

Let's Play Evangelization. Digital Televangelism and the *A Plague Tale* Series

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This paper investigates how digital video games are used in the context of YouTube-based televangelism. The case study is focused on one of the regionally popular channels (*Langusta na Palmie*, 856k subscribers as of January 2023) run by a Catholic priest Adam Szustak, who is a member of The Order of Preachers (Dominicans). Among numerous types of videos ranging from the officially recorded sermons to travel vlog entries, Szustak regularly creates content based on the Let's Play formula, i.e. providing "gameplay footage accompanied with simultaneous commentary" (Burwell & Miller, 2016: 110) in both visual and audio form. Apart from *A Plague Tale*, he played the *Uncharted* and *The Last of Us* series, with *Ghost of Tsushima*, *Stray* and *Detroit Become Human* contributing to a library of narrative-heavy, visually appealing games with moderate to very high production values. Each of the episodes in the Szustak's Let's Play series has a title that underscores a particular interpretative theme, serving as a scaffolding for impromptu commentary on narrative tropes and gameplay situations linked to real-life struggles of young adult Christian persons. *A Plague Tale* series consisting of two games, *Innocence* (12 episodes, approximately 1 hour each) and *Requiem* (16 episodes of similar length), has been chosen for this study. These two games are featured in the newest videos of the Szustak's Let's Play series, representing arguably the most structured approach, with reactionary gameplay covering the majority of the episode's length and a short, separately recorded commentary on selected themes included at the end of each video.

My goal in this study is to identify the key components of Adam Szustak's strategy of evangelization through digital games. To this end, I will follow two procedures. Firstly, I plan to map the key narrative moments that Szustak chooses to engage with and try to determine their basic characteristics informed by design pattern frameworks for describing games (Björk & Holopainen, 2005). Secondly, I will dissect the ways in which hermeneutics is employed by the Catholic priest in his *A Plague Tale* videos, as it is this particular mode of interpreting video games (see Arjoranta, 2022) that Szustak uses on most regular basis. In the Let's Plays, Szustak is keen on informing his online audience about the (alleged) moral lessons accompanying the story beats of the played games. Preliminary findings for this study established that the analyzed Let's Play videos include many instances where the inferred meaning of a particular gameplay situation was immediately juxtaposed with a Biblical story, which subsequently opened the possibility for a metaphor or analogy to gain a new reading. Especially interesting are these moments where the hermeneutical process of "procedural understanding" (see Kłosiński, 2022) briefly interrupts the sermon-like exegesis. When it happens due to

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the challenging gameplay, the emotional, real-time reactions of Szustak provide a dramatic backdrop for the subsequent analysis.

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debates on the ideological readings of video games in the religious context – a topic which is both new (mainly due to the historically hostile attitude of religious institutions towards video games and gaming in general) and underresearched. Whereas the research on religion and games is slowly gaining momentum (see e.g. Anthony, 2014; de Wildt, Aupers, Krassen, & Coanda, 2018; Moyzhes, 2020), little attention has been paid to how the officials representing major religions use video games to their own ends. Some of the previous works on Let's Play formula touch upon the questions relevant for this particular study – for example, Tero Kerttula investigated “how the narration of an LP alters the narrative of the game being played” and “how the gameplay is narrated and represented when stripped of interactivity” (Kerttula, 2019: 237). I will also capitalize on the findings from the works elaborating on parasocial relationships (Kreissl, Possler, & Klimmt, 2021) and morality (Piittinen, 2018) in the context of the Let's Play format. Overall, looking into the interpretative practices of gaming that are designed to meet certain persuasive criteria could contribute to the broader understanding of cultural and societal impact of games beyond the frame of digital entertainment.

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