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Inaugural Issue

***Video Gaming, Let's Plays, and Religion:
The Relevance of Researching gamevironments.***

by

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Sociology are also concerned with questions such as the link between game content and structure, and changes in knowledge and behavior on the part of the gamer.

Cultural Studies and its various sub-disciplines began to address the study of religion and video games in the early 2000s, and a small number of extended publications (edited volumes, books, and special journal editions) have appeared since then. The first edited volume on the topic was “Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God” (Detweiler 2010), which introduces a number of video games from different perspectives, allowing not only academics but also religious actors and game designers to speak. Video games as related to religion and ritual are also discussed in the edited volume “Religions in Play: Games, Ritual and Worlds” (Burger and Boret 2012), which is not solely dedicated to video games but has a broader reach and explores several aspects of games and religion. “Being Virtually Real? Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies’ Perspective” (Radde-Antweiler 2008) focuses on various ways of presenting or perceiving religion in a virtual setting. These include games, but also game-like virtual worlds. Geraci (2014) and Bainbridge (2013) focus on conceptualizing the sacred in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games).

Two recent volumes give a broad insight into the study of video games and religion. The special online journal issue, “Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches” (Heidbrink and Knoll 2014) and the edited volume, “Playing with Religion in Digital Games” (Campbell and Grieve 2014) offer new insights. The aim is to structure and systematize the emerging field of research on video games and religion in concise collections, and to include the most up-to-date work on the subject so far.

In addition to these bigger publications, a number of individual journal articles and book chapters have been published since 2000, addressing diverse topics and featuring diverse approaches and methods. Several articles focus on video games related to a specific religious tradition (but from various perspectives and within different theoretical frameworks, such as Šisler’s work on games and Islam published in 2006 and 2009), as well

medium. Proponents of classical narratology include Murray (1997) and Atkins (2003), who understand games as literal forms that can be accessed using methods from Theater Studies and Film Studies. The game is the performance of a story, and tells a story that makes up most of the gaming experience.

Ludology, on the other hand, favors an approach that focuses more on the experience of the immersed gamer. Frasca (2003) relates the difference between narrative and play to the distinction between simulational and representational media. Whereas it is possible to understand film as an output that one can observe, the gamer's input is vital to the simulation medium. Video games are seen as such simulation media. It is thus not possible to fully understand the content of the game without having experienced it directly while playing it. Consequently, research on video games has to include the gamer perspective such that the analyzed object is not reduced to the audiovisual output of the gaming system.

According to Juul (2001), whereas games and narrative share elements, they are not as closely related as narrative and film. He claims that narration and interactivity are mutually exclusive, and thus a different approach than mere research on narratives is needed. He advocates an approach that considers gamers and their experiences, and acknowledges that every gaming experience is different. This would also make it crucial in game research to thoroughly analyze the gamer's perspective and not just the content.

Juul (2006) goes a step further in "Half Real". He understands the rules of a game as something that the gamer encounters and learns while playing, and which are thus transformed through interactivity (Juul calls it negotiation). This is one of the notions that led scholars of Religious Studies to consider aspects of performed religion in games. This was vital in terms of understanding the video game as a playground for ideas, and fosters understanding of video games not only as fixed symbolic universes but also as flexible transformations of such symbols. The perspective of the research then shifts even more in the direction of the gamer, which raises the question of what effects video games have. On

the one hand it is interesting to see what the gamer does in the game world, and on the other hand there is the question of whether the game world changes the gamer. The concept of serious or educational games presupposes some effects in this direction. Research on violent video games and possible aggressive behavior patterns among gamers addresses this question on an empirical level.

Psychological research on the effects of video games lacks a definitive answer to the question of their effects on gamers. The frequently cited catharsis theory as well as the theory of social learning lack conclusive proof of an association between aggression and video games. Overall, the research field focusing on violence in video games is highly controversial. As a case in point, let us take a closer look at two recent meta-studies on the subject, and the ensuing debate. Greitemeyer and Mügge analyze 98 independent studies with roughly 37,000 participants. These studies revealed that for “both violent video-games and prosocial video-games, there was a significant association with social outcomes.” (Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014, 578) Elson and Ferguson (2014) report different findings from a similar meta-analysis, however. They conclude that the field is too diverse to make a definitive statement, and rather fear that unambiguous statements on the effects of video games damage the credibility of the research. The interesting thing about this study is not the fact that the authors consider the field too diverse to allow a definitive answer with regard to the effects of video games, but that they received comments on their paper that led them to publish a commentary themselves (Elson and Ferguson 2014b). Their original finding, that the research on the effects of video games is controversial and sometimes even ideologically charged, was supported – from their perspective – in the light of the attacks of other researchers from the same field. They claim in their commentary that they were victims of ad-hominem attacks and snide comments (Elson and Ferguson 2014, 2). They also point out that even the work of game researchers witnesses the divided nature of the field, meaning all fields they understand as conducting research on the effects of games, and not only psychology (Elson and Ferguson 2014). Thus, not only do researchers in the field disagree about methodology and outcomes, they cannot find consistent links between certain contents of games and the effects such content has on the gamer. One of the key

2. *Gamevironments*

How, then, can we maintain the cultural, theological and social aspects of game content and still take the performative aspects and ludic interaction into account? Many games ‘play’ with religious symbols or construct symbolic universes to be understood as “religio-scapes”. It is not surprising that a lot of research from the narrative perspective focuses on game design and how religious symbols are transferred as well as transformed within the game (Gregory 2014). The crucial question, however, is this: are these symbols relevant to the gamers or do they just serve as decorative framing?

To put ‘some flesh on the bone’ let us consider a specific game that was quite successful in 2013. The video game *BioShock Infinite* was developed by Irrational Games, and published by 2K Games in 2013. It can be played on various platforms such as Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360. This game is the third part of the *BioShock* series. It was the product of Irrational’s creative director, Ken Levine, who said in an interview that his inspiration was the turn of the 20th century, as well as the recent Occupy movement. The game, which is set in 1912, is presented through the main character Booker Dewitt, who has been entrusted with the job of rescuing a girl called Elizabeth from Columbia and bringing her back to New York, thereby paying back his gambling debt. The flying city of Columbia with its white, patriotic and racist citizens is under the rule of the so-called prophet Zachary Hale Comstock, who has to be worshipped next to the Founding Fathers of the United States. Father Comstock predicted that a ‘false shepherd’ would come to Columbia to try and steal their lamb – his daughter Elizabeth – from them. At the time of the game’s events, racial tensions had risen to the point at which Columbia was on the edge of civil war, waged by the ruling ‘Founders’ and the insurgent ‘Vox Populi’. During the rescue mission Booker finds out that Elisabeth has a special ability, that is ‘to open Tears’, that were holes in time-space, leading to alternate realities that exist simultaneously and independently of one another. As the story progresses Booker and Elisabeth experience alternate realities and learn that Elisabeth is Comstock’s adopted daughter, whom he plans to groom into taking over after his death. At the end of the game the gamer recognizes that in another reality Booker took part in a baptism in the hope of atoning for the sins he committed in war, and

find out if the game has a religious function (Wagner 2012, Anthony 2014), or if in itself it can be categorized as a new religion (Plate 2010) or dystopia (Bosman 2014). At the same time as it became accepted in the field of Religious and Anthropological Studies that cultural and religious systems are not fixed, but are socially constructed, it became clear that the concepts of religion and culture were dynamic and not fixed or fluid, meaning that they could change over time and place. We therefore ask how gamers are influenced by games in their individual construction of religious identity, and by discussion triggered by playing them. By way of a response we need an approach that takes the game as well as the gamer into consideration. Wiemker and Wysocki (2014) follow the same direction in stressing the need to go beyond the analysis of the game and its production process:

“An inquiry about religious topics in games should therefore also ask about the reception of historical phenomena of religious motifs and narratives” (Wiemker and Wiesocki 2014, 198- 199)

Unfortunately, in this study, they concentrate solely on the narratives of God in games without asking if these concepts are identified and/or discussed by the gamers as such. Luft (2014), on the other hand, integrates the perspective of Christian gamers, and wonders how their play is influenced by their religion.

Nevertheless, in all of the existing gamer-centered approaches, two questions remain unanswered:

1. What about ‘average’ gamers?

It is quite obvious that religious actors might have problems with representations of ‘their religion’ or specific moral concepts within the game design. Indeed, there are extensive discussions in various forums marked as explicit religious platforms. In addition to that, however, non-explicitly religious gamers also have to be taken into consideration, given that video games nowadays are among the most important media genres and no longer cater only for the younger generation. For example, studies have shown that only one third of gamers in Germany are between the ages of 14 and 19, the rest are older (Quandt and

inside and outside the major religious traditions. Bochinger et al. (2009), for example, showed how religious constructions with patchwork tendencies were pervading traditional areas such as parishes. Knoblauch (2014) opposes Hjarvard's interpretation that mediatization is banalizing religion – on the contrary, it supports the transformation into popular religion in “allowing both access to the marked forms and transgression of these marks“ (Knoblauch 2014, 216).

In addition, the very concept of media logic has been questioned in Communication and Media Studies in recent years (Krotz 2007, Hepp 2012). The field of Media Studies has relied on a particular media logic based on the idea that content always evolves from a specific form and is dependent on it, which has a specific effect on reality outside the media. By way of contrast, German communication theorist Krotz (2007) stressed the fact that the media can only be understood as inseparable from the construction of reality. His approach reflects communication research based on Action Theory and Cultural Studies. He understands mediatization as a ‘meta process’ of change, meaning a comprehensive framework used to describe change in culture and society in a theoretically informed way. From such a long-term perspective, the history of humankind could be described as a process “during which communication media became increasingly developed and used in various ways” (Krotz 2001, 33).

“Today, we can say that mediatization means at the least the following: (a) changing media environments . . . (b) an increase of different media . . . (c) the changing functions of old media . . . (d) new and increasing functions of digital media for the people and a growth of media in general (e) changing communication forms and relations between the people on the micro level, a changing organization of social life and changing nets of sense and meaning making on the macro level.” (Krotz 2008, 24)

Mediatization as a process has quantitative and qualitative aspects. In quantitative terms, the sheer amount of available technical communication media has increased over time, as has the various modes of appropriation of these media. Qualitatively, the processes of communicative construction of reality are increasingly marked by technical media. However, it is crucial to take the media not as isolated phenomena, but as reflecting the change of

communicative forms that goes hand in hand with media change. Furthermore, media alone are no longer to be seen as the only drivers of change processes, but should be understood as part of various socio-cultural processes of which mediatization is one. Both research traditions differ in their focus on how to theorize mediatization. Whereas the institutional tradition has, until recently, concentrated mainly on traditional mass media, the influence of which is described as a media logic, the social-constructivist tradition is more concerned with everyday communication practices – especially related to digital media and personal communication – and with the changing communicative construction of culture and society. Meyer also emphasizes that religious processes are always mediated:

“Religion, we argue, cannot be analyzed outside the forms and practices of mediation that define it ... the point is to explore how the transition from one mode of mediation to another, implying the adoption of new mass media technologies, reconfigures a particular practice of religious mediation.” (Meyer and Moors 2006, 7)

Thus our present-day everyday experience – also within the field of religion – is highly media-saturated. Classifications such as ‘online’ versus ‘offline’ (Helland 2000) and ‘virtual’ versus ‘real’ have therefore become highly problematic: “(t)he question arises how a dichotomy such as this can hold up, if presently everything is highly mediatized” (Radde-Antweiler 2013, 97), and offline and online are merging and interwoven (Consalvo and Ess 2011).

The media are not the only drivers of social change: it comes about via a combination of different socio-cultural processes in relation to which mediatization, as a “meta capital across different social fields” (Hepp 2013, 619), has to be considered. Methodologically, the consequence of this is that it is no longer a particular medium such as television or the Internet that constitutes a research subject in the analysis, but the individual actors in their mediatized – and in our field of analysis gametized – worlds, in so-called *gamevironments*.

What does this mean in relation to video games and religion? First of all, we should stress the point that, according to mediatization theory, neither media alone nor mediatized

influences the construction and design of video games as well as the gaming experience. One interesting question that arises is whether these gaming processes are the same worldwide, or whether there are different criteria for designing, experiencing, valuing and presenting games and gamer-generated content in different regional settings. Zeiler (2014) points out that a game centered on Hindu mythology draws the ire of some Hindu groups that question the appropriateness of incorporating Hindu deities into games. Šisler (2008) discusses the deliberate construction of Arab or Muslim identity in Arab video games in opposition to American games. In our understanding, this lays the foundation for a comparative approach, which could sharpen the theoretical and methodological considerations established and researched in 'Western' (European and American) contexts.

Let us come back to our case study *Bioshock Infinite*.¹ As we have shown, the game narrative comprises diverse religious topoi. Not surprisingly, there are many studies focusing on this game and its relation to religion (e.g., Bosman 2014). Although it is worthwhile to analyze game narratives, it becomes highly problematic if the results are generalized and claim conclusions on levels other than the design level. The question arises as to whether these results reveal anything except the use of religious topics within the game narrative. Most studies incorporating the analysis of narratives presuppose an inherent media logic according to which religious topics have a specific effect on gamers. The *gamevironments* approach may be helpful in avoiding such conclusions that are based on mere assumption. Let us consider the most prominent English-speaking and the most prominent German-speaking gamer, both of whom played *Bioshock Infinite*. The most prominent YouTuber in Germany at present is Gronkh, with over three million subscribers.² His *Bioshock Infinite* videos range from 65,000 to 400,000 views, with between 300 and 3,500 commentaries per video. As becomes obvious when one watches the videos, the religious references play only a minor role. The major topics of discussion include the quality of the graphics, the spoiler of other commentaries, the advertising of other YouTubers, and in-game strategies to improve fighting skills. The only exception is the discussion about the voice of the preacher, which belongs to Ned Flanders, a character from the TV serial *The Simpsons*. The most prominent English-speaking gamer is TobyGames

mensional lighthouses. I don't mean to sound glib. I didn't take it as a positive message, which is welcome.“ (PC Gamer 2013)

3. Let's Plays

To facilitate a deeper understanding of *gamevironments* and to illustrate precisely what we mean with the term, let us turn to a specific example of what is one part of *gamevironments*. One new 'environment' of games are the so-called 'Let's Plays' – increasingly and widely popular self-recorded gaming videos in which the respective gamers, the 'Let's Players', comment on their journey through the game as well as on various aspects of it. Let's Plays are basically produced for sharing as user-generated content on video broadcasting sites (very often, although not exclusively, on YouTube) and streaming video platforms (such as Twitch, Ustream, and MyVideo). They make it possible (1) for the gamers uploading them to publicly and globally display, transmit and share their individual gaming experiences, and (2) for the watchers, in other words the gaming community and the generally interested broad public, to share opinions, interpretations and cultural understandings of the game, the Let's Plays, the gamers behind the Let's Plays, and their own gaming experiences.

In contrast to so-called 'Playthroughs' or 'Walkthroughs', which are basically manuals advising how to play or walk through a game in the easiest and fastest way possible that in most cases do not include any comments, Let's Plays focus on an individual's subjective experience of a game. They always include the live comments of the Let's Players as they play, and increasingly also their self-recorded video images, which visualize them in the playing process. Such self-filmed documentation, inserted as a small window into the Let's Play, allows the watchers to participate directly in the respective Let's Players' gaming experience, opening up another level beyond audio, and reveals not only verbal information but also non-verbal, facial expressions. Let's Players' verbal comments obviously cover a broad spectrum, ranging from humorous to critical. As one major online community puts it:

We argue for a methodical differentiation between three different levels in the analysis of video games and religion. The first level, naturally, is that of the game. Such research will bring to light, in particular, details of the religio-scapes, belief systems and other religious content incorporated into a game by its designers and producers. The game and its narrative(s), as well as other aspects such as the aesthetics, technical peculiarities and game-design, and its contextualization comprise the foundations on which all interpretations, debates, and negotiations evolving from a game, as discussed by the recipients.

The second level is that of the Let's Play, which is the first of two levels focusing on the recipients' perspectives. A Let's Play includes a number of layers that need to be analyzed. It comprises the Let's Players' gaming performance, including their live comments, and increasingly also their self-recorded video images. This means that the audio and the visual layers play a role in the analysis of both Let's Play and the Let's Player. Analysis on this level yields information on specific gamers who chose to publicly share their subjective experience of the game.

The third level comprises the comments on a Let's Play and necessarily and implicitly complements the Let's Play level. The analysis of these comments opens up public discussion on a Let's Play and the game as portrayed by a very large number of gamers and generally interested audiences. This major source gives direct, unfiltered access to personal statements of opinion and interpretation, and to the recipients' discourse in general. Such a huge quantity of data needs to be handled in a structured, organized manner based on suitable approaches and methods. As stated above, Let's Plays comprise three different levels, each requiring specific methodology. For instance, the methodical problems already start with the archiving of the comments. It often happens that the number of comments is so high that browsers cannot display all of them. Accessing and archiving these new research data would therefore also require new technical solutions, such as new software. There is thus a pressing need for new theoretical and methodological approaches in the research on *gamevironments* in general, and Let's Plays in particular.¹¹

Only by acknowledging all three levels, as we argue above, will it be possible to decipher and thoroughly analyze the role of religion from the perspectives of the people who play the game (the gamers) and the people discussing, debating and commenting on it (the Let's Play watchers, who of course may well be gamers playing the same game they are following). It is imperative to look at all three levels, especially if the interest is in the actors' (gamers, Let's Players, and/or Let's Play watchers) reception of the game and its contents. Let us give two examples that illustrate the risk in staying restricted to one level, whether it be that of the game narrative, the Let's Play, or the comments).

I. *Asura's Wrath*¹²

The globally very well received action video game *Asura's Wrath* (Japan 2012, Capcom) was explicitly developed for a global audience, and was released simultaneously in Asia, Europe and North America. Its unique multiple-genre style features cinematic anime shorts into which the game-play is integrated and thus allows the gamer to switch between third-person combat, rail shooting and interactive cinematic sequences with gamer input. The game's narrative (and its aesthetics) draws strongly from Buddhist and Hindu mythological constructs and beliefs, which are then interconnected with science-fiction elements, apparently also in order to edit the unfamiliar concepts for global gaming audiences. The game is a perfect example of the provision of religio-scapes for both Asian and global religious identities. In itself it contains very many references to Buddhist and Hindu traditions: the narrative makes use of belief structures and terminology (such as karma and samsara), mythological names (such as Asura and Durga), mythological weapons (such as the brahmasastra), mythological frameworks (such as the Vrtra mythology from the Rgveda), for example, and the game aesthetics lean heavily on Buddhist and, to some extent, Hindu traditions. All this has earned the applause of reviewers:

“The characters in *Asura's Wrath* have a unique look fashioned after Buddhist statuary. As they take damage, their skin begins to peel away in layers like a lacquer statue. The amount of thought, research and effort that went into conveying this process makes me smile from ear to ear. ... It's a very cool way to imbue the characters with a sense of mythology and high technology, making them feel like Buddhist cyborgs. It's simply awesome.” (Lee 2012)

All aspects of the game thus strongly and unequivocally indicate one and the same thing: we have lots of religion here! This makes the game as such seem like the ideal case study for research on video games and religion. Analysis on this level only, however, allows no conclusions to be drawn with regard to how recipients receive and discuss this religious content, or whether it is important to them in any way at all. On the next level of analysis, the Let's Play level, it indeed soon becomes clear that religious topoi or issues are no longer as prominent as on the game level. The intensity and complexity of the Let's Players' comments on aspects of the game's religion background differ, of course, but nowhere is it even remotely close to prominent. Analysis of a sample¹³ of four Let's Plays on *Asura's Wrath* from two different Let's Players revealed that the Buddhist/Hindu religious termini and/or concepts implemented in the game rarely attract any comment.

The absence of comments reflecting on or referring to religion is certainly unexpected, given the prominent role of religion in the game, but it is also visible on the last level of analysis, that of the comments. Here, again, are very few comments on the religious content, the discussion rather focusing on the technical aspects of *Asura's Wrath*. When the discussion does turn to the religious content, it tends to be restricted to details of the game-immanent religious narrative, as in this comment referring to the *Asura's Wrath* game universe:

“technically, within the Asura Universe, Chakravartin (?) is the One God. But since your obviously a religious nut, you might as well ignore me.”¹⁴

Very few comments refer to the game-immanent mythology resp. terminology on a more universal level and adumbrate some commentator's background knowledge, which they share here:

“If you've studied hindu mythology, you saw this coming the second you first saw that spider...”¹⁵

“Huh? I've not studied hindu, and now you've made me very curious. Will you explain this, please?”¹⁶

What is surprising here is the extent of the discussion and debate about this very ethical dilemma on the comment level. It attracts comments and triggers discussions, most of which reflect on how to make moral and ethical decisions in dilemma situations. One discussed topic concerns the entitlement to make selfish decisions and to act in interests of a group even when in a very difficult situation oneself:

“and i sometimes get embarrassed to see someone be harsh to some other survivors. i would never have a bad attitude even in the apocalypse.”²²

The role of individually felt guilt and love as factors influencing a person's decision-making is also repeatedly commented upon:

“I don't know if I'd say the same thing. Joel is selfish, but Ellie is currently the most IMPORTANT person in his life, he's taken to her like she's his daughter. But it's more beyond personal feelings, I could say it's also about his OWN life. It's after all that personal loss that he can't let the person he cares most for—I doubt he would have the drive to look for others again and find someone he cares deeply enough for to keep going on his own. Basically, I imagine Joel would die without her. Could you really kill her, and yourself for others, when, like others say, the large amount of people you're trying to save have become trash that you wonder if they're really worth saving?”²³

Religio-scapes, religious belief constructs, symbolism and mythologies, for example, are not prominent in any way in *The Last of Us* case. Its attractiveness and thrill factor derive almost exclusively from a number of very emotional situations, all of which are based on events within and/or negotiations of interpersonal relations. The absence of religion in a narrow sense is then upheld on the Let's Play and comment levels. Interestingly, however, the ethical dilemmas and moral questions arising from the game narrative play a massive role as far as the recipients are concerned, especially on the comment level. We argue that when game-immanent topoi directly touch the recipients' life-worlds they are very likely to be taken up in the *gamevironments*, as in the Let's Play comments: emotional sequences obviously trigger debate. Here, the game intensively stimulates the discussion of ethical and moral behavior and, as such, of value systems. These discussions then very often broach the issue of religious value systems and religious motivations for moral norms, both in and beyond the game narrative.

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