

Proliferation of cults in post-apocalyptic videogames

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Organizations resonating with the popular image of cults are so widespread in games belonging to the post-apocalyptic genre that we must question the reason for this popularity, how exactly this changes the popular understanding of religion in general, small religious movements in particular, or secularity as something derived from it. This article attempts to answer those questions by analyzing the representation of cults in one particular game rife with cultic imagery—*Metro: Exodus* by studio 4A.

We apply the concept of religious dimensions proposed by religious scholar Ninian Smart, intended to organize different aspects of religious tradition, to establish which parts of them serve as more fundamental elements of the cults presented in this game. This allows us to notice that, despite their numerous stylistic and ethical outward differences, all three cults in the game function, first and foremost, as forms of social engineering. This, in turn, serves as a way to implicitly create an opposition between “normal” modernity, exemplified by player characters, and any alternatives encoded as fundamentally connected with the conscious and dishonest actions of cultic leaders.

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Introduction

Throughout recent years, the term “cultist” has become highly recognizable in video games as well as in broader culture. Numerous projects across different genres and aesthetics – from the fantasy RPG *Baldur's Gate III* to the futuristic shooter *Bioshock: Infinite* – center their narratives around a conflict between the player character and a recognizable image of a cult. And games set in post-apocalyptic worlds are no exception. Such a widespread presence of cults across the media raises an important question: why are they so numerous?

The importance of this question is grounded in the increasing influence of popular culture, and video games in particular, in shaping public perception of religion and related topics. Stig Hjarvard wrote about “banal religion” – a decontextualized set of imagery, narratives, and ideas that popular culture borrows from historical religion, which nevertheless influence consumers' understanding of both particular traditions and religion as an idea (2012). Steward Hoover, building upon the concept of spirituality as a new, individualized form of religious meaning-making adapted for the current century (e. g. Heelas et al. 2005), speaks about the media's tendency to use actual religion as a repository of symbols and ideas that individuals can use in their own project of understanding themselves and the world around them (Hoover 2006). Meanwhile, Lars de Wildt introduced the concept of *pop theology* – a popular discussion of religion prompted by the content of video games (2023) – and, along with his

colleagues, highlights the very real, empirically observed influence games can have upon players' understanding of religion and believers (2018).

To put it simply, despite the initial projections of secularization theories (Taylor 2007: 2), religion did not disappear from the public sphere altogether. However, its visibility is increasingly dependent on media, which does not simply disseminate messages originating in a purely religious context, but produces its own meanings shaped by its own media logic (Hjarvard 2018) and the requirements of the market. Therefore, an understanding of religion in the 21st century requires an understanding of its presence and representation in the media. This is especially true in the case of smaller and marginal religious groups that lack the cultural, financial, and political capital of more “mainstream” religions and, because of that, exist entirely at mercy of the media industries to shape their image.

Considering the problematic legacy of moral panics, discrimination, and misunderstanding surrounding small religions – as well as actual cases of violence committed both by small religious groups themselves and by governments against them – it is especially important to try and decipher what representation of these organizations is constructed by modern media, including video games, and what the driving forces behind this representation are.

Of course, providing a definitive answer to this question in a single article would be impossible. Instead, our aim is to initiate a discussion through an analysis of a single video game that heavily relies on cultic imagery: *Metro: Exodus* by the Ukrainian studio 4A Games. We will not focus on the historical or biographical reasons for the inclusion of cults – namely, the specific decisions made by 4A's game designers. Rather, we will examine the role cults play within the game itself and position this role within a broader ideological context.

Methodology

This article is an example of game analysis (Fernandes-Vara 2024), focused on a single game and, more specifically, on one particular aspect of it — its representation of cults. The core concept used to organise the empirical material of the game is *resonance* — a feeling of recognizing some element of the game as connected with something in the global context outside of the game (Apperley 2010: 21). For example, whenever players understand a group of in-game characters as a representation of a type of real-world religious community, they experience resonance.

Of course, resonance itself is not something unique to video games — however, one particular type, *configurative resonance* (Apperley 2010: 136), is. Configurative resonance denotes a situation where players specifically create an in-game scenario in a particular way in order to experience resonance — for example, avoiding killing a character because it contradicts ethics from the primary world, dressing their characters in a certain way to adhere to extra-ludic fashion, or arriving at a quest location in a brand-new car because they feel this is expected of them based on real-world social norms (Chapman 2016: 42).

Some games — for example, global strategies or so-called colony sims like *RimWorld* — owe much of their popularity to this phenomenon, since they provide players with vast amounts of opportunities to create numerous complex and consistent situations imbued with meaning thanks to resonance. And while single-player shooters like *Metro: Exodus* do not

offer the same amount of freedom for players to create their own stories, the logic of offering opportunities to create situations that make sense in a broader context remains the same.

Importantly, resonance can be experienced on the basis of textual or audiovisual cues, as well as through game mechanics themselves, which may resemble something outside of the game. This connects to the second core concept of the article — *simulation*. Frasca defined simulation as a system whose behavior resembles, to someone, the behavior of another system (2003), and contrasts simulation with representation. However, as pointed out by Tuomas (2022), based on Simpson's (2011) work on models, written outside of video game contexts, our ability to perceive something as a simulation is itself culturally conditioned, depending upon the already-mentioned feeling of resonance.

By its very nature, a simulation cannot recreate the behavior of the original system in its entirety — in that case, it would be a copy. Therefore, perception of something as a simulation always depends upon the observer's ability and willingness to ignore or expand upon this necessary simplification — a process which, of course, may occur unconsciously or semi-consciously. In simple terms, to claim that something is a simulation is to make *it* a simulation, though the practical usefulness of a particular system as such may vary depending on its creators' and consumers' goals. This situation is familiar to most video game players, accustomed to both recognizing game elements as behaving similarly to something outside the game and explaining away or ignoring differences between the game and reality.

This process allows games to make what Bogost called *procedural statements* (2007) — by depicting models of real-world phenomena and exposing their internal logic, even in simplified form, games can make claims. The process becomes more complicated if the depicted real-world system is recognisable on an aesthetic level, but unfamiliar in terms of its functioning — this is the case with cults for most Western players. In such cases, the game relies more on the resonance between itself and the popular understanding of the phenomenon in question, already heavily ideologically shaped, becoming a simulation of a *myth*, in the terms of Roland Barthes (1972). An example of such a situation — a game simulating married life in a way that conflates actual lived experience with popular understandings of love and gender roles — has been described by Sebastian Möring (2015).

Finally, on top of that, games do not simply recreate and simplify the behavior of real or imagined systems, but modify it by introducing new elements, principles, and limitations. This can be done for a variety of purposes, from a conscious desire to make a procedural statement to technical limitations, the need to adhere to the canon of a specific genre, or the requirements of a particular story. Whatever the causes may be, it means that games, as media artefacts, produce their own meaning of represented phenomena, using textual, audiovisual, and procedural logic — with these different layers often supporting one another.

In this article, I would like to analyse the understanding of cults created by one particular game using its textual, audiovisual, and procedural components. This means that I analyse texts originating in game segments related to cults — speech of cult members, their letters and other textual fragments, as well as the imagery of corresponding locations, alongside the game mechanics for interacting with cultists. I contextualise the resulting understanding using a framework borrowed from religious studies and discuss the potential reasons for the developers to include this particular *myth of cults* in their game.

Historical Cults.

As Marc Galanter wrote, the very word “cult” is a loaded term, often evoking an image of “a secretive and dangerous group, one led by a madman or a charlatan.” (1999: ix) Throughout the second half of the 20th century, numerous horrific crimes were orchestrated and committed by cults and their leaders—from the mass suicide in Jonestown to the murders carried out by the followers of Charles Manson. Even in everyday language, the term “cult” or “cultic” is frequently used in a derogatory sense, as in “cult of personality.”

However, these negative stereotypes are often unfounded. The vast majority of organizations that could be classified as cults are neither dangerous nor harmful and, in some cases, may even contribute positively to their members' well-being (Galanter 1999: 81-83). Yet, stereotypes persist and not only unfairly stigmatize these groups but obscure the very definition of what constitutes a cult. As a result, many people use the term as a socially acceptable slur for any small or unfamiliar religious group they perceive as threatening or unusual—or, in some cases, for religion in general.

So, in order to analyse cults representation, it is important to understand what, exactly, is being represented. Galanter defined cults, or “charismatic groups”, as he prefers to call them in order to above mentioned negative connotations, through the combination of traits:

A charismatic group consists of a dozen or more members, even hundreds or thousands. It is characterized by the following psychological elements: members (1) have a shared belief system, (2) sustain a high level of social cohesiveness, (3) are strongly influenced by the group's behavioral norms, and (4) impute charismatic (or sometimes divine) power to the group or its leadership. (1999:4)

The first point is relatively self-explanatory: members of cults tend to share a common worldview, often informing their ethics and ontology, at least to some extent. However, Galanter cautions against overemphasizing the importance of this trait; while it is certainly a widespread characteristic, it is just one among several that define such groups.

The second, often overlooked, trait of a cult is its high level of social cohesion — in simple terms, members tend to care deeply about one another, with group meetings becoming an integral part of both their daily lives and overall well-being, not only in a religious sense but also in a psychological one.

The strong influence of behavioral norms dictated by the group exists at the intersection of these first two traits: since members intertwine the group's well-being with their own and share a common belief system, it is natural for them to organize their day-to-day lives according to the group's principles.

Finally, there is a well-documented tendency for charismatic groups to venerate their leader. However, this attributed power does not necessarily have to be centered on a single figure — it can also be projected onto the group itself or its overarching mission.

It must be noted that, to some extent, many of these traits can be found — or at least implied—in traditional religions such as the Catholic Church. However, it is the specific combination of these traits that defines a cult. Many established religions lack certain key characteristics; for example, some do not emphasize sacred leadership, while others prioritize

individual practice based on holy texts and a corpus of commentaries rather than fostering constant communal engagement among followers.

In the case of the Catholic Church, for instance, its sheer size makes it impossible to truly enforce universal behavioral norms or maintain a high level of social cohesion among all members on the emotional level — despite the fact that, in principle, such unity is expected.

On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of smaller movements exhibiting all the characteristics of charismatic groups while dogmatically being part of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or other widespread faiths. “Cult” is a type of human association, not a theological concept.

At the same time, the tendency of charismatic groups to revere the words, deeds, and examples of their immanent leadership or emerging practices often makes them resistant—or at least skeptical—toward external control, whether from secular authorities or bigger religious institutions. In some cases, this resistance can lead to conflict between charismatic groups and their parent organizations if the such group emerged within the dogmatic and organization boundary of a larger religious structure.

This skepticism toward external influence is one of the primary reasons for many well-known peculiarities in the religious practices of charismatic groups. Unbound by the need to adhere to an established tradition, and legitimized by the supposed charismatic authority of their leaders, such groups often have greater freedom to experiment with both practice and theology. As a result, they may borrow elements from a wide range of religions and philosophies, incorporating diverse concepts and rituals into their belief systems. This tendency toward syncretism itself has become a part of popular expectation about what cults are and how they should behave.

Cults in videogames.

On the surface level, video games provide numerous examples of “cults” or organizations that resonate with this concept — almost exclusively as antagonists for players to defeat. This tendency is particularly evident in fantasy games, where its origins can be traced back to the tabletop RPGs of the 1970s, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). In fact, cults were established as common adversaries as early as *Temple of the Frog*, a pre-written adventure module first published in 1975, just a year after the release of the original D&D.

The popularity of cults as enemies in RPGs has remained relatively stable ever since. Players confront cultists in *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, in numerous quests throughout the *Dragon Age* franchise, in the original *Gothic*, and in the recent *Baldur's Gate III*, as well as in various side quests in its predecessors. It is no coincidence that games serving as meta-commentary on fantasy RPG conventions, such as *Darkest Dungeon* and *Wilderness* — which incorporate some of the genre’s most recognizable imagery and mechanics — feature “cultists” as one of the default enemy groups.

Games across various other aesthetics and genres exhibit a similar pattern — players frequently encounter cultist-like adversaries. Examples can be found in sci-fi settings, like in the case of *BioShock: Infinite* or *Dead Space*, as well as in a relatively realistic gameworld, like that of *Far Cry 5*. Post-apocalyptic video games are no exception to this trend. From the Cathedral in the original *Fallout* and the Seraphites in *The Last of Us*

Part II to the Mushroom Cult in *ATOM RPG* and the “religious” governance path in *Frostpunk*, video games are littered with charismatic groups characterized by strong social cohesion, a shared belief system, and leadership imbued with charismatic or quasi-religious significance. Notably, the TRPG *Legacy: Life Among the Ruins* that serves as a veritable compendium of post-apocalyptic motifs and imagery, includes cults as one of the “default” types of post-apocalyptic communities.

This prevalence of cultic representations in post-apocalyptic settings raises two key research questions:

What specific understanding of cults—and of the post-apocalypse itself—do these games establish or, more precisely, encode?

What function do cults serve in video games that makes them such a recurring and popular narrative device?

It may be tempting to explain this situation by historical reasons only. D&D employed cults in the 70s, and they became a popular adversaries since fear of cults became part of cultural landscape in the society few years after murders committed by Mansons Family that were soon “augmented” by Peoples Temple mass suicide. We can assume that later game developers simply followed in D&D’s footsteps, making cults and cultists a part of what Danielle Kirby called a fantastic milieu (2013:2-3), a hypothetical set of different tropes, images and narratives encompassing modern popular culture.

Still, while this historical trajectory is important to keep in mind, it does not explain the enduring popularity of cults. D&D established a number of traditions as part of its game and narrative design in the 70s and 80s, yet many of them, like the idea of “expandable” spells, died out or remained only in the D&D itself. For cults to proliferate so much, they should fulfill some specific function for game designers – and in order to explain it, I would like to analyse one particular post-apocalyptic game with an extraordinary amount of different cults, even in comparison to similar projects – *Metro: Exodus*.

The reasons for choosing this particular title, aside from my personal preference, are two-folded. On the one hand, *Metro: Exodus* is a commercially and critically successful game, deeply rooted into wider popular culture, including other videogames. For example, its experience influenced the *Fallout* series from two directions at once: both as a game based upon books inspired by *Fallout 1* and *2* (Glukhovsky 2016) and as a separate product influenced by *Fallout* installments from Bethesda. As such, it may serve as a representative example of broader tendency in videogame culture or, at least, as a good starting point for discussion, with my findings being easily applicable to other games with similar aesthetic. On the other hand, its reliance upon the trope of cults exceeds most other games of the genre, without, at the same time, making the anti-cultic fight an explicit concept of the game, thus making it an ideal empiric material.

Metro: Exodus

Metro: Exodus is the third installment in the video game adaptation of the *Metro* universe, based on the novels by Russian writer Dmitry Glukhovsky. Genre-wise, it is a first-person shooter with stealth elements. The game unfolds across a series of distinct levels, some of which function as semi-open world environments featuring side quests and a limited number

of non-hostile NPCs, in addition to the usual threats posed by mutants and bandits. Other levels, by contrast, adopt a more linear, corridor-based structure, emphasizing combat and stealth mechanics.

A significant gameplay mechanic in *Metro: Exodus* is its karma system, which influences the player's narrative experience. Within the larger, open levels, players can make procedural moral choices, often — but not always — centered on whether to kill or incapacitate enemies deemed ethically redeemable. Mutants and bandits can be killed without penalty. The consequences of these choices become evident at the end of each major level: if the player's karma is sufficiently low, specific protagonist's team members may be killed or left behind. This, in turn, can lead to a “bad” ending of the entire game if the player reaches the end of their journal with a small team. Conversely, maintaining positive karma allows the player to preserve the entire group and achieve a “good” overall ending.

Narratively, *Metro: Exodus* is structured in the style of a road movie. The protagonist, Artyom, along with his companions from Sparta — a fictional paramilitary organization formed by former soldiers to protect what remains of humanity — embarks on a long journey by train, leaving behind the ruins of Moscow, a location of the first two games. Their goal is to find a safe haven where they can rebuild society, free from the threats of mutants, radiation, and resource scarcity.

As they traverse the post-apocalyptic landscape, they encounter a variety of distinct locations, each populated by diverse and often hostile groups. Many of these factions view the Spartans as intruders, enemies, or potential slaves, leading to frequent conflicts.

What makes *Metro: Exodus* particularly distinctive is its almost obsessive inclusion of cults. The game consists of six major levels: Moscow, Volga, Yamantau Bunker, Caspian Sea, Siberia, and Novosibirsk. Among these, three — Volga, Caspian Sea, and Siberia — feature semi-open world gameplay, allowing players to explore, undertake side missions, and make narrative choices, gaining a better understanding of the fictional world of the game. Notably, all three of these levels are dominated by different religious groups.

If we further consider that the Moscow level functions primarily as a tutorial and that Novosibirsk, due to extreme radiation levels, is almost entirely devoid of human characters in game, the world of *Metro: Exodus* emerges as an overwhelmingly religious post-apocalypse. The cannibals at Yamantau are essentially the only society that receives much attention without explicitly resonating with the image of a cult.

At first glance, this may appear logical if we look at the situation through the lens of enchantment/disenchantment theory. A number of authors, like Michael Saler (2012) or Charles Taylor (2007) develop the works of Weber (1993), as well as Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) to claim that the modern world is fundamentally disenchanted, or, in case of Joseph Josephson-Storm (2012), *disenchanting*. This characteristic contrasts post-Enlightened modernity, characterised by vision of cosmos as fundamentally understandable, materialistic and devoid of liminal, with pre-Enlightened vision of universe as fundamentally unknowable and amistic.

The change between those two states is both fundamentally linked with three interconnected social processes shaping Western civilization in general: secularization, rationalization, and bureaucratization. Apocalyptic events, like the one in *Metro: Exodus*, naturally disrupt these processes along with civilization itself, theoretically pushing humanity into different forms of

social organization. It can be plausible that in such a world presented as resembling the pre-modern one in its economical and political organisation, a more religious worldview might gain prominence. From this perspective, the proliferation of cults might seem like a natural consequence of societal collapse, a shift toward a worldview structured around religious leadership.

However, there are two important caveats. First, it is crucial to note that cults are by no means the only form of religiosity, even on a small scale. In fact, traditional premodern societies — often cited as the clearest examples of groups sharing an “enchanted” worldview — rarely organized their religious practices in a manner resembling a cult as defined by Galanter, while groups of *Metro: Exodus* reference this type of religion specifically.

Secondly, in *Metro: Exodus*, there are no religious characters outside of cults. Artyom explicitly states that he is not religious, and his companions show no signs of religious behavior, despite some being old enough to remember pre-War Earth and its religious traditions. While the idea of post-apocalyptic re-enchantment might make the proliferation of cults believable to players, in principle, these processes should not be directly linked — or at least, their interaction could manifest differently. For instance, rather than an exclusive rise in charismatic groups, we could expect a more general resurgence of religiosity, with cults existing alongside individual spiritual practices, communal rituals within otherwise “secular” societies, or ritual-based religions that do not seek to regulate everyday life.

Therefore, it is important to take a closer look at the cults themselves. All three religious groups in *Metro: Exodus* are clearly charismatic groups, exhibiting all the traits outlined by Galanter: a shared belief system, a high level of social cohesion, strong group norms, and a leadership or mission imbued with an almost supernatural reputation. However, despite these shared structural characteristics, the cults differ significantly in their surface-level beliefs, practices, and aesthetics.

The first group, the Church of the Water Tsar, led by Father Silantii, is based around the Volga River and is a luddite sect that claims the apocalypse was a direct consequence of human reliance on technology. Their aesthetic is heavily inspired by the Russian Orthodox Church, with iconography, architecture and traditional clerical garments adapted to the post-apocalyptic setting. However, significant differences are introduced to signify societal collapse and the cult’s extreme worldview to the players — most notably, their tradition of “God’s judgment,” which involves sacrificing individuals to a giant mutated catfish, the Tsar-fish. Despite these practices, the Church of the Water Tsar is coded as an ethically neutral faction. Killing its members is registered by the game mechanics as an “evil act,” procedurally encoding the cultists as not inherently malevolent in the eyes of the game’s moral system.

The second cult, the Fire Worshipers, led by Baron in the Caspian region, lacks any direct resemblance to traditional religions. Unlike the Church of the Water Tsar, whose aesthetic clearly references Orthodox Christianity, the Fire Worshipers does not have any overt visual or thematic ties to any real-world religious tradition. Their belief system remains vague, aside from an extreme Social Darwinist ideology that glorifies strength as the ultimate moral justification. This worldview extends to slavery and hyper-exploitation, which are religiously sanctified within their society.

Despite the lack of overt religious rituals or theological depth, the game clearly designates them as a cult. The Baron himself resonates with the stereotypical image of a cult leader, as

imagined by popular culture. Unlike the ethically neutral Water Tsar cultists, the Fire Worshipers are portrayed as unequivocally antagonistic, both procedurally and narratively. There are no penalties for killing them, and the game rewards the player with good karma for liberating their slaves.

Finally, the last cult, the Children of the Forest, was originally a group of children stranded at a scout camp during the apocalyptic World War III. Raised by their camp master, whom they have come to call "Teacher," they developed the skills necessary to survive any threat the wilderness might present, including bandits and mutants. It is implied that Teacher later committed suicide after realizing that he could not prevent his pupils from becoming as merciless as the people who were threatening them.

Aesthetically, the Children are inspired by the pseudo-Celtic and tribal motifs popular in the post-Soviet counter-culture, while their practices are derived from traditions established by the Teacher as part of his pedagogical approach. Although the Teacher himself is already dead, his figure clearly fills the role of a charismatic leader, with the phrase "Teacher would (or wouldn't) want this" serving as a final arbiter in any arguments among the Children, as well as the tradition of calling death "going to the Final Exam," etc. Similarly to the members of the Church, the Children are encoded as ethically neutral on a procedural level and even sympathetic on a narrative level, although ultimately, most of the Children that the player will encounter serve as opponents to be circumvented, ideally without killing them.

However, the similarities between these cults become much more pronounced if we analyze them structurally, as religions, using the methodology of Ninian Smart.

Religious Dimensions

As a staunch anti-essentialist and a critic of the Christian-centric approach dominating religious studies of his time, Smart wanted to find a way to organise information about different practices, views, and objects related to religion without any starting assumptions about which of those categories is ontologically superior to others or which more truly constitutes the "essence" of religion, a popular notion among earlier religious studies (Smart 1996). In order to do so, he proposed to organize empirical material from particular religions along the lines of numerous dimensions, with the possibility of pointing out which of those dimensions are more important and constitute more significant elements according to believers themselves — an approach borrowed from the phenomenology of religion (e.g. Husserl 1977). Such classification can be conducted on the basis of any sufficiently detailed set of material, from a field study of small religious communities to the analysis of a corpus of texts and the historical tradition of large religious organizations. Thus, it could also be applied to fictional religions from video games, like the cults in *Metro: Exodus*.

Specifically, Smart proposed a set of seven dimensions, with examples from Cristian tradition for clarity:

The doctrinal dimension is an intellectually coherent expression of the main ideas of a religion, especially concerning ontology and metaphysics. The duality of body and soul or the natural world and an eternal God are important elements of Christian doctrine.

The mythological and narrative dimension consists of all narratives that possess religious meaning in the eyes of believers. The story of Jesus is an obvious example of this dimension in Christianity.

The ethical and legal dimension consists of prescribed norms of behavior, including a stance on what actions are considered good or bad in terms of morality, as well as specific religious laws and restrictions. The Ten Commandments and numerous commentaries on them are a good example.

The ritual or practical dimension includes actions and behaviors prescribed to or avoided by believers. Daily prayers, fasts, and masses form this dimension in Christianity.

The experiential or emotional dimension includes psychological states that possess a special meaning for believers or emotions saturated with religious significance, with meditation and religious ecstasy serving as examples.

The social dimension of a religion encompasses inter-religious social relations, as well as contact between a religion and the outside world, including other institutions, such as the organization and politics of churches and congregations.

The material dimension encompasses artifacts, both man-made and found in nature, that the spiritual tradition endows with special meaning. Church buildings, crosses, ceremonial clothing, and other objects constitute this dimension for Christianity.

Specific practices, objects, and ideas may belong to more than one dimension. For example, the Christian mass in its entirety combines practically all of them. It is used as a way of remembering the life of Jesus (mythological) while being strongly based on Christian ontology (doctrinal). It includes the preaching of specific values (ethical), and the denial of communion can be used for policing a congregation (social). It is supposed to create an elevated state of psyche in participants (emotional). Finally, the ceremony often involves elaborate trappings (material).

On the other hand, specific dimensions are obviously more present in different traditions to vastly different degrees. Some traditions, like many liberal Protestants, focus on the ethical dimension of religion and pay much less attention to the mythological or ritual dimensions. On the contrary, traditional polytheistic religions of the ancient Celts or Romans placed much less emphasis on religious ethics and focused more on rituals and social aspects, constituting a different “architecture” of religious dimensions. This allows us to conceptualize similar “architectures” for the cults in *Metro: Exodus* and compare them with each other.

Dimensions of religion in *Metro: Exodus*

To understand how exactly the game simulates cults, I organise all the massifs of texts, visual imagery and game mechanics connected with cults as representation of different dimensions of religion, and organise those dimensions on the basis of how prominently they are presented to the player during Artyom’s interaction with the cult and travels across corresponding locations. This allows the establishment of four different categories of religious dimensions as presented in game, in this way, it would be possible to approximate what exactly the game understands by “cults”. What elements of the original system, that is,

“religious community” are included and what are excluded from the present simulation, and what are the ideological implications of such a presentation?

Core dimensions are those whose existence is impossible to ignore if the player pays any attention to the narrative side of the game at all.

Preferred dimensions are featured heavily but still require some effort on the part of the player to notice their existence, for example, by paying attention to the architecture of important buildings or the particular wording of prominent NPCs.

Peripheral dimensions are included in the game but are presented as completely optional content. They appear in texts, dialogues between unimportant NPCs, and the architecture of peripheral locations.

Hidden dimensions are completely absent from the game.

Dimension	Doctrinal	Myth.	Social	Ethical	Ritual	Emotional	Material
Water Tsar	Peripheral	Peripheral	Core	Core	Preferred	Peripheral	Core
Fire Worship	Peripheral	Hidden	Core	Core	Peripheral	Hidden	Hidden
Children	Hidden	Peripheral	Core	Core	Preferred	Hidden	Peripheral

If we organize the game elements pertaining to cults according to this principle, we arrive at the following scheme of religious dimensions. As we can see, at heart of all cults in the game lies the interconnection of ethical and social dimensions. To belong to the cult is to follow a specific ethics – one that always implies some specific approach to organizing and running a society, with both Baron and father Silantii basically admitting that cults they created are vehicles of social engineering. All other dimensions, often extremely important for the real-world charismatic groups, like emotional or ritual, are either completely absent or toned down in importance in the game. And this, in my opinion, explains the appeal of cults as narrative devices for game designers, and as enemies for players. Cults serve as a convenient way to include however exotic societies developers can dream off without going too far in the realm of actual social commentary, since genesis of cults is not depicted as being grounded in any emotional need, important narrative or even attempt to make sense of the world but, instead, as personal projects organised by individual social engineers.

Conclusion

This last point is particularly striking when we circle back to the notion of enchantment/disenchantment and the idea of modernity understood not just as a time period, but as a political and social project, aiming, among other things, at making it impossible to criticise it by erasing its own self-awareness (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 2).

All of these cults, in the end, serve as a “monster engine”, presenting a way to turn individual humans into uniformed, even on the visual level, enemies. While Fire Worshippers and Church of the Water Tsar present cases of almost open social engineering, and Children of the Forest represent a more spontaneous emergence of religious behavior in the style of the Lord of the Flies, the end result is the same. All three cults present an antagonistic force and example of social project different from the modernity, and protagonists, who appears to be aligned with the modern worldview as much as possible, act as a sort of “disenchanted agent” combating cultic influences whenever they can and protecting modern sensibilities in both physical and intellectual sense.

Such a narrative consistently implies that the modern worldview is not just the only “right” one but, in fact, the only “natural” one, toward which people tend to gravitate if left to their own devices. Alternative understandings of the world and ethics may emerge only as a result of either misunderstanding on part of the traumatized children, who may in such a context appear sympathetic, but ultimately wrong, or from the conscious efforts of individual bad actors trying to shape society toward their personal needs and philosophies and using cults as vehicles for their ambitions and philosophies.

And this situation may explain the appeal of cults. They allow the player to assume a role of a rebel, favored by both Western culture in general as well as game mechanics of the shooter genre, pitting a single hero against numerous opponents. But the rebellion itself is the rebellion in favor of the modern world, denaturalising, and even demonising, not just particular alternative social structures – there is obviously nothing appealing about Baron's oil empire – but the very notion of society different from our present one. And this is despite the fact that, on a surface level, the very idea of apocalypse—especially a man-made one, as in the case of *Metro: Exodus*—seems to critique modernity and call for an alternative.

About the Author

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