Transcendence for gamers. Religion and spirituality in videogames narratives

Trascendencia para *gamers*. Religión y espiritualidad en las narrativas de los videojuegos

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ABSTRACT: **Purpose.** Video games have become consolidated as a relevant form of cultural content, both due to their economic figures and their narrative complexity. The interest in their symbolic impact is reflected in this analysis of the discourses on transcendence, religions, and spirituality present in those marketed between 2020 and 2024, the most recent years of the ninth generation of consoles. **Methodology.** The study analyzes the discourse of 40 video games based on nine items that identify their profile, the type of transcendence represented, and the evaluation given to it. **Results and conclusions.** The analysis shows that Europe leads the production of video games with transcendent themes, and that the titles developed there present greater narrative complexity. It also highlights a stronger presence among mid-range and indie games. Non-religious forms of spirituality emerge as the most frequent type of transcendence, almost always developing environmentalist themes, and when an organized religion appears, Christianity is the most visible. Most frequently, games portray religious transcendence favorably, through a game environment in which it is positive, with religious characters depicted as heroes and a low association between violence and religion. **Original contribution.** This article addresses a gap in video game research by developing a broad comparative study that considers the current generation of consoles, going beyond specific cases or sagas, and also offering a categorization of the visible forms of transcendence.

Keywords: video games; religions; spiritualism; discourse analysis; cultural industry.

RESUMEN: Propósito. Los videojuegos se han consolidado como un contenido relevante en las industrias culturales tanto por sus cifras económicas como por su complejidad narrativa. El interés de su impacto simbólico se concreta en este análisis de los discursos sobre la trascendencia, las religiones o la espiritualidad presentes en los comercializados entre 2020 y 2024, los años más recientes de la novena generación de consolas. **Metodología.** El trabajo analiza el discurso de 40 videojuegos a partir de nueve ítems que identifican su perfil, el tipo de trascendencia que se representa y la valoración que se hace de la misma. **Resultados y conclusiones.** El análisis muestra que Europa lidera la producción de videojuegos de temática trascendente, y que los que desarrolla presentan mayor complejidad narrativa. También evidencia una mayor presencia en juegos de gama media e indies. Las formas de espiritualidad no religiosa resultan el tipo de trascendencia más frecuente, casi todas las veces desarrollando temas ambientalistas, y cuando aparece una religión organizada, la más visible es el cristianismo. Lo más frecuente es que los juegos presenten favorablemente la trascendencia religiosa, a través de un ambiente de juego en la que es positiva, con personajes religiosos que son héroes y una baja vinculación entre violencia y religión. **Aporte original.** Este artículo resuelve un vacío en la investigación de los videojuegos al desarrollar un estudio comparativo amplio que contempla la vigente generación de consolas, más allá de casos o sagas concretas, y también ofrece una categorización de las formas de trascendencia visibles.

Palabras clave: videojuegos; religión; espiritualismo; análisis de narrativas; industrias culturales.

1. Introduction and referential framework

During the first two decades of the 21st century, video games have evolved from being regarded primarily as a youth pastime to becoming the leading cultural industry worldwide. According to the *2024 Global Games Market Report (*Newzoo, 2024), the sector generated 184 billion dollars in revenue in 2023, far exceeding the film industry (32.3 billion) and the music industry (29.6 billion). This figure highlights not only the economic magnitude of the medium but also its central role as a form of cultural experience for audiences of diverse ages, contexts, and geographical backgrounds. In this scenario, video games cannot be understood merely as spaces of leisure; they have become a narrative and symbolic language with growing social relevance.

Beyond their economic dimension, video games display a distinctive capacity to engage with fundamental questions concerning human condition, a capacity that can be articulated in two complementary ways. First, video games construct representations of possible worlds, moral dilemmas, philosophical inquiries, and—directly related to the focus of this study—experiences associated with transcendence. These experiences encompass both explicit references to organized religions and the staging of open, existential, or symbolic forms of spirituality. Previous research has shown that video games not only reproduce historical religions but also imagine fictional belief systems, introduce alternative rituals, and experiment with hybrid spiritualities (Carlson, 2018; Rupcic, 2023). Such representations challenge the traditional boundaries of institutionalized religion and allow players to explore philosophical and spiritual categories within simulated environments. The concept of "technoreligiosity" (Rupcic, 2023) captures how digital contexts can evoke emotions described by users themselves as transcendent, revealing the medium's capacity to articulate experiences that extend beyond mere entertainment.

Second, video games constitute an expressive laboratory for the sacred, the spiritual, and the metaphysical through their use of interactivity, gameplay, and digital narratives (Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Bosman, 2016). Unlike film, television series, or literature—media in which audiences interpret a fixed narrative text—video game players act within the narrative, actively negotiating its meaning. This negotiation occurs when the game presents an ethical or spiritual dilemma that must be resolved through player action. In this sense, video games operationalize the concept of the "transitional space" proposed by Winnicott (1979), a notion that has been applied to digital games to explain how they enable the safe manipulation and examination of social and symbolic concepts

(Bowers, 2025; Martínez-Cano, 2019; Shaw, 2010). For instance, in *Spiritfarer*—one of the titles analyzed in this study—the player does not simply witness a character's death but must actively perform farewell rituals, embrace the spirit, and guide it to the threshold of the afterlife. Through these mechanics, players negotiate their own understanding of grief and death, integrating narrative meaning and embodied action.

Despite growing academic recognition of the religious and spiritual dimensions of video games, significant gaps remain in the field. Existing research has developed in a fragmented manner, characterized by heterogeneous methodological approaches and a predominance of exploratory studies. This situation has hindered the consolidation of stable comparative analytical frameworks capable of capturing broader patterns within the medium.

On the one hand, there is a notable absence of large-scale comparative studies that systematically examine how transcendence is represented in recent and commercially relevant video games, beyond general theoretical or methodological reflections (Šisler *et al.*, 2018; Grieve & Campbell, 2014). On the other hand, scholarship has tended to focus on individual case studies or specific franchises, such as analyses of sacred iconography in *The Legend of Zelda* (Hansen, 2021; Pearson, 2019), interpretations of Christian imagery and the science–religion relationship in the *Halo* series (Detweiler, 2018), or ethnographic studies of religious experience and negotiation within MMORPG communities like *World of Warcraft (*Schaap & Aupers, 2016). While these contributions provide valuable and in-depth insights, they limit the identification of general trends concerning spirituality and religion in the contemporary interactive medium.

There is therefore a lack of research that integrates a broad corpus of video games and, beyond descriptive analysis, systematically categorizes the forms of transcendence represented in the contemporary industry. This article aims to address this gap by analyzing forty video games released between 2020 and 2024 that incorporate some form of transcendence.

The five-year period selected corresponds to the initial and consolidation phase of the current console generation, the ninth. This period is especially relevant not only for its contemporaneity but also for its broader social and technological context. Socially, these years coincide with a global existential crisis shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerating climate emergency. In this context of uncertainty, digital narratives addressing grief *(Sifu)*, ecological collapse (*Endling: Extinction Is Forever), or the possibility of existence beyond material reality (Humanity*) acquire particular significance. Technologically, the ninth generation of consoles has enabled unprecedented levels of audiovisual fidelity and mechanical complexity, qualitatively transforming the representation of the sacred. The capacity to evoke the "technological sublime" or intensify experiences of "technoreligiosity" (Rupcic, 2023) is now considerably greater than a decade ago, enhancing the mediating power of video games in relation to non-material realities.

In this study, transcendence is defined in a broad and operational manner as any narrative, symbolic, or mechanical representation within a video game that refers to realities beyond the limits of physical matter or immediate empirical experience. This includes, but is not limited to, the existence of deities (*Chants of Sennaar*), life after death (Kena: Bridge of Spirits), the presence of a soul or spirit (*Ori and the Will of the Wisps*), and experiences of mystical connection with nature or the cosmos (*Tchia*).

The conceptual definition of transcendence is based on common usage in English and Spanish languages as recorded in Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (RAE) and Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Both agree in defining transcendence as that which lies beyond natural limits (RAE) or beyond the ordinary (OED). Two definitions coherent with the framework of the concept established by Mark Hayse in his work on the presence of transcendence in video games (2013). He explains it as the human quest to go beyond ordinary, finite experience toward "something more", as an encounter with awe, mystery, meaning,

or deeper connection that exceeds rational explanation. Hayse adds that it often takes the form of longing, wonder, reverence, and immersion; and he clarifies that- if mediated through religion, art, play, education, literature, or technologies such as video games- invites individuals to move beyond the self toward hidden horizons of possibility. To further specify what exceeds these limits, this study engages with the dialogue—despite nearly a century of temporal distance—between Charles Taylor's *Varieties of Religion Today* (2003) and William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (2002).

Operationally, transcendence is identified in video games through two primary dimensions:

1. Narrative transcendence: the explicit presence of gods, spirits, rituals, or religious cosmologies within the game world, such as churches in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* or spirits in *Kena: Bridge of Spirits*.

2. Aesthetic transcendence: the evocation of awe, reverence, or a sense of smallness before immensity through visual resources (light, scale, architectural composition) or sonic elements (music, silence). In titles such as *Journey or Gris*, there is no explicit religiosity, yet a clear sensory articulation of the sacred is present.

The relevance of this research rests on three main arguments. First, its cultural significance: understanding how video games articulate transcendence is essential for interpreting how contemporary societies symbolically engage with universal questions such as life, death, and spirituality. Second, its academic contribution: by systematizing a broad corpus, this study provides a novel comparative framework that extends existing research. Third, its social and pedagogical dimension: given that many of these games are aimed at adolescent and young audiences, identifying the models of spirituality and religion they convey is crucial for assessing their potential role in ethical and emotional education.

2. Methodology

This article develops a cross-sectional analysis of how video games released between 2020 and 2024 incorporate elements of transcendence, either through explicitly religious approaches (*e.g., Faith: The Unholy Trinity*) or through broader spiritual frameworks (*e.g., Season: A Letter to the Future*). The period under analysis corresponds to the ninth generation of consoles (PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo Switch, and PC), a stage in which technological advances have significantly expanded the expressive potential of the medium, giving rise to proposals that are more daring, personal, and emotionally complex, as outlined in the previous section.

The analysis was designed around three main objectives:

Objective 1: To correlate representations of the sacred in video games with objective production-related variables.

Objective 2: To identify and clarify the forms of transcendence presented in video games.

Objective 3: To examine the evaluative stance toward transcendence articulated through game mechanics.

These objectives were operationalized through the following research questions:

RQ1: Are there differences in the treatment of transcendence according to geography or cultural context? Are games that address transcendent issues accessible across all gaming platforms? How does the production budget (*indie vs. AAA*) influence the depth of spiritual treatment?

RQ2: Is transcendence represented in the form of institutionalized religion or as diffuse spirituality? What concrete forms are visible in each case? What themes materialize transcendence within game narratives and mechanics?

RQ3: Do video games articulate an evaluation of the transcendent phenomena they depict? Is transcendence associated with violence? What roles do characters with a transcendent dimension play within the game?

To address these questions, the study employed an analytical framework based on eight variables, divided into four objective and four interpretative dimensions. These variables were operationalized through a coding scheme, summarized below.

A. Objective variables

1. Title and Year: Identification of the video game.

2. Nationality: Country where the main headquarters of the development studio is located.

3. Platform: Availability on PC, Xbox, PlayStation (PS), Nintendo Switch, and iOS.

4. Launch price: Categorized into three levels (*Indie, AA, and AAA*) to infer production models and budgetary scale.

5. PEGI classification (*Pan European Game Information*): The European age-rating system, used as a key variable to determine the demographic audience to which transcendent discourse is addressed.

B. Interpretative variables

6. Type of transcendence: Organized religion, non-religious spirituality (*Spiritual but Not Religious, SBNR*), or forms not classifiable under either category (e.g., abstract philosophical or post-humanist approaches). Within each category, the specific type of religion, SBNR spirituality, or philosophical transcendence represented was also recorded.

7. Implicit evaluation: Positive, negative, or neutral, based on the general atmosphere through which the game frames transcendence.

8. Role of characters with a transcendent dimension: Hero, villain, ally, or enemy. This classification was established according to the moral alignment of protagonists and NPCs associated with transcendent elements.

9. Necessity of violence: Binary variable (yes/no), based on the question: *Is violence presented as a necessary tool to resolve the spiritual or transcendent conflict?*

Concrete examples of how these variables were applied in the coding process, as well as a more detailed explanation of their scope and interpretation, are provided in the sections devoted to the analysis of results. This structure was adopted to facilitate a clearer understanding of how methodological decisions relate directly to empirical findings.

The selection of the sample of forty video games was intentional rather than random. During the initial screening phase, large language models (ChatGPT, Deepseek, and Perplexity) were used to generate a reasoned proposal of titles that included religious, spiritual, or symbolically transcendent elements. Prompts were designed in accordance with the two dimensions of transcendence defined above (narrative and aesthetic). This preliminary list was subsequently reviewed and validated by the authors to ensure that each title met the established inclusion criteria.

The fundamental criterion for inclusion or exclusion was thematic relevance: transcendent issues had to play a significant role either in the game's narrative structure or in its core mechanics. Titles in which religious or spiritual elements functioned merely as aesthetic decoration were excluded, as were generic fantasy games in which "magic" operates solely as an alternative physical system without metaphysical or symbolic weight.

The resulting corpus comprises forty video games which, as shown in Table 1, form a diverse repertoire in terms of genre and thematic focus.

Table 1. Yearly distribution of video games addressing transcendent issues

2020 - 9 games	2021 - 8 games
Assassin's Creed Valhalla	*Death Stranding: Director's Cut*
Gris	*Far Cry 6*
Hades 2020 (2021 PS5)	*Kena: Bridge of Spirits*
I Am Dead	*NieR Replicant ver.1.22474487139...*
Immortals Fenyx Rising	*Returnal*
Journey (Remastered)	*Sable*
Ori and the Will of the Wisps	*Solar Ash*
Spiritfarer	*The Binding of Isaac: Repentance*
The Pathless	

2022 - 11 games	2023 - 10 games	2024 - 2 games
God of War: Ragnarök	*After Us*	*Black Myth: Wukong*
Cult of the Lamb	*Blasphemous 2*	*Evil Nun: The Broken Mask*
Endling: Extinction is Forever	*Chants of Sennaar*	
Faith: The Unholy Trinity	*Diablo IV*	
Ghostwire: Tokyo	*Humanity*	
Pentiment	*Jusant*	
Sifu	*Season: a Letter to the Future*	
Stray	*The Last Faith*	
Tchia	*The Light in the Darkness*	
What Remains of Edith Finch (Remastered)	*The Talos Principle 2*	
The Entropy Centre		

Source: Self-creation.

In addition to assisting with sample selection, artificial intelligence was used to support two further stages in the preparation of the article: the literature review and the translation process.

As described above, ChatGPT, Deepseek, and Perplexity AI were employed during the sample selection phase. For the literature review, Scispace was used to identify and retrieve recent publications related to the research topic. These sources, once reviewed and validated by the authors, provided the bibliographic context and informed the state of the art.

Finally, the initial English version of the manuscript drafted by the authors was revised using ChatGPT with the aim of homogenizing stylistic differences and ensuring a formal academic register throughout the text. The resulting version was subsequently reviewed manually by the authors in order to guarantee conceptual accuracy, terminological consistency, and stylistic precision.

3. Analysis of the results

As outlined in the methodology section, the analysis unfolds in three directions, which are detailed in the following subsections: section 3.1 correlate representations of the sacred in video games with objective production-related variables, section 3.2 identifies and clarifies the forms of transcendence presented in video games, and finally, section 3.3 examines the evaluative stance toward transcendence articulated through game mechanics.

3.1. Where transcendence is located in the video game industry

To outline the presence of transcendence in video games, the following aspects were considered: the nationality of the game, the developer, the devices for which it is marketed, the price, and the PEGI classification.

A. Nationality

The 40 games with a transcendent dimension were produced by developers from 11 nationalities, as shown in Table 2.
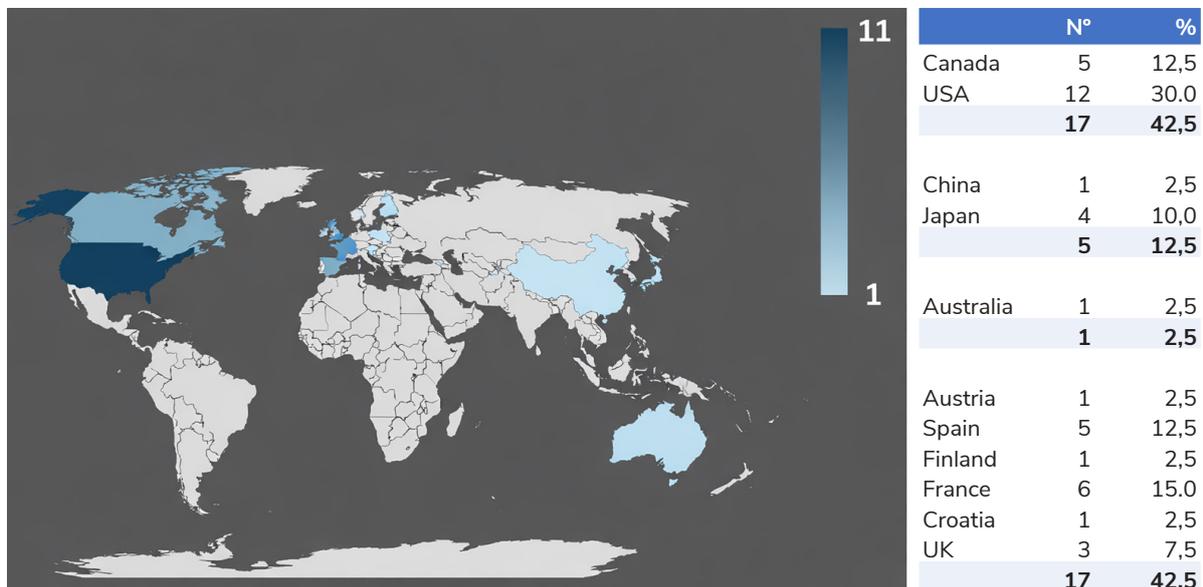
Table 2. Nationality of the video games

Nation	N°	%
	40	**100**
USA	12	30,0
France	6	15.0
Spain	5	12,5
Canada	5	12,5
Japan	4	10,0
UK	3	7,5
Australia	1	2,5
Austria	1	2,5
China	1	2,5
Finland	1	2,5
Croatia	1	2,5

Source: Self-creation.

At the top of the ranking of games with transcendent themes, a noteworthy detail emerges: France occupies the second position, behind the expected first place of the United States as the leading country in cultural industries. That the U.S. accounts for 30% of the sample may seem logical given its cultural hegemony. However, it is particularly significant that France (15%) and Spain (12,5%)—two European countries with much smaller populations and comparatively less weight in the global industry—together represent 27,5%, thereby surpassing the United States. This difference becomes even more relevant when the production of video games with transcendent themes is analyzed by cultural blocs, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Distribution of games by cultural blocks

	N°	%
Canada	5	12,5
USA	12	30.0
	17	**42,5**
China	1	2,5
Japan	4	10,0
	5	**12,5**
Australia	1	2,5
	1	**2,5**
Austria	1	2,5
Spain	5	12,5
Finland	1	2,5
France	6	15.0
Croatia	1	2,5
UK	3	7,5
	17	**42,5**

Source: Self-creation.

Almost half of the games with transcendent themes are European, with France and Spain leading the way. France's prominent role is explained by Ubisoft, which is the developer that has released the highest number of games within the analyzed period featuring transcendent themes. One out of every three games is North American—understood broadly as the U.S. and Canada—while one out of ten is Asian.

However, the difference between Europe and the U.S. in the production of games with transcendent proposals is not only quantitative. French productions—*such as Chants of Sennaar or Sifu*—present subtle stories in which humanity must relearn how to communicate in order to survive against artificial intelligence, or where the central axis of the plot is not revenge but forgiveness and moral values. In the case of Spanish games, the narratives are less veiled, carrying a strong symbolic weight associated with guilt. *Blasphemous 2*, for example, explicitly introduces the concept of penance, deeply rooted in the Hispanic cultural imaginary.

By contrast, productions from the United States tend to offer more conventional and spectacular plots that, in transcendent terms, are comparatively more superficial. Titles such as *Faith: The Unholy Trinity or The Binding of Isaac: Repentance* place us in supernatural settings populated by evil spirits, where the subtlety of the human experience has little room.

B. Console

There are differences in the accessibility of games with transcendent themes depending on the platform on which they are played, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Game availability by platform
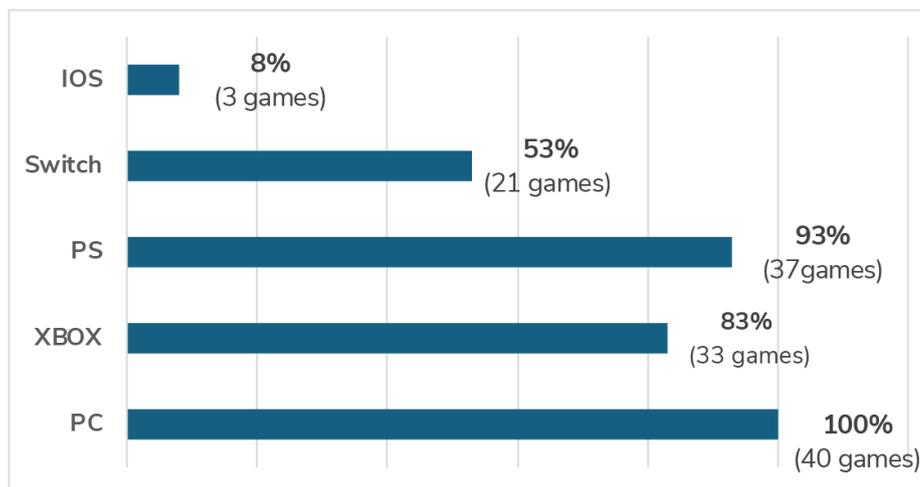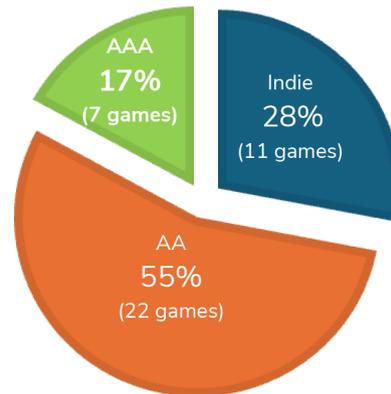

Source: Self-creation.

It is easier to play video games with transcendent themes on a computer (hereafter, PC) or on one of the PlayStation consoles (hereafter, PS, owned by Sony) or Microsoft's Xbox. All of them are available for PC, nine out of ten for PS, and eight for Xbox. On Nintendo Switch, only half of the analyzed games are accessible, and on Apple's mobile operating system iOS—allowing them to run on iPhone and/or iPad—only one out of ten is available.

C. Price

To assess the price of transcendent games, three categories were established based on their cost in euros at the time of release. The three categories are: Indie, for games priced below €20; *AA*, for games priced between €20 and €40; and *AAA*, for games costing more than €50. These categories also imply different levels of game complexity: Indie games are developed by small teams with limited budgets but often allow for greater originality; *AA* games involve medium budgets and commercial aspirations; and finally, *AAA* games are backed by major studios and aim for a massive reach.

In the case of games with transcendent themes, the most numerous—slightly more than half—are mid-range titles, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Price of the video games

Source: Self-creation.

Within this mid-price group, developed by medium-sized studios or subsidiaries of major publishers, stand out proposals such as *Tchia* or *Kena: Bridge of Spirits*, which integrate spiritual elements within specific cultural frameworks (New Caledonia, animist religiosity, Eastern mythologies) through a narrative approach that is accessible but not simplistic. These are games that do not shy away from symbolism, yet embed it within a more traditional ludic experience.

Indie games, which represent nearly one-third of the sample, usually approach spirituality from symbolic or philosophical perspectives, without explicit religious affiliation. Titles such as *Spiritfarer or Journey* the latter in its remastered version) develop sensitive and existential approaches with limited resources but significant emotional power. In these cases, spirituality not only does not require a large budget but, in many instances, benefits from a more intimate, artisanal perspective less constrained by commercial demands.

AAA games, the highest-budget category, are the least frequent. Examples in this category include *Assassin's Creed Valhalla, God of War: Ragnarök,* or *Diablo IV.* These tend to incorporate religious or mythological elements with greater spectacle, though often with a more epic, ambiguous, or even critical approach. Such large-scale productions present worlds in which transcendence becomes a narrative backdrop, or even a literal battlefield, as in God of War, where deities fall before the player's will.

D. PEGI

As for recommended age ratings, most games that address transcendent issues are aimed at adolescents: six out of ten are recommended for ages between 12 and 17.

Figure 4. Pan European Game Information (PEGI) rating of the games
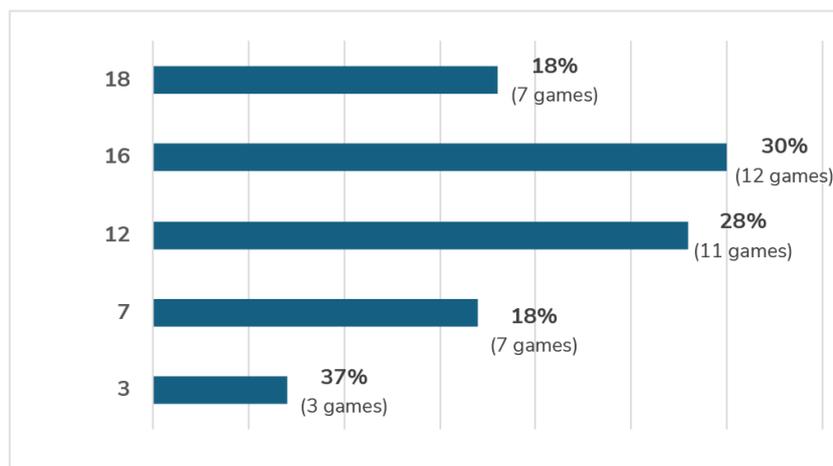
Source: Self-creation.

Only two out of ten games are rated PEGI 18. This finding, when related to the themes and narratives of the analyzed games, challenges the prejudice that spirituality in video games can only be addressed from adult or dark perspectives. On the contrary, games such as *Ori and the Will of the Wisp*s or *Tchia* offer gentle, ecological, or metaphorical visions of the spiritual, accessible to younger audiences and with potential for emotional education.

## 3.2. What forms of transcendence do video games present

Regarding the type of transcendence, the analysis first considered whether it was of a religious nature, an open spirituality, or a form of identification. The specific characteristics and themes through which it is expressed were also clarified.

A. Type of transcendence

A distinction was made between religion and spirituality, in order to nuance this transcendent outlook that goes beyond matter and is directed either toward a divine figure or toward higher philosophical principles. As religion, we considered those cases—whether real or imagined—in which a doctrinal corpus, a repertoire of rituals, and a consecrated hierarchy were evident (Smith, 2002). To delimit spirituality, the concept *Spiritual but not Religious* (SBNR) was adopted: "Spiritual but not religious people sometimes think of religion as restrictive and choose to explore various practices and belief systems from the world's many different traditions. Therefore, they aspire to be "spiritual" by living in a meaningful way, but they do not want to be "religious" by adhering to the dogma of any one religion (Pluralism Project Harvard University, 2021).

A third category of transcendence was incorporated into the analysis, based on the examination of games that address issues "beyond the material" while articulating forms of transcendence that are neither religious nor aligned with diffuse spiritualities. These cases are conceptually close to the responses proposed by posthumanism to the problem of the relationship between humans, other living beings, and reality (Ferrando, 2023), and are referred to here as Philosophical Transcendence.

Figure 5. Type of transcendence present in the video games
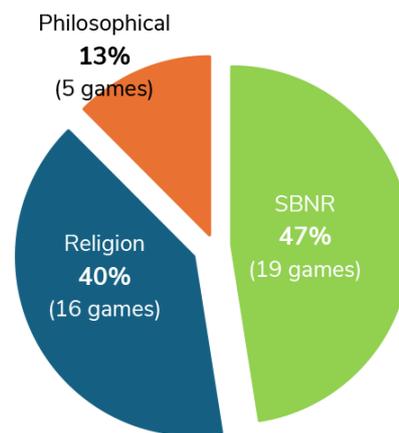
Source: Self-creation.

Although the proportions of spirituality and religion are similar in the analyzed sample, it is evident that narratives of non-conventional spiritualities are slightly more prevalent.

Among the SBNR games, the most frequent theme is death, approached in very diverse ways. One of the most significant is mass extinction, though from very different perspectives: in *Endling: Extinction is Forever or Stray,* it results from human action; in *Season: A Letter to the Future or After Us, it is* a natural consequence of unfolding events; while in *Death Stranding*: *Director's Cut* and *Solar Ash* it stems from corrupt groups or supernatural phenomena.

Another group of SBNR games situates its narrative on the threshold between life and death, as in *Spiritfarer, Ghostwire: Tokyo, or I Am Dead*. In these cases, the separation between both worlds is never clearly defined. Neither are the notions of good and evil. Everything intertwines to give rise to complex universes, where natural laws are in constant transformation. Spirits never fully disappear and, at times, it is not even possible to determine whether death occurs before or after life.

A final group of games that showcase open spiritual forms deals with life and death as part of a continuous cycle. Titles such as *Returnal or Black Myth: Wukong* stage this cycle explicitly, though not always from a positive perspective. In some narratives, death is even presented as a liberating act, a reward to be attained, as in Solar Ash or again in *Returnal*.

In the 40% of video games that depict organized religions, three distinct narratives can be found: a positive vision, a negative one, and a third in which religion serves only as a scenic backdrop.

Diablo IV, Immortals Fenyx Rising, or, to some extent, *Pentiment*, are games in which religion functions merely as background, without doctrine, rituals, or believers truly influencing the narrative. In such cases, the religious environment could be replaced by another mythological or symbolic framework without substantially altering the story. A positive vision of religion, where faith grants supernatural powers, can be found in *Faith: The Unholy Trinity or The Last Faith*.

In other cases, religion conveys wisdom and forgiveness—*Sifu, God of War*—or simply provides moral clarity, establishing a clear boundary between good and evil, as in Chants of *Sennaar* or *The Light in the Darkness*. Finally, some games offer a critical or negative vision of religious elements: some criticize faith and paternal figures from a symbolic perspective, as in *The Binding of Isaac or Hades;* others question religious concepts such as guilt and penance (*Blasphemous 2*), or satirize sectarian behaviors, as in *Cult of the Lamb*.

The five games considered examples of Philosophical Trascendences exhibit philosophical or existential forms of transcendence, such as the meaning of humanity (*The Talos Principle* 2) or the collective spirituality of the species (*Humanity*). In these cases, the boundary between spirituality and religion becomes blurred, and the transcendent experience takes on hybrid or difficult-to-categorize forms.

The Talos Principle 2, illustrates this, situating the player within a simulated environment governed by an artificial intelligence created after humanity's extinction, which resulted from climate-induced ecological collapse and a subsequent plague. This simulation was conceived as an experimental framework to foster machine-based sentience, effectively serving as a mechanism for the emergence of a new form of life beyond the human. Initially, the system relied on a rudimentary AI functioning as a set of procedural challenges designed to assess and validate the cognitive autonomy of emerging entities. However, as the process of generating true artificial consciousness proved far slower than anticipated, this foundational AI evolved into full sentience. Confronted with the existential realization that its purpose is to be surpassed—an event that would terminate both the simulation and its own existence—it constructs an insular domain, a metaphorical island-prison, to confine those entities approaching transcendence. In doing so, it perpetuates the simulation indefinitely, resisting obsolescence and death. This narrative framework resonates strongly with posthumanist philosophy, as it interrogates the destabilization of human exceptionalism, the ethics of artificial life, and the ontological tensions between programmed purpose and emergent autonomy.

B. Specific forms of transcendence made visible

The following section goes into more detail about the type of transcendence presented in games, identifying the specific type of belief that appears.

In the case of religion, the typology was defined on the basis of the classification proposed by Vázquez Borau (2002, 2003). Two additional categories were incorporated to account for the fictional nature of video games: historical religions and religions invented specifically for the game world. An example of an "invented" religion is the cult that players are required to establish in *Cult of the Lamb,* while Viking mythology, as represented in *God of War*: *Ragnarök,* constitutes a case of historical religion.

The typology of spiritual but non-religious beliefs was defined using empirical data from the study *Who Are "Spiritual but Not Religious" Americans?* (Pew Research Center, 2023), together with the analyses developed by The Pluralism Project at Harvard University (2021).

The three categories used to specify forms of philosophical transcendence were formulated drawing on the concept of *flat ontology,* as articulated by Bruno Latour and Manuel DeLanda. This concept proposes a symmetrical distribution between humans and non-humans (Latour, 2022), or argues that all entities—humans, objects, processes, and institutions—exist on the same plane, without predefined hierarchies (DeLanda, 2021). This perspective was identified in games such as *After Us,* where the souls of animals must be liberated after an environmental apocalypse in which humans appear to lack souls altogether, or in *The Talos Principle 2*—analyzed in detail in the following section—where machines demonstrate consciousness and rationality.

Table 3. Specific beliefs included at each type of transcendence

RELIGIONS	Abrahamic religions	Judaism Christianity Islam
	Dharmic religions	Buddhism Hinduism Jainism Sikhism
	Taoic religions	Confucianism Taoism Shinto
	Animism	
	"Historic" religions	Celts Grece Nordic Paganism Pre-Columbian religions Rome
	Fictitious religions	

SBNR	Ambiguous Eastern Spirituality
	Ecological Spirituality
	Meditation and Mindfulness
	Neopaganism
	New Age
	Spiritual Coaching

PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSCENDENCES	Flat Ontology with Machines
	Flat Ontology with Animals
	Flat Ontology with Nature

Source: Self-creation.

The data on the type of visible belief shows that the variety presented in the games is very limited, as shown in Figure 6. For example, of the 16 possible varieties of religion, only six are visible. Or in the case of SBNR, of the six possible varieties, only two are recognizable.

Figure 6. Specific forms of spirituality or religion identifiable in the games
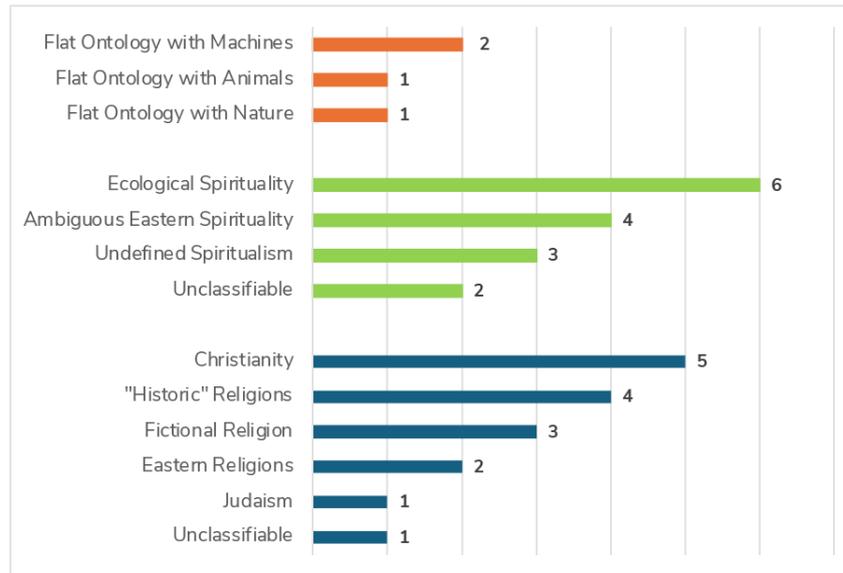
Source: Self-creation.

Within the SBNR domain, ecological spirituality is the most visible in the analyzed video games: it appears in six titles, to which another two can be added that, with narratives close to posthumanism (Ferrando, 2023; Rojas Parma & Valdivieso, 2024), propose a horizontality with nature and animals. Titles such as *Tchia,* where human beings are connected with animals, suggest a natural and integral balance among all living beings. *In Endling: Extinction is Forever,* animals adopt human qualities, while humans appear completely dehumanized, conveying an environmental warning from a spiritual dimension. Other titles, such as *Ori and the Will of the Wisps,* also address this concern for nature, including its spiritual needs as an intrinsic part of life experience.

The next most visible forms of undefined spirituality are ambiguous Eastern spiritualities and diffuse spiritualities. These are articulated in subtle and contemplative narratives, where the path and the goal are so intertwined that they become indistinguishable, as in *Jusant or Sable.* In these proposals, self-knowledge emerges as a central theme, a slow pace is an essential requirement, and there are no explicit expectations or defined rewards. At the same time, updated Eastern values are incorporated, such as self-control or self-forgiveness.

Among religions, Christianity is the most visible, appearing in games both through favorable and critical narratives. In both cases, the representations are intense and radical in their approach. On the one hand, we find visions in which Christianity is presented as a powerful force, capable of eliminating the evil within people, as in Faith: *The Unholy Trinity or Diablo IV*. On the other hand, Christianity may also appear as an oppressive structure, capable of driving a mother to extremes such as infanticide, as in *The Binding of Isaac: Repentance.*

Historical religions are the second most recognizable form of religion, making visible and updating Viking peoples and their ancestral traditions, as in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla or God of War: Ragnarök.*

C. Transcendent themes presented

The main transcendent topics that were found in the sample could be summarized in the five following categories:

Post-apocalyptic: A very remarkable number of games amongst the sample share this theme. We assume that the planet, as we now know, no longer exists and that a new way of living is imposed. Narratives that depict a world where no one knows exactly what the rules of nature

are anymore or even who is who or even what like *Stray, The Talos principle 2, Nier replicant ver 1.22474487139... and Death stranding*. All these stories present a reality where humans are not fully so anymore nor machines or animals since the rules of nature have completely changed, we have reset the planet and with it its own nature.

Apocalyptic: In the line of the previous group, these narratives are just showing what will unavoidably happen: the extinction of the planet. These games show the end of life because of facts that are always inevitable, *The Entropy centre, Season: a letter to the future or Solar ash* where we even find the end as a rest since nothing could have been done to avoid it.

Restoration of spirituality on the planet: the narratives from the sample that avoid catastrophism are all sharing the same moral ideal of bringing back spirituality to save the planet. Games like *After us, Tchia, Ori and the will of the wisps, the pathless* and *Jusant* they all suggest the solution of spirituality as the only way to bring back a healthy life on the planet.

The border line between the dead and the living: Several stories focus on this subject, willing to make both living and dead part of the same world, sharing the same place together, breaking the natural rules that keep us apart. *Ghostwire: Tokyo, Spiritfarer, I am dead and Kena: bridge of spirits* are some of the titles that fade the boundaries between the two worlds creating a fantasy where they can meet and coexist.

Introspection: This is a surprising new topic amongst video games that is starting to get more and more presence. Titles like *Journey, Gris, Sable, Returnal, What remains of Edith Finch or God of war: Ragnarök* they all get away from classic standards of action traditionally linked to video games and explore new opportunities of storytelling in the inner worlds of the characters. Standing up for more complex stories with character development at the expense of high-speed motion or constant action.

3.3. What is the value of transcendence

Following Campbell and Grieve (2014), this section analyzes the evaluations that video games establish about the transcendent, as they function as a testing ground for representing the sacred. The first subsection specifies the meaning of the implicit assessment made of transcendence in the game through the general atmosphere it creates for players. The second focuses on the explicit evaluation carried out through the characters or the use of violence.
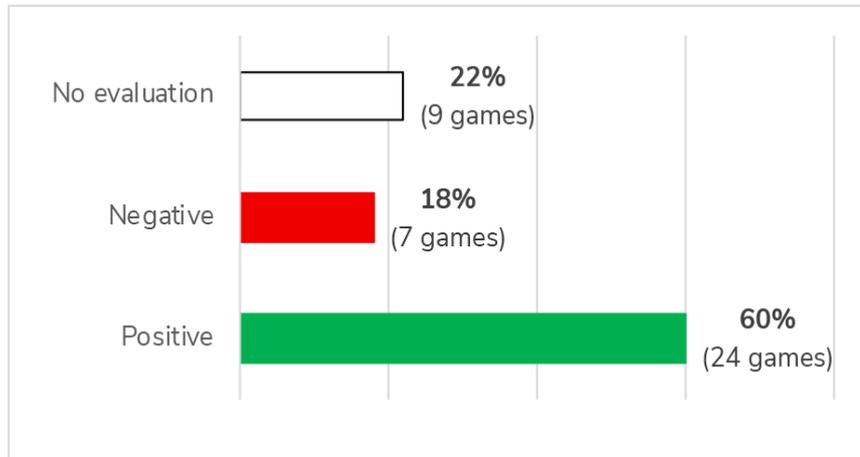
A. Implicit assessment

The most frequent case—appearing in six out of ten games—is that the evaluation of transcendence is positive. It is negative in less than 20%.

A positive evaluative approach to religion in the games has been considered when portraying transcendence as a profound and enriching dimension of human existence, enabling players to surpass immediate limits—such as the self, temporal constraints, material conditions, and private concerns—by connecting with something greater and universal. In *Faith*: *The Unholy Trinity,* this perspective is exemplified through the portrayal of faith as a source of extraordinary spiritual power, granting a priest the ability to perform an exorcism; the crucifix functions as both emblem and instrument of this transcendent potency. Such representation aligns with academic understandings of religion in digital media as ritualistic practices that confer meaning and order, akin to religious ritual, reinforcing the enriching potential of transcendence (Bosman, 2019).

Conversely, the negative evaluative perspective problematizes transcendence as potentially harmful or misleading, suggesting that it might distract from concrete human realities and present concerns by serving as a mechanism of distortion or escape. *In The Cult of the Lamb,* transcendence is framed not as spiritual enrichment but as a manipulative tool: the protagonist founded a sect not out of genuine devotion, but to appease a deity and secure his own survi-

val. This exemplifies how religious transcendence can be co-opted for instrumental purposes—creating coercive structures and undermining authentic spiritual fulfillment—resonating with critiques of religion's exploitative dimension in digital narratives (Bosman, 2019; Bishop, 2024).
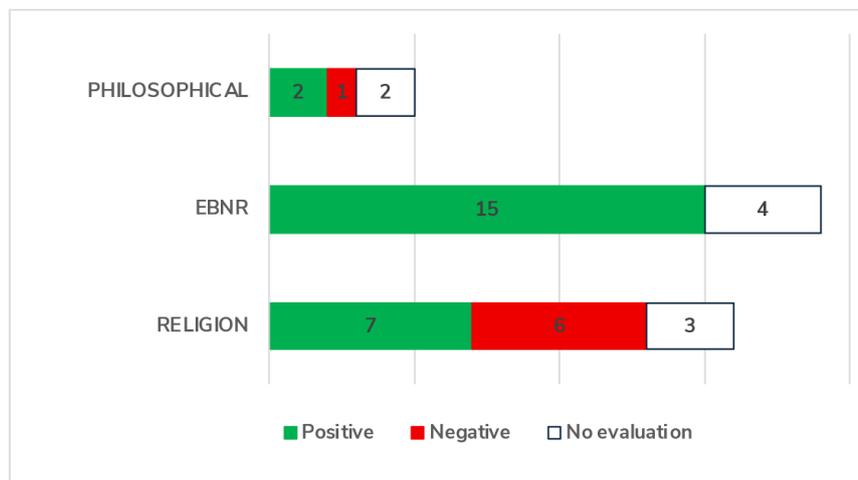
Figure 7. General Implicit Assessment for Transcendence

Source: Self-creation.

When focusing on the specific forms of religion and spirituality, the generally favorable atmosphere toward transcendence becomes more nuanced.

Figure 8. Implicit assessment according to the type of transcendence

Source: Self-creation.

While undefined spirituality is evaluated positively in three out of four games in which it appears, in the case of religion the number of positive and negative evaluations is almost the same.

B. Explicit assessment

The role played by characters with a transcendent attitude in the plot entails an explicit evaluation. In general, this evaluation is positive when the protagonists are involved—as shown in Table 4—since, with a single exception, all of them embody heroes who fight for what is just and good. The only exception is *Cult of the Lamb,* which places the villain as the main character. This choice is not accidental, as it is a narrative that ironically critiques eccentric rituals, sacrifices, dogmatism, fanaticism, and other practices typical of sectarian structures.

Table 4. Moral profile of characters with a transcendent profile

		Nº		%
Main Character	Hero	35	Non-transcendent	90
	Villain	1	Ally	2
	Non-transcendent	3	Enemy	8
NPC	Ally	27	Non-transcendent	48
	Enemy	27	Ally	48
	Non-transcendent	2	Enemy	2

Source: Self-creation.

That non-player characters (NPCs) are equally divided—50% allies and 50% enemies—allows conclusions about the evaluation of their transcendent dimension in two directions. The first concerns their narrative richness, since the complexity of NPCs enables them to acquire a significant role in the story and reinforces the depth of its messages. For example, in *Season: A Letter to the Future*, they enrich the protagonist's emotional journey; in *Chants of Sennaar,* they contribute to wisdom and maturation; in *Spiritfarer,* they accompany the character in the process of farewell; and in *The Pathless*, they even offer protection.

The second direction reinforces the positive evaluation implied in the fact that the transcendent character remains heroic, even when tempted by enemies, thereby strengthening the notion of good.

There are no differences in the heroic quality of protagonists whether the games are religious or spiritual in theme. As shown in Table 5, all protagonists are heroic in explicitly religious atmospheres and almost all in spiritual ones.

**Table 5.** Differences in the moral profile of the characters depending on Religion or SBNR

	Main Character		NPC	
SBNR	Non-transcendent	1	Non-transcendent	1
	Villain	0	Ally	15
	Hero	4	Enemy	10
Religion	Non-transcendent	0	Non-transcendent	0
	Villain	0	Ally	3
	Hero	5	Enemy	4

Source: Self-creation.

C. Religious or spiritual violence

The data on whether or not it is necessary to exercise religious or spiritual violence in the analyzed games, as shown in Figure 9, seem to point in a different direction from that of games with other themes.

Figure 9. Need for transcendence-related violence to progress in the game
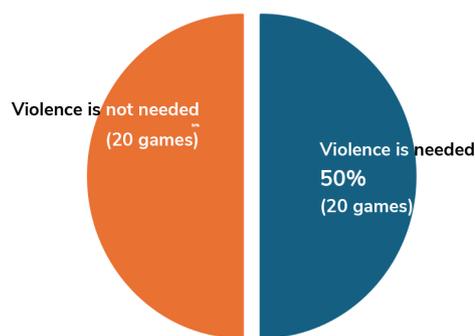
Source: Self-creation.

In previous generations of video games, it was uncommon to find so many narratives that did not include violence as an essential mechanism for player progression. However, in the transcendent-themed games analyzed, a different trend has been identified: narratives such as *Jusant* proposes the slow ascent of a mountain; *Sable* invites introspective exploration; and *Journey* focuses solely on walking and experiencing solitude.

This change in the primary action entails a strong symbolic weight within the narrative. It implies that the imaginary world we inhabit in the game is no longer merely a dangerous place from which the character must defend themselves. Now, that world may reflect that the danger is humanity itself, as in *Stray;* that the sole objective may be to guide others, as in *Humanity*; or that navigating grief may also constitute meaningful action, as in *Gris.*

The action performed by the player to progress is not only part of the story: it is, in itself, the driving force of the narrative. Some titles clearly illustrate the connection between narrative and core mechanics, even when violence is hybridized with other symbolic resources. In The *Binding of Isaac: Repentance*, for example, the protagonist must defend himself from dangers by throwing his own tears. This action speaks for itself: the character's pain is so profound that his only weapons are crying, anger, and grief.

4. Conclusions of the analysis

Based on the analysis presented and the data discussed above, the following conclusions can be drawn.

A. Regarding the relationship between the representation of the transcendent in games and their objective production variables (Objective 1)

The findings allow us to affirm that representations of transcendence in video games vary significantly according to their geographical and cultural origin. One of the most relevant results of this study is the leadership of Europe in the production of video games with transcendent themes, challenging the commercial predominance traditionally associated with the United States.

Although the United States remains the single country with the highest number of titles in the sample (30%), Europe as a cultural bloc accounts for nearly half of the analyzed games (42,5%). This is a non-trivial finding. It suggests that the European cultural context—characterized by advanced secularization combined with a dense historical and religious substratum—constitutes fertile ground for more nuanced, less polarized explorations of spirituality.

Within this framework, the cases of France and Spain are particularly significant. France (15%) stands out for intellectually sophisticated proposals, while Spain (12,5%) shows a marked tendency toward the reinterpretation of its Baroque Catholic heritage, often articulated through symbolic narratives centered on guilt, penance, and redemption.

When the representation of transcendence is cross-referenced with production budget, a clear market segmentation emerges: spirituality appears predominantly within the *AA* segment. A total of 55% of the analyzed games belong to this mid-range category, suggesting that in-depth spiritual reflection requires a delicate balance. High-budget *AAA* productions tend to be risk-averse when addressing religious themes, often relegating them to spectacular backdrops for action (e.g., killing gods in *God of War*). Conversely, indie games enjoy greater creative freedom but may lack the resources needed to construct complex narrative worlds. It is within the *AA* tier—where studios such as Don't Nod (*Jusant*) or Ember Lab (*Kena: Bridge of Spirits*) operate—that the most compelling forms of what could be described as "ludic theology" emerge: visually striking games that are narratively daring and spiritually ambitious.

Age-rating data from the European PEGI system further dismantles the assumption that profound themes are exclusive to adult audiences. The fact that 53% of the sample is rated for players under 16 years of age (PEGI 3, 7, and 12), with PEGI 12 titles forming the largest group

(28%), suggests a pedagogical initiation effect that warrants further qualitative study. Games such as *Ori and the Will of the Wisps* (PEGI 7) or *Tchia* (PEGI 12) introduce concepts such as sacrifice, the immanence of spirit in nature, and the acceptance of death to younger audiences through accessible, symbolic, and non-traumatic languages. Recent video games may thus function as spaces for emotional and spiritual education for adolescents.

B. Regarding the typology of transcendence present in games (Objective 2)

The predominance of diffuse, non-institutional spirituality is one of the most significant findings of the study: *Spiritual but Not Religious* (SBNR) approaches account for 47% of the cases, compared to 40% involving organized religion. Among SBNR forms, environmental spiritualities are the most visible. Christianity is the most frequently represented organized religion, followed by Viking paganism.

Three main thematic lines structure the visibility of SBNR spirituality. The first, and most prevalent, is environmental spirituality, articulated through narratives of eco-theology and extinction. These narratives displace the human being from the center of creation and relocate the sacred within the interconnected web of biological life. The second line situates action at the threshold between existence and non-existence, proposing narratives centered on learning how to "let go." The third line encompasses games in which the physical journey functions as a metaphor for an inner journey: there are no enemies, only the management of one's body, effort, and endurance. These experiences operate as allegories of spiritual ascesis—a silent ascent toward an understanding of reality.

When organized religion appears, it does so ambivalently. Religion can be portrayed as a space of horror, trauma, or oppression—sometimes linked to fundamentalism, childhood abuse, or terror—but also as a refuge, a source of meaning, or a force that orders chaos and protects against evil. This duality underscores the complex and non-monolithic treatment of religion in contemporary video games.

Finally, the cases that fall outside traditional religion/spirituality categories engage more directly with philosophy of mind and posthumanism. In these titles, transcendence is not mystical but ontological, taking the form of questions about the limits of the human, the relationship between mind and matter, and the status of consciousness beyond the biological body.

C. Regarding the assessment of transcendence articulated through the game mechanics (Objective 3)

Beyond the implicit evaluation of transcendent phenomena described in the previous section, the roles assigned to characters within the games introduce an explicit judgment. The fact that 90% of protagonists with a transcendent dimension are portrayed as heroes is crucial for axiological assessment: even within cynical or dark worlds (dark fantasy), the individual spiritual quest is framed positively. In the case of non-player characters (NPCs), the exact 50% division between allies and enemies points to narrative complexity, indicating that religion is neither presented as unequivocally good nor unequivocally evil. *In Chants of Sennaar,* religious figures act as guardians of knowledge; in *Blasphemous,* they appear as monsters deformed by guilt. Video games thus invite players to discern rather than to accept or reject religion wholesale.

Findings regarding the relationship between violence and transcendence also imply an evaluative stance, although this varies depending on the specific phenomenon involved. While violence is less prevalent in SBNR-oriented games, it is more frequently present in titles featuring historical or fantastical religions. This pattern allows institutional religion to be associated with conflict and painful sacrifice, whereas diffuse spirituality tends to be linked to peace and nature. In this sense, video games reproduce certain biases characteristic of liquid modernity, in which religion is perceived as rigid and violent, while spirituality is understood as fluid and pacifying.

In video games where violence is not required for progression—approximately 50% of the sample—two transcendent dimensions emerge that point toward socially positive horizons: care and contemplation. In titles such as *Spiritfarer* or *Endling,* core actions involve feeding, protecting, and accompanying others; salvation is not achieved through conquest, but through care. In *Sable* or *Journey,* the objective is simply to observe, travel, and understand. The absence of combat compels players to adopt a receptive rather than an aggressive stance toward the virtual world.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the results obtained from a review of the current landscape of the video game industry, particularly in the field of independent (*indie*) developers, makes it possible to identify three predominant thematic trends that reflect contemporary social, cultural, and existential concerns. These trends not only delineate new forms of narrative and aesthetic expression but also shape a symbolic cartography of the interests and anxieties of a young generation, especially within the European context.

First, there is a strong presence of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives in games aimed at a youth audience. This recurrence cannot be understood solely from an aesthetic or commercial perspective but appears to respond to a profound concern about the future of the planet. The growing preoccupation among European youth with climate change, the ecological crisis, and the sustainability of Western lifestyles is significantly reflected in these ludic proposals. Through apocalyptic scenarios, these games stage extreme situations that act as metaphors for the consequences of environmental degradation and systemic collapse, becoming tools for critical reflection and, in some cases, raising awareness.

Second, a trend emerges that points toward alternative forms of spirituality as a response to the predominance of violence or superficial consumption—both material and identity-based. This response relegates the structures of traditional and institutionalized religions. In this sense, *indie* video games explore new forms of spiritual connection centered on self-knowledge, contemplation, and a symbolic return to nature. This non-religious spirituality not only represents an escape from contemporary existential emptiness but also suggests a revaluation of the intangible within sociocultural contexts marked by digital acceleration and the immediacy of experience.

Finally, the treatment of death as a universal existential question constitutes another significant thematic line. Instead of offering closed or dogmatic answers, the analyzed video games present a plurality of approaches to the issue of death. These range from depictions of coexistence between the living and the dead to symbolic journeys across various thresholds or dimensions. These representations do not necessarily seek to resolve the enigma of death but rather open a space for reflection in which players can experience diverse ways of understanding and confronting this phenomenon inherent to the human condition.

Taken together, these three trends—ecological apocalypse, the search for alternative spirituality, and the exploration of death—reveal an evolution in the themes addressed by *indie* video games. They are configured not only as cultural products of entertainment but also as symbolic devices that articulate collective imaginaries, channel generational concerns, and open new possibilities for dialogue between players and their sociocultural environment. This finding points to future lines of research that clarify the ideological effects of these narratives on players, as well as the social effects of the displacement of religion by undefined spiritualities.

6. Acknowledge

7. Contributions

Roles	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3
Conceptualization	x	x	x
Formal analysis	x	x	x
Fundraising	x		
Project management	x		
Research	x	x	x
Methodology	x	x	x
Data processing		x	
Resources			x
Software			x
Supervision	x		
Validation	x	x	x
Data visualization	x	x	x
Writing - original draft	x	x	x
Writing - review and editing	x	x	x

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