# gamevironments

Gamevironments from the perspective of an actant. ChatGPT (prompt: "gamevironments").

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# Gamevironments Revisited

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## *Gamevironments* as an Analytical Lens for Studying Gaming and Culture. A Critical Revision

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**Abstract**

This introduction unfolds the argumentation of what exactly is meant by the concept of gamevironments published in 2014 (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014), what change of perspective the concept entails, and how it differs from existing research. On this basis, it critically reflects on the extent to which the concept was still thought to be too vague and, in part, not contextualized consistently enough at that time, and on the extent to which necessary changes must be made. Furthermore, it presents the further development that took place in 2017 with the introduction of the research matrix *gamevironments as communicative figuration* (Radde-Antweiler 2018a) and what methodological as well as theoretical implications this implies. Finally, the article critically discusses whether the concept is suitable only for the study of religion and video gaming or takes a broader approach to the critical research of video games and culture.

## God Bless Ubisoft? An Introduction

On April 15th, 2019 the iconic cathedral Notre-Dame in Paris suffered a devastating fire that threatened to obliterate one of the world's most significant architectural and religious landmarks. Even if more than 400 fire workers tried to extinguish the fire, it nearly killed vast amounts of parts of the cathedral. For example, the spire collapsed and the majority of the roof was damaged beyond repair. After a short period of

time, there were a lot of expressions of sympathy and messages of condolences on social media. The world seemed shocked at the immense destruction of one of the most symbolic religious monuments of our time. Shortly after, French President Emmanuel Macron declared a five-year plan to restore the cathedral and up to now, over 1 billion euros have been donated for reconstruction so far.

While it is probably clear why this incident can be connected to religion, the question could be raised, what does the destruction of the Notre-Dame have to do with video games? Interestingly, not only individual private persons or well-known companies such as Apple or L'Oréal donated funds for the reconstruction, but also game development companies like Ubisoft were part of the donors and spent 500.000 Euros (Holt 2019). But it was not just about giving money to rebuild a religious building. In addition to its donation, Ubisoft argued that the Notre-Dame cathedral is essential to one of its gaming franchises. One of Ubisoft's most prominent game series is *Assassins Creed*, a franchise that started in 2007 with its first game and has developed twelve in the main series and several additional spin-offs. The underlying storyline of all games consists of a conflict between Assassins and Templars that has been going on for centuries, with the player mainly embodying an Assassin. The games' settings are mostly specific regional places in the past, focusing on actual historical events. The eighth game, *Assassin's Creed Unity* from 2014, took place in the time of the French Revolution and was praised for its accuracy in presenting 1700s Paris and especially in its depiction of the renowned Notre-Dame cathedral. However, even if Ubisoft worked on modeling the cathedral solely for two years, the representation in the video game isn't entirely faithful to the Notre-Dame cathedral of the time. Responding to player feedback, game developers reintroduced the cathedral's historic spire to their virtual representation, despite the fact that the original spire had been dismantled in 1786, well before the French Revolution, and

later reconstructed during the 19th century. Ubisoft, with the help of academic advisors, put much effort and to create an authentic representation of historical settings as the production coordinator Maxime Durand put it in an interview "history in our games is not just a backdrop or empty buildings on a Hollywood backlot" (Beer 2014).

The consequence of this detailed reconstruction of the Notre-Dame cathedral, on the basis of a range of shots for the virtual set, was that they pledged its virtual rendition and their research from *Assassin's Creed Unity* to the restoration team in 2019 (Holzer n.d.). So, even if the game model as such wasn't used as such in the restoration of the cathedral, they used the photos Ubisoft collected in their preparation of the game (ibid.). In addition, Ubisoft allowed PC players to play it for free for a week, to raise awareness of this crisis, but also so that they still can experience the cathedral while climbing on it even if it was gone in the analog world (Ubisoft 2019). What does this case study tell us about the relationship between religion and video gaming? From my perspective, various points become visible here: first of all, we need to focus not only on video games as such, but on gaming-related media: the first and, in my opinion, most important point is that even if video games are in the core of the field, it's not just about them. As the case study shows, there are much more media and practices in general involved. To understand the relationship between the Notre-Dame cathedral incident and Ubisoft, it's not sufficient to focus just on the specific game *Assassin's Creed Unity*. However, different media formats involved are, for example, Ubisoft's website announcing their cooperation, video streaming platforms with Let's Players discussing this, and also players discussing Ubisoft's actions on different gaming services such as on Steam discussion forums:

> "Thanks Ubisoft & Assassin's Creed Unity for giving us an opportunity to appreciate what Notre Dame used to be. God bless France." (Grayson 2019)

As a consequence, there were a lot of gaming and news magazines that wrote about this cooperation and are because of that part of the related media practices.

But of course, not only the players, game developers, or other actors involved in the gaming processes (e.g., the academic advisors for creating the historical environments in 2014) are important in a potential analysis of the relationship between video gaming and religion. We also have to integrate actors who have nothing to do with the video gaming-related media and practices as such but are forced to position themselves to it. These are, for example, the Roman Catholic Church in Paris and Rome, but also religious magazines that reported on that. For example, the independent Roman Catholic Church magazine *Crux* spent an article on Ubisoft's efforts and came to the conclusion that "Notre Dame helped shape 'Assassin's Creed: Unity,' and now the game will get to return the favor – both to the cathedral and to Paris as a whole" (Smith 2019). This was an interesting twist, because in times before the Church – but also gamers – have criticized the game franchise for its critical representation of the Christian Church and its history, for example, a reviewer on catholicgamereviews.com stated

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> "Never in my entire time as a gamer have I seen a game so openly malicious towards Catholicism. The game also implies Islam is just as illegitimate, but never as directly or explicitly as Christianity. So not only is Assassin's Creed brazenly blasphemous, but it does so while implementing a double standard." (TheGoodHoms 2022)

In the following, the article unfolds the argumentation of what exactly is meant by the concept of gamevironments published in 2014 (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014), what change of perspective the concept entails, and how it differs from existing research. On this basis, it critically reflects on the extent to which the concept was still thought to be too vague and, in part, not contextualized consistently enough

at that time, and on the extent to which necessary changes must be made. Furthermore, it presents the further development that took place in 2017 with the introduction of the research matrix *gamevironments as communicative figuration* (Radde-Antweiler 2018a) and what methodological as well as theoretical implications this implies. Finally, the article critically discusses whether the concept is suitable only for the study of religion and video gaming or takes a broader approach to the critical research of video games and culture.

## We are Living in Times of Deep Gametization – Preliminary Remarks

We are living not only in a deeply mediatized but in a deeply gametized society. In their manifesto, Zimmerman and Chaplin (2013) declared the 21st century a "ludic century," that is, one that is going to be defined by games. But what do we mean if we are using concepts such as *deep mediatization* and *deep gametization*? Let's start with defining the first: Especially in the field of religion and digital media, a lot has been written on how to understand mediatization (e.g., Lövheim 2011, Lövheim and Lynch 2022, or Zeiler 2019). In contrast to Hjarvard's (2008) mediatization approach, which includes an understanding that the media's logic is determining other fields by its inherent logic, the concept of deep mediatization is based on an understanding that mediatization describes a longer process of media change and goes hand in hand with other meta-processes that caused transformation processes (Krotz 2009). However, times of deep mediatization (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018) can be characterized as an "overall digitalization and connectivity of various 'old' media and the emergence of 'new' digital ones" (Hepp and "Communicative Figurations" research network 2017, 14). This observation underscores the complexity of societal transformations, highlighting that no single medium can be solely credited with

driving social change. And furthermore – based on the notion of mediatization as only one metaprocess among others – that there are no monocausally conceived changes due to media changes only. However, in times of deep mediatization Hepp and Hasebrink (2018) identified certain trends and consequences which can be observed within society:

> "1. Differentiation of a vast amount of technologically-based communication media, which exist next to each other and take a bundle of forms;
> 2. Increasing connectivity of and through these media;
> 3. Rising omnipresence of media;
> 4. Rapid pace of innovation related to the emergence of 'new' media and services in ever shorter periods of time;
> 5. Datafication, that is, the representation of social life through computerized data produced by media devices and their underlying software and infrastructure." (Hall, Kołodziejska and Radde-Antweiler 2023, 35)

These trends can lead to consequences such as new opportunities for participation; an increase in options but also of social surveillance at the same time, a blurring of boundaries between different social spheres, etc. (cf. Hepp and "Communicative Figurations" research network 2017). So, with this in mind, we have to ask how communicative practices change in times when actors live in a qualitatively and quantitatively expanded media environment and – looking at the developments in digital technology, especially but not exclusively in fields of education – in a more and more gametized environment. In line with the term deep mediatization, we can speak of *deep gametization*.

Video gaming has still been judged critically in the public discourse, be it as a fundamental danger for addiction, especially for overweight, young males. And also, video gaming is named as one of the reasons for school attacks. However, in contrast to these stereotypes, graphics draw a different landscape: the global market revenue

shows that in 2022 more than 335 billion euros was spent on video game sales alone worldwide (Statista 2024a), not counting the money for the related franchise, TV series, and advertising revenue on YouTube. Examining the global digital media revenue landscape reveals a remarkable trend: the games segment now commands approximately half of the total revenue, with its market share continuing to grow (game 2024). Furthermore, video game revenues are estimated to increase by more than 12% by 2027 (ibid.). Not surprisingly, Asia represents the largest share of this (two thirds), followed by the US (106 billion) and then Europe with 47 billion. In a comparison of countries, China has the largest sales with around one third of this (approximately 109 billion). However, in relation to the video game penetration rate, the UK has the highest one, followed by Japan, South Korea, Sweden, and Mexico.

But it is not only in terms of financial resources that video games are an essential part of social life. If we look at the age distribution of video gamers in Germany in 2022 for example, it becomes obvious that the numbers are distributed very regularly among the different age groups (game 2024). It's not only the younger generation, but the highest percentage (18%) of players are persons between 30 and 39 and persons between 50 and 59 years. And even for the group from 12 to 19 years, the JIM study has shown that the gender distribution is quite balanced: 90% of the girls and 98% of boys are playing video games, however boys more regularly (Feierabend et al. 2024, 3).

So, it is not surprising that in recent years, a lot of research has been done on the relationship between both. Religion in relation to video gaming played a role in various set-ups: gaming as religion (e.g., Wagner 2012), religious gamers (e.g., Luft 2014), or religious narratives within video games. However, due to the former and sometimes still the recent role of video games as neglected media, many of these

publications dealt with the legitimization of this research by showing the existence of religion and the richness of religious elements in video games. Due to the usual legitimation arguments for a new field of research, video games were primarily singled out as special. It was emphasized that they are completely different from other media, e.g., because of their immersion, interactivity, etc. But is it so easy? Or in other words: does the appearance of religious elements necessarily show a *religionization* of video gaming? And if not, what exactly happens when video gaming and religious elements are brought together by human beings?

Early play theorists like Huizinga (1955, 10) described games as creating a distinct realm within ordinary reality, characterized by a unique sense of order. His *magic circle* metaphor conceptualizes these spaces as "temporary worlds within the ordinary world," emphasizing play's ability to establish a structured environment separate from daily life. Expanding on this idea, Bogost (2006) introduced the concept of the *simulation gap*, which highlights the inherent biases and ideological underpinnings of games. This theory suggests an inevitable disconnect between a player's subjective experience and the game's objective simulation, revealing the tension between the messy complexity of reality and the engineered order of game worlds. These perspectives collectively underscore how games create carefully constructed alternate spaces that both reflect and diverge from our lived experiences, offering a nuanced lens for understanding play as a complex cultural phenomenon (cf. also Hao 2020).

From a mediatization perspective, digital games are far more than mere historical reflections of political, social, or religious realities. They actively participate in constructing and shaping these realities, serving as dynamic communicative platforms that generate and transmit worldviews. As products deeply embedded in their historical moment, games render visible and interactive the social norms,

acceptable narratives, and conceptual frameworks of their era. Consequently, they function as rich scholarly resources, offering researchers nuanced insights into popular cultural and societal understandings – including the complex dimensions of religious representation and perception.

Jesper Juul (2006) has already stressed the necessity of following an approach that goes beyond game-immanent narratives because of gamers' different gaming experiences. While Castronova (2008) presupposes a gap between the *real world* and the *virtual world*, or in his words an *in there* versus *out here*, the socio-constructivist mediatization approach postulates an increasing integration of digital technology into religious actors' everyday lives. In this sense, Religious social realities are shaped through communication and are categorized as religious or non-religious/secular based on specific preconditions and power dynamics. These interpretations and negotiations occur through what are known as communicative practices. In modern times, such processes are increasingly taking place on social media platforms From this perspective, it is clear that video games are part of these construction processes and not independent or existing beside the so-called real world or mere mirrors of these processes. The same is true of the immensely difficult concept of a digital religion, which by its very name still presupposes that there is another – a non-digital – form of religion alongside it.

To sum up, constructions of (religious) identity do not stop at a digital border between the game world and so-called real life but impact the self-understanding of the gamer. From the mediatization perspective, video gaming needs to be an integral part of researching religious identity in times of deep mediatization. Or to ask in a more provocative way: Can we even investigate processes of religious identity formations without taking mediatization processes – and as an important part of it,

gametized lifeworlds – into account? However, we must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Or in other words, it is important to acknowledge that neither (digital) media nor video games are the only or main reasons for social change but are interconnected to different social and cultural processes such as individualization, economization, or globalization – just to name a few. It follows that we must not over-interpret our results in terms of social – and also religious – change, but rather understand and accept our focus as *one* part of that change. By that, we have to recognize our own limits of research – as any research must! After more than 20 years of research, we have to step out of the defensive mode and admit that even if video gaming is in fact an important and legitimate object of study, it is not so special. In contrast to emphasizing the specificity of games research or video games as such, it would do us good to see video gaming as a part of changing media landscapes and also as a part of the overall cultural and social change, which is always related to other media formats or even processes of change. This means that our research must always be aware of research in other areas and relate it to our findings. If for example, we want to evaluate transformation processes in relation to religious communication, it is critical to correlate our findings to processes of globalization or secularization and not only to processes of deep mediatization or deep gametization. And even within games research, we have to ask critically why we focus solely on video games. Shouldn't we have to integrate board games as an integral part of gaming – not only to gain a historical perspective but to acknowledge that they are still an essential part of gamevironments' media.

## It's All Gaming Related! Actors, Media Practices, and Media Formats

But what do we mean if we speak of research on gamevironments' media, and what is then the necessary object of investigation? In this part, the article will argue, based on cultural studies, that research on gaming is more than just the game or its narratives neither on the gamers solely. As the analytical concept of *gamevironments* stresses, we need to put the whole *gaming environment* into research focus – this was the reason why we created the portmanteau combining the terms *gaming* and *environment*. For that, we need to broaden our research on two levels: first, the level of involved actors and their media practices, and second, the level of involved media formats.

The classical trisection mostly distinguishes between the levels of

1. video game production,
2. video game and
3. video gamers.

Whereas the first and third levels consist of persons or actors, the second is focused mainly on the game as a medium. So, let's start with the levels that involve different kinds of actors.

It is undisputed that the level of game production is one of the most difficult levels of analysis. This has to do with several factors. For one thing, the actors involved are difficult to access. For example, it is only possible in exceptional cases for researchers to accompany the planning and production of a videogame or to reconstruct it retrospectively with the help of interviews of those involved. Here, too, however, the

fundamental question is who is actually involved and how? In the case of AAA games in particular, the question arises as to which of the various people responsible for the project made which decisions regarding the game narrative or the visual design (cf. for example, de Wildt 2023). This is especially true for large game productions, where the games are developed in companies all over the world. It is therefore not surprising that most of the research on video game production and especially religion – if not in general – has mostly focused on so-called indie games.

But also, the third level – the video gamers – is not without problems. As the example of *Assassin's Creed*, in the beginning, has clearly shown, the field of video games has societal consequences and therefore all involved actors need to be taken into consideration. Especially the field of serious games (actually an absurdity in itself, because this suggests that the rest of the games have no seriousness in their content or effects) shows that there are other actors involved as well, e.g., NGOs that have video games produced in order to transmit certain content pedagogically. One example of that is the game *Bad News* (2018) where the player has to spread fake news to gain many followers and that was developed by the Dutch organization DROG to promote media literacy. And video games such as *Go Duterte* (2016) – a game produced in the Philippines not only referring to but supporting former president Duterte (Grieve et al. 2018) – indicate that video games can be used as political propaganda tools. And also, the current discussion of *Atomic Heart* (2023) shows that video games are far from being mere entertainment objects, but can be political propaganda and part of political and societal world events.

So, in order to understand video games and their role in their respective cultural contexts and societies, we need to include all actors that are related to video gaming and not only the gaming producers or the gamers as such. It is important to note that

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the claim of actor-centered research is not congruent to a gamer-immanent approach. As I already stressed in 2018, the "gamer-immanent approach" (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2015) opts for a "combination of actor-centered and game-immanent approaches towards game research" (Heidbrink and Knoll 2016, 2). The difference is – besides the conflicting underlying theoretical presumptions (in detail cf. Radde-Antweiler 2018a) is the understanding of *actors*. While the gamer-immanent approach quite rightly calls for an integration of studies of both game-immanent narratives and in-game actors and to include the perspective of the players themselves – something that was already done by others (e.g., Juul 2006) – the gamevironments concept goes one step further and expands the perspective even more. The implied actor-centered perspective focuses "on people who play games and who are interested and influenced by them in their gaming environments" (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2024, 14). The latter sounds rather incidental and can easily be overlooked, however, it has been one of the main ideas of the concept in 2014. However, this is also somewhat self-inflicted, since the article only briefly touches on these ideas and does not expand on them. The article from 2018 even goes one step back and defined actors' constellations as "gamers as well as game producers that are interrelated and communicate with each other" (Radde-Antweiler 2018a, 212). Here a critical revision has to expand on this idea a bit more and discuss what are the consequences of the gamevironments approach.

So, what do we understand as actors that are connected to gaming environments – that are gamevironments? In general, this refers really to *all* actors that have a direct or indirect relation to gaming. In line with the classical tripartition, we can differentiate a bit more and distinguish between:

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a) actors *related to* the gam*ing* production

b) actors *related to* gam*ing*

c) actors *related to* the reception of gam*ing*

Two questions arise. First, why gam*ing* and not game related? Even the introduction of the gamevironments concept in 2014 made clear that "that it is not only the game in its relation to religion that is the research object but the whole gaming process This process includes the people who play games and who are interested and influenced by them in their gaming environments which is precisely what we call gamevironments." (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, 14). Now, some will argue that research on games, which talks about games, has always had gaming in mind. But language is treacherous, and it should be clear from the beginning that not only games – and the practices that evolve from them, such as gaming – must be the starting point of scientific research, but that from the beginning all practices that relate to the much broader field of gaming itself should be considered.

Second, why *related to* instead of *involved in*? Let me give you an example. Studies such as the one by de Wildt (2023) has focused on so-called decision-makers – creators, editors, and game developer. They can be labeled as actors involved in game production. However, to draw a broader – and perhaps more complete? – picture of the creation of a game, you have to take more actors into consideration. For example, what about the sponsors? They decide what could be profitable or not and, in line with that, what game topics or what form of games can be profitable? And actors involved in the public relation of a game as well influence the development and the advertisement of a game as well by deciding what press content is published at what time. This sounds redundant, but if we are reflecting on the *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2017) case study from the introduction, the decision on

what was published by Ubisoft could have had different effects on society and also other actors, e.g., the Church media to position itself to Ubisoft's offer. And furthermore, in relation to actors related to the reception of the game, the power and influence of Let's Plays for example made clear that the discussion of a game in the public discourse can be influenced by people who have just watched people playing the game without even having played it by themselves. Another good example is e-sports – a field where the different interests and connected to that, the different actors involved, become visible. Just to name a few: the gamers, the audience and fans, the fan organizations, people from the game industry, political stakeholders, international organizations such as the IOC that decided if at all and then which games within the e-sport section become part of Olympic sports and of course also the journalists who discussed this issue widely. But of course, there are other societal parts that are affected by video gaming but are mostly not visible and not discussed prominently: just like other technology video gaming demands a lot of hardware and software, and furthermore, growing server capacities combined with an increase in energy consumption. This so-called e-waste has consequences for a lot more players than gamers or game developers. However, if we want to focus on video gaming research all related actors have to be taken into consideration.

To sum up, the *gamevironments* concept is so far based on an actor-centered approach that goes way beyond the gamer-centered approach. But to push the whole thing to the extreme and expand it even more, the interesting question, however, with regard to a further critical development of the gamevironments approach, is to what extent an additional extension in relation to individual human actors is needed. Or in other words: could it be fruitful to speak of actants in contrast to actors? In light of actor-network theory by Latour (1996), not only human actors but all entities within a network – that is society – have an impact on it. So "it does

not limit itself to human individual actors but extends the word actor – or actant – to non-human, non-individual entities" (Latour 1996, 369). As a consequence, it is not sufficient to focus on human individual actors as the only ones producing meaning. The social thus emerges not only between humans but also with the participation of non-human entities. In regard to our field, that means that it is not enough to consider the human actors related to video gaming but to consider the agency of other entities as well, be it the screen, the computer, the software from which the game is made, the mouse, etc. Research on communication in relation to datafication has stressed that it is necessary not to stop "at the communicative relationship between individual humans and machines but expanding our view to the role played by automation in societal communication" (Hepp and "Communicative Figurations" research network, 47). A revisited *gamevironments* concept should therefore be based not on an actor-centered but on an *actant-centered* approach. What does that mean? An actant-centered methodology demands a comprehensive perspective that encompasses both human and non-human actors, including technological elements such as hardware and software. Depending on the specific research focus, additional non-human actants may be incorporated into the analytical framework.

In line with an actant-centered approach, we have to focus on

1. gaming-related actors,
2. gaming related media, and the
3. gaming-related (media) practices, which are practices relating the actors and the media formats to each other.

The focus on gam*ing* instead of games made clear, that there is more than the game when it comes to media that is involved in gaming. We developed the concept of

*gamevironments* in 2014 to focus on the actor in their gametized lifeworld. Such a gametized lifeworld takes into consideration not only the games but any other media which are connected to that, e.g., digital media such as Twitch, Let's Plays, forums, discussion forums, etc., but also classical print media such as books. For example, in prominent games such as *Minecraft* (2011) – still the most played game until today (Statista 2024b) – the range of the associated media quickly becomes clear: besides the game as such, we have servers to play on, videos on live-streaming platforms or on video platforms such as YouTube, podcasts, websites to promote information about the game or fan fictions for example, forums to discuss gaming strategies, merchandise from the game as such but also of prominent Let's Players. Furthermore, we can see that *older* media do not disappear, but are still part of the media landscape. The success of books such as *Diary of Enderman Legendary Hero* (Umer 2019) or the *Minecraft* film announced by Warner Bros. for spring 2025 show that clearly. An interesting collaboration between classical mass media institutions and gaming content can be observed in Germany, where the *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* – one of the main public-service television broadcasters – developed the comedy-mystery web series *Antarktika* (2017) that was created entirely in the *Minecraft* game engine.

However, an investigation of these media must not only focus on their use but also on their evaluation by the actors themselves. Thus, media are not value-neutral for actors. For example, different actors evaluate media differently. This is quite obvious in relation to video gaming. As the above stereotypes have made clear, video games and the practices associated with them still have negative connotations in the public discourse. This is also nicely illustrated by the aforementioned *serious games* distinction, which categorizes all other games as being for entertainment purposes only and thus non-serious. And the debates about child rearing also clearly show that

when a demand is made for an allocation – and this mostly addresses the limitation – of media time, it refers to media that are considered to be less useful for the child's development. In contrast, print media such as books are nowadays considered to be useful for the development of the child. We can see the same tendencies when it comes to religious actors, e.g., gamification elements are used more often to transmit religious content (e.g., Marklund, Loewen-Colón and Saridaki 2021) – labeled as so-called educational games. So, de-mediatization strategies (Pfadenhauer and Grenz 2017), as well have to be taken into consideration. De-mediatization "highlights the opposite side of mediatization, that is, processes going against mediatization trends" (Hall, Kołodziejska and Radde-Antweiler 2023, 40). This can resolve into communicative demarcation, that is rejecting communication formats with the help of new technologies, an allocation of a time budget for media communication, or the separation of areas of life with a specific form of media communication. To comprehensively examine how video games might contribute to religious identity formation, one must first understand the socialization context of the actors involved, specifically exploring whether they were permitted to engage with such games during their formative years. For example, was there limited playing time? How important were video games in your parents' home? Do these ratings still play a role today?

## No, It's All About Context!

Context plays an important role when it comes to the study of gaming and culture, honestly, for studies in general. "[V]ideo games are produced, consumed, played, and/or discussed, within both their broader cultural and social context" (Radde-Antweiler 2018a, 209). The consideration of the context sounds self-explanatory at first glance, but it can be observed in some studies that the phenomenon of video games as such is emphasized – mostly to emphasize the specificity of video games –

without considering the concrete socio-cultural processes of the respective game in the specific context. This probably has to do with the fact that new areas of research are always on the defensive: they do this by showing how different, how special, and how unique the medium is and spend much of their energy attempting to legitimize the subject of their research. However, if we take the mediatization approach seriously, we must recognize that it is not individual media formats such as video games that trigger change processes – and not even just media per se! – but transformation processes are located in a complex web between different metaprocesses (e.g., globalization, individualization; cf. for mediatization as one metaprocess Krotz 2009) in certain cultural settings.

However, if we look at the research that references the *gamevironments* concept, it quickly becomes clear that ultimately, it doesn't go beyond just naming the concept. The concept is really only used when you want to say the context or the actors are important or based on that to define a field of research, e.g., Arabic gamevironments (Šisler, de Wildt and Abbas 2023). This is of course not wrong; however, it shows that the *gamevironments* concept is a bit superficial and needs further differentiation. In the first version of 2014, the concept ultimately does not go beyond the mere mention of *context is important!* In addition, it mentioned two different levels in which contextualization is necessary:

> "1. [t]he technical environment of video games and gamers and
> 2. [t]he cultural environments of video games and gaming." (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, 14)

Whereas the first one refers to gaming-related media, e.g., the game but also other forms of media involved in the gaming field (Let's Play videos, podcasts, etc.) and focuses on the technical structure, the latter takes a look at the socio-cultural

environment that influences the construction and design of video games as well as the gaming experience. The original *gamevironment* rightly asked,

> "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." (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, 15)

And of course, they are not and for this reason, we need to take the actors' context into consideration. However, the question arises whether this only concerns actors, or if the technical environment of video games and gamers can be thought of as separated from the cultural environments. Thus, technical possibilities are also socio-culturally conditioned. When we want to focus on gaming-related media and gaming-related (media) practices in their contexts, the *gamevironments* approach needs to be reconsidered in a way that these two levels cannot be considered separately from each other and must therefore be resolved.

Hepp and Hasebrink (2018) developed a helpful distinction between communicative practices on different levels: the media environment, the media ensemble, and the media repertoire. Whereas the media environment includes all media that were available at a given time within a specific society, media ensembles refer to all the media formats used and produced by a particular group – be it an organization or even smaller groups. The media repertoire, however, includes the media that an individual actor uses for his/her communicative practices. In relation to gametized lifeworlds, this would mean that we have to distinguish between gaming-related media in media environments, in media ensembles, and in media repertoires.

But why is such a distinction important or even necessary? Individual, collective, or collaborative (e.g., organizations) actors can only use media that is available in the

respective society. This has to be taken into consideration when we are analyzing gaming-related media or media practices in a specific country, e.g., "Amazon dominates in the U.S., and PlayStation in the UK, while Tencent stands out in China and Steam in Germany" (Trenker 2023, 24). Even within Europe, a different picture emerges when we compare the video game market: "PlayStation has a high user share in France, while Amazon dominates in Italy and Game has the biggest share in Spain together with PlayStation" (ibid., 24). So, depending on the specific media environment, the media ensemble or the media repertoire can be quite different – not only because of the choices of the actors but also due to the available media within society. Furthermore, it can be interesting to compare the choices on the different levels and ask, for example, why specific gaming-related media are not in the specific media ensembles even if they are quite prominent in the media environment. This is particularly interesting in the research field of religion and games, as religious organizations, for example, are known to be rather reluctant to react to and use newer media formats. However, these arguments ultimately lead to one of the most important points that the *gamevironments* approach already made strong in 2014: the necessary consideration of contextual factors. Gaming-related media as well as gaming-related actors must not be examined without their context. The distinction between gaming-related media, gaming-related media practices, and gaming-related actors has the consequence that the context on the respective levels must be taken into account. All three elements are not the same worldwide, e.g., Šisler (2008) has already pointed out the differences in the production of games in Arab countries in contrast to the USA back in 2008, for example.

So, if we take the actant-centered focus seriously and think it through to its logical conclusion, the old distinction between actors and technical structure no longer makes sense. The technical environment is part of the cultural environments of video

games and gaming, or to be more precise, of gaming-related media, gaming-related communicative practices, and gaming-related actors. Media and actors form together the actants and are carriers and triggers of communicative practices. All three levels are therefore context-related and that has to be integrated into the research design.

## Okay... But *How* do we Analyze *Gamevironments*?

But what do we do if everything can somehow only be thought of together, but we also need a concrete focus and thus a restriction of the material for the particular research? First of all, there is nothing like *the* method to analyze video gaming and culture or religion. Now one could interject that this should be self-evident and clear to everyone, but in some cases, there is still talk – possibly for legitimation purposes – of being *the* method for this field (e.g., for religious studies, Steffen 2017). And also, studies involving the argument that only this method contains everything that others cannot do presume that there is something – method or theory – that can explain everything. However, the field of video gaming and culture/religion is in general an interdisciplinary field and as such requires different methods, depending on the specific research question. We as researchers in this field would therefore do well to understand this multi-perspectivity as a benefit for their own research. Even if studies from philosophy or theology have a certain normative point of view and are based on completely different theoretical assumptions than social-empirical studies, they have a certain perspective on this field, which can be fruitful for other research. For example, studies about video gaming as theology – on the basis of digital theology (e.g., Kurlberg 2022) they can be called gaming theology – show how religious actors are using and interpreting video gaming for various reasons, be it on a theological level, including for missionary purposes. And, vice versa, studies focusing on the development of games and gaming practices can be of help in thinking about how to

understand specific video game narratives. But also within social science studies there is a need for cooperation and the integration of different perspectives. Thus, religion or culture cannot be thought of independently of other fields such as economics or politics, and vice versa. This means that the results of these studies must be perceived and put into perspective by others in order to be able to explore the broad field of video games.

As introduced already in the 2018 article, we can analyze gamevironments as a communicative figuration (Radde-Antweiler 2018b). Based on Elias' concept of figuration as "networks of individual" (Elias 1978, 15) the *communicative figuration approach* is not to be confused with a method (remember, there is not *one* method!), but serves as

> "a heuristic concept that offers a systematization of the field. It integrates the different actors involved, the media used, the style of communication, and the topic communicated … It can be understood as a conceptual tool and is defined by three different aspects:
> 1. Communicative practices;
> 2. A specific constellation of actors; and
> 3. Thematic framing that characterizes the communicative figuration and serves as a guiding topic." (Radde-Antweiler 2018b, 2011)

All three levels must, of course, be considered in their respective contexts. In line with the idea of gamevironments reconsidered, we would speak now not of actors any longer, but of actants regarding the second level. Such a heuristic allows us to think about the field of video gaming and religion/culture in a systematic way. This naturally leads to the fact that one's own research has to focus on only a specific part of this communicative figuration and the results have to be put into relation to it later on (see for the detailed explanation of *gamevironments* as communicative figurations Radde-Antweiler 2018b).

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## And is it About Gamevironments and the Study of Religion (Only)?

The attentive reader will probably have noticed this already in the title: the absence of the term religion. So, the answer to the question from the subtitle is quite easy: no, the *gamevironments* concept cannot be applied only in the context of studies of video gaming and religion.

Even if one wants to study religion, it follows naturally that one cannot do so independently of other sectors of society such as politics, economics, education, etc. And, furthermore, research has made clear that religion is not primarily discussed openly within gaming practices, be it that the platform has a no-religion rule or be it that religion as such is not something that interests players. However, next to religious elements as parts of game narratives, gamers are constrained by games' rules and procedures, which are, therefore, essential to understanding their persuasive or educational impact (Bogost 2011). These rules – as well as the game design – are deeply connected to decision-making processes and with specific values that give meaning to the gamers' decisions. Games then trigger the discussion of

ethical and moral behavior. These values often broach "the issue of religious value systems and religious motivations for moral norms both in and beyond the game narrative" (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2020, 25). Grieve et al. proposed value formations as a broader analytical concept that offers us then the possibility to have a broader perspective, to include content related to religion that appears hidden at first sight, and look at how religion is implicitly connected to certain values and gameplay. Religion can shape values, but the relationship is not unidirectional. Values are not exclusively religious, yet may be deeply influenced by religious frameworks. These values often operate on implicit and unconscious levels, serving as foundational elements for constructing meaning. Religious organizations, legal structures, and institutional experts play crucial roles in defining and legitimizing value systems. Individuals' understanding of what is *right* emerges from complex socialization processes – encompassing cultural norms, societal contexts, and potentially religious traditions inherited through familial and community experiences.

A critical reader might add that then everything is everything and therefore nothing. No. Of course, as a researcher you have to choose a specific research object relating to the individual research question. However, from my perspective, we have to distinguish between the concrete research that we are doing at the moment and a broader analytical frame to which this research must position itself. In my understanding *gamevironments* – in this revisited understanding – may serve as an approach that goes beyond the narrow field of video gaming and religion or value formations. Instead, it tries to encompass all processes of *deep gametization* and relates them to processes of deep *mediatization* as being a specific part of it. To avoid misunderstandings: I wouldn't argue for gamevironments as a medium-range theory or as a theory as such. As a theory *gamevironments* should include a set of logically connected statements that explain a particular section of the world – in our

case gametized lifeworlds. However, the concept does not provide this at the moment. Instead, it serves in my understanding as an analytical lens to broaden our research perspective on three different levels:

1. research on gam*ing*, not on games only,
2. research on *gaming-related actants*, not on gamers or game developers only, and furthermore, not only on human actors,
3. research on *gaming-related media practices*, not on game practices only!

This does not mean that this approach cannot be transformed into a medium-range theory in the future. However, this requires further research and theoretical considerations in order to elicit valid statements about the case studies and to relate them to each other. Let's go!

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