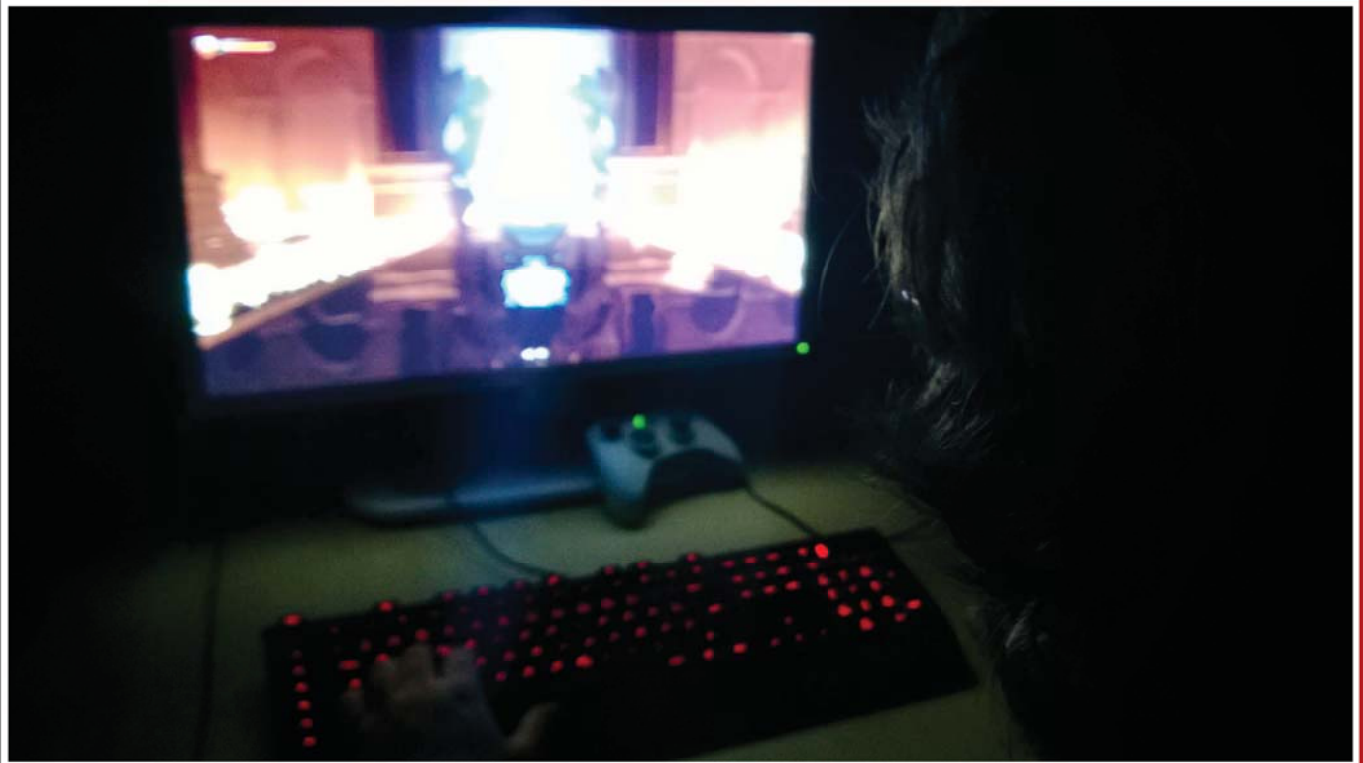




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# **‘When people pray, a god is born... This god is you!’<sup>1</sup>**

## **An Introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games.**

Markus Wiemker

Jan Wysocki

### **Abstract**

Notions of religion in media are not only found in literature, movies, or music but also in the growing field of digital games. We want to dive into this field by thinking about in what ways religion can be and is used by developers in the narration of a game and what religious motifs we encounter in our research. This essay attempts also to show that cultural studies can make a significant contribution to a better understanding of digital games, by regarding the ‘game-text’ together with its production contexts and acquisition processes. We try to highlight this through an examination of different aspects of religion in games and with a special focus on how the notion of ‘god’ is used in games. We will discuss the genre ‘god games’ that puts the player in a position to influence different layers of a complex game system, like a tribe, a city, or other social or economic systems, etc. There we will ask what this genre has to do with concepts of ‘god’ or gods. Ultimately we will explore games that present more distinct images of gods and show how concepts from different religious contexts, like Greek or Japanese mythology, are used in a game’s narrative.

### **Keywords**

cultural analysis, digital games, religion, god, god games

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1 Black & White (Lionhead Studios 2001)

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## 1. Cultural Studies and Digital Games

Since their first appearance as entertainment-products digital games found their way into a broad range of society and inevitably will do so further. Besides other popular media digital games process different kinds of cultural input. They can deal e.g. with historical places and situations, like renaissance Venice, refer to different cultural practices, like farming, sports, or war, or tell adventurous stories of wondrous lands and fantastic characters – or something completely different. Digital games relate also sometimes to another cultural phenomenon or social practice: religion. Religion is a highly disputed field in science and society alike. Among other things because it can be strongly emotionally charged and is sometimes tied to political and social agendas either of marginalised groups that want to gain significance and respect or on the other side powerful actors that want to maintain a certain status quo. No matter how one moves up to this field there will be some kind of trouble. But as researchers this won't stop us from trying to conceptualize religion (and religion in games).

As we see it religion is a phenomenon that firmly resides in the interconnections of different cultural layers. Religion should be seen as a social practice that is dependent on its time, region, actors etc. and not something monolithic and timeless (cf. Smith 1984). Religion is part of culture and its highly intertwined dynamics. We consider cultural studies having the most practical theoretical and methodological toolkit for an approach towards religion. Anglo-American culture research that is based upon the theories and methods in the tradition of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has concentrated on the social role of popular media products for a long time. Games being a part of (popular) media can therefore be also understood through the lens of culture as we will try to argue in this essay.<sup>1</sup> Some features of cultural studies seem to be especially promising compared to the other paradigms of the social sciences and the humanities, as for example linguistics, film studies or educational science. Those approaches often have their own set of tools to dissect an object of research and do so effectively. But since cultural products, such as digital games in our example, originate from special contexts of society and since their creators, e.g. game designers, are influenced by these contexts, like religion, we should strengthen the analysis of games with the research of said environments. So a close examination of a game's production context can shed light on structures, processes and ideologies which influence the development of a game on a conscious or unconscious level. An inquiry about religious topics in

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<sup>1</sup> Of course this is not an entirely new project. E.g. the journal *Games and Culture* is especially designed to promote such research. We find Adrienne Shaw's (2010) sharp analysis of how cultural studies and game studies can work together a very remarkable contribution to the field.

games should therefore also ask about the reception of historical phenomena of religious motifs and narratives.

The focus on reception and social contexts should not mean that an analysis of the game itself (and its ‘game-text’) will be made obsolete. On the contrary: Only through a combination of both approaches we can better understand games as cultural products influencing and influenced by their surroundings. In this way we can reveal e.g. models of society presented in the game, intrinsic identification potentials and creative acquisition potentials. But the way the game is eventually adopted by the player can only be made clear by a close examination of its acquisition and the various forms of reception it induces. To sum it up, we can look at three layers that are of importance in our inquiry of digital games as cultural products: the production of games, the game-text, and the acquisition and reception a game generates.

Another advantage of a cultural studies project is that it is dealt with in a multi-disciplinary approach, i.e. theories and methods from other faculties can simply be integrated if they contribute to the epistemological interest. This multi-perspective approach provides the opportunity to analyze games on various levels and gives us a needed flexibility of perspectives. With the help of this toolkit we will ask about the connection of religion and digital games and how historical and social contexts influence a game with its religious motifs and narratives. We will use the already mentioned three-step approach: First we ask about the production of games, then about motifs the games themselves contain, and last about how gamers appropriate the games they play.

Religion covers an immense field of symbols, imageries, narratives, practices etc. We certainly can’t speak about all of those instances but have to focus on a certain topic that illustrates our research. So we take the term ‘god’ as a starting point and we will try to show how this notion, that is in many different circumstances an important part of religious practices, is used in digital games. Of course it is entirely possible to search for a different theme, like religious organizations, architecture, rituals, or something like post-mortality (cf. Ahn 2011), that functions as a marker for religion. But asking about ‘god’ in games already delivers such a huge amount of data that even touching lightly on this topic gives us enough material to begin with. We will start with the special game genre of god games that lets the player assume the powers of a god modelled after certain Christianesque narratives. Afterwards we will explore the notion of ‘god’ more generally by looking at the games *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica 2005) and *Ōkami* (Clover Studios 2006) that both feature gods prominently in their stories asking about how those entities are depicted and how players can possibly relate to those characters.

## 1.1 Contexts of Production

Because designers are people that (like all of us) reside in their own cultural backgrounds, world views, time, etc. it is necessary to ask about the influences (open and obscured alike) in the creation of games. We see that designers and developers take certain themes and topics and retell them in the form of the game product. But many different circumstances have an influence on the outcome of the product. We can sometimes even go back to the school days of a developer to see what influenced him or her in her work. David Jaffe from SCE Santa Monica for example, developer of *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica 2005), a game set in a mythological version of Greece, stated that he was fascinated by Greek mythology and its literature as a school boy but that he also is a fan of Ray Harryhausen's movie *Clash of Titans* (Davis 1981) (cf. Reed 2005). Jaffe combined his fascinations and finally produced *God of War*. Ken Levine, designer of *BioShock* (Irrational Games 2007), said he created his game as the depiction of a possible outcome of novelist Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy (cf. Cowen 2011). Without doubt Levine read Rand's *Fountainhead* (Rand 1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand 1957) and worked through the statements made in those novels transforming the motifs putting them into a new scenario and curving out a new message (cf. Bosman 2013). We can ask about the cultural background of a developer and the practices and ideologies that are often accompanied with it. When somebody is firmly set in e.g. a western context he or she is likely to reproduce or at least somehow treat narratives, symbols, and maybe even strong ideologies etc. from this background. Of course developers with other backgrounds will likely somehow deal with those in the production of games. Atsushi Inaba, producer of *Ōkami*, a game set in mythical Japan, sees himself as being part of the culture which spawned the mythology that is used in the game. He would have liked it if his game would be akin to an ambassador for Japanese culture explaining it to a western audience (cf. Shea 2007). It gets even more interesting when we look at designers who conflate different cultural and/or religious backgrounds. The processes of retelling, remediation, and transformation are something that would be very interesting to describe.

But there are also different other levels of cultural background and practices a researcher would have to pay attention to. There is of course the powerful economical side of production. One often neglected aspect is that when a game is developed and released, economical conditions which are not directly related to the development process may play a significant role – as for example, processes of concentration in an increasingly globalized game industry, commercialization tendencies, as for example the placement of advertisements in games, and the development studios' relationship with the companies responsible for the releases. These basic parameters are decisive factors whether a game will be produced in the end, whether companies monitor player activities, the way games are advertised, and, crucially, which social practices and ideologies influence a game.

One quite evident and also important example for the analysis of production contexts and religion is the yearly Christian Game Developers Conference (CGDC).<sup>2</sup> Especially contrived to give room for developers that see themselves as devoted Christians this conference shows how religion, design and business are sometimes intertwined. One goal of this conference is to empower Christian developers that feel their convictions and beliefs have rarely space in their work. They talk also about possibilities and difficulties to combine messages of Christian faith with appealing game design (cf. Good 2011).

## 1.2 Game Text: Ideology, Representation and Rules

These contextual conditions, social practices and ideologies can sometimes be identified in the game itself. There are various approaches to analyze the actual game text, but one prevalent method in cultural studies is ideology criticism (cf. Kellner 1995). The term “ideology“ refers here to a set of convictions, ideas or philosophies claiming to be valid and true and at the same time serving the interests of a social group. Ideology can both influence the level of representation of the game’s characters and society models and the ‘ludic’ structure, i.e. the rules and objectives of a game (on distinguishing representation and ludic structure (cf. Buckingham 2006: 9, 183). The part of criticism would mean that we can discern and name certain ideologies and thoughts found in the game text. Of course it is not the case that we will find strong ideologies in every game we look at. But this sensitivity to ideologies gives us the opportunity to discern other ideology-like patterns that are only found when we try to read beyond the first layer of the game-text. We think e.g. about statements about religion that can be found in a game like *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft 2008). In the beginning sequence of the game we see a statement from the design team emphasizing their multi-ethnic and multi-religious effort making clear that they do not want to criticize any religious movement. But looking deeper into the narrative of this game series one can find various clues that the overall approach of the game towards religion is a quite negative one.<sup>3</sup> The story of the series reveals ultimately that motifs on which e.g. the Christian religion is based, like the idea of Eden, are not connected to a higher reality, religious truth, god, etc. but are merely artefacts that stem from a supreme alien civilization that visited the earth and humans long ago.

As an example that lets us discern an ideology quite easily we would like to take the game *Left Behind – Eternal Forces* (Left Behind Games 2006). *Left Behind* is a game based on a successful Christian fiction book series from Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (2011, c1995). The series describes the final days of earth before the second coming of Christ, and ultimately the battle between the dark forces of Satan and Jesus and his followers. The strategy game adaption lets the

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2 Cf. <http://cgdc.org/> [10/11/2013].

3 We would like to thank Gregor Ahn for this remark.



player lead several characters and their followers in their task of converting as many people as possible to Christianity through the use of units like missionaries, healers, or gospel-singing musicians in order to save their souls from evil. The game is built on slowly expanding one's influence and the resource of spiritual power in order to convert neutral or enemy units (like liberal atheists, rock musicians, or soldiers of the Antichrist) by power of faith, spirit, and persuasion. But in the economy of the game violence is also useful to combat units that pursue the player's gospel singers, ministers etc. On the one hand the game penalizes violent behaviour by dropping the player's 'spiritual level'. In fighting against the enemy the player's units lose spiritual power and are more likely to defect to the enemies side. But the player can raise this 'spiritual level' quickly again ordering his units simply to pray, redressing the player's former actions. Here we see that the game rules and the economy of the game differ from its narrative of peaceful conversion to the Christian faith. Observing this disparity we can reveal new layers of meaning that the game contains.

Broadly speaking such a game tries to depict very distinct religious convictions and could be therefore called a 'propaganda game'. But looking at games that seem to have a more neutral stand towards culture and/or religion even there we can sometimes see distinct worldviews. They may be not as obviously religious as the ones in *Left Behind* but are nevertheless based on specific morals and thoughts that stem from certain ideas or ideologies. As an example we could take *Dragon Age 2* where the game is in itself a more negative display of possible outcomes of a religious conflict gone wrong. Here we see that rules-wise the game slightly favours an approach where the player does not choose to side with one of the religious groups but focuses on the characters that accompany the player on his or her journey (see Bezio 2013). Trying to befriend one's companions and show interest for their personal concerns and not alienating them gives the player the opportunity to use most of them at the end of the game. But even remaining neutral in this religious conflict or trying to de-escalate it can't stop the end of the tensions which always resolve in bloodshed. Here we see the idea that religious conflicts will always escalate and an individual can do nothing against it. Rather one should stick to his friends. This is a statement of an ideological kind invoking a certain behaviour pattern, namely the care for one's friends rather than associating with groups that are in conflict with each other. Here a certain a-political attitude is represented combined with a in some ways fatalistic worldview where the withdrawal out of bigger problems and concentrating on one's immediate sphere is in parts favoured.

Of course those examples are interpretations from a scholarly viewpoint and can hint at other possibilities of (also differing) reception from a player's side. It is not always possible to make conclusions about the integration of game-content and narratives into the daily lives of people who play. The game text might also be only the basis of the acquisition process, but different interpretations and diverse forms of experience or joy remain possible.

### 1.3 Practices of Appropriation: Experience, Creative Adaptation and Communitisation

The different forms of experiences players have during the acquisition of digital games are a fascinating topic for cultural studies. These experiences are not necessarily triggered by the game text, nor does it have to coincide with the experiences intended by the developer. It fluctuates, depending on the genre and in particular on individual, psychological factors. The type of experience and its intensity might also vary during the game, and obviously a strategy game will be experienced differently than a car racing game. In the end the player's expectations, his or her mood, competence, and taste will be decisive factors for the game experience (cf. amongst others Carr 2006: 52, 177). The evolvment of experience is often initiated by various practices, as the creative adaptation of digital games or the membership in virtual communities, which exceed the actual game process. Players talk in forums about the games they play, how they play, or what they like and dislike about them, or they meet physically or virtually to play together. The stories, characters, settings, etc. that constitute a game are topics of detailed interest for many players that can culminate e.g. in the practice of cosplay, i.e. dressing up as one's favourite character from a game, tv-show, movie etc. interacting with other fans e.g. at conventions or other gatherings (cf. Bonnichsen 2011; Lammerichs 2011). An involvement with games can also be expressed through the practice of 'modding' where players themselves start to use software such as game editors to create new game worlds, objects, characters, scenarios, stories, etc. for their games. This takes the game-text from the constraints of the developers and lets the player, or 'modder', be creative in his or her own way. Even religious symbols can find their way into games in this way. E.g. modders create new objects for *The Sims 3* (The Sims Studio 2009) one can download and put into the main game. Among other things people are offering cross necklaces for download that can be worn by the characters in one's game.<sup>4</sup> Even buildings like churches can be added to the otherwise very 'secular' game.<sup>5</sup> The practices of 'gaming culture' are of course manifold and do not only encompass territories we would usually consider as sub-culture. People who play and who occupy themselves with different other aspects of games, gaming and everything around it are actually found in the part of our society we like to call 'mainstream culture'. As Shaw argues it is therefore also important to have a 'critical cultural study of games, rather than a study of game culture as such' (Shaw 2010: 404).

Generally speaking the more time players spend with the dissemination of game specific information or the creative adaptation of games, the more probable is it that they are members of virtual computer game communities engaging themselves in individual games, genres or specific aspects of games. These (often temporary) communities range from loose alliances to sophisticated

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4 Cf. <http://mysims3blog.blogspot.de/2012/08/cross-necklace-by-irinka.html> [8/12/2013].

5 Cf. <http://www.modthesims.info/d/350589%7C> [8/12/2013].

and well organised fan cultures featuring a fixed set of rules and norms, a common language and history, shared patterns of behaviour and their own institutions (cf. amongst others De Mul 2005: 264). Normally a player will only be accepted in these communities, if he or she can document his or her motivation by the existence of competence and/or knowledge (cf. Newman 2004: 157; Winter 1995; Wiemker 1998). This competence which is usually focused upon the specific social world, serves on the one hand to affirm membership to the scene, on the other hand to define oneself within the ‘game culture’ and to set oneself apart from other members. Depending on the degree of involvement various player types are distinguished. The level of the ‘newbie’ is first and foremost characterized by curiosity; he or she hardly knows the specialized culture and does not spend a lot of time in this culture. If his or her interest increases and he or she engages more intensely in this hobby, he or she will become a ‘tourist’. The status of a ‘freak’<sup>6</sup> can only be achieved if competence and knowledge are large enough and a lasting stabilization sets in (cf. Winter 1995). Needless to say, these fan activities consume a considerable amount of time; nevertheless membership of these communities is very satisfying for many players, since they can gain social prestige, self-affirmation and a wide range of social contacts there. Besides, most of the virtual cultures provide different kinds of assets. For example, players can benefit from the collective or specialized knowledge of the community (knowledge assets), fall back upon a large, sophisticated network (network assets) and benefit from the solidarity within the community (social assets). In doing so, virtual communities sometimes become so significant to players that they seek and (apparently also) find moral support in them. This goes to show that even though these communities exist merely virtually, ‘real’ social functions are assumed. These new forms of (media) ‘communitisation’ (Weber 1922) refute the widespread claim that the mediatization of contemporary life inevitably leads to atomization and dissolution of social relationships.<sup>7</sup> Instead, these communities are the prototype of a new form of collectivity, a collectivity organizing itself, supporting socialization, and providing the opportunity of looking deeply into the construction of one’s own identity.<sup>8</sup> For an in depth discussion of the topic of gamer communities, especially in MMORPGs, we recommend Nick Yee’s Daedalus Project.<sup>9</sup>

We would also like to ask in a more normative way, whether players can learn something ‘positive’ by playing and whether playing supports the acquisition of media literacy. If we as

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6 We use ‘newbie’, ‘tourist’, and ‘freak’ as very broad categories that stem partly from the discussed field of gamer culture but don’t have any claim on universality. There exist of course very different terms to describe one’s status in a gaming community depending strongly on the community and the special language its members use.

7 According to Max Weber, the term ‘communitisations’ refers to a social relationship which is based upon its members’ subjective (affectionate or traditional) feeling of belonging together.

8 The vast ongoing popularity of (fantasy) online role playing games like *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) also seems to suggest an increased interest in virtual communities.

9 Cf. [http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway\\_intro.html](http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_intro.html) [07/12/2013].

scholars try to see through different layers and narratives of games, shouldn't it be desirable for gamers to gain the ability to use media and games in a critical fashion? According to Gee (2006) learning is always a part of the game, as occupation with digital games initiates critical learning processes, which allow the player to experience the world in a new way, to get to know new communities with various social practices and to acquire resources for future learning and problem solving (cf. Gee 2006: 228, 238). 'When people learn to play video games, they are learning a new *literacy*.' (Gee 2006: 229). Thus players acquire a new form of media competence which enables them to discern media critically, to use them in a selective way and to produce media products themselves. They acquire the ability to grasp media social processes in an analytical way according to ethical and socially responsible aspects and to use them in a reflexive way for their own actions. In order to do so, they use their knowledge of the correlations in the media system and they learn to use technical equipment for receptive and interactive purposes, as well as for producing innovative and creative media concepts (cf. Mikos 2004). It is the autonomous creation of media products, such as the modification and adaptation of games, which is a first step to the acquisition of media competence.

## 2 Religion in Digital Games

### 2.1 The Term 'Religion'

This paper uses a multi-layered understanding of the term 'religion'. At first we want to point out that religion was and sometimes still is often talked about in too normative and too undifferentiated ways. We can see substantialistic and one-dimensional definitions understanding religion and religions for instance solely connected with transcendental powers and faith. Having in mind several decades of critical and differentiated analysis from scholars of the study of religions (cf. Smith 1982) we have to acknowledge that a Christocentric viewpoint on religion, saying that it must have something to do with god and with structures we encounter in Christianity (faith, the transcendental, holy writings etc.), doesn't get us very far in our understanding of religion (cf. Ahn 1997). In this case we would act more as theologians forcing western/Christian concepts onto every kind of religious dynamic we try to describe. Instead we will start with the general observation that 'religion' is a discursive element in culture (cf. Kippenberg 1983, McCutcheon 2007) and can be filled with an overwhelming amount of meaning (cf. Nehring 2005, on the notion of religion and violence) by different actors.

Our basic task of researching digital games therefore should be threefold: First to find clear references of religion in games. When we see that certain symbols and concepts from known religious contexts (Hinduistic, Jewish, Shintō etc.) appear in a game we can discern those references and the objects they refer to. Second we can trace back the lines of reception and point out their place of origin. Religious symbols in games don't appear out of nothing – game designers take them from other sources like literature, cinema, other games, and of course the vast cultural-traditional background every one of us has. In this case we also ask about the processes of transformation or even remediation (cf. Bolter, Grusin 2000) of the source-material. And finally we can ask about the influence such narratives, symbols etc. have on their recipients, the gamers and the society at large.

## 2.2 Three Modes of Religion Used in Games

Combing through our material of games that feature aspects of religions and religion we can identify at least three ways how religion is used in digital games:

Religious issues can work as a background to heighten the authenticity or to create a special atmosphere of a game, but they have seldom a traceable effect in the gameplay itself or its overall narrative. A good example for this is the game *Resistance - Fall of Man* (Insomniac Game 2006), in which the designers chose the Manchester Cathedral as one environment for this first-person shooter with the goal to prevent an alien-like invasion of Britain. The cathedral had the function of delivering an interesting place of combat and exploration and to show the player something that he or she maybe can recognize as a special architectural object that is tied to the history of Britain.<sup>10</sup> This adaption of the historical building stands for the place or the country the player has to defend in the game and for the way of living that the alien creatures try to destroy.<sup>11</sup> Such symbols or backgrounds are often left without further contextualization by the game or the developers and function more as placeholders that suggest authenticity and atmosphere.

The second way to use religion is as a relevant game story issue. This is not to say that a player must have specific knowledge of religion or specific religions to play and beat the game but will certainly be confronted with this subject matter while he or she plays. We want to share some

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10 Nevertheless there was a big discussion after the publication of the game. Because the Church of England threatened legal action against Sony Computer Entertainment Europe for featuring Manchester Cathedral in the game without permission. 'Officials described the use of the building as "sick" and sacrilegious and stated Sony did not ask for permission to use the cathedral. They have demanded an apology and the removal of the game from shop shelves - otherwise legal action will be considered' (cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resistance:\\_Fall\\_of\\_Man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resistance:_Fall_of_Man) [10/11/2013]). Later Sony issued an unreserved apology to Manchester Cathedral by publishing it in the Manchester Evening News (cf. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/manchester/6276460.stm> [10/11/2013]).

11 *Resistance's* story is built on the premise that not the Nazis but aliens from outer space try to dominate Europe in WWII. The game's narrative relies heavily on the notion of fighting an ultimate evil while defending one's own home country and its values.

quick examples: In *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2008) you are told about the time of the crusades, the power relations in Jerusalem and the different religious groups that are in conflict with each other. In *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare 2011) a big part of the story and the environment the characters are involved in shows a socio-political conflict between two (fictional) religious groups, the Chantry and the Qunari (cf. Bezio 2013). The player often has to decide how he or she wants to relate to those groups. In *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft 2008) the player has to revive an oriental-like desert setting with the power of the god Ormazd and fight against dark and polluting shades that are servants of the god Ahriman, both entities being taken from Zoroastrianism. The *God of War* series (SCE Studios Santa Monica 2005) puts the player in the position of Kratos, a rebellious son of Zeus who wants to dethrone his father and take revenge on the gods of Olympus for the loss of his mortal family. *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) uses an evangelical prophet-figure as nemesis for the player and shows different depictions of his prophetic religion that is tied to American Exceptionalism (cf. Bosmann 2013). *Age of Mythology* (Ensemble Studios 2002) delivers a broad range of religious narratives giving the player the opportunity to use the power of Greek, Egyptian, and Nordic gods and send mythological figures into battle. In most of these cases the story relies on religious topics for its congruity. This list could be continued for a surprisingly long time and shows how many religious images are used for stories, characters, and environments in digital games.

The third way of the interplay between religion and games is the dominant description of religious issues with the aim to inform, influence, or convince players about beliefs, doctrines, practices etc. of certain religions and to deliver the possibility for gamers with a certain religious background to find their own beliefs portrayed in a game. These games are produced by developers that are somehow affiliated to religious groups or as commissioned work. The most popular example for the use of a game as a kind of 'propaganda' or as a medium to deliver a specific ideology associated with religion is the game *Left Behind - Eternal Forces* that we discussed before. There are also examples of Christian games that teach the bible or show biblical characters like Moses or Noah in a way that can be interpreted as intentionally 'religiously didactic'. Examples would be *Bible Adventures* (Wisdom Tree 1991) or *The Story of Noah's Ark* (Southpeak Games 2010). This type of games is not exclusively made for the purpose of imparting Christian messages. There exist also games developed by teams with e.g. Arab and Muslim backgrounds that use a political and religious language and imaginary to convey certain Muslim contents. One (quite militaristic) example is *Al-Quwwa al-Khasa* (Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau 2003), translated as *Special Force*, where the player fights as a member of Hezbollah during the occupation of Southern Lebanon by Israel (cf. Šisler 2006). Here religion plays an important part in the game's message, which is to depict heroic Muslim resistance against 'Zionist' forces as legitimate in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most games of this type have explicit messages tied to specific religions, their followers and their practices and worldviews. On one side certain religious

practices are displayed as positive as well as the player's presumed affiliation with them. We see in these instances that rather than creating a game for unknowing people that have to be informed about doctrines, practices, worldviews etc. these games seem to deliver content for people already somehow in touch with parts of the depicted religion. We can think about those games also as a kind of affirmation for players with a certain religious and cultural background.

### 3 God(s) in Digital Games

Having hypothesized about the more general shapes that religion can take in digital games we want to focus our attention on a more specific example of inquiry: 'god games'. Treating this genre of games can show us the usefulness of a cultural studies approach in action. Having in mind our categorization of religion in games the following questions seem to be important to understand the cultural logic of god games: What component of such games is related to the term 'god' and why are they called 'god games'? How are known religions related to these games and does this kind of games promote special kinds of religious activity? Which (religious) norms, values, beliefs, ideologies and worldviews are suggested and supported in god games? After a short description of this game genre and its roots we will discuss the connection between such games and religion.

#### 3.1 A Short History of God Games

In 1989 small British software entrepreneurship Bullfrog Productions with its lead developer Peter Molyneux published a game called *Populous*. The premise was simple: Hovering over a landmass with hills, lakes, valleys, shores and the like the player can flatten the geography and thus create habitable space for a number of little people dressed in blue clothing. They run around and begin to build tents, huts etc. that automatically develop into bigger buildings as soon more flat space is available for them. After a while mighty dwellings like forts and castles will dot the landscape with an increasing amount of inhabitants. But not all is so peaceful and prosperous in this land. Sooner or later the player and his population stumble upon other people from another 'team' played by the computer and dressed in red. In most cases the player has to start a fight with this enemy in order to succeed on his mission objectives (capture a certain point of the map etc). Using his special powers not only he can level the land and make space for his people, he has also the ability to throw fireballs from the sky, let the water rise, create inhabitable swamps, let volcanoes burst out, summon earthquakes and tornados and let different other plagues lay waste to the land and to his enemies. *Populous* quickly became known as the first installment in the genre of god games.

One interesting part is that Molyneux and his co-workers say they didn't think of their creation as something that had to do with gods or similar otherworldly beings:

'We didn't talk about gods for a second – it really didn't occur to us. We said: let's have a red team, and a blue team, and they're both trying to expand to fill the most territory.'

'Without showing someone, or better still, letting them play *Populous*, we didn't really know how best to explain it. At no point during development did we talk about you being a god, or it being a 'god game' – it just didn't occur to us. The person who suggested that was a journalist called Bob Wade. He was the first games journalist to come and see it.' (Edge Staff 2012: 2).

So it is likely that Wade and British computer magazine ACE in fact were the first instances to call Molyneux's program a god game. In the end it seems that this idea was picked up by the publisher and the game was specifically promoted as having something to do with God, gods or entities the like. The game-box of *Populous* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) carries following claim:

'You are a Supreme Being. The forces of nature are at your command. The earth rumbles at your fingertips (...). Your faithful worshippers depend on you to provide them with fertile land (...). But evil scours the land while you toil. Move quickly and lead your following to face the heart of darkness' (*Populous* 1990).

Here even a conflict between Good and Evil is invoked to set the stage for the game, the player depicted as representing the forces of light fighting against darkness. The game's successor *Populous II: Trials of the Olympian Gods* (Bullfrog 1991) developed the divine theme further letting the player feature a son of Zeus battling the Homeric pantheon with a very similar game mechanic of land-flattening and spell-hurling.

From there on other games with similar *Populous*-like elements were published and subsequently classified as god games. They have several narrative and gameplay elements in common: The scope of the narration lets the player rule over a tribe or larger group of people that are in need of guidance and protection or which the player lets loose on his enemy. Aesthetic elements like the isometrical perspective from which the player views the game world point also to the scope of the game at the same time portraying somehow a popular Christianesque image of a god (or *the* God) who resides high above in the sky looking down on us humans and guiding our mortal ways. Handling various powers to manipulate the scenery and destroy one's enemies are also important markers for the godly status the player holds. Several examples that have such qualities in common would be *Powermonger* (Bullfrog 1990), *ActRaiser* (Quintet 1990), *Mega Lo Mania* (1991 Sensible Software) *Black & White* (2000 Lionhead), *From Dust* (Ubisoft 2011) and the upcoming *Godus* (22Cans 2014).



### 3.2 Pictures of God

If players refer to a game as a god game they have to implicitly formulate what they think a god is and what powers or agency he, she, or it has. Some concepts that the majority of so called god games have in common are of course the mentioning of ‘god’ and other mighty beings as narrative markers, the special bird’s-eye perspective, and the power of influence.

First let us look at the player’s viewing perspective: As we stated earlier the bird’s-eye view refers to a popular conception of God or a god as a mighty being that resides in the sky or heaven and looks down on the world. This idea seems to be influenced by popularized Christian beliefs that paint the Heavenly Father as a being associated with a cloudy realm that is literally above the heads of humans. His role as a guarding instance that influences human life on a more direct or indirect level is presented throughout Christian history in of course often very differing nuances but has become nowadays a popular conception if one speaks of the Christian God. In *Populous* and *From Dust* an additional picture of godly powers is painted: The godlike or god-incorporating player can manipulate the terrain of the game world. This can be tied to conceptions about a world-creating god as he is depicted in the book of Genesis where he handles the raw material of the universe. The player can re-enact this powers in *Populous* and *From Dust* to a certain extend by raising the water, leveling the hills and mountains or creating new ones out of flat fields. The more apocalyptic abilities of a Christian image of God are shown through *Populous*’ other spells like the fireball and summoning of earthquakes and volcanoes, storms and swamps etc. Here the angry face of the Christian God is made available to the player as a feature in gameplay. ‘Armageddon’, the ultimate spell in *Populous*, even refers directly to certain Christian believes. After casting it every single inhabitant of the game world is summoned to a point at the map where the two teams of red and blue fight until only one of them survives.

In *Black & White* the theme of being an influencing god is also developed. The player has to take care of settlements on the game map full of his worshippers. To convert new villages and its inhabitants into believing in him or her the player can perform certain miraculous actions. He or she can pick up large boulders from the game map and toss them over the heads of people inspiring fear and fascination. This can also be accomplished by sending a mighty creature to the other settlement and let it eat villagers in order to make them subservient. Then again the godly player can give wood or food being a helpful and providing deity to inspire love and admiration in his or hers followers-to-be. Here the Christian-like notion of an angry and punishing, or a benevolent and loving god are present. It is no surprise that such elements from a western Christian cultural background find their way into cultural products such as games and are transformed in the developing process. So also the concept of ‘god’ in those *Populous*-like games is most likely a western/Christian one.

### 3.3 Inconsistencies in the Usage of the Term

This analysis concerning popular images of a Christian God is true for some god games that are built on the tradition of *Populous* and that make definite statements about gods or feature such elements in the narrative. But looking at other games that are considered examples of this genre one won't find it as easy to link together religious images and gameplay aspects.

We have to consider that games of this genre are often classified as such not only if the theme and narration has something to do with gods and otherworldly beings or the player is even considered a god that resides over his flock, like some of the examples above. Rather games are sometimes referred to as god games if they put the player into a position from where he manages a game system that in everyday circumstances would not be possible to be controlled by one single person. For the purpose of a brief glimpse into this discourse about what is considered a god game we will refer to the Wikipedia page 'Chronology of video god games'.<sup>12</sup> Here we see entries like *Sid Meier's Civilization* (MicroProse 1991) where the player is in full control over an entire nation, or *Startopia* (Mucky Foot Productions 2006) in which one has to manage a space station filled with alien inhabitants. We see also *Dungeon Keeper* (Bullfrog Productions 1997) in which one plays a dark master caring for demons and other usually rather unfriendly creatures battling heroes or other factions of dungeon dwellers.

We stand before the difficulty to make sense of this broad and often seemingly inconsistent definition of god games. The themes and narratives in these shortly presented games differ greatly and often don't feature gods and the like. So it seems that a game can be labeled by players, game critics etc. as a god game if it lets you govern or influence game systems on a more or less large scale. But what are the other characteristics of these so called god games that make players, commentators and other people involved in the discussion categorize them as such? We don't want to dismiss this categorization as merely false. Instead we want to ask what gamers, commentators etc. could have in mind when they say a game is a god game? What does 'god' mean then for those players?

### 3.4 What Does it Mean to Play (as a) God?

We began analyzing the Christianesque image-worlds of certain god games. There we found images and themes that point towards somehow popular conceptions of a biblical god. But when we see titles like *The Sims* or *Dungeon Keeper* being categorized as god games we have to think further. Those titles do not mention God or gods at all. They lack the imageries we described earlier and do

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12 Cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology\\_of\\_god\\_video\\_games](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_god_video_games) [10/11/2013].

not cause us to link them directly to parts of religious history in which the concept of god would be covered. Why are they sometimes called god games nevertheless? Or even more importantly, what does it imply for the term ‘god’ when such games are called god games?

In occupying ourselves with these games we see some gameplay concepts that we talked about before, namely the big perspective the player gets from the game-world hovering above it and the power to influence certain elements in said world. In *The Sims* the player camera hovers above one’s house and his inhabitants, his Sims. The player is looking from above into his dollhouse of some sorts commanding his Sims to eat, shower, learn, exercise, work, socialize, tend for their children, and all in all lead an everyday western suburban life. So where does ‘god’ come into play here? We can assume that people saying this is a god game see the player’s actions as comparable to those a god or the God would also be able to perform. In this perception a god has a strong or even ultimate power over the lives of people. He commands them in every single daily activity and is a sort of puppet master with almost ultimate control over the ones he is in charge of. The god of *The Sims*, the player, is nearly almighty when it comes to his influence over the characters running around the house.

In *Dungeon Keeper* we see a different narrative yet in certain ways similar image. There the player has to command little demons to tunnel through a cave-like underground environment building rooms for other demons, chicken farms, torture chambers, hallways with traps that keep intruders away etc. The player has to care for an infrastructure in his dungeon so that enough of his underlings are provided with food and shelter keeping the morale up in order to guard one’s own lair and invade other’s lairs becoming the ultimate lord of the subterranean realm. Nowhere is mentioned you play a god but *Dungeon Keeper* is being called a god game. The themes of power and influence are pretty clear here even if the player does not have such a fundamental control over nearly every aspect of the non-player characters as in *The Sims*.

For now those two examples have to suffice in order to extract the themes of control, power, influence and the like from so called god games. We think those topics are at the core of the categorization of this genre and point towards a concept of a controlling, manipulating image of god. But this image has also a more playful side when we consider e.g. *The Sims*’ dollhouse qualities. The power bestowed by the game unto the player to control NPCs or whole social structures reminds us of children playing with dolls or in a sandbox, reigning supreme and enforcing their will onto their own creations and worlds. We think that these images being present in god games point at a certain articulation or maybe even transformation of a more general meaning of ‘god’. When somebody says ‘god’ in the context of god games he or she will likely refer to ideas of power, influence, control, all-seeing, expression of one’s own will etc. but also care, nurture, and watching over one’s subjects. These are placed not only in an environment of one individual but often in a bigger picture where these topics have to be applied to a greater structure.

This interpretation will have to be tested and refined by asking gamers what they think god games are and what ‘god’ means in this context and for them personally. Here an interesting field of research opens up in which we could try to discern how nowadays ‘god’ is filled with meaning. What did people mean in the past when they talked about ‘god’ and what do they mean by it now? How are digital games involved in the tradition and transformation of the concept of god? As stated before we can only point at certain potentials of meaning that seem likely and plausible for us. In order to work within a cultural studies approach we will have to consider the viewpoints of social actors, gamers, game commentators, designers, etc. to paint a bigger picture of our inquiry. Our observation and interpretation within and of the game-text can serve as a starting point.

### 3.5 Other Games that Feature Gods

Looking at the vast gaming material we see the notion of ‘god’ not only in god games. There exists a great deal of games that picture beings that are specifically described as gods in the game and its textual and verbal statements. Then again we can recognise beings or characters in a game as having attributes that remind us of godly beings in the history of religions of known or ‘established’ religions. For instance the name of the Hindu god Shiva appears in several games of the popular Japanese *Final Fantasy* series. There she (rather than ‘he’ like in Hindu traditions) is depicted as a mighty being associated with ice and cold some player characters can summon to cast powerful spells on one’s enemy. This being isn’t called a god in the games (rather ‘Esper’ in *FF VI*, ‘Guardian Force’ in *FF VIII*, ‘Eidolon’ in *FF IX*) but clearly carries the name of the specific Hindu god. Such connections between known religious entities and their usage in games are manifold. We would like to describe two games as examples of this connection.

In the *God of War* series the player has to face different gods from Greek Homeric mythology in a violent story about revenge. The player controls the Spartan warrior Kratos who has to kill Ares the god of war by an order of Athena the goddess of wisdom. After defeating Ares Kratos ascends to the throne of the god of war but is soon betrayed by Zeus who wants to diminish Kratos powers. In a rage Kratos battles through the whole pantheon killing god after god and inciting a rebellion of the Titans to dethrone Zeus. The story focuses on Kratos’ feelings of being only a plaything of the gods and the deception of Ares who tricked Kratos into killing his own family. We see here a known story of the fight between small mortals and mighty gods and the rebellion against powers that control one’s life. The fight between children and their parents is also a prominent theme here. Wishing to use a cultural studies approach we can e.g. ask about the origin of the story, the characters, and images in the game from the developer’s side. David Jaffe, Game Director of SCE Santa Monica, spoke in interviews about his ambition to make a game that is a mixture of Heavy Metal Magazine and the movie *Clash of the Titans* by Ray Harryhausen. But Jaffe also pointed out

that even as a kid he was interested in Greek mythology and was familiar with literature about it (cf. Reed 2013). So we see a first starting point to investigate further on the reception history of motifs in *God of War* – here pop culture merges with established views on history of religions. The second step would be a detailed game analysis and the decryption and naming of motifs from the history of religions, e.g. characters, like the Greek gods, the sceneries, like Athens or the river Styx, the objects, like Pandora's Box or the statues of Athena, and different parts of the whole game story. These findings would be tied to specific points of already known religious (and other) history. Besides that we can also point out specificities in the game material. For instance how the gods in *God of War* are presented and how oneself as a player is connected to them. In this example we see quite the negative image of the term 'god': Kratos' family is taken by a ruse of Ares, Athena promises Kratos that his nightmares of slaughtering his own family would end but in finishing the game it turns out that Kratos (and presumably the player) hoped in vain. The gods are depicted as manipulating and use the mortal Kratos only as a means for their sibling war. Being utterly disappointed and with his hopes crushed the Spartan casts himself from Mount Olympus into the sea. But he is not even allowed to die because Athena 'saves' him and makes him successor of Ares.

Another example would be the Japanese action-adventure game *Ōkami* (Clover Studios 2006) where the player incorporates the sun goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami (cf. Ashkenazi 2003). A whole plethora of characters, symbols, and stories from the old Japanese myth-compilations *Nihonshoki/Nihongi* (translation by Aston 1985) and *Kojiki* (translation by Chamberlain 1986)<sup>13</sup> were used in constructing *Ōkami*'s narrative landscape. There among plenty other stories the sun goddess is characterized and also the battle told of her brother, the god Susano-wo, with the eight-headed serpent Yamato-no-orochi. But in the game Amaterasu is not depicted as a woman but rather as a white wolf. The story revolves around her who has to cleanse mythical Nippon (Japan) from a demonic taint that came over the inhabitants and the land when an old seal was broken that held the evil dragon Orochi at bay. Ripped of her full godly powers she also has to recover her abilities step by step in order to face the demons polluting the land. When Amaterasu encounters spirits of the forest or other (lesser) gods that hide from the pollution she is often revered as 'mother of all things'. The other divine beings bow to her and praise her doings. But in the eyes of the normal sake (rice-wine) brewer or town guard the goddess appears only as a big white wolf which is sometimes just referred to as 'doggy' or 'puppy'. But wherever she walks and runs flowers blossom in her trail and the animals of the land react joyfully to her offerings of food. Step by step she heals the nature of Nippon that changes colours from gray and white to hues of green and plants grow instantly on the revived spots of earth. Amaterasu is depicted as a powerful but far from almighty

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13 The *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* are both myth-compilations that date back as far as to the early 8th century (cf. Isomae 2010). Both feature among other things stories about the creation of Japan, the gods (like e.g. Amaterasu-ōmikami) and other mythical heroes.

deity that is strongly connected with nature and purity. But her representation is not very spectacular or awe inspiring. The normal people of Nippon don't regard the player's character as a heavenly being, only other gods and characters that have a sense for the supernatural (like a certain Buddhist priest that one can encounter in different locations) see through Amaterasu's 'disguise'. But being a wolf she does not behave like one would expect it from a goddess. She growls and barks when danger is ahead and expresses joy in a similar animal-like manner. Even her companion Issun jokingly calls the goddess 'Ammy' or 'furball'. Risking a comparison with *God of War* we would say that the image of god painted by *Ōkami* is a very positive one. Here gods help to restore peace, they act in unison with nature, they serve the people without asking for much (only for some prayers and faith) and in most situations they don't have the gravitas and seriousness of the gods in *God of War*. Then again we can compare the images of the gods in both games with the image we tried to extract from titles from the god games genre. In contrast to the broader idea of a non-personal and all-seeing god Athena, Ares and Amaterasu are depicted as mighty beings with powers that go beyond those of mortals but are not totally removed from the constraints of a physical world. They are personalized characters that remind us of humans (or at least have characteristics similar to humans like Amaterasu). Here we can of course encounter themes of control and influence too, but they are presented in a different manner, more as elements of the story. Amaterasu for example can't command the people of Nippon to do her biddings. Instead she uses her abilities to heal the land step by step and has only influence on the lives of the people on a very basic level. She is more an unobtrusive helpful entity than a controlling godly empress.

This (of course very short) analysis opens up other interesting questions. We could ask why gods are presented so sympathetically in *Ōkami*, which is a product of Japanese developer studio Clover Studios, and why the Greek gods of *God of War* are so unlikable and painted as adversaries not only for the player character Kratos but for humankind in general. Has the cultural background of both developer teams something to do with their approach on the notion of god and gods?

Working in a sense of cultural studies we can further ask how players deal with those religious symbols, images, stories etc. and how they appropriate those narratives or how they transform them and carry them on. It is necessary to interview players and e.g. to sift through discussion in forums in order to get a first glimpse of what players think of those religious narratives and whether they would label such motifs religious. Something that in the eye of a scholarly beholder can be conceptualized as having something to do with religion doesn't have to be seen as such by other social actors. Most interesting are the dynamics and changes that occur in the understanding of certain narratives. If we look at the depiction of god and gods in games it is mostly certain that those entities are modelled differently than, let's say, through books or movies in the past. Still being very important for the religious practice of millions of people gods aren't a thing from the past – far from it. They reside firmly in the everyday religious life of many Hindu

devotees, Christian churchgoers, Shinto-shrine visitors, etc. Taking gods and making them characters of digital games could have an impact on how those gods are treated or looked at in general. All those questions hopefully will be discussed more in depth in the future by studies that specifically aim at revealing the connection between gods in games and the players' attitudes towards them.

#### 4 Summary & Outlook

We wanted to show how the lens of cultural studies can be applied to the field of games and religion. We saw that it is necessary to examine digital games not only as artifacts but also look at their contexts of production and their appropriation. Religion is a theme explored in and through various digital games as it has been and is still being explored in various other cultural products like literature, movies, music, everyday objects, etc. Our ambition was to make a first quick survey of the field of religion and digital games and to bring a bit of order into it. We proposed three broad categories or ways in which religion and religious symbols, narratives, and the like are often used in games. Such symbols can appear either as atmospheric placeholders that are mostly devoid of their initial (religious and cultural) meaning. Then again we see instances where religious narratives play more important roles in a game's story and are put into a context in the narrative and world of the game. Often set pieces from known religious systems are used to invoke authenticity. Those set pieces also often undergo a certain transformation in the process of adaption and remediation. In a third way we see religious belief systems, ideologies, and practices depicted by designers who themselves have a certain religious affiliation. In these cases religious statements are either used to promote the worldviews of certain religious actors or to condemn other ones (as we saw in the example of *Al-Quwwa al-Khasa*).

As an example of a religious dynamic we looked at the appearance of the idea of 'god' in games. We saw that gods represent themes in various digital games. You can play as one, battle them, pray to them, talk about them, etc. Some games give you the opportunity to act as a Christianesque godly supervisor looking down from above the game world influencing devotees and smashing your foes with righteous wrath. This biblical image is sometimes used in the genre of so called 'god games'. But interestingly the idea of playing god does not have to be supported by Judeo-Christian markers and symbols in a game in order to be called a 'god game' in the broader gaming discourse. In a list of cases it suffices that a player can have control over a bigger game system, like a nation or a family, in order to invoke associations with the term 'god'. We see that in a certain way the idea of 'god' does not have to be related to classical markers from religious

history. In the described instances the notion of ‘god’ is filled with thoughts about power, influence, playing with one’s environment, etc. Then again other games set the player in the position of a god that is powerful but doesn’t muster the near omnipotent qualities of the idea of the biblical god. The images of gods used in digital games are often taken from sources like (religious) literature, movies, and various other media that preserve tales or bigger narratives of (religious) history. It would be most interesting to see how such depictions of gods in games can shift the overall image people in a society have about the term ‘god’. Digital games play such an important role in the lives of many adolescents and adults. Therefore it would be very interesting to ask how those people will be affected by religion presented in games. How do they react to religion and how will they use it for their own means? What sense do gamers old and young make from religion when they stumble upon it? Actor-oriented studies have to be conducted to delve deeper into this possible religious dynamic.

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## Biographies

MARKUS WIEMKER studied Sociology, Philosophy, and Psychology with the focus on Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Technology RWTH Aachen in Germany. He has been teaching game design and game studies for over ten years at various schools (e.g. the Games Academy Berlin or the Cologne Game Lab) and universities in Germany and Austria and also developed game design curricula for institutions in Austria and Southeast Asia. Besides his storytelling and game design work for several game companies, his current research priority lies on the regulation and censorship of digital games. In this function he worked with/for the Austrian Institution for Game Ratings (BuPP) and several developers and publishers.

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JAN WYSOCKI is enrolled in the Master's program of the Religious Studies department at the at the University of Heidelberg. Having written his Bachelor thesis on the topic of mourning rituals in contemporary Japanese Soto Zen he now specializes in the history of evangelical religion in North America. His interest for all things digital and playful led him to the occupation with Game Studies which will result in his Master thesis about the representation of American religion in *BioShock Infinite*. He is also interested in the theory, method and epistemology of the Study of Religion.

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