

# Making Religion - Playing Religion

## Modifications for Digital Games as a Medium of Religious Expression

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### Modding in the world of gaming:

Fan-based modding is an essential part of the world of gaming. To mod(ify) a game basically means to alter the games files (on a programming level) in order to change the players experience of the game. Modifications range from simple additions to the games world (like adding a chair) to very complex rearrangements of the games core settings (like improving the AI of NPCs).

One type of modifications are those that add religious elements like this altar or the observed avatars praying-animation. They are created by modders to enhance the religious experience of gamers, who expressed a lack of said experience in their game.

In the field of comparative religious studies, the topic of religion-themed modifications for digital games is hardly noticed. Only Oliver Steffen wrote a chapter about the world of religious modifications for digital games in his 2017 book *Level up Religion*.

Thus, in my master-thesis I analyzed one of the religion-themed modifications called *Wintersun – Faiths of Skyrim* for the game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2016).



### The modification:

However, the already present elements of religion in the base game were not enough for some modders and players, leading to the creation of the modification *Wintersun – Faiths of Skyrim*, the main object of research in my thesis.

The self-proclaimed goal of the analyzed modification was to overhaul the religious aspects of the game by adding the following religious elements:

- Adding and/or overhauling 51 deities of the game's lore
- Adding shrines for those deities not yet having a shrine and overhauling the other
- Adding a mechanic of gaining divine favor with said deities in order to unlock powerful abilities
- Tenets and taboos for each deity, which increase divine favor when upheld, respectively decreasing it when neglected
- The ability to pray as another way to increase divine favor
- The possibility to conduct worship at a shrine, shown by the picture above

### The modifications base game:

The base game, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*, is a medieval-style adventure role-play game. The protagonist, the dragonborn, must defeat the evil end-time-dragon Alduin in order to save the world. To accomplish this, the player must explore an open world, fulfil quests, find powerful weapons and artifacts and ultimately gain enough power and experience to kill the dragon, as well as other foes, that may come along the way.

The world of Skyrim itself is a fantasy-world, which in its aesthetics is inspired by pop-cultural pictures and stereotypes of vikings and medieval Scandinavia. This world also comes along with its own religion, the cult of the nine divines, as well as their semi-evil antagonists, the daedric princes. Both have a representation in the game in the form of shrines and altars, as well as priests and temples in the case of the nine divines. Apart from these two groups, the games background story, the lore, is full of additional deities and higher beings.

### Theoretical approach: Religion

To analyze and compare the **religious elements** with elements of real-world religions, Bensons Salers polythetic definition of religion and Clifford Geertz definition of religion as iconographic system formed one side of the approach to religion in the modification.

To better grasp the modders understanding of religion as well as the wish of an individually customizable religion expressed by the mod-users, Michael Bergunders definition of an *Alltagsverständnis* of religion and Ulrich Becks theory of the individualization of religion opened the users and modders side on the matter.

### Methods:

I used three different methods to gather information in order to analyze the modification on different layers:

- The analysis of the content and structure of the mod-page as well as player-comments about the modification, which provided information about the mod's features as well as player-opinions
- The playing observation (after Oliver Steffen Religion in Games, 2017), actively playing the game and documenting it (in my case by video) to find the different elements of religion in the modified game
- The analysis of said recordings without being distracted by the gaming aspect itself.

Original, unmodified game



Modified game with religious elements



### Theoretical approach: Game

The main theoretical basis for the concept of game in my thesis was provide by two theorists on game:

- Roger Caillois:
  - Game is voluntary, limited, uncertain, unproductive, rule-based and fictitious
  - Four categories of games: competitive, luck, role-playing and thrill-seeking
- Aki Järvinen:
  - Theory of game elements: every game constitutes itself through the interaction of nine different elements of game with each other
  - Theory creates a basis for the deconstruction and analysis of the modification's elements:
  - New concept of *feature* to categorize game elements, that were changed by the modification

### Religion themed features in games:

One of the difficulties in analyzing these modifications and their features is, that they might aim to be immersive, or in other words, not be distinguishable from the surrounding games world. But since my research mainly focused on the modification, and not on the game, a distinction between the two had to be made. Thus, only elements of the original game, that either served as medium of the modification, staged features or served as points of reference to the modification, were observed.

The modification may use **landscapes, ruins or other objects** present in the original game to stage the added **religious elements** like temples, statues or artifacts.

But it may also use objects like **weapons or buildings, but also stories or the games lore** as points of reference.

### Results:

- Modders and community express an individualistic understanding of religion through modification:
  - No religious authorities, communities or soteriology are added by modification
  - High demand for further customizability expressed by the game-community
  - Modification as expression of individual religion by Ulrich Beck
- General features like prayer, shrines and worship are not meant to be comparable to distinct real religions:
  - Shrines stage themselves through the games world and constructed iconographic systems
  - Shrines use the games lore as points of reference in their aesthetic design
- Making religion:
  - Constructing religion through the modification
  - Perpetual making through the praxis of prayer, worship and adhering to tenets
- Playing religion:
  - Role-playing religion
  - Creative playing with religious elements
- Medium of religious expression:
  - Expression of religion in the privacy of one's own computer without real-life consequences
  - Interactive exhibition of pop-cultural understanding of religion

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