Special Issue

**Current Key Perspectives
in Video Gaming and Religion.**

by
Gregory Grieve,
Kerstin Radde-Antweiler,
and Xenia Zeiler

Issue 03 (2015)

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Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

How should religious study concern itself with video games?

Religion has to be necessarily engaged with video gaming due to the fact that video games are a part of communication forms and modes nowadays, namely of our mediatized life-worlds (Hepp & Krotz 2014). As the German communication theorist Krotz (2007) already stressed: "media can only be understood as inseparable from the construction of reality" (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, Zeiler 2014, 12) and vice versa. This also includes religion as part of the everyday life communication. Meyer and Moors point in the same direction if they stress, that religious processes are always mediated: and cannot therefore "be analyzed outside the forms and practices of mediation that define it" (Meyer and Moors 2006, 7). Based on this assumption, separately thought categories such as 'virtual' and 'real' and connected to religion concepts like 'online religion' and 'offline religion' (Helland 2000) have to be discussed critically: "(t)he question arises how a dichotomy such as this can hold up, if presently everything is highly mediatized" (Radde-Antweiler 2013, 97). Contrarily, offline and online actions and behavior are merging and interwoven. To sum up, religious study has to integrate video games (and gaming!) if the respective research focus is on recent religion. For example, a study that wants to analyze post mortality constructions nowadays could not longer ignore video games anymore due to the fact that they are nowadays one of the most important media genres not only for the younger generation. In contrast to the typical stereotypes of 'the gamer' statistics show that games are not restricted to the so called digital natives. Let's take for example a look on the numbers of German players: in 2006

at least 20 % of all gamers were between 40 and 64 (Quandt, Wimmer and Wolling 2008)!

So it is common knowledge that games nowadays present an important factor in social as well as religious education. Therefore, computer games not only reform our understanding of religion within digital culture but our understanding of religion in general due to the fact that these construction processes don't stop at a 'digital border' but in contrary are part of religious identity construction processes as such.

Nevertheless, the interesting question however is how religious studies should engage with video gaming? In contrast to former studies, which stress the point that one single medium – such as the internet, the video games etc. – change religion (whatever we define as such) as such. In this sense I'm totally skeptical and would vote for a more humble assumption of the relevance, influence and importance of video gaming. Why is that so? In reference to mediatization theory (Krotz 2007), neither one single media form alone nor mediatized worlds can be seen as the only reason for social and religious change, but they are parts of various interwoven processes that go hand in hand with other processes such as individualization, globalization, or economization.

Therefore religious studies should overcome common media-centered research and should consequently start with actor-centered research, which focus on mediatized worlds of gamers. Such an approach has to take the different intertwined processes such as individualization, globalization etc. into consideration and relates them to mediatization processes.

One important consequence of this approach is the abandonment of video games as

THE research object, but to turn to the whole gaming process, which includes the gamer as well as the producers and their cultural and technical environment. We developed an analytical concept gamevironments (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, Zeiler 2014) which - based on such an actor-centered approach – integrates video games as a research object with the broader cultural and social context in which these games are produced and consumed. The concept as well integrates two different levels, namely the technical environment of video games and gamers, for example the game in relation to textual and audiovisual narratives, its interactivity options as well as the in-game performances, the production and design of the game, and gamer-generated content. Additionally, the cultural environments of video games and gaming will be taken into account that means the social, political and religious context as well as the national regulations and policies concerning the game.

With such an analytical concept or framework religious studies will be able to concern itself with video games without neglecting their influence in our recent media life-worlds and without overestimating their influence on religion nowadays.

What methods and research questions do you recommend?
There is neither only one research question nor one method I would recommend. In my perspective everyone can raise every question he or she is interested in and connect to this question the suitable methods. The most important thing however is, that everybody concerned with video gaming and religion is reflecting on the method(s) he or she is using! Methods can be described as a systematic, clearly defined, step-by-step technique, practice or approach applied to analyze a sample of data in the light of a specific research question.

In some works today one can observe a lack of methods, so it is not easy – or sometimes impossible – to understand the argumentation due to the fact that the author(s) are not revealing their method, their case study as well as their sample. By defining precisely these points the researcher can overcome with an over-simplification. Every research – and not the ones dealing with video gaming – need a precise defining and description of the method used including contextualization, such as origin, discipline background etc. as well as your theoretical assumptions which are linked with the method(s) you are using.

Working with the approach of *gamevironment* I am interested in the gamer in his/her mediatized life-worlds. To evaluate this mediatized, and more precisely gametized life-world I work with different methods such as

1. Media discourse: The media discourse can be analyzed for example by Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring 2015) in the light of discourse analysis. QCA offers an appropriate method of analysis, because it considers contents and semantic correlations and rationales as well as latent structural pattern of narrations and decision making within narrative sequences. Furthermore, the discourse analysis helps to focus on power relations and speaker positions (Jäger 1999). Based on a historical-critical analysis of all sources, we then ask in line with Foucault's four regulative principles' 'the incidental, serial, regular and the conditional possibilities of statements' (Foucault 2003) and ask for communicative transformation patterns (Keller 2004, 2012). Additionally we are dealing with audio and visual material – especially in the television context – which has to be integrated in the discourse analysis.

2. Actors: Here you can use media questionnaires (to evaluate which media the

actor is using), episodic interviews (Flick 2011a: 238ff) to acquire semantic and narrative knowledge. With photo-elicitation (Moser 2005), the people will be confronted with discourse fragments gathered in the first. These will be integrated in the interview and serve as a stimulus for narratives (Harper 2002). Participant observation in the organisations will complement the research.

Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?

This is in fact an interesting question! In the field of religious studies there is a long tradition of discussing the question, if a religious researcher has to be a "religious musical person" (cf. Friedrich Heiler, Gerardus van der Leeuw). In this sense I strongly vote against such a phenomenological approach. Of course, a researcher doesn't have to be a (religious) gamer to empathize and understand his/her feelings toward religion and video gaming. Additionally I'm skeptical if methodical approaches such as "thick playing" aren't based on this theoretical presumption implicitly: while you – as a researcher – are playing the respective game, can you really observe the gamers' attitude or experience within the game? For me this method is quite familiar with the process of experiencing ("Nacherleben") by Gerardus van der Leeuw and implies the same methodological problems.

Nevertheless, if you are interested in the gamer in his/her gametized word it is quite helpful to know this context. The same can be said for the anthropologist who doesn't travel to the countries he/she wants to analyze. Titles such as 'arm-chaired-anthropologists' clearly show that it is quite problematic if you don't know your field, and that's the game as well the gaming in the field of religion and video gaming. For example, if you want to design questionnaires or conduct interviews I think it is absolutely necessary to know what the gamers are talking about. Nevertheless, the necessity of playing the game depends on the questions you are interested in and linked

to that, the method you are using.

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