

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

Special Issue

Peripheral Religions and Games

edited by

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Peripheral Religions and Games. Introductionⁱ

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

Abstract

This introduction presents the conceptual framework for the special issue Peripheral Religions and Games, peripheral religions and the relevance of focusing on such within the context of game culture studies. Considered as a rarely explicitly, but often implicitly understood phenomenon of religion in the context of game cultures, the goal of this special issue is to explore the presence, function, and design of peripheral religions and religious practices both across the fields of digital and analogue games. Based on previous research in religious studies and theology, and rooted in practice research, peripherality will be mapped out as a socio-cultural, relational, practice based, and context-based category for specific communities of religious practice. In parallel, through mapping out the conceptual framework, the specific perspectives applied by the authors of this special issue are introduced.

Keywords: Peripheral Religions, Game Cultures, Religious Practice, gamevironments

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In the game *Strange Horticulture* (2022), the player assumes the role of a shopkeeper who inherited the eponymous shop from their deceased uncle. While selling a wide variety of plants with expedient and increasingly supernatural properties, the main character is drawn into a dense net of plots spun between several factions. The game's narrative draws on a set of topics that could be associated with peripheral expressions of religions and religious practice (at least when applying a culturally/locally/politically dependent norm, often *Christocentric* in North American

and European discourses; cf. Bender et al. 2012), such as witchcraft, magic, and the summoning of elder gods. At the same time, unearthing the properties of plants and fungi, and where to forage for them – one of the game's core mechanics – evoke images of herbalism, forgotten knowledge and, yet again, witchcraft as part of the desired aesthetic (Couture 2022). *Strange Horticulture* is but one example for released games in recent years (be they videogames or games in other media), that are interested in incorporating peripheral religious practices into their narrative, their aesthetic, or their design.

This trend towards the margins and marginalised in games has, however, yet to be incorporated in academic reflection. Looking at previous research across theology and religious studies shows that these fields have repeatedly engaged with religious practices on the peripheries of society, established religion, or academic perception (Bender et al. 2012, Kniss 2014b, Parker 2024). And while research on intersections of religion, games, and gaming communities can be considered as a largely established approach in game culture studies (de Wildt et al. 2018, Rautalahti 2021), the focus on diegetic and actual *peripheral* religious practice in game cultures has been implicit, rather than explicit.

Especially when considering roleplaying games, the deviation from diegetically established *mainstream* religions, or the establishment of religious practice in a presumably secular space seems to provide key elements of religion-oriented narratives, which is central to several contributions in this special issue (cf. the contributions of Moyzhes and Sebag, and Sharbat Dar in this issue) as well as to previous research.

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Typically, those narratives appear in what seem to be areas of tension within diegetic societies or between the played characters and their surroundings. Games such as *Outlast* 2 (2017) or *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) utilize peripheral religions often as a cause of conflict, diegetically created through cataclysms and crises, or instrumentalizing them as antagonistic groups. The latter can be seen with the so-called Cult of the Absolute in *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), as analysed by Sharbat Dar in this issue. In contrast, *inter alia*, independent games, and here most notably so-called *cozy games* such as *Cult of the Lamb (2022)* or *Little Witch in the Woods* (2022), present religious groups outside of a spiritual mainstream through the depiction of (modern) witchcraft and positively coded *cult*-like communities.

However, the connection of peripheral religious practices, games, and research is not limited to the diegetic space, but finds its continuation in the wider context of gaming culture and its adaptation, with mutual influences between real-life peripheral religious practices and their diegetic counterparts. And, further, the implementation of peripheral religious practices and communities in games allows for potential cognitive and emotional reflection as well as investigation of their real-life counterparts by players, developers, and researchers, as recognized previously for other themes and topics in games (e.g., Aarseth 2003, Mekler et al. 2018, Houghton 2018, de Wildt et al. 2018, Mayer 2023).

In this introduction to the special issue *Peripheral Religions and Games*, we will outline the conceptual framework by introducing the underlying understanding of *peripheral religions* and their intersection with game culture (studies), connecting it to the individual perspectives on the theme brought in by the individual authors.

The goal of this special issue is to explore the presence and function of these belief systems, representations, and practices on the periphery of major established religions. Bringing together research perspectives from the intersections of game culture studies, media studies, religious studies, theology, and game design, the issue provides insights into the different appearances, representations, and definitions of peripheral religions and religious practice in game cultures.

Peripheral Religions and Religious Practices

Throughout this special issue we consciously understand religions (peripheral or otherwise) through the lens of religious practices. In doing so, the entanglements of user's expectations, game's narratives, aesthetics and mechanics, as well as developer's understanding (implicit and explicit) towards the religious can come into focus expressed through the material presentation of the games, as well as their affordances and usages. Furthermore, looking at religious practices allows us to not only consider religions within games (e.g., as part of the narrative or as an aesthetic choice) but also lets us include users and communities who are engaging with games and gaming cultures as part of or in relation to their religious identity.

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

interaction and the self-positioning in relation to the social. Through the performance of practices, they can shift and evolve over time (sometimes radically and dramatically), being re-performed as changed entities. It is therefore not uncommon within theories of practice to suggest that the social is situated in practice and that the individual performing a certain practice is participating in the practice in an embodied manner, rather than inheriting a practice as part of a personal skill set. Furthermore, practices are not only embodied, but they are also connected to the material configurations of the social (Shove et al. 2012, 9, Hillebrandt 2022, 67). Through this, theories of practice are connected to social theory as well as to fields as science and technology studies.

How do we understand religion in this context? Despite the numerous definitions of religion available, it is important to note the problems associated with them. There has been no universally accepted definition of the term *religion*. Furthermore, the term has often been imposed on phenomena in different cultural contexts where no comparable term exists or existed, which reflects an often Christocentric perspective that does not necessarily match local ideas and practices (Schilbrack 2013, Pollack 2018). Therefore, it is important that when attempting to define religion, we always at least acknowledge and consider the problems of such an attempt.

Nevertheless, pragmatically we still need to make clear what we mean when we use the term *religion* in this introduction and as an offer for this special issue.ⁱⁱ We provide a minimal working definition of religion which puts religious *practices* in focus and is still able to capture peripheral phenomena. In doing so, we repudiate intellectualistic and voluntaristic approaches toward religion, similar to stances taken by post-structural critiques (Limacher and Walthert 2021).

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We instead follow Schmidt (2022, 4) and take the position that religions

"exist as practised, not as a fixed and static essence. In the perspective of practice theory, religion is not a fixed, clearly delineated entity, such as a set of beliefs or doctrines, pre- or proscribed actions, or hierarchical structures of authority. Instead, religion is understood as practised and performed, as a field or web of intersecting or interweaved practices [...] Religion is neither sharply nor universally delimited. Viewed as practised, it is contextual and situational as well as changeable. [...] Rather than an essence that is religion, [...] religion [...] is produced and re-produced through practices and practising."

This point of view entails a transition in focus away from the pursuit of a definitive core or function of religion and instead directs attention towards the ways in which religion becomes manifest through specific actions, contextual nuances, and power dynamics. Taking this stance allows us to perceive religion as a formation of praxis (*Praxisformation*), that is, the ever-processual association of different materialities and their figuration through a plethora of (maybe highly specialised, maybe dangerously peripheral) practices (Hillebrandt 2014, 133, referring to the idea of actants and actors in Latour 2007). This intentionally broad approach allows us to research religion even in non-religious-dominant spaces, such as the development or online discussion of games (a topic that is addressed later), where non-religious individuals predominantly determine the shaping, perception and practice of religion.

The *periphery* of practices is defined here in relation to dominant discourses within a specific community, both large scale (e.g., the whole of society) to smaller scale (e.g., religious subcultures). Therefore, the peripherality of practices and its positioning towards what is perceived as *central religious practice* and what as *peripheral* is here understood as relational and non-static: while a practice can be considered as peripheral from a *mainstream perspective*, it might be a central practice for a specific

community. The description of peripheral can here be a self-attributed label for delineation of the own community, as well as an externally attributed label based on geographical space, role in society, systemic positioning, and time. As a diegetic practice, this is discussed in the contribution by Sharbat Dar in this special issue. A nondiegetic approach, more focused on the representation and the framing of certain peripheral religions through game mechanics, is analysed in McMahon's article.

We recognize the perception of a religious practice as peripheral in the following relations:

- **a)** Within a practice system largely perceived as central (Figure 1: C1), practices deviating from canonisation, naturalisation, and/or broad social, cultural, or political acceptance while still being located within the same belief system can be perceived, self-described, or labelled as peripheral (see for example Kniss 2014, 361-363) (Figure 1: P1-3).
- **b)** The perception of centrality in relation to peripherality is rooted in the specific cultural, geographical, and/or temporal context, as well as social acceptance. Communities of practice which are largely accepted as central in their respective cultural, geographical or temporal context, might be perceived as peripheral when entering contexts in which another practice is perceived as central (Figure 1: C1<>C2).
- **c)** Perception and declaration of peripherality is a multi-level phenomenon. Within communities of practice already considered peripheral, there always can be a further internal understanding of centrality and peripherality (Figure 1: P1[C]<>P1[P]).

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- **d)** Religious practices, which are not related to existing established communities of practice (e.g., some New Religious Movements: Wallis 2003, Barker 2014, see for example *social sectarianism* Kniss 2014) or are hybrids of multiple fragments of established practices can be considered as peripheral based on (self)perception of size, cultural distance, or social acceptance (Figure 1: P4).
- **e)** Practices might be subjected to a general attribution or perception as peripheral depending on the larger systemic conditions (e.g., regarding the perception of the role of religion for society at large, as well as perspectives on communities outside of a hegemonically established discourse; see for example Bender et al. 2012 and Parker 2024) in which religious communities are located.

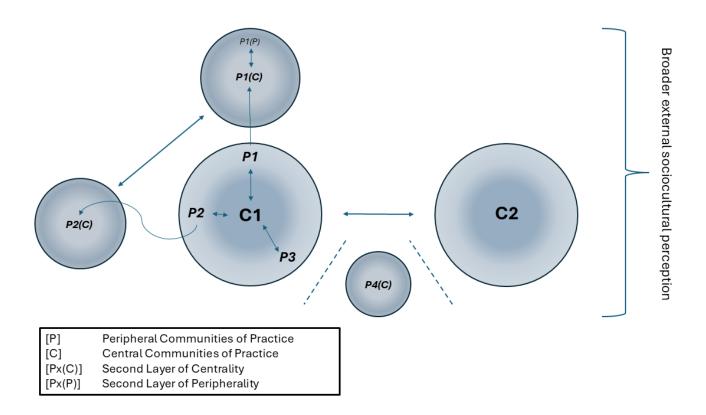


Figure 1. Diagram showing the relations of centres and peripheries in practice communities. © Aska Mayer. CC BY-NC.

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This introduced model is a general one and as such could be broadly applied across multiple contexts of systems of practice. However, for the study of religions, the relation of peripheral and central has been recognized as a formative paradigm in the analysis of both historical and contemporary religious practice (Bender et al. 2012, Parker 2024).

When applying the introduced general model to the specific study of religions and religious practices, the notion of centre and periphery has already been evident for example in Eisenstadt's (2003) notion of "Great Traditions [...] organizing and creating symbolic distinction, thus establishing a fundamental semantic distance from the Small Traditions of the periphery" (Parker 2024). Centrality – and through that periphery – are established through powers which are not necessarily only tied to belief systems, but rather through broader societal, spiritual, cultural, financial, military, and political power (Kniss 2014). Peripherality is established when religious practice is located outside (1) of the authorities of institution and congregation (Bender et al. 2012), or (2) the discourses hegemonically dominating the field of study (Parker 2024).

The first element here primarily includes but is not limited to cases such as *social sectarianism* (Kniss 2014), as well as New Religious Movements (Wallis 2003, Barker 2014) and the experience and construction of (non)belonging to surrounding systems based on social, cultural, and spiritual factors (Kniss 2014). The second element here refers to a meta-structure of perceptions centrality and peripherality, not rooted necessarily in the self-perception of religious communities and practitioners but rather systemic observation. A typical example is here the application of North

American and European understandings of religious practice on, e.g., indigenous religious practices, only critically interrogated in the recent past through the introduction of decolonial approaches (Parker 2024, see also Figure 1: C1<>C2).

In summary, and exemplary for this introduced understanding, Parker delivers a comprehensive existential definition, relating to the interplay of aspects a)-e).

"Our definition of the periphery is not topological, nor primarily spatial or geographical, but rather sociocultural and existential. In the religious context, it refers to the periphery of symbolic-religious production, which is subjected to official production and disparaged by both the religious center and the conventions of the dominant society. Peripheries will always be seen as 'divergent', even when they are situated and reproduced immediately adjacent to the center and power. For example, 'indigenous religions' or ethnic religions in Latin America, Africa, or Asia are generally viewed with suspicion by the population, if not subjected to disqualifying prejudices." (Parker 2024)

Intersections of Religion, Periphery, and Game Culture Studies

The intersections of religion, periphery, and game culture studies go far beyond the analysis of religious representations in digital games itself.

"As with any media text, representations in games are not produced in a vacuum and neither are they neutral constructs: they allegedly reproduce dominant ideologies, institutionalized power relations and social-economic conventions that, in turn, socialize players into these hegemonic worldviews." (de Wildt and Aupers 2019, 869)

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

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religious motifs and themes (cf. Kapcar, and Moyzhes and Sebag in this issue). These constructed systems can either closely resemble existing traditions or develop into fully independent theologies that require deeper interpretation. Regardless of the specific form, the integration of religion in games is predominantly accompanied by periphery (Riemer 2020).

Importantly, religion in games cannot be isolated from the broader structures of game culture. Religious motifs are shaped not only by in-game representations but also by the reciprocal dynamics between developers, players, and the peripheries of society and cultural production (Grieve and Campbell 2009, 61). This dynamic positioning is vital for understanding how games shape and are shaped by the religious field and its margins. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the depictions of religion in games can also give rise to issues. They can reinforce stereotypes, contribute to *othering*, and often reflect a specific Eurocentric and/or Americentric worldview (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, 16-17 and 38, de Wildt and Aupers 2019, 870).

Game developers, particularly those operating within the independent sector, are subject to specific constraints and pressures that shape the representation of religion in games. Whilst large studios tend to follow market research and trending themes, indie developers face different limitations. For instance, popular game engines frequently offer a restricted selection of assets that are predominantly of a Christian context, thereby influencing the portrayal of specific elements. Furthermore, developers report implicit expectations from players, who often anticipate familiar (context-based central) religious symbols (such as priests representing healing) thus forming a kind of language culture (de Wildt 2023, 42 and 64-70) in game design. The significance of this aspect is particularly evident when developers report that they

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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

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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).

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

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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.

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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.