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Inaugural Issue

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

by

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points in their arguments, however, is that the link between violent games and aggressive behavior is not consistent:

“Many studies pointing to such an effect suffer from weak methodologies and an artificial setup of both the measures and the playing situation itself, while more carefully designed experiments show there are many variables to be considered that are more important than violent content.” (Elson and Ferguson 2014, 39)

They also suggest that experimental studies are inconsistent in terms of outcome, giving way to long-term studies. This weakness shows itself in the experimental setting, which is artificially created. The aim in these studies is to measure the gamers’ reactions and to observe what ludology would refer to as the outcome of the interactive experience, but they identify no consistent effects. The effects they do identify are sometimes contradictory, and sometimes inconclusive. Other meta-analytical studies (Sherry 2007, Ferguson and Kilburn 2009) report minimal effects of violent games. Sherry also found differences between survey studies and experimental studies, the former reporting a bigger effect than the latter. This trend could be relevant to game research in the field of religion, and with regard to video games. Whereas ludology claims that gamer interaction is the foremost characteristic of the gaming situation, narratology gives greater weight to the content. As shown above, research on religion and video games already encompasses these two aspects, which nevertheless comprise two sides of the same coin. Delving into the research field of game effects revealed methodological problems related to experimental settings and their artificiality, as well as a certain bias in survey studies. Research on video games and religion needs to find a way of overcoming these problems while maintaining its broad and diverse approaches. There is a need for a methodological approach that maintains the cultural, theological and social aspects of game content, while at the same time incorporating the performative aspects and ritualized forms of ludic interaction that establish such a broad connection between religion and video games.

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

Wimmer 2009). It is also common knowledge nowadays that video games are a significant factor in social as well as religious education. It is therefore important to include all gamers and people interested in games in studies analyzing the relationship between the construction of a religious identity and video games.

2. Is there a direct effect between the video game and the actor, or is it much more complicated?

Previous studies (Campbell 2005, Helland 2000, Hoover 2002) indicate that the new media are highly relevant in the study of recent religious discourses. Dawson (2004), for example, points out that the establishment of the Internet has changed the face of religion. The concept of media logic (Altheide and Snow 1979), which is based on the assumption that modern media influences social life to an increasing extent, has dominated the field of Communication and Media Studies. Various aspects of culture and society, such as religion, are driven by such logic, which serves economic interests. Hjarvard (2008), for example, applies this thinking to the field of religion and makes the case that the increasing mediatization of society contributes to secularization. The concept of media logic has been questioned in Communication and Media Studies. Media Studies presuppose a specific logic that has a specific effect on reality – outside the media, which are thereby considered a separate social field alongside politics, economics, and religion. Lövheim and Gynch (2011) published an extensive criticism of Hjarvard's work. She focuses primarily on his concept of religion, which recognizes only a theological doctrine represented as a fully-fledged religion, the main function of which is reflected in the definition and legitimation of social reality. Following Meyer (2006), she advocates an understanding of religion as practices of mediation, which “claims to mediate the transcendent, spiritual, or supernatural and make these accessible for believers.” (Meyer 2006, 7)

This underlying secularization thesis seems quite problematic in the light of recent theoretical debates. Recent religion is perceived as something that is individualized and dynamic (Hervieux-Leger 1993) and without boundaries in an institutional and cultural sense (Bourdieu 1987). Diverse empirical studies show that such fluid religion can be observed

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:

“Usually Let’s Play videos consist of jokes (Good, bad, and/or corny), frustration, and bewilderment by the ones playing. Some also explain gameplay, easter eggs, and general trivia pertaining to the game being played.”⁴

In general, Let’s Plays seem to draw such intense interest from a very large audience, which regularly follows the latest uploads and streams, because they offer a distinct, often highly individual approach to the way a game can be played and a game-play experienced. It is by no means a marginal phenomenon, as user numbers clearly show. Quite on the contrary: the most prominent Let’s Player worldwide, PewDiePie, has more than 32 million subscribers on YouTube,⁵ and his daily uploaded videos are watched by four to six million people. Other popular Let’s Players also have very high numbers of subscribers and views: TobyGames, for instance, has close to seven million subscribers on YouTube, Markiplier close to five million and Gronkh close to 3.5million.⁶ The attraction of Let’s Plays to so many people also, not surprisingly, brought about a new fandom culture centered on certain star gamers:

“Sometimes – most times, I’d say – it’s not the game people tune in for, but the player. It’s why people pick favorites, why you’re more likely to hear about the Let’s Player and not so much about the Let’s Play. People don’t care what game is being played, they want to see the person who plays it. That’s the big appeal to Let’s Plays. It’s kinda like a new form of comedy or reality television, I guess.”⁷

Let’s Plays also have increasing economic importance. Let’s Players are very often financed through commercial advertisement, which provides their income. The success of the advertisements depends on the numbers of views a Let’s Player attracts and led to the fact that Let’s Players increasingly become organized in so-called networks. Just recently, in December 2014, the German Let’s Player Unge (formerly Ungespielt) got intense media attention for public harsh critique on his network. With such (and other) media attention,⁸ Let’s Players also increasingly become visible in the public discourse.

Let’s Plays are produced and watched all over the world and are, by definition, highly global. The national or regional affiliations of both Let’s Players and people watching and commenting on a Let’s Play, in most cases for these very people play a very minor role, or even none at all. For the researcher this means that in most cases it is rather easy to detect

the national background or country of residence of a Let's Player, but it is much more difficult or even impossible in the case of most Let's Play commentators because they tend to not refer to their regional or national backgrounds. The only reliable indicator of at least regional belonging, therefore, is language. The vast majority of Let's Plays are produced, watched and commented on in English, but there are also rather large and growing Let's Play communities using German, Spanish, Japanese and Korean (and certainly smaller Let's Play productions and audiences in other, mainly European and Asian, languages).

Many of these Let's Plays are watched by several millions of people, and views on one single Let's Play such as *GTA V*⁹ or *Happy Wheels*¹⁰ uploaded by popular gamers such as PewDiePie can reach more than 16 million. They also attract emotional and at times highly controversial comments from many tens of thousands of people. Comments on one single Let's Play uploaded on YouTube can reach more than 60,000. These comments provide a new and effective way of directly accessing discussions, and also interpretations of a game by the people interested in it. Because Let's Plays obviously induce people to express their opinions and make emotional statements on topics addressed in the game and/or by the Let's Play/Let's Player, which leads to (at times heated) discussions and debates on a large variety of subjects (including religion) among a very large number of people, we now have abundant, brand-new research data. These comments and conversations give direct access to the discourse on the transformation of religious content by the people who perform this very discourse.

Acknowledging Let's Plays as new research field – that is as *gameenvironments* – brings a huge new pool of research data to the study of video games and religion, but most importantly it extends the research and analysis from the games and their possible religious content to include the recipients' perspective. The value of Let's Plays for the research on religion and gaming, then, lies in the opening up of two more levels in addition to the game level.

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)

II. *The Last of Us*²¹

Our second example demonstrates that such highly divergent results concerning the religious content on the three levels discussed above can occur in any combination: in other words, religion may dominate other than on the game level. Its prominent role is therefore not necessarily restricted to the game's narrative, but can emerge in unexpected ways. *The Last of Us* (USA 2013, Naughty Dog), a third-person survival horror action video game, is set in a post-apocalyptic scenario. The game received over 200 'Game of the Year' awards and was the second-largest PlayStation 3 video game launch of 2013. It is set in the year 2033, twenty years since a fungal-based, brain-altering pandemic had infected considerably more than half of the world's population. Not (yet) affected Joel and Ellie try to survive and to find a cure. On their journey they suffer losses and have to constantly defend themselves.

Religious content does not dominate the narrative in this case study, and religious issues, symbols, and beliefs play no important role. What are highlighted here are interpersonal relationships, and the storyline slowly develops the relationship between the two main characters. Ellie assumes more and more of a daughter-like status for Joel, who lost his real daughter in the chaotic and violent aftermath of the pandemic, and a bond very similar to a father-daughter relationship develops. Joel saves Ellie's life at a certain point in the narrative, although her death would probably have resulted in the development of a cure that would save mankind.

The Let's Play level in this case study does not reveal discussions or comments on religious content per se. What some Let's Players reflect upon, however, is the very situation that poses the ethical dilemma. The decision of whether or not to save Ellie (saving her requires taking action and shooting an unarmed doctor) is often understood as a moral challenge. Joel's decision to save her, thereby depriving mankind of a possible cure constitutes the most emotional, controversial and complex sequence in the game narrative. As such, it is also taken up, to some extent, on the Let's Play level.

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¹ First discussed from this perspective by Radde-Antweiler 2014.

² Numbers by 22 December 2014.

³ Numbers by 22 December 2014.

⁴ Let's Plays defined by the reddit subthread 'letsplay', see r/letsplay 2014.

⁵ Numbers by 22 December 2014.

⁶ Numbers by 22 December 2014.

⁷ See Saetha 2014.

⁸ See for example articles in the most prominent German newspapers:

<http://www.zeit.de/news/2014-12/22/medien-streit-mit-netzwerk-youtuber-stellt-kanaele-ein-22160405>,

<http://www.bild.de/digital/internet/internet-hype/youtube-star-simon-unge-stoppt-kanaele-39063584.bild.html>,

<http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/games/mediakraft-star-simon-unge-wuetendes-abschiedsvideo-youtube-a-009803.html>, accessed 23 December 2014.

⁹ See PewDiePie 2013.

¹⁰ See PewDiePie 2012.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the new proposed methods for researching and analyzing the individual three Let's Play levels, see Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2015 forthc.

¹² First discussed with this approach by Zeiler 2014b.

¹³ For this case study, a sample of four Let's Plays, namely the respective first and last out of complete playlists on the game by two different Let's Players, were analyzed.

¹⁴ See Naraku9108.

¹⁵ See geekof92.

¹⁶ See TheEdgeOfTheCoin.

¹⁷ See Ranting Otaku.

¹⁸ See MacyPooh196.

¹⁹ See JoJoMdadara.

²⁰ See noelle Jones.

²¹ First discussed from this perspective by Waltemathe 2014b.

²² See FacelessDeadly.

²³ See Pyranut.