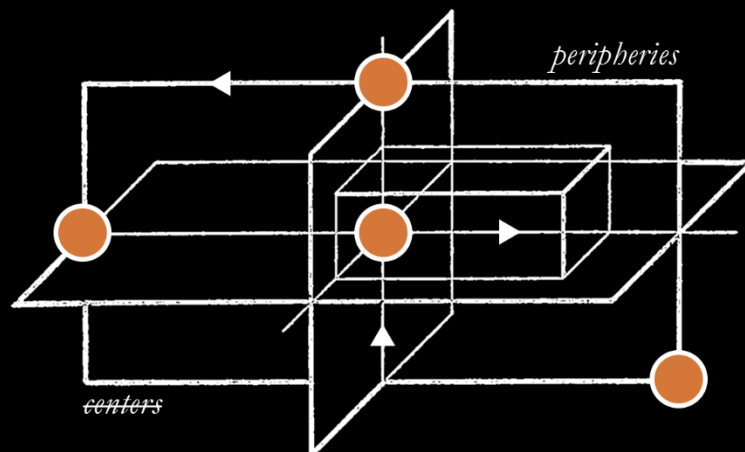


global network player authority PewDiePie guilt god Let's Play angel undead with authentic mediatisation skill PVP contest
 game rule system gameplay meta WoW blessing nobb kills demon fact body fight tropes pe digital
 religion gamer analysis representation healing lore religio-scape soul dialo class tradition experience Twitch rebirth discussion wedding
 simulation ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral ruins virtual identity buff priest genesis clan game
 narrative



Peripheries – Title Image. Image by Aska Mayer. CC BY-NC.

Special Issue

Peripheral Religions and Games

edited by

Carolyn Puckhaber, Aska Mayer and
Knut V. M. Wormstädt

Practices can be understood as entities as well as performances (Shove et al. 2012, 6-8). They are entities insofar as they form recursive and routinised forms of behaviour that consist of interdependencies between, *inter alia*, "forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, *things* and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz 2002, 249). But at the same time, they are performances insofar as they need to be filled out and reproduced in a successive form, in order to be sustained over time. Only through performance, they can be observed and become relevant for social

7

Religion in games manifests in various ways: through direct references to real-world religions (cf. McMahon in this issue), the construction of entirely new religious systems (cf. Sharbat Dar, and Loring-Albright in this issue), or the implicit use of

deliberately utilise English folklore to ensure the game's primary theme is not misinterpreted: "If we'd use specific Australian or Aboriginal mythology, that would seem like we're making a very very bold statement about that's what this game is about!" (de Wildt 2023, 69).

It is noteworthy that there is a limited prevalence of independent developers who integrate their personal religious affiliations within the context of their gaming creations. In the corporate and independent development sectors, the subject of religion is widely regarded as a contentious and often sensitive topic, with limited opportunities for open discussion among colleagues. Despite the tendency to associate indie games with socially relevant themes and increased diversity, these aspirations are only partially realised. The industry continues to be predominantly shaped by Eurocentric and/or Americentric, patriarchal and heteronormative structures that influence both narrative content and access to platforms and visibility (Henning 2017, 267-268, Ruberg 2019, 778-786, de Wildt 2023, 60-63). It may thus be posited that the peripheral positioning of religion within the developers' sociocultural and professional contexts significantly shapes the ways in which religion is implemented in games, while simultaneously reinforcing its marginal status within game cultures themselves. How this may influence the developers' reflection on their games is discussed exemplarily in Loring-Albright's contribution in this issue.

Players are not passive consumers of religious content in games, they actively interpret, contest, and even co-create religious meaning. A notable example is the controversial baptism scene in *BioShock Infinite* (2013), where a player requested and received a refund due to his objection to undergoing baptism in-game, having already been baptized in real life. This incident evoked a wide spectrum of reactions within the gaming community, ranging from critique of religious dogma to overt

hostility towards religion, thus underscoring the multifaceted reception of religious themes in contemporary society (Steffen 2017, 202, Bosman 2019, 50, de Wildt 2023, 81). The contribution by Kapcar in this special issue provides another example. Analysing the usage of games as components in practices of magic, players come into view as members of communities of peripheral religious practice.

Players also report that games can influence their religious identities, either by strengthening their faith and inspiring new practices, or by prompting deconversion (Grieve and Campbell 2009, 61, Gottlieb 2020, 186, de Wildt 2023, 96). In massively multiplayer online roleplaying games such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), players have established their own in-game religious rituals and communities. One notable case involved a funeral ceremony for a deceased player being disrupted by another guild, highlighting the interplay between in-game religious practices, power dynamics, and player agency (Goguen 2009).

13

It is important to acknowledge that existing research on religion in gaming cultures often focuses on major platforms for player interaction, particularly large gaming forums, while systematically overlooking alternative spaces, such as religious forums, where games are also actively discussed (cf. Kapcar in this issue as an example for utilising this kind of source for research). This can be used as a form of self-limitation, as can be seen, e.g., in de Wildt's (2023) study. Aiming for a methodologically consistent approach and focusing solely on the question of how gamers are talking about religion, he purposefully excluded religious forums (de Wildt 2023, 84).

Nevertheless, this also means that religious users as a demographic with certain approaches towards and forms of engagement with the field of games remain underresearched, yet. Gaming forums are often exclusive spaces that offer limited

visibility to marginalised groups and tend to reflect the perspectives of a predominantly white, male and often secular user base (de Wildt 2023, 108). This structural bias is mirrored in the composition of many qualitative samples and may reinforce the impression that religion is peripheral to players themselves, when in fact it is the research perspective that constructs this peripherality. Within this context, the dominance of secular perspectives in gaming forums may discourage the expression of religious viewpoints, potentially leading some users to remain silent or to turn to alternative spaces where they might feel more comfortable articulating their views. Conversely, the exclusive focus on religious forums carries a similar risk, namely that of constructing a distorted image in which religious interpretations take center stage, while secular or non-religious perspectives become peripheral or do not appear at all (Šlerka and Šisler 2018). In both cases, the discursive framing can obscure the diversity of player experiences and lead to an over-representation of certain voices. Even though the discussion of religion may seem central in such forums, it is important to ask whose perspective shapes the discourse and who has the discursive authority to define what is central and what is peripheral.

It is evident that the relationship between peripheral religions, religious practices and game culture studies is a multifaceted endeavour, the comprehensive exploration of which extends beyond the scope of a special issue. Notwithstanding, this special issue has been curated to showcase a diverse array of approaches, encompassing various perspectives, gaming cultures, and game components. These contributions offer not only significant academic value in their own right, but also, when considered collectively within the context of this issue, provide an overview of a substantial research domain that, while currently peripheral, has the potential to make a significant contribution to the central focus of the field.

Indeed, an investigation into the periphery engenders a shift in perspective on purportedly central concepts, thereby affording peripheral phenomena an appropriate place within the interdisciplinary study of games cultures.

References

Aarseth, E., 2003. Playing research: Methodological approaches to game analysis. In: *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*, Melbourne, Australia.

Baldur's Gate 3, 2023. [video game] (multiplatform) Larian Studios, Larian Studios.

Barker, E., 2015. The not so new religious movements: Changes in 'the cult scene' over the past forty years. *Temenos: Nordic Journal for the Study of Religions*, 50(2), 235-256. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.48461>.

15

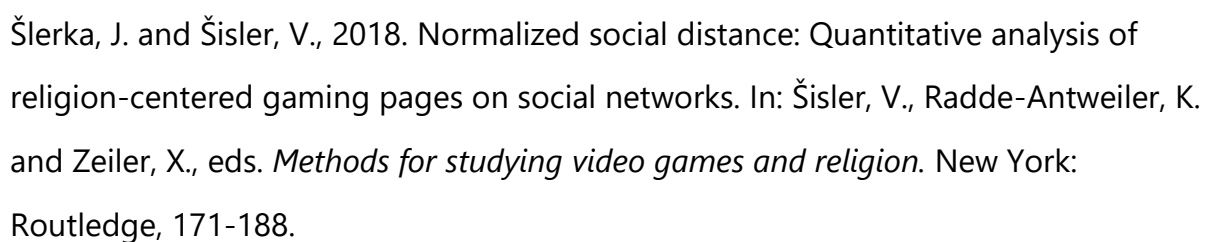
Bender, C., Cadge, W., Levitt, P. and Smilde, D., 2012. Introduction religion on the edge: De-centering and re-centering. In: Bender, C., Cadge, W., Levitt, P., Smilde, D., eds. *Religion on the edge: De-centering and re-centering the sociology of religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-20.

BioShock Infinite, 2013. [video game] (multiplatform), Irrational Games, 2K.

Bosman, F. G., 2019. *Gaming and the divine: A new systematic theology of video games*. London: Routledge.

Couture, J., 2022. Finding the right plant for the job in Strange Horticulture. *Game Developer*, [blog] 15 March. Available at

Rautalahti, H., 2021. Non-religious players asking big questions: Video game worlds affording affinities of meaningful encounters. *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 33(2), 69-88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.2020-0012>.



The guest editors would like to express their thanks to Dom Ford, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Lissa Holloway-Attaway, and Xenia Zeiler of *gamevironments* for their support of this special issue. Further, they would like to thank the authors and reviewers of this issue for their submissions, feedback, and inputs. Lastly, they would like to thank Sabine Durchholz for proofreading this introduction.

ⁱⁱ The authors of the articles and reports in this special issue were not given a fixed or pre-decided definition of religion to work with, so their view might differ from our definition. This has been intentional, as definitions of religion may differ depending on research question, field, or disciplinary sub-area.