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Applying the devotional–promotional model to the video game “Faithful”



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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explore the relationships among video games, fans, and public relations from a theoretical perspective. Using [Tilson and Chao's \(2002\)](#) devotional–promotional model of communication and the concept of civil religion to examine this relationship, this article continues to build on the idea the public relations practices of religious communication has many practical implications in the secular world. By examining video game fans through the lens of the civil religion and the devotional–promotional model, this paper explores the implications of commodification of civil religion and builds on an earlier exploration by [Xifra \(2008\)](#) and the idea that “faithful supporters” can be the most valuable audience and that they can be cultivated by public relations.

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1. Introduction

The video game industry is one that has experienced steady growth over the last several years and is expected to grow from a \$79 billion worldwide industry in 2012 to \$111 billion in 2015, with an increase in sales of video game consoles, mobile games, and PC Games ([Blau, Erensen, Nguyen, & Verma, 2013](#)). In the United States alone, the [Entertainment Software Association \(2015\)](#) indicates that sales of video games totaled \$15.4 billion in 2014 and that the industry employs more than 120,000 people across the country. The video game industry is experiencing significantly more growth than some more established industries like filmed entertainment, which saw a 5% decline in sales from 2011 to 2014 with U.S. box office sales totaling \$10.35 billion in 2014 ([Willens, 2015](#)). Similarly, the recording industry reported that revenues in the U.S. totaled \$6.97 billion in 2014 ([Sisario, 2015](#)). This growth has also created an increasing need for public relations practitioners both in-house and at dozens of agencies that advertise a specialization in “video game PR.”

With the increasing audience for video games, enthusiasts are a key public for gaming companies and often targeted with multifaceted marketing campaigns aimed at engaging them directly. These “core gamers” are often considered crucial to the industry for their reliability in regularly buying games, and they may be fans of several different games, which will lead them to spending even more on games ([Ortutay, 2008](#)). The author’s own experiences as a PR representative for several video game companies allowed him to see first-hand the companies’ desire to create a dedicated fan network to extend gaming franchises. As a result, the companies dedicated entire teams of PR practitioners to engage fans directly through invitations to exclusive events and providing them with select previews of games, with the goal of encouraging fans to create their own culture around the games.

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This cultivation of a fan culture is not unique to the video game industry. The sports industry has a well-documented history of fan engagement and encouragement of consumer identification with a product as a key driver of success and brand equity both online and offline (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). In sports, fans are embodiments of brand loyalty, which guarantees a stable following for the product (team) and the ability to charge premium prices, while also allowing for the generation of product extensions to generate more revenue from the existing brand/product (Gladden & Funk, 2004).

Not unlike the sports industry, video game companies have also sought to encourage this type of fan culture. Not only does a well-established fan base allow for continued revenue generation through product extensions like films, books and game expansion packs, but it also engenders the creation of game franchises which can guarantee revenue streams through on-going sequels. In an industry where, as some game journalists have noted, a top title can cost anywhere from \$15 to \$60 million (Superannuation, 2014), a well-established fan culture can ensure steady and new revenue streams through the creation of game franchises via multiple sequels to the existing games and the establishment of product extensions like books, films, and expansion packs for the games.

Though the ultimate goal of encouraging a fan culture may be the generation of revenue for companies, the actual creation and dynamics of this culture function similarly to a religion and its followers. Thus, understanding religious devotion is a key component of creating a fandom around particular game titles. The creation of this “civil religion” built around the game titles often falls to the public relations practitioners, who then can leverage these communities for the benefit of the company. Therefore, the aim of this article is to expand upon Jordi Xifra’s (2008) earlier examination of soccer fandom and the creation of a civil religion through the theoretical framework of the devotional–promotional model of communication, as posited by Tilson and Chao (2002), and apply this same theoretical examination to video game enthusiasts. Through the discussion of the model in context of video game properties, this paper presents another way to understand how video game companies can understand and create or leverage the civil religion around certain brands through the employment of the devotional–promotional model of communication to more strategically engage fans.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

In his book, *The Social Contract*, Jean Jacques Rousseau first proposed the principles of a civil religion as the foundational glue that holds society together by giving the state a sacred authority and providing a guiding moral compass for the government (Xifra, 2008). Bellah (1967) applied Rousseau’s concept to modern culture and speculated that civil religion in America was so successful because it borrowed particular aspects from religious tradition, rather than being purely secular, which avoided conflicts with churches and enabled a sense of nationalism that encouraged individuals to work toward national goals. Thus, Bellah’s concept of civil religion also reinforced Durkheim’s (1964) earlier concept that society in the modern age rapidly developed the ability to name gods and transform secular concepts or institutions into sacred ones.

This idea of the secular as sacred “manifests itself as a series of myths, civil pieties and public exorcisms that uphold the political but are also upheld by politicians and politics” (Xifra, 2008; p. 193), and these traits of civil religion all serve to define and unite a society by giving them commonly accepted practices and expectations (Giner, 1993). These manifestations are reinforced by the mass media. In particular, the media are instrumental in representing blood sacrifice, through their reporting of violence, and assembling congregations (Marvin & Ingle, 1996). Both concepts are important to the idea of traditional religion and civil religion. The idea of blood sacrifice refers to the willingness of members of a particular group to sacrifice themselves for the cause the group advocates (Marvin & Ingle, 1996). This is a crucial concept in order to ensure the continuation of the group, and evidence of it from a civil religion perspective can be seen in the form of U.S. troops being sent abroad to war in service of the country. The media then report on the sacrifices the troops have made on behalf of the nation to the “assembled” congregations in the form of their audiences. These rituals of reporting both the sacrifices and threats to the group help to ritualize events, which then “focus group attention on threats to solidarity and help set in motion resolving rituals” (Marvin & Ingle, 1996; p. 777).

Similarly, “rituals” not associated with war are also very important to reinforcing civil religion in a society. Trials, for example, are rituals enacted to reinforce society’s ideals and the idea that those who threaten its practices will be “sacrificed” and punished. The media duly report some of these high-profile rituals, but an unsuccessful ritual can negatively impact the society. In a trial, which is considered a ritual, irregularities in the evidence can result in an acquittal of a defendant even if a sizable portion of the society views him/her as guilty, and this unsuccessful ritual can cause strife within the society (Marvin, 2002). Mass media play a large role in reporting these rituals, but the advent of computer-mediated communication has also created an avenue for far-flung members of a group to play a more active role in ceremonies, and thus civil religion as well (Fernback, 2002). Logging onto news websites, for example, both allow the mass media to still play a role in showing the ritual, while also giving participants an avenue to indicate approval or disapproval of the ceremony through the comments section of the site.

Though much discourse about civil religion is tied to nationalism and nation-building, its principles can also be applied to popular culture concepts, as they help to form a group identity. Xifra (2008) links soccer and civil religion by indicating that the fans’ love for a particular team evolves “into a symbolic and ritual system by which it contributes to national or ethnic identity” (p. 193). Similarly, Meizel (2006) explores the idea of music as part of civil religion from the angle of reinforcing the American brand within and outside the U.S. In both of these cases, the soccer club and the music serve to reinforce nationalism, as well as contributing to the creation of unique group identities surrounding them.

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