Reception of Revelation in *Darksiders*: The Case of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Valérie Nicolet [1,*] **and Benoît Ischer** [2,*]

[1] Faculté libre de théologie protestante, Institut protestant de théologie, 83 Boulevard Arago, 75014 Paris, France

[2] Faculté de théologie protestante, Université de Genève, 1205 Genève, Switzerland

* Correspondence: valerie.nicolet@iptheologie.fr (V.N.); benoit.ischer@gmail.com (B.I.)

Abstract: This paper explores how the series *Darksiders* appropriates the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and elaborates on them. It reflects on how this reception affects our understanding of the four horsemen and of apocalyptic literature broadly.

Keywords: Revelation; video games; *Darksiders*

---

1. In Whose World Are We Anyway?

In Steven Spielberg's last movie, *Ready Player One*,[1] set in a not-so-far-away future, young teenagers must rescue a virtual game universe from being taken over by big corporations. Striking in the movie is the way in which Spielberg has captured the blurring of boundaries between virtual and real worlds, between game avatars and real players. Computer game scholars are exploring this aspect of the computer game universe and, like T.L. Taylor,[2] they invite to reflect on (at least) three aspects of online game culture:

- The obsolescence or artificiality of maintaining a difference between virtual and real worlds
- The blurred boundary between one's avatar and one's real person
- The creation of virtual communities in the game that function as real communities.

These aspects of gaming culture are in general relevant mostly for online games, in which you build characters, go on adventures, fight monsters, such as *EverQuest* for example; and *Darksiders* is an offline franchise. However, Rachel Wagner, in her article "This Is Not a Game", insists that for some gamers, their involvement in the games becomes so intense that some of the rules they experience in the game universe "bleed over into real life."[3] For Wagner, it is particularly the case with violent war games such as *Call of Duty* or *Gears of War*. She writes that video games "don't force us to do anything, but they do shape our values, like rituals do."[4] In the case of war games, she argues that the experience of the game can easily be mapped onto reality, and inform the system value of the player, leading to a "us versus them" mentality and an oversimplification of conflict issues. For Wagner, this can become particularly problematic in the context of real-life conflict (for example American involvement in the Middle East): "Games, as rituals, almost always require us to think in terms of us and them. The

---

[1] (Spielberg 2018).
[2] (Taylor 2006).
[3] (Wagner 2014, p. 19).
[4] Wagner, "This Is Not a Game", p. 22.

implications of such games for inhibiting interreligious and intercultural understanding are painfully obvious."[5]

While we find that for *Darksiders* in particular, there is no clear mapping of "good" and "evil", we consider the notion that computer games *do* things to the players, that they function as rhetorically persuasive objects,[6] inspiring for our reading of Revelation in relationship with the game *Darksiders*. Danielle Gehm has shown that for the franchise *Fallout*, players are actively involved in a virtual world, interact with it, and modify the outcome(s) of the game depending on their moral choices.[7] In her analysis of *Fallout* (and in particular *Fallout 3* and *Fallout New Vegas*), she demonstrates that some video games function differently than the war games Wagner analyzes. For Wagner, violent war games contribute to simplistic dualistic worldviews, and can have problematic outcomes. In her interpretation, Gehm indicates that the *Fallout* franchise, albeit equally violent, offers a different experience to the player, who finds herself confronted with moral quandaries aimed at showing the artificiality and constructed aspect of the categories "Right" and "Wrong". The player thus is led to realize the complexity of postapocalyptic reality, and the ambiguities of the decisions she makes to survive. Of course, the freedom perceived by the player is an illusion: the choices one makes are restricted to what the programmers will allow. Freedom is controlled, and only a limited set of experiences are possible. Still, we believe that Gehm is right to insist that playing *Fallout* offers a different relationship to "good" and "evil" than the one found in violent war games. The same could be said about *Darksiders*. In *Darksiders*, the player does not have the (perceived) freedom of influencing the outcome(s) of the game. However, the world that confronts the player is not neatly divided between good and evil.

Our analysis will address several aspects of the possible interaction between *Darksiders* and Revelation. We will begin by presenting broadly how *Darksiders* uses motifs of Revelation and, more specifically, how it proposes a midrashic reappropriation of the four horses found in Rev 6. This will also allow us to provide a short summary of each of the three games of the franchise (Section 2). Then, focusing more specifically on the reception history of Rev 6:1–8, we will map the ways in which the game plays with the motif of the horsemen. This opens up the rather large reception of the motif of the horsemen in the history of interpretation. What *Darksiders* does with the motif is representative of the broader reception of the horsemen in interpretation (Section 3). In this section, we are not so much interested in showing the specific value of the reception of the motif in the game, or whether it is conscious or not. Rather, we now have this specific object of popular culture, *Darksiders*, and we are interested in seizing it as a cultural object, to reflect on the possible interactions of this popular culture object with the text of Revelation. In our final section (Section 4), we will present three main payoffs that emerge from the interactions between *Darksiders* and Revelation.

These payoffs will demand that we interact with apocalyptic literature more broadly conceived than the text of Revelation. It will also engage Wagner's work on computer games directly. The first payoff concerns the blurring of boundaries between real and virtual worlds that can occur in computer games, and that parallels the porosity between spiritual and earthly worlds experienced in apocalyptic texts. The second result focuses on the effect that apocalyptic texts could have on their audiences. We argue that Revelation is a type of literature that creates its own crisis, and, like computer games, contributes to organize reality in clearly delimited camps. It provides what Wagner calls "imagined maps of order."[8] Finally, we will discuss whether one can call *Darksiders* an apocalyptic game. We will find that, as so many ancient apocalyptic texts do, it does interpret present reality for its

---

5　Wagner, "This Is Not a Game", p. 28.
6　Here scholars usually build on (Bogost 2007). See for example Wagner, "This is Not a Game", and (Wagner 2015, Publication date: September 2015. Accessed January 2019. DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.013.8). See also (Davisson and Gehm 2014).
7　(Gehm 2012). *Fallout* has also been discussed in a volume on Revelation and popular culture: James Schirmer, "'We all stray from our paths sometimes': Morality and Survival in *Fallout 3*", in (Howard 2011).
8　Wagner, "Videogames and Religion", p. 1.

players. Specifically, it addresses a postmodern concern around the notions of "good" and "evil", as constructed and ambiguous concepts. *Darksiders* would tend to confirm recent analyses of apocalyptic literature not as a single phenomenon, but rather as the assemblage of various apocalyptic motifs to make sense of reality. In the case of *Darksiders*, the game aims to make sense of the player's morally ambiguous universe.

We thus begin with a few comments about the *Darksiders* franchise and its relationship to Revelation, in particular Rev 6:1–8.

2. The *Darksiders* Universe: Midrash on Rev 6:1–8

Darksiders differs from many other postapocalyptic computer games (like the franchise *Fallout* for example) in at least two aspects. First, Wagner, when discussing *Darksiders*, *El Shaddai: Ascent of the Metatron* and *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, indicates that *Darksiders* varies from the two other games in the fact that the creators of the game developed their own "engine in house."[9] She also insists that *Darksiders*, even though it uses elements of apocalyptic literature rather liberally, subordinates these elements to "tropes from secular video games, like *Halo* and *Portal*."[10] The game (especially in the first installment) is also often compared to the way *Legends of Zelda* is played. Thus, Wagner correctly argues that "the game engine most powerfully controls what can and cannot be done even if a textual apocalypse is a known influence."[11] In order words, it is the experience of playing a video game that will decide what is kept or not from outside influences. Second, and this might be a more important difference, *Darksiders*, although set in a postapocalyptic setting (like *Fallout* or *Left Behind*), is not about survival, and not even about humankind. In the games discussed by Wagner, *Left Behind* is the game most directly influenced by Revelation. Wagner says that the "game's rhetoric of good versus evil perfectly maps onto the literalist reading of the Book of Revelation that prompted *Left Behind*'s creators to make the game in the first place."[12] The idea in *Left Behind* is that the player is "an active agent of God's divine will, collecting believers and punishing non-believers."[13] *Fallout* is a more secular version of what happens after the apocalypse, when the player has to figure out how she will survive in a world destroyed by nuclear catastrophes, and what kind of morality she will embody.

In contrast, *Darksiders* opens with humanity entirely destroyed after a battle between the forces of heaven and hell. The fate of humanity is of no interest for the first installment of the game. *Darksiders 1* uses as its starting point, very much like some *midrashim* do, a narrative nugget in Revelation and develops it to epic proportions: the summoning of the four horses of the Apocalypse and their riders (Rev 6:1–8). In *Darksiders 1*, the player is in control of War, presented as one of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, presumably the second one (even though he is not named in Revelation, he is presented as the one who removes peace from earth and causes people to slaughter each other). The goal of the game is to clear War's name, who is accused by a superior and divine-like entity, the Charred Council, of causing a premature apocalypse. In this quest to clear its name, War (and thus the player) encounters various mythical creatures, demons and angels alike, inspired by apocalyptic literature, but also by Celtic folklore, and Japanese manga. In addition, War's attempts to redeem himself contribute

---

9   Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 6.
10   Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 7. The game, especially *Darksiders 1*, develops a fairly complex angelology, for example, that could be influenced by Enochic literature. Uriel is a female angel, leader of the Hellguard, who is loyal to Abaddon, the lord of Hell. Samael, a demonic being, looks like a satanic being. He is the one who will send War on multiple quests to kill the Chosen Ones of the Destroyer and bring their hearts back to him. The Chosen Ones (which provide the Big Boss fights in the game) are Tiamat, a female monster-bat, the Griever, a crab-like figure, the Stygian Worm, and Silitha, the last one, a giant female spider. To those four, one must add Straga, the most powerful of the Chosen Ones. Straga is vaguely human, with horns, and a body made of what looks like stones. Finally, the Destroyer, the final battle of *Darksiders 1*, is a mash up of various devil figures. As Wagner indicates ("Video Games and Religion", p. 14), this final battle alludes to Michael's fight with the dragon in Revelation 12:7–10.
11   Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 7.
12   Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 13.
13   Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 13.

to restoring balance between the forces of good and evil, a balance which has been upset through the premature apocalypse.

Darksiders 2 puts the player in control of Death, presented as another one of the four horsemen. Death's entire purpose in *Darksiders 2* is to demonstrate War's innocence. To do so, Death will embark on a quest to resurrect humanity, thus erasing the crime of which War is falsely accused. In its game narrative, *Darksiders 2* only loosely makes use of apocalyptic themes, and dwells rather into Celtic mythology, as well as myths surrounding the character of Death itself. In *Darksiders 3*, the gamer finds herself playing as Fury, the third rider. In this instalment that came out in November 2018, probably to respond to demands for more female characters in video games,[14] the franchise takes some liberty with the traditional identification of the four riders as male, and proposes a female rider. Fury's mission is to track the seven deadly sins and defeat them. While on this quest, one also realizes that the story is enmeshed with the broader narrative of the two other *Darksiders* games, probably taking place just before *Darksiders 1* and 2, or in parallel. The innovation of *Darksiders 3* is the presence of some human beings that survived the apocalypse, and are now placed under the care of Fury. In an interesting wink to apocalyptic literature, Fury is presented as deeply hostile to humankind to begin with. She finds them despicable and lowly, much inferior to her, a superior being. Part of the development of the character is precisely her change of heart towards humanity. Fury's relationship to humankind can evoke some of the ways apocalyptic literature in general constructs the relationship between humanity and (fallen) angels.[15] As the game draws to a close, it is revealed that the leader of the remaining human beings is none other than Strife, the fourth horseman. The franchise leaves the door open for a fourth game starring Strife, and perhaps even for a fifth installment, where the four siblings would be reunited.[16]

The three instalments of the franchise construct a rather ambiguous understanding of good and evil. Clearly, the three riders cannot be qualified as good. Their actions are marred by violence for example. Furthermore, the entities involved in the various battles are also ambiguous. In *Darksiders 3*, the morality of humanity is also questioned, even if at the end, Fury seems to place all her hopes in human beings, who might be capable to build a future characterized by justice. In the quest for balance, human beings are identified as embodying this balance. All the *Darksiders* games are marked by questions concerning who can and cannot be trusted. Thus, *Darksiders* reflects what Wagner calls "anxiety about the very notion of good and evil in a postmodern context."[17] The apocalyptic elements, which at least in the book of Revelation help to divide the world between good and bad, are diverted to respond to a contemporary questioning about ethics in a morally ambiguous world. In this reflection, when it comes to the riders of the Apocalypse, *Darksiders* functions like a midrash, providing a background story to biblical characters and filling in the blanks of the relationship between the four horsemen, presented as siblings. Here we are focusing on the specific ways in which *Darksiders* plays with the motif of the horsemen evoked in Rev 6:1–8.

3. The Riders of Revelation 6:1–8: Identifications in Scholarship and Use in *Darksiders*

We are all familiar with this rather famous passage (also because of its wide reception in art, both past[18] and contemporary), yet a few observations on the issues surrounding these verses might still be

---

[14] Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, pp. 93–124, discusses the place of female gamers in the video game industry, and calls for more inclusivity. In the 2018-released *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, the player has the choice between a male character (Alexios) or a female character (Kassandra). In contrast to Fury, Kassandra is not depicted as particularly sexy, which is often the case in video games featuring women (see for example the look of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*).

[15] Traces of this can be found in *1 Enoch* for example, 14,24–16,4. Also Is 14:12–15. And much more clearly in the *Latin Life of Adam and Eve* 12.1–17.3

[16] *Darksiders 3* has a cinematic sequence where one is privy to Fury's fantasy of being reunited with her three brothers and made their leader, which could well correspond to players' fantasy of a fifth game where the four horsemen are reunited.

[17] Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 14.

[18] See for example (Öhler 2006).

useful. With chapter six, one enters the first cycle of seven that structures Revelation. The lamb (with its seven eyes and seven horns) has just received the sealed book (Rev 5:7), after the seer despaired quite dramatically that there was no one worthy of receiving the book (Rev 5:4). The four animals and the twenty-four ancients (Rev 5:8), along with myriads of angels (Rev 5:11), proceed to honor and worship the lamb. At the beginning of chapter six, the seer describes what happens when the lamb opens the first seal. The opening of the six first seals is narrated in chapter six, and the riders accompany the opening of the first four seals. Then chapter seven interrupts the unsealing of the book and reports on the 144,000 set aside, and who are to be protected. The seventh seal is only opened in Rev 8:1 and provokes a silence that will last for thirty minutes. Then, somewhat anticlimactically, a new cycle of seven is inaugurated (the seven trumpets). In Revelation 6, we find the first rider on a white horse (Rev 6:2); he has a bow and receives a crown. His purpose is to vanquish. The second rider mounts a horse of fire and he will remove peace from earth, wielding a great sword (Rev 6:4). The third horse is black and his rider holds a scale in his hand, presumably to measure out rations in a time of famine (but the interpretation of Rev 6:6 is difficult). Finally, our fourth horseman is the only one named: he is Death, riding a greenish horse, with the power to kill a fourth of the earth (Rev 6:8).

3.1. Identification of the Horsemen in Scholarship

One typical characteristic of the interpretation and reception of Rev 6:1–8, also found in *Darksiders*, is the creativity with the names of the first and third horsemen. Traditionally, the horsemen are identified as Conquest, War, Famine, and Death. However, for number one and number three, one witnesses creativity, since the text itself is not entirely clear. It might not be useful for our purpose to rehearse the history of interpretation of this passage, but a couple of comments concerning the identification of the horsemen in Rev 6:1–8 might be necessary. The scholarly debate, as John C. Poirier has aptly summarized,[19] focuses heavily on the identity of the first rider and its relationship to the Christ figure of Rev 19:11–13, who also rides a white horse, and is called "the word of God". In particular, scholars have disagreed on the identification and evaluation of this first rider: is he a positive figure, representing Christ, or to the contrary, should he be understood negatively, as the Anti-Christ? The reading that the first rider represents Christ is already found in Irenaeus[20] and has been fairly dominant in research, perhaps until the advent of historico-critical scholarship.

As Michael Bachmann highlights, after Wilhelm Bousset's commentary on John at the beginning of the 20th century,[21] however, the tides turned, and the consensus was to interpret the first rider as a negative figure, either (following the early interpretation of Luther) as an evil political power[22] or even as the Anti-Christ (like Mathias Rissi[23]). Bachmann himself challenges this consensus in a 1996 address to the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* (published in 1998 in *New Testament Studies*) and proposes to see in the first rider a "hypostasis of God's apparition."[24] In discussion with Bachmann, Poirier agrees that one does not need to see the riders as negative entities and that one should not identify the first rider with the Anti-Christ. However, he is critical of Bachmann when the latter identifies the first rider as Christ and separates him from the three other riders. For Poirier, the four riders function similarly and bring "a sequence of four devastating fates into focus: captivity, sword, famine, death"[25] without necessarily being connected to historical figures. Rather for Poirier, this sequence is connected to LXX

---

[19] (Poirier 1999).
[20] *Haer*. 4, 21, 3, as quoted in (Rissi 1964, p. 407).
[21] (Bousset [1896] 1906).
[22] Martin Luther, WA.DB 7.435, as quoted by Bachmann, who sees in this interpretation by Luther the importance of the historical context of Luther at the time, and the influence of Albrecht Dürer's etchings on Revelation. One of them, also discussed by Öhler, represents the first rider with Turkish traits and was done in 1498. It influences Luther's reading in 1522. Bachmann indicates that the first political interpretation goes back to the 13th century, and is found in Alexander von Bremen, who identifies the riders with the Roman emperors. See (Bachmann 1998, p. 258, n. 9).
[23] Rissi, "The Rider on the White Horse", particularly pp. 415–18.
[24] Bachmann, "Noch ein Blick", here p. 278: "Hypostasierung des Erscheinung Gottes".
[25] Poirier, "The First Rider", p. 260.

Ezekiel 5:12 (and less strongly to Jer 15:2). Thus, the first rider is the "threat of captivity as one . . . part of a fourfold devastation."[26]

While Poirier refuses to see historical entities behind the riders, Markus Öhler in a more recent article (2006)[27] sees the four horsemen as all interconnected, like Poirier, and functioning rather negatively, but seeks to identify historical realities behind each individual rider. Before tackling the more difficult identity of the first rider, he indicates that the three others all represent concrete threats: the second rider represents the threat to *Pax Romana* and would recall for the audience the menace of civil war. The third rider carries the threat of hunger, caused by a rise in the price of cereal, and the fourth rider the threat of death. It stands to reason, then, for Öhler, that the first rider should also be a concrete threat. Like previous interpreters, Öhler associates the first rider with the Parthian army, who threatened Roman peace in the first century BCE.[28] A Parthian attack could thus participate in the liberation of the believers, if the empire was defeated on its eastern frontier. For Öhler, thus, the first rider stands somewhat apart, and might be associated with more positive connotations (at least for those opposed to the Romans) than the three others, a figure similar to Cyrus in Isaiah (41:2). In the face of this variety of interpretation (and we have said nothing of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this passage, which sees the metal band, Metallica, for example, write a song "The Four Horsemen" where they are identified as Time, Hunger, Pestilence, and Death[29]), it is no wonder then that the *Darksiders* franchise takes some liberty with the names (and even the gender) of its horsemen as well.

3.2. Use of the Riders in Darksiders

In Revelation, no sooner have the riders of the Apocalypse been released, that they disappear from the narrative world (except if one admits that the first horseman comes back in Rev 19:11–13, as the Faithful and True One). But not so in *Darksiders*. *Darksiders* riffs on the opening of the four first seals, and is both faithful to the original setting of the riders in Revelation and widely creative, a mixture that adequately describes most of the ways in which the horsemen have been received in art.[30] *Darksiders* faithfully numbers four horsemen, and identifies two as they are usually identified in Revelation, namely War (the second horseman) and Death (the fourth). All riders also mount the correct horse: War's horse is a fiery, red horse; Death has a somewhat pale horse, with greenish flames coming out of its hooves instead of yellow ones, like War's horse. The first and third riders use a white and a black horse, respectively. But the franchise also takes some liberty with the four riders. As already discussed, the third rider is a horsewoman, named Fury. She mounts a black horse—who is killed dramatically in the third game—and she should thus correspond to the third rider of Rev 6. The first rider, presumably the protagonist of a fourth *Darksiders* game, is identified as Strife, and does indeed ride a white horse. *Darksiders* takes some liberty with the identification of the four horsemen, and the order in which they are introduced in the game: first comes War (the second rider in Revelation), then Death (the fourth rider in Revelation), then Fury (presumably the third rider of Revelation), and finally Strife (the first rider of Revelation).

The moral evaluation of the horsemen/horsewoman in *Darksiders* also deserves notice. As Poirier has noted when discussing whether the horsemen are positive or negative entities,[31] all the horsemen are heaven-sent. As he says, the opening of the seals and the judgment that follows are all under God's

---

26　Poirier, "The First Rider", p. 261.

27　Öhler, "Die vier Reiter", p. 88.

28　Öhler, "Die vier Reiter", pp. 89–90. For Öhler, the Parthian identification also explains the somewhat unexpected presence of the bow as the weapon of the first rider. Parthians were renowned both for their horsemanship and their bowmanship.

29　See Öhler, "Die vier Reiter", p. 94.

30　For some examples, see Öhler, "Die vier Reiter", pp. 91–94, who discusses Dürer's reception (negative representation of all four riders), Luther's Bibel of 1534 (also a negative representation of mostly the first and the last rider), two paintings by Dalí (with a neutral stance towards the riders), a fantasy representation by Rupert Schwartz, and a literary expansion in Terry Pratchett's *Thief of Time*.

31　Poirier, "The First Rider", p. 258.

control. While it is not so clear in *Darksiders* whether the apocalyptic fate that has befallen the world was the intent of the divine-like Charred Council, it is quite clear that the horsemen's loyalty is bound to their divine superiors. Specifically, it is central to the moral character of War, whose entire being and mission is defined by his will to prove his innocence (and thus his loyalty) before the Charred Council. The player cannot help but feel sympathetic to War, and tends to evaluate this character, as well as Death, in a positive manner. Fury also, who at first seems rather detached from any moral values, becomes sympathetic to the player, especially when she recognizes her own weaknesses and demonstrates moral rectitude in her willingness to protect humanity. As Poirier suggests regarding the horsemen in Revelation, it is their function that makes War, Death, and Fury sympathetic in *Darksiders*. Their characters might be marred with moral ambiguities (a theme particularly present in *Darksiders 2*, where Death is troubled with the primeval murders of the *Nephilim*, described as brethren to the horsemen, and in *Darksiders 3*, where Fury is presented as unpredictable and concerned only with her own survival) and their preferred modes of action marked by gruesome violence, but in their function in the game, they attain positive outcomes. As Poirier says about the original horsemen, the characters in the game are "*functionally* positive figures."[32]

The riders in *Darksiders* might not represent historical entities (although fans on websites dedicated to the game do analyze the game politically and insist on the way the Charred Council represents a corrupt political entity, whereas War represents purity), but they are confronted with moral choices and follow a code of honor easily identifiable, and which allows them to decide which course of actions is best. For example, one can consider Death's dilemma at the end of *Darksiders 2*: he can choose to resurrect the *Nephilim*, which would compensate for the guilt he feels at killing his own brethren, or he can resurrect humanity, an action which will erase War's crime, and exonerate him. All along the game, Death's actions are dictated by his loyalty to his brother and, when faced with his final ethical dilemma, he again chooses to save his brother, thus sacrificing himself and the other *Nephilim*. As protagonists in the game, War, Death, and Fury are characters with negative and positive aspects, but in their role in the game, they clearly function as positive figures. In the end, all three, War, Death, and Fury, determined as they are, are perceived by the player as acting out of nobility and loyalty. Of course, this also puts the player in a position where she feels like this nobility, this faithfulness to the mission, and this abnegation, is also hers. If one thus "reverses the hermeneutical flow"[33] and starts with the game to read the text, *Darksiders* would confirm Poirier's observation that the positive or negative value of the horsemen of Rev 6:1–8 need not trouble us too much, provided they accomplish the mission entrusted to them by the divine authority.

It is now necessary to return to some possible payoffs of reading Revelation with *Darksiders*.

4. Payoffs of Reading Revelation with *Darksiders*

4.1. Blurring of Boundaries Between Real and Virtual Worlds

A first boundary to be called into question in computer game culture is the one between real and virtual worlds. As the player is immersed in the virtual world, it might also impact her concrete reality. In the book of Revelation, it is interesting to reflect upon the relationship between spiritual and earthly realms. Öhler correctly remarks that the images proposed in Revelation are "approximations of reality."[34] Öhler highlights that these approximations preserve the distance between earthly and spiritual realms, and leave room for interpretation. In Revelation, one gets the impression that the earthly and spiritual realms are two separate geographical entities, and that if one lives in the one, one can only access the other through mystical experiences and/or divine, forceful, interventions.

32　Poirier, "The First Rider", p. 259.
33　For the expression, see the work of Larry Joseph Kreitzer, for example: (Kreitzer 1994).
34　Öhler, "Die vier Reiter", p. 85: "Er macht vielmehr wiederholt deutlich, dass es sich um Vergleiche handelt, um Annäherungen an die 'Wirklichkeit'". That point is also made quite clearly in Pierre Prigent's commentary on Revelation.

Two examples will suffice: (a) in the opening vision of the book (Rev 4), the seer sees an open door in the sky (Rev 4:1); to access this door and contemplate the vision contained there, the seer needs to become in the spirit (Rev 4:2). It is his becoming in the spirit that grants him access to the vision. (b) In Revelation 12, after Michael battles with the dragon in heaven and defeats him, the dragon no longer has a place in the cosmic universe and it is thereafter thrown on earth (Rev 12:8–9), where it will roam for a limited time. The intervention of the divine army permits the dragon's change of location. In the mystical experiences and in the interventions of cosmic powers, the limits between earthly and heavenly worlds are blurred, even as the distance is maintained. Yet, despite the geographical distance, the earthly and heavenly realms are also connected in Revelation. Indeed, one of the purposes of the work might precisely be to show its audience that their temporal, earthly dealings with imperial power have the potential to influence the outcome of the cosmic battle raging between the forces of Evil and the forces of Good in heaven (Rev 7:14; Rev 13:8–10; Rev 14:4.13; Rev 18:4; Rev 22:11–12; and perhaps more importantly, the fact that the visions are preceded by the letters to the churches who describe the achievements and failings of the communities). What one does on earth directly impacts the cosmic battle and, eventually, one's fate at the final judgment.

In the first and second *Darksiders* games, the blurring between celestial and terrestrial planes does not happen in the game, since earth and humanity have been destroyed. Rather, it is the human player who is projected in the cosmic universe, as she gets to embody War or Death. The blurring thus occurs between the earthly world of the player and the heavenly, virtual world of the game. Inside the game, the player gets to travel a little bit like the visionary of apocalyptic literature, to receive further revelations pertaining to the storyline of the game and allowing to unlock further game space. Through her avatar, the player travels to worlds which are inaccessible to others, who do not play, or are not as skilled as the accomplished *Darksiders* player. As War and Death, players have a direct impact on the storyline. They contribute to the cosmic drama which is developing in the game (inside the parameters determined by the creators and producers of the game evidently), in a very direct way. *Darksiders 3* complicates matters further, since Fury plays on the remnants of a destroyed earth, and is tasked with the additional responsibility of saving the human lives she encounters in the game, to send them to a safe place. Eventually, at the end of the game, human beings and Fury travel to another dimension, unknown to the player, to await the results of the fight between the forces of evil and Strife, associated to characters called Makers.

4.2. Involvement of the Audience in Revelation and of the Gamer in Darksiders

Is it possible to use this experience of direct involvement to shed some light on the possible ways apocalyptic texts could have functioned in ancient times? Are apocalyptic texts providing their readers with the necessary space to fantasize their own participation in the end-time battles?

In terms of readers' involvement in Revelation, we think that *Darksiders* and Revelation function differently. While the direct involvement of the player in *Darksiders* might render us attentive to the possible involvement of the audience of Revelation in the performance of the text and to the entertainment value of such a text, we are also aware of the fact that the universes of *Darksiders* and Revelation are ultimately different. *Darksiders* is a morally ambiguous universe, where the difference between good and evil is hard to perceive and even harder to maintain (the ultimate power in the game, the Charred Council, is far from being presented as a force for good; the big boss of Evil is [probably] a good fallen angel, Abaddon). Revelation seeks to trace clear limits between Good and Evil, and aims to present its audience with clear strategies to stick with Good and avoid Evil at all cost.

If the stakes for the audience are different for *Darksiders* and Revelation, Wagner interestingly notes that the notion of the "avatar" might provide some clues for understanding the motivation behind the pseudonymity of many ancient apocalypses. She uses research on video games to highlight that the avatar of a game allows the player to share "substance with the avatar through the interface of

the game's controls."[35] She also indicates that a good avatar is a motivation to play a game well. As a player, you want to avoid killing or hurting your avatar. She suggests that using a famous ancient figure as an author might have functioned a bit similarly for apocalyptic writers: "Perhaps then a figure from the past was chosen as a means of insuring the piety of the secondary visionary: if you are going to *play* as Enoch, you better do your best to act like Enoch, even in your daily life."[36] This is not quite true for the canonical Revelation, since it is a nonanonymous text in the New Testament. In the case of Revelation, the notion of avatar does not help us to understand the authorship of the book as much as it might shed some light on the audience. Just like the gamer is invited to do her best to embody one of the riders in *Darksiders*, the audience of Revelation might be asked to see the role it must play in the "game" going on between Good and Evil in Revelation and to take this role with utmost seriousness and piety.

However, Wagner insists that the relationship to play in video games and in apocalyptic literature must be differentiated. She insists that "gaming apocalypses are 'fun' because they have no obvious material stakes in the real world."[37] In contrast, she writes that for ancient audiences of apocalypses, "external stressors were very obvious, evident in daily anxieties about when or how new persecutions might erupt."[38] In the case of Revelation, we tend to reconstruct the situation a bit differently. While it is difficult to measure how ancient Christ believers perceived the acuteness of dangers associated with their beliefs, for Revelation, it seems possible to say that part of the effect of the text of Revelation itself is about creating a situation of danger and anxiety. If one accepts that a likely date for the composition of Revelation is the end of the first century, during the rule of Domitian, the reality and the extant of systematic persecutions of Christ-believers is doubtful. For us, Élian Cuvillier is correct when he argues that Revelation reflects the community's hostility against the imperial power and ideology, rather than the response of a community under persecution.[39] In that context, one of the purposes of Revelation might precisely be to create a feeling of pressure and stress for its audience, to provoke separation from imperial practices, rather than mingling with the Empire. Revelation is not so much responding to a crisis, than creating a crisis, through its strong critique of Roman imperial ideology.[40] While one cannot quite define this as entertainment, it remains that some of the appeal of Revelation for its addressees might precisely have been the fact that it organized reality in a clear manner, and provided them with a clear sense of what to do if they wanted to win the battle against evil. In that sense, Revelation does indeed resemble video games, which also, as Wagner explains, provide "imagined maps of order, or worlds in which predictable rules adhere."[41] This brings us to our final question: is *Darksiders* an apocalyptic game?

4.3. Darksiders as an Apocalyptic Game?

Wagner indicates that computer games, like *Darksiders*, *El Shaddai*, *Left Behind*, but also *Fallout*, have a strong connection with apocalyptic literature, and display "orderliness and predictability of the universe, illuminating the affinity between digital apocalypse and biblical apocalypse."[42] She highlights the way games and apocalypses can be connected through their use of pseudepigraphy or avatars, their understanding of time, their reliance on otherworldly mediators. It is worth noting that the reception of Revelation in the manner of *Darksiders* is not proper to this game, or to computer games broadly. It is a more common trope in popular culture today, which often uses the motif of a

---

[35]　Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 8, quoting (Voorhees et al. 2012).
[36]　Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 8.
[37]　Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 17.
[38]　Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 17.
[39]　(Cuvillier 2000, pp. 396–97).
[40]　See Cuvillier, "L'apocalypse de Jean", p. 401.
[41]　Wagner, "Videogames and Religion", p. 1.
[42]　Wagner, "Videogames and Religion", p. 4.

postapocalyptic world as a setting for various narratives.[43] One can thus ask what this does to our understanding of what constitutes an apocalypse or apocalyptic literature. In *Darksiders 3*, for example, typical motifs of Christian theology broadly understood (and not necessarily apocalyptic) become part of popular culture: the *Nephilim*, the horsemen of the Apocalypse, the domain of the dead, the seven deadly sins are mixed with other non-Christian elements, that are broadly mythological and vaguely religious (one could think for example of the universes created by a series like *Matrix* or *Dr. Strange*). While it might in some ways correspond to the manner in which ancient apocalyptic literature mixes different imagery, it does ask what one needs to make an apocalypse today.

The classic definition of apocalyptic literature, still amply quoted today, was given by the SBL Genre project in 1979, and is expressed here by John Collins: "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world."[44] As Emma Wasserman indicates, this definition remains "open-ended", makes apocalyptic literature as "subspecies of revelatory literature", and avoids limiting the genre to Jewish or Christian texts.[45] Wasserman herself aims to show how Paul in particular adapts and combines various traditions beyond apocalypticism. She insists that there is no "Jewish apocalyptic theology or system of thought."[46] Even though one should acknowledge the diversity and flexibility of apocalyptic literature ("as constituted by a constellation of imagery, ideas, and motifs that appear in diverse patterns in apocalyptic and nonapocalyptic literature"[47]), Collins, and Wasserman, also admit that there might be a common "basic worldview or symbolic universe"[48] informing apocalyptic works. In the *Invention of Judaism*, Collins summarizes the characteristics of this symbolic universe in the following manner: one needs the revelation of mysteries; the belief in a division of history in periods, the conviction that the final period is at hand, and that the righteous are destined for a blessed afterlife.[49] He says it a bit differently in the *Apocalyptic Imagination*, but touches on the same general elements:

> The world is mysterious and revelation must be transmitted from a supernatural source, through the mediation of angels; there is a hidden world of angels and demons that is directly relevant to human destiny; and this destiny is finally determined by a definitive eschatological judgment. In short, human life is bounded in the present by the supernatural world of angels and demons and in the future by the inevitability of a final judgment.[50]

If one looks at *Darksiders* in the light of these criteria, the franchise does not miss the mark by much, in fact, and could be defined as modern apocalypse. It places its player in the midst of the end and relies heavily on the progressive disclosure of revelations to fuel the various quests of the game (one does, after all, need to keep the player engaged in the game). Angels and demons are an intrinsic part of the game, and they affect how the human gamer experiences and traverses the game, mostly by opposing her, and more rarely, by coming to her help. *Darksiders*' organization of time might not neatly divide history in periods, but it does regularly evoke the idea of several ages that are coming to pass (in particular the age of humanity). Until *Darksiders 3*, it seemed that the franchise was not particularly concerned by the idea of a final judgement, and by preparing the righteous for a blessed afterlife. *Darksiders 3* modifies this perspective a bit, by introducing human beings back into the game.

---

[43] For examples of reception of Revelation in popular culture, one can look at the Sheffield Phoenix Press series: Apocalypse and Popular Culture, which has six volumes so far.

[44] (Collins 1979, p. 9).

[45] (Wasserman 2018). Wasserman indicates that in the original *Semeia* publication, essays discussed Greek, Latin, Persian, and gnostic apocalypses in addition to Jewish and Christian ones.

[46] Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War*, p. 10.

[47] Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War*, p. 10.

[48] Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War*, p. 10.

[49] Collins, *The Invention of Judaism*, p. 119.

[50] (Collins 1998).

At the end of *Darksiders 3*, the fate of humankind appears to be paramount to restoring the balance between good and evil which would allow life on earth to resume. There is thus a sense that humanity holds the key to a better future. The fact that in *Darksiders 3*, the leader of humanity turns out to be the fourth rider, Strife (in itself a revelation worthy of note!), might suggest that there will indeed be reward for human beings. With *Darksiders 3*, the game is still awaiting the final revelation and the final judgment on various characters. The player thus functions as the one who, for now, interprets the moral value of her avatar.

On the basis, then, of Collins' broad definition, and of Wasserman's remark that there is no shared apocalyptic thought system, we find that *Darksiders* can qualify as modern apocalyptic. It makes use of apocalyptic imagery, themes, and lore, adapts and reinvents them, while also combining it with other elements that help make the game visually attractive, and exciting to play. Yet, in terms of closer comparison with the book of Revelation, despite its creative appropriation of the riders—and it is an exciting gaming experience to be able to pick Death, War, or Fury as avatars—we also note that *Darksiders* chooses a different interpretation of reality than the one presented in Revelation. A common trope of critical interpretation of the book of Revelation today is to indicate that Revelation is not so much about revealing the future than about interpreting the reality of the community to which it is addressed, particularly in the way it constructs its relationship to Roman imperial ideology.

In our comparative work on Revelation and *Darksiders*, we find it important to reflect on the way *Darksiders*, as an apocalyptic artefact, offers a specific point of view on its present reality. There is a tendency in the analysis of video games to indicate that they primarily serve to escape reality. Wagner uses this feature to highlight the commonality between games and religion. She indicates for example that "both [video games and religion] promise temporary relief from the chaotic and confusing ideological commitments of twenty-first-century life."[51] Elsewhere, focusing specifically on the ritual aspects of religion and gaming, she says: "Religion and game play both offer to ritually transport practitioners into an ideal space that offers a sense of purpose and meaning defined by pre-set rules."[52] While there is a definite sense that the world created by the video game offers relief from everyday life, Wagner also pushes us to reflect how this escapism into the ordered world of the game, with only limited options on how to play, and limited freedom in what one is capable or not of doing, is precisely also a way of interpreting reality. Revelation invites its addressees to go through a process of unveiling the true aspect of, say, the Roman empire (you might think that the empire is this seductive power able to give you riches and fame, but I will reveal it for the fallen prostitute it really is). This unveiling, as *Darksiders* might remind us, can have a possible entertainment value, and participate in the attraction of the text. Yet, Revelation's (eventual) canonization and its status as scripture, means that the text itself (if not its audience, necessarily) understands the stakes as higher, and sees the fate of the addressee as a choice between, eventually, eternal life and eternal death. In contrast to *Darksiders*, the text of Revelation presents itself as having a role to play in its reader's choice between life and death, and aims to encourage its addressees to place themselves on the side of Good.

Without seeking to influence real-life choices for its audience, *Darksiders* might also, in its preset ordering of reality, invite its players to reflect upon the organization of the world and of reality. While Revelation relies on a depiction of a black-and-white universe, where one's actions might contribute to the triumph of Good, *Darksiders* addresses the postmodern anxiety surrounding the notions of good and evil.[53] *Darksiders*'s audience must compose with a world regularly described as on the brink of self-annihilation, where it is difficult to evaluate who is good and who is evil, and where every action might have unintended consequences. It might thus not be a surprise that two returning features of the *Darksiders* games are the moral ambiguity of the characters and the importance accorded to balance. We have already mentioned that in all three games the main characters (War, Death, Fury) are morally

---

[51]   Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 1.
[52]   Wagner, "This Is Not A Game", p. 16.
[53]   See Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 14.

ambiguous. This is also true of most characters in the game, where angels are often depicted with dubious goals, where demons can become allies (if for a little bit), where Fury's accompanying watcher turns out to be the most dangerous foe in the game. Since the main feature of the franchise is moral ambiguity, the goal of the player is not the defeat of evil in favor of good, but merely the "restoration of an uneasy balance between them."[54] Perhaps unsurprisingly given the feelings elicited by the state of our globalized world, the goal for the player is to "restore order to a chaotic world."[55] This use of apocalyptic motifs for a new purpose in *Darksiders* could be a testimonial to the flexibility of the motifs, and to their potential for uses that run counter to the ideology constructed by an apocalyptic text like Revelation. This would tend to reinforce the idea that there is no unique apocalyptic system, that would have "some independent or hypostatic cultural or religious identity",[56] but rather apocalyptic motifs and elements that can be used creatively to address various life situations. In addition, if we recall that what is experienced in the gaming world has a way of shaping values and experiences in the real world, *Darksiders's* interpretation of the world, in all its ambiguity and chaos, can also inform the way the player comes back to the real world, and try to make sense of the chaos she encounters there. In contrast to most war games, and more like *Fallout*, *Darksiders* seems more apt at deconstructing an "us *versus* them" mentality, and trusts that its players can handle morally ambiguous situations with humor, in the game, and perhaps also in real life.

Author Contributions: V.N. and B.I. conceived the project. V.N. researched the history of scholarship on Revelation 6. B.I. played the three *Darksiders* games, and researched the creation and context of the games. Both authors met and discussed the analysis of the games, and the payoffs for reading Revelation. V.N. wrote the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

Bachmann, Michael. 1998. Noch ein Blick auf den ersten Apokalyptischen Reiter (von Apk 6, 1–2). *New Testament Studies* 44: 257–78. [CrossRef]

Bogost, Ian. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Bousset, Wilhelm. 1906. *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 6th ed. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen. First published 1896.

Collins, John J., ed. 1979. Introduction: Towards the Morphology of the Genre. In *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*. Missoula: Scholars, pp. 1–20.

Collins, John J. 1998. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 9.

Cuvillier, Élian. 2000. L'apocalypse de Jean. In *Introduction au Nouveau Testament*. Edited by Daniel Marguerat. Genève: Labor et Fides, pp. 387–403.

Davisson, Amber, and Danielle Gehm. 2014. Gaming Citizenship: Video Games as Lessons in Civic Life. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 4: 39–57.

Gehm, Danielle. 2012. Navigating the Fallout': Post-Apocalyptic Games as Representations and Explorations of Moral Ambiguity. Bachelor of Arts Senior thesis, Willamette University, Salem, OR, USA.

Howard, Robert Glenn, ed. 2011. *Network Apocalypse. Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, pp. 183–99.

Kreitzer, Larry Joseph. 1994. *Old Testament in Fiction and Film. On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*. London: Bloomsbury.

---

54 Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 14.
55 Wagner, "Video Games and Religion", p. 14.
56 Wasserman, Apocalypse as Holy War, p. 10.

Öhler, Markus. 2006. Die vier Reiter (Apk 6, 1–8): Die Apokalypse des Johannes und ihre Rezeption. *Wiener Jahrbuch für Theologie* 6: 85–98.

Poirier, John C. 1999. The First Rider: A Response to Michael Bachmann. *New Testament Studies* 45: 257–62. [CrossRef]

Rissi, Mathias. 1964. The Rider on the White Horse. A Study of Revelation 6:1–8. *Interpretation* 18: 407–18. [CrossRef]

Spielberg, Steven. 2018. *Ready Player One*. Universal City: Amblin Entertainment, De Line Pictures, Dune Entertainment, Farah Films & Management, Reliance Entertainment, Village Roadshow Pictures, Warner Bros.

Taylor, Tina L. 2006. *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.

Voorhees, Gerald A., Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock, eds. 2012. Introduction: Things That Go Boom: From Guns to Griefing. In *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First Person Shooter Games*. New York: Continuum, p. 8.

Wagner, Rachel. 2014. This Is Not a Game: Violent Video Games, Sacred Space, and Ritual. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 15: 12–35. [CrossRef]

Wagner, Rachel. 2015. *Video Games and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford Handbook Online.

Wasserman, Emma. 2018. *Apocalypse as Holy War. Divine Politics and Polemics in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 9.