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**PLAIN TO SEE**

**AN EXAMPLE OF POPULAR THEOLOGY IN  
DECISION-MAKING GAMING (L.A. NOIRE)**

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**Abstract**

The video game *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar Games, 2011) replaces a theocentric worldview with anthropomorphically amended versions of spiritual life. For instance, the attribution of human values and even of a body to obviously impersonal existence is conspicuous. In the unfolding of the plot, moral conduct and notions of duty are commonly thought to stand for a mostly unseen and silent God. He is treated accordingly, i.e., as having both extrinsic and intrinsic representations in public fictions. Even more, a popular (mis)construal of Theology is part of the aesthetic tradition that games are bound to fall into. The fictionalizing of the daily life in the gaming industry essentially relies on sensational incidents and violent appeals to emotions. The cultural discourse of game-playing brings together the visual and the sonic set-up of godly absence/presence plain to see in the familiar re-enactment of the social intercourse and in the re-construction of a mostly urban landscape. Basically, the computer generated interface is immersive insofar as it features ethically-minded versus morally-corrupt characters. The video games aesthetics showcases a version of the Western pop culture that fits the obviously monotheist mould of our European past. What drives the usually minimal plot of mainstream digital storytelling is the compulsive belief in one legitimizing truth. The underlying cultural narrative is that of one hero, who embodies statistics about biography and sets out to enforce his authority over the world. The search for existential answers to questions of life purpose is limited to the presuppositions of the Western civilisation. The conclusion is that a melodramatic paradigm structures the ethical and societal issues touched upon by current mainstream video games.

*Keywords:* melodrama, authorship, theocentrism, anthropomorphism, idealism

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**1. Introduction**

Video games deliver a human-centred perspective on the mainstream social environment, as well as on the virtual world inhabited by the gamers and by their avatars. Commonly, the critical discourse on videogames employs the term ‘gaming’ [1] in order to cover both the experience of playing and the video product as such. Basically, gaming is an attempt to convey the study of a cultural

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and technical commodity which only makes sense when operated by its intended average customer. By comparison, reading lacks the constant input demanded from the end-user of video storytelling and, consequently, it lacks the ensuing sense of personal responsibility the typical gamer is bound to experience. Philosophical questions about the “meaning of life” [2] are being asked, and necessarily answered, in the commonsensical reconstruction of the human body, city landscapes or locomotion means. It targets the faculty of the mind by which narratives of social reality are being assembled from individual and, mainly, from collective cultural memory. The end result is an intricate dramatization of decision-making against the backdrop of melodrama, natural law, theocentrism, anthropomorphism or philosophic idealism. In that respect, decision video-gaming invites a reading that spans beyond cultural studies clichés. Yet, it does not reach to theological research proper. Broadly speaking, I attempt to bring my concern with video games in the mainstream of what the so-called memory studies has already achieved as far as other areas of social communication are concerned. The basic assumption that drives this field of inquiry is that “social groups construct their own images of the world” [3], which is literally the work carried out by the gaming industry under the commission of quite a large social group. This is to say that what we make out of past experiences (and, for that matter, out of our likely future), as conveyed by PC and console gaming, is yet another technology of memory that I find to be largely indebted to theological inspiration. This choice of critical language is meant to defuse the tension that decision-making video games (the BioShock series by Irrational Games, the Fallout series by Bethesda Game Studios) deal in to the extent to which they may very well come across as cautionary, if not apocalyptic, tales.

As far as this paper is concerned, *L.A. Noire* particularly contextualizes straightforward questions about right versus wrong, while emphasising a paradigm shift still in progress, from the German Idealism and French Enlightenment to our Americanized present. Namely, gaming can be construed as the 20<sup>th</sup> century consequence of an intellectual debate that has gradually advanced the cause of secularism in the Western world. Bluntly put, the opposition to religious language, something of an anti-theocentrism, has been on the agenda of the civil society since its foundation. In so many words, the policy has been to have “the theocentric and teleological natural law doctrine [...] identified in the Bible” replaced with (or, at least, complemented by) “human teleologies [of] self-interest or self-construction” [4]. Presently, the video games industry, the video game as such and the gaming experience carry on the political struggle and even have a say in the philosophical debate. *L.A. Noire* displays most of the unexpected results and unintentional humour decision-making gaming is known for in current popular culture.

To some extent, the exchange of information between the individual and the system paraphrases the anthropomorphic language of Abrahamic religions. Thinking of God as some form of “aerial vertebrate” [5], narratively created in the image of man, is anthropomorphology at its best/worst. The players are bound to act as self-aware, computer-conscious, moral and volitional agents

working their way through a series of trials towards a final reward. For example, the time spent by players impersonating the hero of *L.A. Noire* is an exercise in judging people's character, mostly deciding whether or not they lie. The facial recognition of deceit versus candour is always at stake and drives the plot forward. Pronouncing sentence on others is the trademark of the game and poses questions on what qualifies gamers to make the right calls. Except for the hints written down in a handy detective notebook, everything boils down to reading the sensible signs of pictures, mostly the posturing and the physical appearance of human characters. However, the soundtrack and the atmospheric lighting also reflect the ascription of human features to the video environment. Passing judgement only comes to prove the fallibility of human nature. Consequently, the image of men – as well as that of women – stands for a moralizing attribution of form and character to the principles of duty by which fictional agents are guided or, on the contrary, aren't. This reflects on defining identity as depending on experiential knowledge, culturally repackaged in gaming's graphic and narrative devices. The evidence of ideological purpose in digital storytelling is compelling and has everything to do with human suffering and struggle for poetic justice. Historically, popular fictions have already told the same stories. Currently, the media debate about gaming is focused on commodity mostly and less on philosophical concerns. This is to say that its use-value, marketing and distribution are under scrutiny while the actual product is somewhat ignored.

It turns out that everything said and done about video games is oddly familiar to traditional print-based humanities. Particularly, to the publishing industry that promoted the realist novel, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the same commercial footing of marketing and distributing titles. Possibly, this literary genre used to perform roughly the same cultural tasks, prior to the advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century media entertainment. Nowadays, for a fair cross-section of the Western world, computer literacy has replaced linear fiction with real time, multiple/open ended plots. Irrespective of the present-day entertainment, the setup of a notional environment – generated by information technology– seems to be the future of humankind. The gaming industry provides various end-users, already conditioned to eagerly interact with any and all kinds of virtual realities, with present day opinions “about the existence of God, the divine attributes, angels and lesser gods, providence and natural evil, all topics commonly treated under the doctrine of God in classic systematic theologies” [6].

At any rate, notions of folk psychology are generally considered to be the popular drive behind video games. The video story telling – much like popular fiction – resorts to common notions of Moral philosophy, which give substance to the rather loose narrative devices employed to keep together the basic plot. Presently, one of the most influential forms of public discourse, gaming, stages moral decision-making scenarios by video and narrative means. The player is lectured on core human values and the game-play may very well be an instantly recognizable and practical part of ethics. This is not to say that vicariously indulging in immoral conduct in the public circumstances of social communication, as exemplified by gaming, stands for an accurate

comprehension of theological practice or that gaming necessarily makes sense in such terms. On the contrary, my own reduction of theology (as actuated in video games) to the practical part of ethics is proof of mistaking daily events and, implicitly, their performance in video games for a source of theology, which, once more should definitely not be the case.

The narrative construal of goodness, suffering or redemption is always present in the minimal plot curve of digital role-playing. Basically, human consciousness is reduced to making choices about being honest, doing right, caring for animals, etc. Such anecdotal evidence of the search for meaning in life contextualizes narrative developments in the virtual world the avatars live in. For obvious reasons, the video game is a cultural product that can very well be construed as ideological, racist, gendered, so on and so forth. For the sake of a self-evident argument, some titles say the whole story: *Ethnic Cleansing* (2002, Resistance Records), the *Gothic* series (Egmont Interactive), *Hitman: Contracts* (2004, Eidos Interactive), *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* (2005, Electronic Arts), *Manhunt* (2003, Rockstar Games). However, their average aesthetics promotes a version of the Western pop culture that fits the obviously monotheist mould of our European past, now inherited by the North Atlantic world. In other words, the compulsive belief in one legitimizing truth keeps together the usually minimal plots of mainstream digital storytelling. Video-games “are uniquely, consciously, and principally crafted as expressions. As such, they represent excellent candidates for rhetorical speech—persuasion and expression are inexorably linked.” [7].

Nonetheless, the above-mentioned statement is simplifying to excess the issue of game literacy. From the said perspective of their entertaining purpose, games and game-playing are relegated to an ordinary, if not somewhat unsafe, practice of the contemporary pop culture. Possibly most common and yet challenging, the gaming phenomenon, when broken down into “unit operations” [8], accommodates a reading that makes its great diversity of meaning crystal clear. Simulated worlds pose a number of commonsensical threats to the comprehension routine developed and used in the daily social intercourse. The deliberate overstatement of these daily circumstances is supposed to stir gamer’s emotions. Nonetheless, the everyday life is the conspicuous backdrop of usually hackneyed storylines and, as a result, dull everydayness is made universal while being placed in perspective. Even more, the social reception of particularly successful games (the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *Red Dead Redemption* to name just two of the most notorious recent releases) is riddled with the major pitfalls of folk wisdom both in the reception and in the aesthetic choices of the developers. Broadly speaking, the conviction that they are harmful or, anyway contrary to moral principles is always present. Next to (spiritual) health concerns, there is a sense of widespread apprehension regarding the personal and the corporate responsibility of the parties involved in the whole gaming industry. The suspected improper conduct seems to be a decade-old marketing stunt still working for the benefit of those concerned.

To top that, academic inquiry only adds to popular unease. The operation of software on a computer/console results in a sequence of images interpreted by the player in accordance with his/her prior cultural conditioning. This customary course of action brings real-time input to the game-play that is explained by the system in a number of pre-ordained scenarios, each liable to vary in order to accommodate statistical differences in likely social behaviour. Eventually, once the game-play appreciation is exhausted, the abstruse nature of the cultural product under scrutiny comes across vividly. Though it is both narrative and video representation, the package makes sense in terms of fairy tales, other-worldism, mythical plots, etc. However, the rationalization of the gaming behaviour is done in terms that recall of the disclosure of the truth motive in narrative fiction. Video and audio content play the popular understanding of fate, estrangement, faith, etc. Such a frame of reference is conducive to a rather small number of archetypal plots. Rather unfortunately, it even falls below a critical level, which is symptomatic of pop-culture's stereotyped stories: action-adventure, driving/racing, role-playing, shooter, etc. World-building games, also known as God-games (a number of video game series that made the history of the genre are *Civilization* released by Firaxis Games, *The Age of Empires* by Ensemble Studios, or *The Sims* by Electronic Arts), go to great lengths to convey the magnitude of the task undertaken by a usually underage player. Explicitly, the gaming industry reclaims the heritage of folktales, later to be discovered in graphic narratives too. The visuals and the rhetoric of the mainstream 21<sup>st</sup> century games showcase the Western popular culture.

Tracking down the interaction between operating the game, its graphic interface and the perspectival telling of a story is infinitely more complex. The comparison with traditional, linear narratives helps make the above-mentioned statement exceedingly clear. Essentially, the comprehension of gaming challenges the traditional critical language and paves the way for what has come to be known as ludology. Its current meaning ranges from the formal reading of play theory and game history to the critical language designed to map down the art and the industry of video games. As it is the case with most new cultural commodities, the reception of innovative public communication is somewhat provisional and meant to answer pressing needs. Although gaming has gained momentum inasmuch as is presently a mainstream social practice, the original miscellaneous approach to the object of study remains roughly the same. The tentative academic reading of games has come with this new territory and states the suspicion that what meets the eye must be deceptive. The basic assumption is that this social practice cannot possibly be that transparent as it appears to be. On the contrary, its melodramatic pattern that aims for startling impressions, to be read against the backdrop of daily life, is informative of the Western worldview, implicitly promoted in the unfolding of the basic plot. To all extents and purposes, gaming is amenable to various ideological interpretations. Basically, ludology sets out to dispel popular misconceptions and to establish the credentials of the industry. The side-effect is that gaming comes across as sophisticatedly multi-layered, almost like an act of deception. The diverse range

of means and sources used to advance such a claim is conjectural. Ultimately, it is perhaps best suited to the job, even now that the industry is decades old and widely celebrated throughout pop culture. Whatever the gamer is exposed to is a widely known division into two, which makes the whole ambivalent. The multi-sensorial experience is powered by the substantial hardware and by the more elusive software. The similar two-fold nature of the address works further: the package makes the equation between faith and reason when it comes to making sense of the actual unfolding of the gaming experience. The same is true of the equivalence between violence and excitement used in order to offer cheap thrills. Everything amounts to the conclusion that information technology delivers an aesthetic medium which collapses the traditional detection of authorship. Explicitly, the once effortlessly identifiable narrator is currently being dismantled into a number of authorial instances listed in the credits of video games. They carry out both creative and managerial tasks that seem to be peculiar to this industry: (head) designer, producer, script writer, (lead) programmer, (lead) animator, art director, etc. The exchange between the system and gamers brings out the meaning of these various authorial instances, rather difficult to tell apart in the experiencing of what is essentially both the artistic representation and the narrative development of the game play.

The view of cultural communication, which anthropomorphizes the video aesthetics as if it were a proper interlocutor, is simultaneously naïve and sophisticated. Factually, cultural anxieties are triggered by the avatar body of the player, which openly invites a number of questions. The conspicuous ones pertain to moral character, to the faculty of reason, to immortality concerns, to achieving dominion over the (video) world. These are all biblical tropes of celebrated theological inquiry. They are effectively retold by the means of mass entertainment. For example, the kinship of the avatar with the players and, importantly, with the silent maker of these fictional agents, boils down to the self-evident motive of *imago Dei*. Being made in likeness of God renders explicit the underpinning narrative knowledge of these popular stories. Their self-evident message usually conveys abridged versions of deliverance from peril. It is a promise of eternal victorious life for those who comply with this narrative mode of knowing the world. Mostly, the gamers are required to go along with the redemptive plan of an all-powerful, obviously good, God. In order to carry on with the simplistic analogy, the power over the fortune of the player should be manifest in the artificial intelligence that the gamer has to interact with every step of the way. The approximate judgement of so-called volition acts displayed by the software, otherwise known as the video game, is cultural guesswork on the player's part. For instance, *L.A. Noire* makes the point that experiential knowledge is not always safe enough to detect criminal conduct. The interrogations conducted by the player's avatar have some percentage of failure that cannot be rationally accounted for. Expressions and gestures commonly thought to help in judging people are often misleading and only come to reinforce the folk wisdom about the inscrutable ways of providence.

## 2. Video performance and theological meanings

As previously said, the assessment of video game reception is mainly troubled by its authoring technique that assembles quite a number of inputs from various areas of production and development. As a matter of principle, most games undergo changes throughout their history. Ultimately, this is what proves the success of one title or another: the demand for improvements means that the game has a fan base big enough to keep the interest going. Nonetheless, formal statements, which are commercial disclaimers, point at the very same issue of authorship. Factually, these messages say that the copyright proprietor is not responsible for the changes made after the game is officially launched. The case in point is the booklet of *L.A. Noire* which instructs the public with respect to the shifting identity of the video product as such, irrespective of the fact that it has already been released: “the information in this manual was correct at the time of going to print, but some minor changes may have been made” [Rockstar Games, *L. A. Noire* Booklet, 2011, 7]. These circumstances reveal the culture of updates, patches and configuration revisions, generally available when it comes to digital applications. The monumental drive to deal with minor glitches is famously revealing of the information technology’s exploits. The attempt to return to a proper condition the games that occasionally malfunction is commonplace. It is further proof of the work-in-progress status that most I.T. products, not only video games, end up with, once they are operated in the real world environment.

However, this practice of the industry overemphasizes the joint authorship of the constantly changing product. Of course, the topic is valid for the current digital communication as a whole. It is of particular interest for digital humanities (video games included), on account of the academic tradition present in the field of narratology and cultural analysis. The cultural awareness of game operation is intrinsically linked to the identity on whose authority a statement is made. The concept of copyright “in a capitalist culture [proves that] ownership is continually parlayed into some form of currency (e.g., cash, recognition, tenure, and promotion)” [9]. The popular view on the necessarily one originator of all communication is steeped in the assumption of the persons who carry on a dialogue and possibly hold the rights of intellectual ownership.

To a large extent, ethical concerns are foregrounded in order to highlight the mutual entanglement of various factors at play in decision-making games. In a didactical manner, the current deadlock over their means and ends summarizes older debates about the moral responsibility of narrative representation and, as a matter of principle, of art.

The functional understanding of popular culture – “the locus of cultural, political, and knowledge formation for whole populations, a prime site for further democratization of knowledge” [10] – essentially advertises the morality of secularism. Under the guise of amusement, video games take part in the collective search for happiness, as marketed by the entertainment industry. Playing is rewarding on its own and, most of the times, the attainment of what is considered useful (i.e. either good or rewarding) in the logic of the plot is the

ultimate target of narrative development, irrespective of the moral considerations that are, nonetheless, always at play in most instances of public communication. However, I do not intend to wrongly assume that video games are necessarily an example of religious studies, due to the possible misinterpretation of theological insights as yet another cultural narrative of (non)ethical patterns of behaviour. Theology is the scientific recognition of God, based on revelation. Even if considered as formal knowledge on God but not only (i.e., commandments pertaining to notions of morality, human being, Church, saints, etc.), as derived from divine sources (e.g. Bible or theologically sanctioned revelation), it still rejects transparent associations with secular approximations of ethics as an objectively rational scientific pursuit that secures the propriety of social intercourse. Once more, the various developments of the cultural studies paradigm I myself exemplify presently (that range from the rhetoric of collective memory to the cinematic assessment of video world-making patterns) is non-theological, both in character as well as in the means deployed to track down the current pop culture comprehension of morals in all departments of human life.

*L.A. Noire*, set in the aftermath of the World War II, follows the fortune of the honourably discharged marine Cole Phelps, now serving in L.A.P.D. Satisfaction with his own achievements is depicted as a matter of instant gratification in complete disregard for moral standards of behaviour (a vigilante code of honour is enforced at the expense of law offenders casually shot down in hot pursuit). Anyway, mainstream gaming is keen to oppose the moral majority of the conservative Western society always eager to assume that the industry is “the root of all evil” [11]. As a rule, video games argue that right, honourable or virtuous conduct does not necessarily result in social and individual well-being. On the contrary, cynical stories make it obvious that similar commitments may very well delay or even prevent the achievement of one’s goals.

Eventually, the replacement of a theocentric worldview with blatant anthropocentricity argues for the primacy of human consciousness in the virtual version of social reality. A dated, yet obviously materialist United States is available for consumption in *L.A. Noire*. Most of the times, players are asked to engage in the prolonged performance of repetitive actions. They range from driving to the routine of cross-examinations, but, importantly, they are all indicative of the moneyed interest at the heart of the social intercourse. The concern with money as the most prized possession available is ever present in the social communication between fictional characters. Gamers find themselves in a nostalgic history of the late 1940s to the extent to which the setting, the costumes and the music point at a Hollywood-like American past. Otherwise, the game-play shows that the only characters who would profit from being policemen are the policemen themselves, not the public they supposedly serve and protect. From the particular to the general, self-interest is shown to be the foundation of secular morality. These are cultural anxieties about survival to be read in individual behaviour and professional codes of conduct. Though money goes unmentioned, this is a fill in the gaps exercise.

No other alibi is provided for the menial tasks somebody's avatar has to perform in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Los Angeles. The deliverance from enemies always remains the same, yet spiritual salvation is replaced with personal well-being regarded as the chief good one is supposed to strive for. In the long run, this statement is made for the sake of dispelling a popular myth. Namely, the belief that ethics based on the welfare of mankind in the present life is tantamount to a moral code of life, as the theocentric worldview of religious thought used to provide for the citizens of the Western world. It follows that this is definitely not the case. At least to some extent, the topicality of gaming in popular media is concerned with the psychological effect of conduct rules: they are as important as ever. Secular or religious, they are held together by an ultimate devotion to human interests, yet the rhetoric remains the same at the expense of moral virtue.

This is a human-centred worldview supposed to account for cultural communication and even for the appreciation of beauty in various aesthetic forms. Much of what the topic has come to stand for, if not everything, stems from abridged forms of philosophic idealism(s). The foundational discourse of "German Idealists [...] paved the way for [...]critical theory and poststructuralism, and in doing so left a mark that remains highly visible in [...] religious studies and aesthetics" [12]. There are a number of easily identifiable issues that, since Kant and Hegel, have become a collection of rhetorical common-places in current popular culture. As mentioned previously, their ancestry can be traced back to the century of idealism (1760-1860) whose discourse substantiated the hope of self-determination attributed to free-will.

Even more, ideologies that do not find an independent reality of external objects have come to fruition in the postmodern catchphrase that perception shapes our sense of reality. Notwithstanding, less familiar to the said European tradition of rationality circumscribed to idealism is the view that there are no objective standards available. Late 20<sup>th</sup> century's cultural production indulged in similar statements that further spiralled into a relativistic assault on common sense. Public discourses confidently declared "the unspeakable and/or impossible Real" [13], which is only one step away from advocating the disregard for moral duties, This is tantamount to a view of the world closer than ever to the practical atheism video games have largely exemplified ever since their advent. Such widespread apprehensions corrupted the Western world's legacy from (subjective, transcendental, objective or absolute) idealism [14]. Notions of 'freedom' and 'self-consciousness' [15] are nonetheless embedded in the instantly available knowledge democratically circulated by video games, as prime examples of current popular culture. They both are readily available in the reconstruction of the world, together with the whole contents of our experience, as it is known to players in video games. The opinion that the world is understood according to the already existing cultural conditioning of its citizens has always been in contrast with the opinion that it has an independent reality. In so many words, the social practice of gaming and the cultural product as such prove that reporting on our social environment is a highly contentious endeavour. Irrespective of the object of perception, ideas (of the perceiving or of

the universal mind), as well as our experience, successfully replace an independent reality with an immersive and somewhat solipsistic environment.

At any rate, the devotion to mundane pursuits amends the rules of former spiritual life. The secular morality has gained the momentum of an already time-honoured tradition. The obvious historical landmark is Enlightenment's secular conversion of the human mind to material and temporal purposes. Everything was done at the expense of "the long-dominant monarchical, aristocratic, and religious ideologies" [16]. This is the worldly mind-set of gamers as staged by their avatars. The attribution of human values and even of a body to obviously impersonal existence is presently conspicuous too. Gaming provides the finest examples of body reconstruction in public communication. The industry makes out of corporeality the paradigm case of current socio-cultural inscription of identity in popular culture. The post-human body of technology is written, broken, gendered, etc., in order to accommodate the universal trauma of physical and mental degradation that leads to death. The characters' response to their environment is structured on picturing desirable bodily attributes. This is a cultural policy naively re-assembled in terms of antagonistic relationships which keep the story going. The anthropocentricity of most, if not of all, influential public narratives is a matter of philosophic humanism as well as of social conditioning at its best. Explicitly, such teaching by example and discovery instils social skills and behavioural standards in the end-users of video games. Unmistakeably, the fictional agents' interaction is part of an obvious grand scheme of things that recalls both the game's commercial genre and the foreordaining of characters through trial to the salvation of happy ending. Such predestination does not necessarily imply divine action, yet it is equally unchallengeable as far as the order of events is concerned. For example, the one who presides over their unfolding resorts to non-player characters so that the loose ends are tied up in the story. This is to say that personages and plot are masterminded by the omniscient and multiple author. Everything serves the purpose of reinforcing the melodramatic paradigm.

Frequently, gaming employs a loose moral code and notions of duty that are commonly thought to stand for a mostly unseen and silent God. The very conceptualising of authority is treated accordingly, i.e., as having both extrinsic and intrinsic representations in fictions. The worldview advanced by gaming is patterned on the prevailing beliefs and values circulated by the mainstream media. The evidence of ideological purpose in digital storytelling is compelling and has to do mainly with human suffering and struggle for poetic justice. Basically, the computer generated interface is immersive insofar as it features ethically-minded versus morally-corrupt characters. The video games aesthetics showcases a version of Western pop culture that fits the obviously monotheist and humanist mould of our European past.

The recording of human experience is inescapably formalized in genre, style, modes of reception, etc., all plain to see in video games too. As far as establishing their credentials is concerned, there is always a transparent digital reshuffle of traditional humanities, at its most obvious in game design. This is to

say that the canonical blueprint of current mass entertainment is ascertained when it comes to tracking down the ethical and societal implications of video games. Basically, their concern with everyday culture is steeped in a narrative mode of knowing the world that taps into the universal paradigm of storytelling. It follows that emphasis on codes of conduct and a sensationalist imagination structure the video aesthetics, much like in comics [17] or cartoon shows. The dramatic treatment of events recalls of popular melodrama, loosely defined as focus on stark ethical contrasts, unrelenting appeal to emotions, convenient happy-endings and a befitting soundtrack. Irrespective of such blatant mawkishness, the cultural discourse of game-playing is contentious. For the most part, it puts together the visual and sonic set-up of a godly absence/presence to be read in graphically depicted human suffering. What is more, emotionalism spills over into the media coverage of the issue. Consequently, everything spirals into a public relation war, waged between self-righteous adult players and Pharisean voices of paternalistic extraction (parents included). The bone of contention is the teenager's exposure to anti-social behaviour and immoral practices advertised by the video game industry in breach of social responsibility rules. The silent, if not absent, yet benevolent God-like centre which patterns the unfolding of the plot is an instance of virtue the players strive to impersonate themselves. Principled conduct and, particularly, a sense of duty are commonly thought to acknowledge that God has both extrinsic and intrinsic value for gamers and the aesthetic tradition games are bound to fall into. As a matter of principle, decision-making strategies place the emphasis on the rhetoric of moral exhortation. Games particularly highlight that there is no abundance to choose from and the field for choice is predetermined. The option of taking what is on offer or nothing is available for public and personal scrutiny. The attribution of values and obligations to both behaviour and characters, which are patterned on the cartoonish melodrama of mostly an urban underclass, is a sort of moral exhortation for gamers. Obviously, the language of urging to laudable conduct is in tune with the current, chiefly disparaging usage of the term. Decision-making gaming stages the failure or the success of fictional agents in terms that should expose the recognition of God for the moralizing tale of the universal good-versus-evil scenario. The coherent reduction of theology (knowledge on God) to morality is usually meant to showcase a paternalistic need to moralize, conveniently proven wrong by the course of events. Accordingly, my own reading of video games sometimes exhibits a similar conflation of the core theological notion of revelation with the narrative language of social conditioning, as it is largely exemplified by the unfolding of choice-making. It follows that video games cannot possibly amount to a source of revelation and gaming per se advertises morality, values and obligations outside any and all religious traditions.

The tradition of common melodrama and the perception of rather sophisticated three-dimensional environments are means to an end. Namely, they amount to one of the most effective shortcuts to "religion as an aspect of the human spirit" [18], in the words of the German theologian Paul Tillich. Through

the agency of the avatar, of first person game-playing, the meaning-of-life-task performed by the genre is plain to see. As a matter of principle, the dramatic composition posits an ethical dilemma. Good versus wrong fuel an essentially moralizing statement. The performance of various tasks in the two-way flow of information between the environment and the gamer acts out the narrative of the self. The reported circumstances of interactive entertainment extend beyond the linear plot of literary fiction.

Conclusively, if approached from the perspective of faith and, inescapably, of Christianity, the narrative exemplifies the “almost schizophrenic split in our collective consciousness” [18, p. 3]. From obviously contrasting perspectives, the popular construal of theology and ludology alike address the issue which lies at the core of decision-making gaming: the familiar theocentric master narrative of Western culture remains essentially the same, while only the divine consciousness is being replaced with anthropomorphised authorial fixtures.

### **3. Case study - *L.A. Noire***

*L.A. Noire*, a 2011 release of Rockstar Games, is presented both as action/adventure and open world game. This marketing strategy on its own is worthy of attention. Despite being a publicity stunt that plays on the practical confusion between the two conventions largely employed in the game industry, this sales gimmick helps players better understand the decision-making routine of this particular game. Basically, this is a rather common practice by which traits belonging to a genre are appropriated by another one in order to reach for a wider audience. The choice not to distinguish between the two was obviously deemed commercially effective.

Of interest is the main side-effect of this crossover identity: the already mentioned issue of authorship is further emphasised in the attempt of the game’s originator(s) to stir various emotions. Effectively, they show the same familiar questions regarding the multiple authorship strategy in most I. T. commodities and, specifically, in video games. Information technology, in the service of entertainment, advertises intricate notions of joint authorship.

In the gaming experience, both the genre of video game and the perception of particularized game play rely on a comprehension routine that features anthropomorphised fixtures alleged to address the gamers and to demand input into the system. Commonly, this is a cultural frame of reference that helps gamers make sense of the virtual environment. Sensational incidents and violent appeals to emotions add up to a reward-and-punishment scheme understood by the average player of decision-making games in terms of his/her cultural conditioning. Accordingly, the computer-generated world is thought to be managed by a God-of-the-gaps concept of providence. A heterodiegetic author (outside but in charge of the plot) controls whether or not gamers receive what they need/want. His presence is adduced as an explanation for the development of the plot. This rhetoric phrases the need for instantly

recognizable language and meaning in the melodrama pattern of mainstream social communication.

However, these anxieties are peculiar to video games and gaming on account of the fact that other forms of cultural communication appropriated the means of information technology later in their individual history. Namely, literature, music or film use the newly developed I. T. medium, while video games originated with computers. A collaborative authorship may very well be read in the credit titles of films or television broadcasting as well, yet the authorial ethic, present both in the experience and in the development of video games, is explicitly different. When it comes to the acknowledgement by name of each contributor, something radically new is experienced by the inquisitive gamer who ventures to read, say, the *L.A. Noire* booklet. All in all, roughly the same layout of the printed text, which is meant to glamorize gaming and to list the credits, is to be found whenever video games are legally purchased.

Definitely, there is a literature of booklets and case covers. They come with the original video game case and, mostly, deliver iconic screenshots from in-game animation next to the seemingly endless credit lines. Half advertisement, half instruction manual, these tiny books tell a big story. Of course, they over-simplify to suit the popular taste and, at the same time, circulate a stereotypic comprehension of the social reality. To some extent, they are the overlooked yet matter-of-fact manifesto of the computer literate age. Readily available and in the least prone to change, these printed texts deliver meaning instantly. Immutable as they are, they amount to a textual record of the game at a particular moment in time – i.e., prior to its release. Importantly, gamers are also provided with an iconic record of a stage in the game's development. The changes bound to be made later on accommodate mostly practical demands regarding the game play. For the most part, they do not address aesthetic concerns and are essentially functional. In this respect, these amendments show that the video game is cultural communication patterned on the average home appliance functionality. The operation of the computer/game console fuels the ethic of collective authorship in pragmatic terms. Everything boils down to improving the gaming experience. Graphics and sound effects remain roughly the same while the way the game is played is subject to change in accordance with the expectations of the fan base. The rules of conduct regarding authorship in the video game industry presuppose the continuous action of keeping the product in effective market condition.

Anyway, the sheer magnitude of the undertaking is apparent. For example, the booklet under scrutiny states briefly that the approximately three hundred people in the cast of *L.A. Noire* are roughly half the staff who actually worked on the game, from those who deserve special thanks to the writer and director Brendan McNamara. Frankly said, there are some familiar entries too: producer, lighting, video editor, etc. But they are featured alongside a vast majority of digitally-bound items. These are obviously restricted to mainstream computer culture and never actually mentioned in the moving pictures media (traditional film or television). This is conspicuously soon account that the noir

genre is a benchmark openly quoted by this tribute, set in 1947, to the homonymous Hollywood blockbuster *L.A. Confidential* (1997). Such easily recognisable meanings frame the culture-bound character of the game.

As displayed on the screen, the data stored on a computer is mostly perceived as the visuals of gaming next to other, less conspicuous characteristics. Besides what is acknowledged in terms of auteur communication ‘written + directed by’, several other parts of production are listed: ‘programming’, ‘art & cinematic’, ‘audio’, ‘depth analysis – motion scan’, etc. [*L. A. Noire* Booklet, 2011, 17].

More explicitly, the confusion between the two genres is a matter of cultural communication. It lies with the intertwining mode of telling employed by the game. On the one hand, the story is framed by the formerly heroic times of the World War II and converges on a protagonist possibly scarred by his war exploits. He fits the profile of a decorated war hero, yet sometimes the video champion loses his composure and unexplainable events occur: head-on collisions between cars while driving peacefully, conflicts that escalate once a suspect is called a liar, almost a habit out of singling out children and old people for a rough police treatment. This is the detective story cliché of the overachiever “keen to continue serving his country on home soil” [*L.A. Noire* Booklet, 2011, 5]. In narratological terms, the perspective is of a narrator observably in touch with what is going to happen next. A plan of action devised in order to attain the desired outcome is obviously at hand.

As a result, the plot development is easily identifiable and establishes the circumstances needed to introduce the cross-examination of various characters, which is the trademark of *L.A. Noire*. Everything happens at the right time and falls into place. Future events are foretold and a rather comfortable video performance is expected from the gamer whose expectations are met by the plot’s unfolding. Essentially, no revelation is available and, allegedly, both characters and players resort to reasoning from known facts. This is a naïve appropriation of natural theology, eagerly deflated by the unavoidable mistakes made in reading the faces of suspects. True knowledge lies with unexplainable epiphanies, which may very well recall of luck or, even, fideism. The two of them, natural theology and fideism, amount to a binary rhetoric that phrases notions of fate and good fortune in the plot development, never actually threatening the grand scheme of events, yet possibly being able to soothe existential fears. Inadvertently, it prompts the misguided comprehension of video storytelling as a source of revelation, as if *L.A. Noire* were the holy scriptures of a new religion. Of course, such (mis)construal should help better grasp the public (dis)services rendered by gaming yet it is not a matter of academic debate.

On the other hand, the players gradually discover that they enjoy a degree of freedom in delaying certain assignments at will. This is the closest the game gets to the sandbox convention. Rhetorically, the address of the game is involved in the narrated world and this discovery-mode that defers making decisions is discretionary, i.e., up only to the player to prolong or end. A first person account

of recognizable daily language is conventionally put together. Ultimately, the game's design demands the successful completion of particular hierarchical tasks. The gamers are instructed that they "must investigate each of the cases that are assigned to you" [*L.A. Noire* Booklet, 2011, 12] in order to complete the game. In other words, though able to act without restraint if the gamer feels like roaming around the streets of Los Angeles, there is no true liberty of action. This is to say that this Rockstar release is necessarily a progression-style game. Finally, the decision-making routine the game sets up is what defines *L.A. Noire* to all extents and purposes. The game's rhetoric points at what turns out to be a storyline unalterably determined from the very beginning, while simultaneously suggesting the unrestricted use the avatar can make of the virtual environment.

Looking back on *L.A. Noire* from the perspective of the present, it is safe to say that it went against the grain of a profit-driven and forgetful industry. It has achieved a cult status on account of the unusual course of action gamers are invited to pursue, which makes it worthy of a 2014 critical assessment. The game is singular in conveying the unavoidableness of daily chores, statistical commitments and cultural practices as they are used by average socialized individuals. The staging of ethical values can always be read from the perspective of the "ultimate concern [...] manifest in the realm of knowledge as the passionate longing for ultimate reality" [18, p. 8]. It is possible to think of reasoning from natural facts as of a popular construal of religious sentiment in biographical public narratives, which is, nonetheless, not to be equated with the discourse of Theology. Instead, it has much to do with theological inspiration in the various genres of video games. Controlling the moving images on the screen is a matter of organizing notions of personal reward (shelter, food, pleasure) and social cohesion (justice, loyalty, integrity). Understandably, the game displays most of the trappings typical productions of mainstream gaming have to rely on in order to make instant sense.

However, its stake on this standard way of making entertainment is rather unusual. For example, honour-based violence, which is justified by the narrative in terms of belonging and togetherness if not job duty, comes across as a side effect of the facial capture technology. Much of the game-play is centred on watching the faces of characters being cross-examined. The policemen have to suspect them of carrying out illegal activities and their ability to hold the gaze of the law-enforcer should provide clues in finding out the culprits. This is a demanding enterprise bound to result in making the wrong choices that, thankfully in the long run, do not lead to anything else but arrests and legitimate killings in self-defence. The game invites the players to indulge in the comfortable performance of acting in the line of duty. Not to mention that it is heavily indebted to the cinematic tradition of the Hollywood noir genre. What it does is to revivify the said convention in the performance of the menial tasks of detective work: mostly driving around Los Angeles, cross-examinations, sudden bursts of violence and gun fighting.

Ultimately, the game falls into the category of action/adventure because, no matter what, only one possible ending is in store. Yet, the freedom to roam on your own is embedded in the game-play and a sense of self-determination attributed to the gamer's free-will is readily available. What is more, the iconic interrogation system of the usual suspects prompts gamers to believe that there are consequential choices to be made. Three options to pick from are always listed: truth, doubt or lie. It is a case in point example of human-centred video environment. The interactive drama features self-conscious players who act out the narrative of computer-conscious, moral and volitional agents. As a matter of principle, a form of retributive justice is enforced throughout the game.

The policeman's worldview is shaped by the grand narrative of substitutionary atonement and, ultimately, by death: "a burgeoning drug trade, a movie industry relentlessly preying on naïve young girls, rampant corruption" [*L.A. Noire* Booklet, 2011, 5]. Innocents die in the City of Angels and the guardians of law and order are indisposed to action and, even less, to effort. They are tempted by the opportunity of an open-world environment to pursue self-indulgence. Even their detectiveship is somewhat slothful, there is no hurry and no surprise in *L.A. Noire's* police work. In the virtual world of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the surveillance culture of the capitalist civilization is policed by the players themselves: "the powers that be are watching..." [*L.A. Noire* Booklet, 2011, 5]. The citizens of Los Angeles suffer heavy casualties under the watchful eye of the gamer who comes to understand that human sacrifice satisfies God's wrath as well as man's anger. Both of them can only lead to recurring rounds of bloodshed.

#### 4. Conclusions

The estimation that moral norms are social rules is at the core of the secular popular culture, as it is largely exemplified by video games. Specifically, *L.A. Noire's* decision-making procedure makes it exceedingly clear that "the mundane might provide an outside to the division between the religious and the secular" [19]. The cultural practice of gaming summarizes experiential and social readings of reality, in the tradition of the civil society's agenda that has always advanced. Since its invention, the philosophical assertion of natural right over natural law has been advertising drastically amended versions of the theocentric worldview, prevalent in the Western world prior to the German Idealism and French Enlightenment. Of course, it follows that humankind is the product of biology, history, society. Cancelling out the metaphysical assumptions about human nature is the practical atheism that goes without saying in the prevailing worldview marketed by current public discourses. Various cultural and aesthetic narratives endorse these values and beliefs. One of the most effective ever instances of cultural communication is the video games industry. It capitalizes on humanities' former social clout and, at the same time, the immersive, interactive performance required from its end-users makes the most out of information technology. The package is an obvious breakthrough in

entertainment, and possibly in various other uncharted areas of culture and Psychology.

Plainly said, it is the documenting of human exploits recorded in the multimedia format of interactive drama instead of novelistic or other traditional storytelling. The video game is designed to meet the expectations of players in terms of documenting their sense of geography, social integration, etc., much in the same manner of narrative fiction. However, information technology, in the service of entertainment, advertises intricate notions of joint authorship. In the gaming experience, both the genre of video game and the perception of particularized game play rely on a comprehension routine that features anthropomorphised fixtures, alleged to address the gamers and to demand input into the system. Commonly, this is a cultural frame of reference that helps gamers make sense of the virtual environment. Sensational incidents and violent appeals to emotions add up to a reward-and-punishment scheme understood by the average player of decision-making games in terms of his/her cultural conditioning. Accordingly, the computer-generated world is thought to be managed by a God-of-the-gaps concept of providence meant to rationalize the unfolding of the plot.

The video games aesthetics showcases a version of Western pop culture that fits the obviously monotheist mould of our European past. What drives the usually minimal plots of mainstream digital storytelling is the compulsive belief in one legitimizing truth. The anthropomorphized instance who structures the unfolding of the plot is thought to have also authored the game. This results in framing the popular comprehension of the video performance in the theological meanings of a god-like, rather absent, yet directorial figure. The underlying cultural narrative is that of one hero who embodies statistics about biography and sets out to enforce his authority over the world. The search for existential answers to questions of life purpose is limited to a corrupted version of theological rhetoric that still suffuses present day entertainment. Decision making gaming exposes one instance of presently influential Western pop culture for the reconfiguration (corruption?) of the European theological and philosophical tradition that it really is. The popular drive to conflate the language of theology and morality, as if the two were the staple ingredients of a civic-minded conduct, disregards the evidence that even moral theology (not to mention public morals) is subsumed into theology. The core of the latter is a recognition of God, while a public-spirited ethos of the secular mind-set has not much to do with a theocentric worldview. Accordingly, video games cannot possibly amount to a source of revelation and gaming per se only advertises disparate notions of (im)morality, which may very well be construed one way or another. Commonly, the gaming industry alleges that it shares in the aesthetic convention of art, rather than in reporting on social reality. Either way, video games find themselves outside any and all religious traditions.

The conclusion is that a melodramatic paradigm conveys what is essentially a religious sense of the self and gives meaning to the ethical and societal issues touched upon by digital storytelling, irrespective of the theological inspiration of gaming.

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