the theoretical operation. This socio-constructivist approach labels as religion those phenomena declared as *religion* or *religious* by the actors themselves. In such a case, religious social realities are seen to be communicatively constructed. From this point of view, religion is no longer evaluated as a clearly delimitable, consistent, and homogeneous symbol system. Instead, the entire spectrum of possible meanings, as well as their contexts and intentions, could be taken into account.

How does the category of value, which we have also posed as socially constructed, get us out of this quagmire? How can the concept of value further the study of religion in *gamevironments*? First, we maintain that religion can influence value, but not all values stem from religion. What does that mean? Values in our understanding do not have to do necessarily with religion (labelled as religious by the actors), but they could. In fact, religion often serves as an – implicit and unconscious – basis for constructing religious systems. Furthermore religious experts and institutions often use values to legitimate and authorize their discourses, who ascribe meaning to the value of *right* because they are part of a particular religion. Take abortion for example. Actors involved in these discussions are not always, but often discussing the right or wrong of these decisions because of certain values they share (or not). These values can (but do not have to necessarily) be connected to religious systems. For example, the crucial question is the right to *kill* another human. With reference to Biblical law, many Christians are against abortion. In this sense, the specific value of life is directly connected to religion. However, these values are not always fixed – as religious regulations often suggested. One interesting question for us is then, how are values legitimated by referring to formalized norms/rules/laws? Do these have to refer to explicitly religious norms at all?

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

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

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

5's audio-visual, narrative and procedural levels. The second case study investigates comments that respond to four Let's Plays, YouTube videos that document the playthrough of the mission. The final case study evaluates the discussions and debates that gamers make about *Far Cry 5* on Steam, a video game digital distribution platform owned by the Valve Corporation.

**The Mission**

*Far Cry 5* is a first-person shooter set in the fictional setting of Hope County, Montana. It is the twelfth release in the *Far Cry* franchise, which began with the *Far Cry* (2004). The series, premiered by the German company, Crytek, and further developed by Ubisoft Montreal, is known for its larger-than-life antagonists and lush rural environments. The *Far Cry* games do not have significant shared narratives, but all play out a similar storyline where players are situated in a lawless wilderness environment where they must struggle against powerful despots. Unlike earlier games in the series, *Far Cry 5* does not have a predefined central character. In the game, the player takes on the role of a sheriff's junior deputy who becomes entangled in a violent conflict between a malicious doomsday cult, The Project at Eden's Gate, which is led by "The Father," Joseph Seed, and his brothers, Jacob and John, and his half-sister Faith. Joseph Seed possesses the charisma of earlier *Far Cry* antagonists such as Pagan Min and Vass. Collaborating with the player and resisting the Project at Eden's Gate are a loose band of freedom fighters such as Pastor Jerome, the saloon owner Mary May, and the pilot Nick Rye.

The Project at Eden's Gate is loosely based on Christian new religious groups such as James Jones's Rainbow Family, Veron Howell's (aka David Koresh) Branch Davidians, and Warren Jeff's FLDS church, as modified by the current American far-right rhetoric of freedom, faith and firearms (Regan 2018). *Far Cry 5* received mixed reviews but



makes it easier for the player by remaining in the center of the field as she attacks. After Faith is defeated the next mission, "Walk the Path," starts automatically.

Crucial for our case study is the understanding that for players, a game does not stop at the imaginary boundary of the game itself but flows back and forth between on- and offline social settings. As such, *gamevironments* indicate a video game's cultural and social fields, or environments, which includes ingame gameplay and narratives, players and designers, as well as the orbit of gaming paraphernal practices, such as fanfiction, cosplay or gaming conferences. In this article, Grieve uses a ludographic method to focus on the values provoked by *Far Cry 5's* gameplay, while Zeiler uses content analysis and Radde-Antweiler content analysis plus discourse analysis to investigate *value formations* as expressed by gamers and people within the wider vicinity of the game, on the internet platforms YouTube and Steam respectively.

**Case Study 1. Value Formations Investigated in Far Cry 5's Gameplay**

Gameplay is not just the content of a game. As a methodological approach, obviously it cannot ignore graphics, narrative, audio and haptic elements, as well as the procedural aspect of a game. Yet, it cannot be reduced to these. The pioneer game designer, Sid Meier (in)famously defines gameplay as "a series of interesting choices" (Rollings 1999, 38). His esoteric statement shows that games do not merely create meaning through words, visuals and haptics, but also through the processes, they embody and models they construct. Gameplay describes, then, how players procedurally interact with game choices, as afforded by rules and the game's interface. In other words, gameplay records how players, with their diverse motives, diverse intentions, and styles of play make and transform *gamevironments* through a dialectic between the game's structure and agency working back and forth in a dynamic relationship.



hours. One can beat the game in forty to fifty hours, but *Far Cry 5* is an open world, and I (Gregory Grieve) purposely explored every nook and cranny of the gameworld. To research this article, I returned to the game, and between 5 February and 15 February 2020, I played through the Henbane region in eleven hours and thirteen minutes. I was interested in the values contained in the *Paradise Lost* mission that is set in John Seed's half-sister Faith's region of the Henbane River and starts automatically after the completion of "The Lesson." How does ludography differ from just playing the game? As stated above, if ethnography is based on participant observation, then ludography is based on participant play. Participant observation is a method of field research by which an investigator (the participant observer) studies the life of a group by sharing in its activities. Participant play is a method of field research by which an investigator (the participant player) studies the values of players by actually playing the game and sharing in a game's fan communities. Participant observation captures the flow of culture through fieldnotes, qualitative accounts that consist of both descriptive information and reflective accounts of an event. In a similar fashion, *participant play* records gameplay by writing notes that describe a playthrough as well as the players' reflection upon the gameplay.

During my ludographic study of *Far Cry 5*, I encountered many values. For lack of space, I want to concentrate on how bliss plays out as a negative religious value, both as an ecstatic play mode, and also as the ingame drug of the same name. In the game, Bliss is a drug made from the moon flower that is used to convert people to the cult's cause. In the game, Bliss causes non-player characters to behave ecstatically, to be outside of themselves and not to remove the play from its normal functioning. The negative religious values of Bliss play out in non-player characters, as well as the game's narrative, audio, visual, haptic and gameplay. Non-player characters on Bliss are called *angels* and are depicted as disheveled, with milky white eyes, wearing dirty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1. Axial codes of the sample.

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

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

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

**Case Study 3. Value Formations on the Steam Platform**

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





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

Discourse analysis made clear that Christianity is mostly understood as *us*, especially if the discussion concerns Christianity being shown as a *sect, cult*, and *fundamentalism*, e.g. "What will stay in most of the player's head will be that a) the cultists are Christians b) the Christian religion is dangerous because cultists. That's how propaganda works..." (PXC20172605\_34). This was often contrasted to how Islam (or also Russians) were seen as obvious game-immanent enemies. These discussions on the right or wrong representation of Christianity show that the gamers have certain values that constitute the criteria for this evaluation, namely good or bad religions. As in the case of the game-immanent values, we can observe an underlying distinction between religions that are described as worthy or unworthy, namely ethically *right* or *wrong*. For example, the *Far Cry 5's* religion – the so-called cult or sect Project at Eden's Gate – in the game is judged as a bad religion because of their followers' unethical behavior. Interestingly in contrast to the game-immanent values, in the majority of the discussions there is no explicit attribution of *bad religion* to sects or cults, but more broadly to Christianity – sometimes restricted to American Christianity – or sometimes to religion in general. Therefore, the distinction between sects/cults in contrast to Christian denominations is not transferred into the Steam discussion.

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

gives liberals the satisfaction of killing their fellow Americans that don't share their political views (...) And they call themselves 'tolerant'" (TTX20182603\_55). The analysis shows that the value of *not right* or *bad* is linked to a certain religious group. However, at second glance, it can be observed that religion, politics, nationalism, and racism are equated. The interesting question now is, whether the discussion really concerns religion as such (that would be the result from an approach focusing solely on religion), or if religion is used as label or characteristic for something bigger, an overall criticism of American nationality, whose characteristics also include religion, nationalism, a specific political and racist attitude etc. Using a broader perspective on *values formations* we are able to show how certain values that are sometimes implicitly or explicitly connected to religion or not are interrelated.

**Conclusion**

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

surrounding media platforms. As we have shown, these topics are better explained and understood through *value formations*. In short, even when investigating religion, *value formations* is a better analytic term for understanding *gamevironments*. As stated above, values are the signifying processes, and their outcomes, by which actors construct worthiness, and conversely are constructed as legitimate agents in a social field. Values are the production, product, and reproduction of *value formations*, those collections of interrelated and interdependent values understood as both signifying processes as well as their outcomes.

In hindsight, the importance of values in our turbulent time is not at all surprising. In fact, looking over the last two centuries of the term's use, we see that *value* as an analytic category pops up its head, like the rodent in the arcade game *Whac-A-Mole* (Creative Engineering Inc. 1976), during times when tacit assumptions about self-evident truths are breaking down. It is at these periods that, as the German Historian of philosophy, Herbert Schnädelbach, writes "ontology [the study of being] must be supplemented by axiology [the study of value]" (1984, 163). Furthermore, especially in times of crisis and insecurity – the article was finished in the initial quarantine of the COVID-19-pandemic – an increasing (re)negotiation of existing values can be observed. Therefore, in times of physical distancing even more *value formations* are taking place on one of the most used communication platforms, *gamevironments*.

We are not saying that the study of religion and video gaming does not have value. In fact, we hold just the opposite. Instead, our programmatic hope is that a theory of *value formations* will enable research on religion and *gamevironments* to progress beyond its initial stage. If we look over recent scholarship on religion and video gaming we find that authors spend much of their energy attempting to legitimize the subject of their research (for detailed literature reviews, see Campbell and Grieve

2014, Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). Players, on the other hand, sometimes do not comment on or even notice the religious content except when it directly relates to other themes. What seems to be occurring is that researchers are attached, and attracted to religious content in games, while players, for the most part, do not value religion as a category to explain their play. One could argue that we do not need to throw out the baby with the bathwater, and rather than abandoning the category of religion, we just need to redefine it. Our goal in this paper, however, is to save both the baby and the bathwater. We do not want to abandon the study of religion and video gaming, but rather save it, by making evident that religion in *gamevironments* is better described and analyzed as part of larger *value formations*.

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