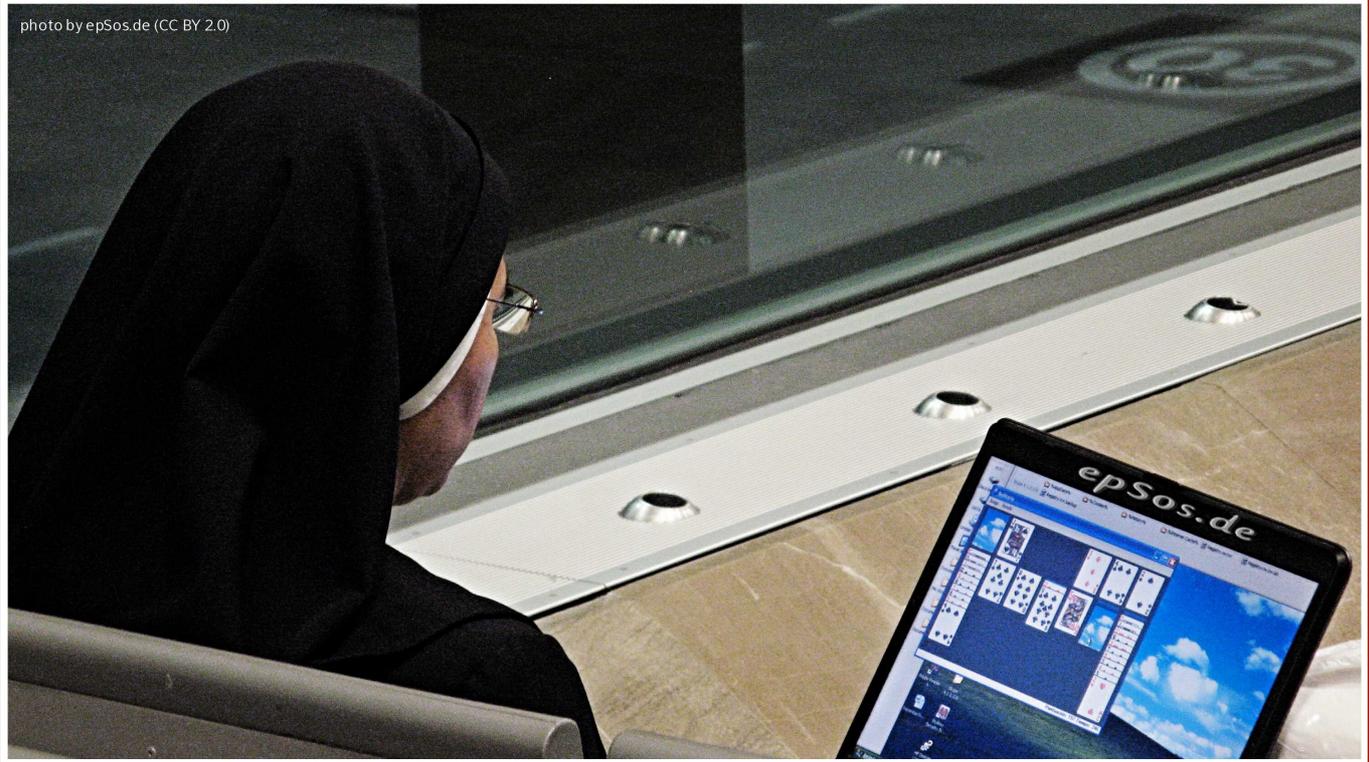




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Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki (Eds.)

Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

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“Venturing into the Unknown”¹(?)

Method(olog)ical Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki

Abstract

Digital games research has finally been accepted in ‘serious academia’ as the multitude of new scientific publications clearly show. There is an abundance of case studies whereas thorough methodological and methodical groundwork is hardly to be found. A void that is reflected by some (from an academic viewpoint) rather disputable practical approaches. This article is trying to fill that void by offering some methodical considerations, striving for starting up methodical discussions in academia.

Derived directly from the ‘digital fieldwork’ in different game spheres and from the perspective of cultural studies, the authors give a practical and basic introduction into methods applicable for researching different aspects and occurrences of religion in digital games, gamers and the practice of digital gaming. The methodical discussion is illustrated by examples derived from a case study on *Smite*, a multiplayer online battle arena game published by Hi-Rez in 2014 and are preceded by a short summary on theoretical and methodological preconditions and considerations.

Keywords

religion, digital games research, method, methodology, *Smite*, actor-centered research, game-immanent research

1 Quote from the “lore” of Janus, the *Smite* “god of portals”. See: <http://smite.gamepedia.com/Janus>.

1 Introduction

‘Thor, as famous as he is bold, is God of the thundering sky. Yet his hammer, Mjolnir is nearly as famous as he is, and Thor will not be parted from it.’² By a mighty blow of Mjolnir, Thor crushes his adversaries’ ‘minions’. With his wild red mane, beard and his piercing blue eyes, Thor is indeed an impressive appearance. His chest is muscle-bound. He is clad in a shining blue metal armour and his huge hammer makes an awe-inspiring and lethal weapon. He is big and overshadows most men and gods. While he is overcome by ‘warrior’s madness’ or when he spins his hammer in a ‘berserker’s barrage’, there is virtually nothing that can sustain his assault. When Thor throws his hammer or leaps into the air to come crushing down on his adversaries, his trademark attacks ‘Mjolnir’s attunement’ and ‘anvil of dawn’ drive his enemies back – or leaves them dead on the battleground. With him is Fenrir ‘the Unbound’, a monstrous black wolf whose eyes and mouth seem to be on fire. He is foretold to slay the great god Odin when Ragnarok has come, the final destiny of the gods is being decided and the world as we know it will cease to exist. Fenrir is a fierce creature, a wolf-weapon unchained who haunts Norse legends as being the one to devour earth and sky. Yet Thor and Fenrir stand united, two assassins shoulder to shoulder against mutual enemies. Finally one of the combatants emerges. Ra, the Egyptian sun god in his traditional incarnation as a human figure with the beak of a hawk, a solar disk above his brow. He is clad in traditional Egyptian vesture and carries a long staff with the all seeing eye on top. He may be the creator of life in Egyptian myth, now as a ‘mage’, he deploys the power of the sun to bring agony and destruction to his opponents. Not only can he move with the ‘speed of light’, he also is able to summon a ‘celestial beam’ to cause harm and a blast of heat to induce ‘searing pain’, incinerating those unlucky enough to be close by. When Thor slams his hammer to bring forth a ‘tectonic rift’ to slow Ra down, his antagonist has already conjured the ‘divine light’ that instantly blinds his adversaries. Will Thor be able to sustain? Or will Ra be victorious in the end?

Theomachy, the ‘battle of the gods’ is a landmark theme in Norse mythology. According to legend however, the divine warfare back then was limited to the gods of the Norse pantheon. These confinements have now been invalidated when in March 2014 the third person multiplayer online battle arena videogame³ *Smite* was newly released by Hi-Rez Studios⁴. In the game, players take on the role of a god and participate in arena combat, either against other player-controlled gods or against NPCs. The aim is to capture the opponents’ base, en route destroying several obstacles and finally defeating an epic boss opponent who guards the hostile fortress. Players choose a god according to their preferences of class and fighting style. They can pick a ‘melee fighter’ who engages in close combat, a long-distance fighter or a supporter whose main task is to help the others in combat. Each character of choice features one basic attack and four spells with varying effects, such as ‘area of effect’ (AOE) damages or spells on multiple targets within a certain area, crowd

2 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1779>.

3 Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) is a mixture of real-time strategy (RTS) games and action games where usually two teams compete, each player controlling one character. The emphasis of MOBA games lies on cooperative team-play with the objective to destroy the opponents’ main base. Famous MOBA games (and predecessors of *Smite*) are e.g. *Defence of the Ancients* (<http://www.playdota.com/>) and *League of Legends* (<http://euw.leagueoflegends.com/>).

4 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/>.

control (CC) like movement or action modifiers that actively stun or slow the opponents down as well as a multitude of other special moves and buffs.

2 Religion and Digital Games, Gaming and Gamers

Religion and religious elements frequently appear in the context of videogames (like the example of *Smite* clearly shows). As subjects to study, they can serve as indicators for the multitude and variety of negotiation processes of religious topics in different socio-cultural settings as well as the construction of fictional religious worlds, the justification and constitution of religious conflicts or even as instrument for the visualization of (mostly) subliminal social discourses.

The theoretical research backgrounds have been extensively discussed before (e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014), so we give only a brief overview. The main focus of our paper is an introduction into method and methodology from the perspective of cultural studies, which is (among others) also suitable for students' use in the classroom. So please join us, on our quest, "(...) deviating from a path of safety and certainty into something unexpected"⁵: the research of religion and digital games, gamers and gaming!

2.1 Game Narratives and Visuals / Aesthetics

The reason why *Smite* is so appealing to scholars of Religious Studies is its application of religious content from different settings and contexts, namely from Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Chinese, Hindu, Roman and Mayan mythology and its transfer into a (seemingly) 'profane' game environment.⁶ The topic of theomachy has by the game designers been turned into a unique feature that distinguishes *Smite* from other MOBA games whereas the gameplay and game mechanics are roughly the same. Consequently, the individual gods seem to have been designed and shaped with consideration, taking into account their religious features, mythological background stories and regional flavors of the setting they are derived from. In-game as well as on the game's website the gods are thoroughly explained, their features, their abilities in battle and a version of their story (according to the designers) is being told, often accompanied by video clips introducing their character and showing their art of war.⁷ But it is not only historical and mythological influences and small bits of (back-)story that add to the construction of a god character. It is also modern media, namely

5 Quote from the "lore" of Janus, the *Smite* "god of portals". See: <http://smite.gamepedia.com/Janus>.

6 For the role and function of 'myth' in computer games, see: Krzywinska 2005, 2006.

7 For Thor see the Hi-Rez' 'god reveal' on YouTube <http://youtu.be/cR5Q2onmbCU>. For Fenrir see: <http://youtu.be/wqsf3ThdGRE>.

literature (most often fantasy and scifi), film and television, as well as earlier videogames that merge into the reception, reconstruction and reproduction of a figure by generating a consecutive (if not always perfectly coherent) narrative. ‘Game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces,’ as Henry Jenkins puts it (Jenkins 2004: 121).

The already mentioned ‘thunder god’ Thor e.g. resembles in many aspects the figures described in Norse mythology and recorded in the Norse sagas, e.g. his characteristics (as recounted in the game), his fighting moves, ‘Mjolnir’, his weapon. However, many features of the visual/aesthetical design of the god seem to have been taken from the 2011 action movie⁸ based on the even earlier Marvel comic character⁹ of the same name. This blending of interwoven motifs and discourses that constitute the notion of Thor by both the game designers as well as the recipients (who most often recognize the character without any deeper knowledge of Norse Literature) can be denoted as ‘thick text’¹⁰. The term refers to the intertextual contexts, the multitude of references, allusions and connotations within as well as across media genres. Even though the concept was originally focusing on blockbuster movies, it can be nicely applied to explain the various strands of narrative and iconographical references in videogames (and has in fact been used by various scholars) (Krzywinska 2006: 383). The processes of creating and composing ‘thick text’ can be described as applying the concepts of ‘transmedia storytelling’ and ‘remediation’. ‘Transmedia storytelling’ according to Media Scholar Henry Jenkins¹¹ emphasizes narratives and storylines and describes the processes of narratives being transferred and transmitted by a multitude of media platforms, thereby reverting to topics from earlier media forms, e.g. literature or other popular or traditional strands of discourse. Bolter and Grusin’s approach of ‘remediation’ however focuses on the processes of mediatization themselves (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Retracing the refashioning of earlier media like visual art, film, television, literature etc. by new digital media, they state that the digital means of communication do not merely substitute its predecessors, but incorporate them and only through this gain cultural significance (p. 20 ff).

In the area of videogame research, the remediation of textual and intertextual elements derived from a multitude of preexisting media genres such as orally transmitted myth, literature, fantasy tale, comic and movie merge into the narrative, plot, setting, gameplay and/or mechanics of the digital game – or into the creation of a singular character as we have already demonstrated

8 See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0800369/>.

9 See: http://marvel.wikia.com/Thor_%28Thor_Odinson%29.

10 The concept of ‘thick text’ most probably goes back to the term ‘thick description’, coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). It has since then been widely used and adapted. Even though the media critic Roz Kaveney in her conception of ‘thick text’ does not openly refer to Geertz, the references are quite obvious and have also been applied and adapted by other Media Scholars for the description of videogame narratives and iconography. See Kaveney 2005: 5; Krzywinska 2006: 383.

11 For a general explanation of the concept ‘transmedia storytelling’ see Jenkins 2006. For an application on videogames, see Jenkins 2004.

taking the example of Thor. The complexity of reception and (re-)construction processes that take place during the design procedure of a videogame or game elements are most probably not accidental and can nicely be traced using the example of the new god character of ‘Janus’ in *Smite*. On the occasion of his new release in May 2014, an official making-of film¹² was publicized apart from the official ‘god reveal’ video clip¹³, explaining in detail the different steps the designers took in the making of the character. This is indeed a lucky strike. Even though the level of the design is very interesting for the research of religion in digital games it mostly remains a “blind alley” since in most cases the design studios do not communicate or cooperate with scholars.

2.2 Gameworld and Gameplay

Another area of in-game research is the videogame as a whole, its general appearance, its topography (representing the ‘gameworld’) and its modes of play (the ‘gameplay’). We have already looked at the narratives and aesthetics both of which considerably affect the look and “feel” of the game. But instead of looking at certain and marked-off aspects within the game setting, we enter a higher level of complexity which constitutes the ‘worldness’¹⁴ of the game as ‘invented universe’ (Klastrup 2008: 2), be it a scifi scenario in outer space, a modern-day or futuristic city, a medieval town or a Tolkienesque fantasy world.

A gameworld represents the result of a game’s aesthetics, its narrative and its possibilities in the communication between the player and the game. It is this combined effort of the underlying mechanics and elements that constitute a gameworld that can be experienced by the player. (...) Thereby aesthetics are complemented with narratives and thus form the groundwork of the gameworld. (...) So the gameworld can be seen as a nexus in which all the strands of aesthetics and narratives merge together and are interwoven with the option of the player to interact with those elements. (Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 26)

Thus the gameworld indicates the larger experience of the game which comprises its mechanics, its plot, its storyline(s), its objects, its characters, its spaces etc. Within the gameworld, the gameplay takes place, pointing to the levels of interaction by the (human) players in the course of the game, mainly in regard to choice, interactivity and agency¹⁵ (see 28 ff). Together with the constitution of a (coherent) gameworld, the gameplay shapes and steers the ‘ludic experience’ (Rodriguez 2006) and the players’ ‘immersion’ (see Murray 1997: 38; Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014), i.e. the feeling of

12 See: <http://youtu.be/ZtsGe5EYID4>.

13 See: <http://youtu.be/9US7evaihQM>.

14 For a detailed account on ‘worldness’ in digital games, see Klastrup 2008: 1; Krzywinska 2006: 386.

15 For a discussion of the term ‘agency’ see e.g. Barker 2005: 233-238.

‘being drawn into a world’ (see Klastrop 2008: 4). ‘Doing something in a world, participating in its ruleset, to get involved in its world through exploration and/or through the repertoire of action of the player’s avatar lets the player become part of the gameworld.’ (Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 31).

At the point where gameworld and (aspects of) gameplay interconnect, we often find reference to religion in many different forms and shapes, even though in many cases not as obvious as in *Smite*¹⁶, where the whole setting, the players’ characters to the point of the name and description of the various attacks and fighting styles conveys the leitmotif of ‘theomachy’ or ‘battle of the gods’ even though in a contemporary layout.

2.3 Gaming Culture and Beyond

Beside the discourses around the design process and an in-game analysis of religious elements (like narratives, aesthetics, gameworld and gameplay), the gamers’ receptions of the game context play an important role. The gamer’s notion of the game contents and their correlating and negotiating of those religious discourses within and outside their own religious disposition is an excellent diagnostic tool which enables insights into their very own and individual religiousness in a qualitative perspective.

An example for religiously based discussions that largely exceed the limits of the game itself and even the gaming community is the debate on the appropriation of Hindu deities in *Smite*. A fact that has led to much criticism, namely by Hindu leaders like Rajan Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism. He claims that putting the deities under player control ‘trivializes’ them and additionally denounces the alleged ‘pornographic’ depiction of the goddess Kali as inappropriate.¹⁷ The conflicting positions within the debate are thanks to the internet easy to trace and allow insight into the (otherwise often concealed) area of personal as well as institutionalized religion.¹⁸ During the discussion, the *Smite* developers confirmed their refusal to remove the Hindu gods – and at the

16 For a multitude of different examples see Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 26 ff.

17 <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/deity-based-moba-smite-will-not-use-jewish-christian-islamic-figures/1100-6384974/>.

18 See e.g. <http://www.rtsguru.com/game/451/article/3378/Hindu-Leaders-Unhappy-With-Smite-Hi-Rez-Responds.html>, <http://www.rtsguru.com/game/451/article/3419/Controversy-Over-Hindu-Gods-in-Smite-Not-Over.html>, <http://www.cinemablend.com/games/SMITE-Offends-Hindus-Catholics-Jews-With-Porno-Style-Depiction-Kali-44645.html> and <http://www.change.org/petitions/stop-denigration-of-hindu-gods-in-video-games-boycott-smite>. The Universal Society of Hinduism did a similar protest against *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* the first entirely India-developed digital console game (published for PS2 in 2009), as Xenia Zeiler’s analysis reveals. She identifies the discourses as mediatized negotiations of religious authority within global diaspora settings. See: Zeiler 2014: 66-87.

same time declared their rejection of ever integrating characters from Abrahamic religions like Judaism, Islam or Christianity, allegedly for gameplay reasons:

‘From [the] perspective of a video game, the key Abrahamic figures--Adam, Noah, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, are not that interesting in character design or gameplay. They are all human. They never overlapped or interacted with one another. They certainly never fought each other in dramatic fashion with unique abilities. They are all peaceful--at best they would be support characters,’ as Todd Harris, Hi-Rez Studios’ chief operating officer is quoted.¹⁹

This substantially unequal treatment of characters from different religious background generates many interesting research questions and would therefore make an interesting field for religious studies beyond the perspective of the game itself.

In summary, the recounted aspects constitute why videogames (in the same way as other means of popular culture) represent an outstanding field of research for the shaping, the transmission and the (re-)construction of religious discourse in the present age. It is mainly the accessibility and transparency of the discourses in and on videogames (via the multitude of digital media) that make videogames an excellent source of information. However, in order to being able to conduct a thorough research in this field it is necessary to wisely choose the appropriate method(s), a basic selection of which will be explained in detail in the following section.

3 Methods for the Research of Religion and Digital Games

Digital games are – to differing degrees – complex constructions of visuals, sound, architecture world-building, narrative, rules and game mechanics.²⁰ As we have already described elsewhere (see Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014), we have to turn to each of these elements (when present) while hoping to unravel the usually complex and multidimensional relationships between religion and games. At first glance, some of these elements may be approached through means of “more established” disciplines. Especially game aesthetics, narratives and world-building seem to be predestined for an analysis by film and literary studies.

Without dipping too much into the ‘narratology-vs-ludology’ debate²¹, it is worth mentioning that purely narrative and aesthetics based approaches to game research can pose their own issues,

19 <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/deity-based-moba-smite-will-not-use-jewish-christian-islamic-figures/1100-6384974/>. For more information on the background see also <http://www.gamebreaker.tv/pc-games/playing-god/>.

20 For further details see e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 18 ff.

21 See e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 11 ff.

most of which relate to the unique structure and properties of games as a distinct form of media – or perhaps “media conglomeration” (see eg. Aarseth 2004: 46). As scholars of religion we are interested in the processes of reception and discourse involved in the constitution of religious beliefs and identity, which also involves reception of media like movies, books, comics and – of course – games. But to understand these processes of reception, to be able to ask the ‘proper’ questions and make sense out of the answers returned to us, we need to understand the context and circumstances under which reception takes place. In the case of a videogame which features religious elements this context consists of

- a) social, cultural and peer related knowledge of the player including his knowledge related to religion as well as games and other media – in short: his or her (religious) lifeworld – and
- b) the act of playing itself and all the choices, involvement and experiences but also the mechanical, rule- and design-related restrictions this may encompass.

Accordingly, the following sections are split up into two main parts. The first will be focused on a ‘game-immanent’ approach, advocating and describing playing as a method of research as well as sharpening the view for the identification and analysis of religious elements inside digital games. The second section will be focused on a more actor-centered approach, drawing on methods of the social sciences and mainly qualitative research and gaming-related online community research.

In the summary of this chapter, we will then try to amalgamate both approaches. We will try to further illustrate that both game-immanent as well as actor-centered methods may not be seen as exclusive but rather as complementary approaches.

1.1 Playing Research? The Game-Immanent Approach

The title of this section was taken from Espen Aarseth’s article ‘Playing Research: Methodological approaches to game analysis’ (2003). ‘Playing research’ is a rather skillful play on words, as it encompasses various issues with game research methods still prevalent to this day. There is of course the most obvious and simple reading of

- a) the research and analysis of games and play. But reading a little further into the contexts and struggles of game research – especially at the time of publication of Aarseth’s article – one could also read the title as “playing” – as in “make believe” – research, enforcing the notion of

b) game research as something not to be taken as seriously as “proper” research in other fields of study²².

Of course, Espen Aarseth – himself an early supporter of game research (see e.g. Aarseth 1997) – had no intention of implying such a sentiment (quite the contrary, actually). Therefore the most significant way of reading the title of his article – and this section, while we’re at it – is the notion of “playing as means of research”. Aarseth himself expresses three ways through which knowledge about games can be acquired:

Firstly, we can study the design, rules and mechanics of the game, insofar as these are available to us, e.g. by talking to the developers of the game. Secondly, we can observe others play, or read their reports and reviews, and hope that their knowledge is representative and their play competent.²³ Thirdly, we can play the game ourselves. While all methods are valid, the third way is clearly the best, especially if combined or reinforced by the other two. (Aarseth 2003: 3)

All of these approaches (as well as their issues) will be discussed throughout the following paragraphs. The main purpose of this section however is to expand on the idea of playing as a method of research as well as the importance of a game-immanent perspective. But before we go into more detail on how a ‘game(r)-scholar’ should approach playing as method, let us elaborate on why we think this perspective is essential for the understanding of games, play and gamers as well as – to stay on topic – their relation to religion.

Playing vs. Watching vs. Reading

First, it should be made clear that while we support the view that playing is an integral part for comprehending games and gaming, this does not mean other sources of information can or should be devalued or even ignored. The option of using the numerous gaming-related online communities and video platforms like *YouTube* or *Twitch* for actor-centered research will be discussed in one of the following sections.²⁴ But even when taking a game-immanent approach, external sources can prove a very useful tool.

One of the perks of doing extensive game research is the fact that the communities of some games or game series can be very productive in providing fellow fans, interested readers and

22 See e.g. <http://criticalreligion.org/2013/10/21/here-be-dragons-the-quest-for-academic-credibility/>.

23 The question of competence will be addressed in sections *Playing with method – Playing as method* and *The actor-centered approach* in this chapter.

24 Espen Aarseth provides a more extensive list of sources for what he calls ‘non-playing analysis’. Namely these are ‘previous knowledge of genre, previous knowledge of game-system, other player’s reports, reviews, walkthroughs, discussions, observing others play, interviewing players, game documentation, playtesting reports, interviews with game developers’ (Aarseth 2003: 6). Some of these will be discussed in the following sections.

watchers and – in our case – researchers with large amounts of information and material. This information is usually stored in so called ‘gaming wikis’ or community fansites, a few examples for *Smite* being *Smitefire* and the *Smite*-wikis hosted by *wikia.com* and *gamepedia.com*. Everything available on these sites was collected and reviewed by active community members and players of *Smite*. The collection includes detailed rundowns and guides of every god available in the game. What makes these wikis especially useful is not only the fact that they provide the interested researcher with easily accessible data otherwise only available by starting up the game – hereby adding some convenience. They also feature additional tools like a ‘history’ and a ‘comment’ function through which changes made to the entries can be tracked back and easily reconstructed.

Throughout their life cycle, games – like many creative products – go through numerous iterations before they are – at least on paper – considered finished or “released”. And even then, the design process may never really stop until the game is completely abandoned – by players and designers alike – and considered to be no longer economically feasible. As Roz Kaveney phrases it:

We have to learn again that all works of art are to some extent provisional – in that they are abandoned rather than ever completed, and in that they are always one particular stage in a notional process which may be picked up again two decades later. (Ridley Scott’s 2003 re-edit of *Alien* is a case in point here.) (Kaveney 2005: 5)

This is even more relevant for multi-player games like *Smite*²⁵ which has gone through an extended beta test phase²⁶. Throughout this test phase of over two years – during which the game was already open and playable for the public – the gameplay, aesthetics and especially the god roster of *Smite* changed in a way that makes the first versions of the game barely recognisable when compared to the current iteration. And the changes and additions haven’t stopped with the official release on march 25th 2014. In order to keep the game “fresh” and interesting for the players as well as attractive for the ever growing competitive gaming scene²⁷, constant changes are being made to the game. This ranges from small mechanical modifications on single gods to make them more ‘balanced’ with respect to the other gods to complete aesthetics and gameplay related overhauls of unpopular gods²⁸. Additionally, a new god is added to the roster every month and now and then a

25 There are also examples for remakes and “Director’s Cuts” of singleplayer games like the *Age of Mythology Extended Edition* (<http://www.ageofempires.com/AoM.aspx>) or the *Deus Ex: Human Revolution Director’s Cut* (<http://www.deusex.com/directorscut>).

26 ‘Beta phase’ is a term derived from software development and testing. A beta version of a game is usually ‘feature complete’ but has not yet reached final release status. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_release_life_cycle#Beta).

27 For examples see section *The actor-centered approach* in this chapter or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_sports.

28 The popularity of a god in *Smite* can be based on different factors. For example, he or she may be perceived by the players as not viable or strong enough or just boring to play when compared to the other gods. Or the god might be

whole new game mode (e.g. in May 2014 the so-called ‘Siege Mode’) with its own rules is being released. Online resources like wikis (and their history functions) but also video resources like ‘Let’s Plays’, game trailers, reviews or first impression videos can be a great tool when trying to track back, compare and document changes made to a game over time.

Of course this is not the only use for “game external” sources. With a little online research for example, one might be able to find collections of in-game texts²⁹, dialogue transcripts³⁰ and gameplay walkthroughs for many games. While these tools can prove exceptionally useful when planning and documenting one’s own gaming research, they should never be used as a substitute for actual play. First, there is always the possibility of errors or missing elements in third party sources. Secondly, “watching” (via *Twitch* or a ‘Let’s Play’) or “reading” (through guides and wikis) a game provides the game(r)-researcher with a limited view and experience of a game, seen only through the eyes of another player. This deprives the researcher of all agency when choosing what to do, what to see and what to take a closer look at. Of course, the perspective of other players becomes extremely important when turning to the actor-centered approach, but until then the ambition of a “regular” player is not necessarily the same as the ambition of the researcher, the latter of which should be aiming for an impression of the game which is as comprehensive and detailed as possible.

The Language of Digital Games

There are many different arguments one could use to advocate a more “hands-on” approach to game research. Many of these points seem rather universal and obvious³¹ while others are mostly related to the unique properties of games as a deeply involving and interactive medium³². But let’s stick to a perhaps more relatable – to non-gamers – example to make our point.

Proper communication is an essential element of many competitive and cooperative multiplayer games. *Smite*, being attributed to the ‘multiplayer online battle arena’ (MOBA³³) genre, uses a distinct ‘quick chat’ feature (called VGS³⁴) to simplify communication during the usually rather bustling matches. The pressing of certain key combinations (up to 3 keys in a row) triggers pre-

perceived as as not fitting with regards to his or her mythological (and pop cultural) background. See e.g. the rework of the god Sun Wukong based on community feedback (<http://www.vault4.com/threads/smite-sun-wukong-massive-change-and-new-god.1799/>).

29 See e.g. <http://www.imperial-library.info/books/skyrim/by-category> for a collection of all in-game lore books from *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*.

30 See e.g. http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/1c6nb1/all_of_the_dialogue_in_skyrim_use_for_modding/ for a full dialogue transcript for *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*.

31 Like the ‘first hand’ vs ‘second hand’ knowledge argument made by Espen Aarseth (Aarseth 2003: 6) and the fact that most scholars would probably not dare writing about a book or a movie without having read or watched it.

32 See for example Markku Eskelinen, who refers to the ‘configurative’ nature of games, compared to the ‘interpretative’ nature of literature, film and theater (Eskelinen 2001: Gaming as configurative practice, para. 5).

33 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/what-is-smite->

34 This system is taken directly from *Tribes: Ascend* (<http://www.hirezstudios.com/tribesascend/home>). Another multiplayer game developed and published by Hi-Rez Studios but otherwise very different from *Smite*.

defined voice messages only audible by team mates of the player. Unfortunately, many of these messages seem rather cryptic – if not incomprehensible – when heard out of context:

‘Attack Left Lane!’

‘Gank Middle Lane!’

‘Enemy missing right!’

Readers who are familiar with *Smite* will perhaps understand these short sentences. Players of other games of the MOBA genre might also recognise them but notice a few subtle differences to their own gaming related experience. Everyone else might at best guess what they “could” mean but otherwise fail to grasp their whole message. This is of course due to the differing degrees of context provided and present at this point.

Many games – especially those which involve strong communicative aspects like multi-player games – or rather their players have developed their very own distinct vocabulary of terms, abbreviations and designations. Various lists and guides with possible “translations” can be found throughout the internet³⁵, but what makes this “gaming language” particularly hard to grasp for those unfamiliar with the corresponding game, is that its terminology is usually closely tied to certain aspects of gameplay. Imagine trying to translate a word from an (unfamiliar) foreign language which designates an item or action which is equally unfamiliar to you. Of course, this comparison can only hold to a certain degree as most terms from “gaming lingua” derive from the English vocabulary and carry some of their “original” meaning with them.³⁶ Still, to be able to grasp these kinds of terms and phrases used by many gamers – not only inside the games but also “outside”³⁷ – comprehensive knowledge of the underlying gameplay mechanics, rules and structures is needed.

This brings us back to the examples at the beginning of this section. The given phrases are actually already more “beginner friendly” versions of phrases which are used since the emergence

35 For example <http://thecircular.org/the-language-of-gamers/>, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/9.390989-A-Friendly-MOBA-Primer-A-How-To-Guide> or http://smite.gamepedia.com/Common_Terms.

36 For example ‘gank’ in the example above, which in the context of multiplayer games refers to a combined and oftentimes surprising attack or ambush on a player of the opposite team. (http://smite.gamepedia.com/Common_Terms) Another example would be ‘tank’, used in many MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* but also sometimes used in *Smite* and meaning a player character role which focuses on being able to sustain large amounts of damage while keeping enemies away from more fragile teammates. ([http://www.wowwiki.com/Tank_\(game_term\)](http://www.wowwiki.com/Tank_(game_term))).

37 For example when discussing about the game and their experiences with it but also to extending degrees in their everyday conversations not necessarily related to games.

of the MOBA genre with the original *Warcraft III* modification *Defence of the Ancients (DotA)*.³⁸ They are used to ask teammates for assistance, notify them of possible dangers, declare own intentions or initiate combined actions and strategies. But even with this information, the full meaning of each phrase (and the right way to act upon it) can only be deciphered on the basis of further knowledge about the game and its structure, namely:

- The most popular ‘map’ on which matches in *Smite* take place is divided into three main routes (called the ‘left’, ‘middle’ and ‘right lanes’, respective to their position from the player’s perspective).³⁹
- The game is played in two teams of five gods, each god is controlled by a player
- The teams start on opposite sites of the map, their starting points (‘bases’) connected by the three lanes.
- The main aim of the game is to stay alive and kill enough enemy gods and their minions to gain an advantage, enter their base at the opposite end of the battlefield and kill their ‘titan’.
- The lanes are connected to each other by a labyrinth of paths with multiple entry and exit points
- This area is called the ‘jungle’ and is populated by neutral monsters which can be fought for extra gold and experience rewards as well as temporary improvements (‘buffs’).
- Usually players are assigned (by their team) to one of the ‘lanes’ or the ‘jungle’ as their main operational area. But using the paths through the ‘jungle’ allows players to traverse from one ‘lane’ to another and possibly emerge behind enemy players and attack or ambush (or ‘gank’) them.
- This is possible because players are only able to see enemy gods which are in their ‘field of view’, meaning directly in front of them and not obstructed by walls or other obstacles.
- To avoid being surprised by such a ‘gank’, players try to keep each other up to date on the position of enemy gods by using the ‘enemy missing’ command as soon as they lose vision of an enemy god, suspecting he or she might be trying to ‘gank’ another lane.

Hopefully, this information – while by far not complete – will suffice for making clear, how much knowledge of a game is necessary to grasp the basic and regular communication between players throughout a play session. The VGS system of *Smite* is a rather simple example, as the pre-defined voice messages are comparatively well phrased. But not every *Smite* player may use the built in VGS command system. Many type out the respective messages by use of the regular text chat

38 Some might even track back the origin of the MOBA genre to the *Starcraft* Modification *Aeon of Strife*. ([http://starcraft.wikia.com/wiki/Aeon_of_Strife_\(map\)](http://starcraft.wikia.com/wiki/Aeon_of_Strife_(map))).

39 See e.g. <http://www.smitenews.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/azg6gRF.jpg>.

interface. This is often an old habit translated from past experiences with other games of the genre and may result in even more cryptic communication. A common (and fully acceptable) chat message during a regular match of *Smite* might then look like this: ‘ss mid, care bot ra inc’. This could be translated into: ‘Enemy god is missing from the middle lane, be careful everyone on the bottom lane, the enemy god Ra is heading towards you!’⁴⁰ Easy, isn’t it?

So, to sum up this already quite extensive section: An integral part of learning the language of games and gamers – which is again a useful tool to access and figure out social structures among gamers – is understanding the underlying game mechanics as well as the overall structure of the game. This can be achieved most reliably and comprehensively by actual playing combined with research based on external resources like – in this case – guides on terminology and abbreviations.

Playing with Method – Playing as Method

We hopefully have been able to make a point for the importance of playing as part of researching games and gamers by now. But even though we addressed the question of ‘why’ the question of ‘how’ still stands. While a definitive answer cannot be given – as it heavily depends on the context and interest of the given research – we would like to provide some general suggestions and key points on how playing research could be approached.⁴¹

Modes of Play

When playing a digital game as a researcher, we first of all have to reflect on and be clear about our own agency, intentions and context. This is in many respects essential: First, we have to be aware that playing research is not the same as playing a game “for fun”, the way most regular players would approach a game. This makes us more perceptive of the elements of a game we are aiming to analyse. But it also distances us from the players’ perspective who might not see and play the game in the way we – quite intentionally – see and play it. This can hardly be avoided but somewhat alleviated by incorporating the experiences of other players into our own research.⁴² Additionally, a game could be played several times in different “modes” with varying goals and intentions. For example, the first time a game is played you could follow a more “explorative” approach⁴³, based

40 In other games of the genre like *Defence of the Ancients* or *League of Legends*, the game map is arranged more diagonally, so the right lane is often referred to as ‘bottom’ lane and the left lane as ‘top’ lane. (See http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Summoner's_Rift).

41 These suggestions are based on our own experiences when researching religion in digital games and should be considered in this context. However, they could also prove useful in other research scenarios, given sufficient reflection and – where appropriate and necessary – additions in methods and focus.

42 See also section *The actor-centered approach* in this chapter.

43 Of course, even then one has to reflect on the own “playing style”. For example, Richard Bartle identifies four types of players: socializers, killers, achievers and explorers (Bartle 1996) with ‘cheaters’ added by Espen Aarseth as a 5th mode of play. (Aarseth 2003: 4). Nick Yee expands on this classification and names ‘Socializing and Role-Playing’, ‘Achieving and Competing’, ‘The Explorer Type’ and ‘Immersion’ as main motivations for playing MMORPGs (Yee 2007).

on the intention of experiencing the gameplay and gathering some first impressions, while the second playing session could then encompass a more analytical approach which focusses on detail, analysis and documentation.⁴⁴

Secondly, we have to reflect on our own background i.e. the prior knowledge we bring to the table. This encompasses both our own gaming experience and knowledge of genre – the typical mechanics and conventions plus narrative and aesthetic tropes derived from other games and media – as well as our experience and knowledge as scholars of religion.

Thirdly, in case of research in and on multiplayer games and especially the complex social structures of MMORPGs, we have to reflect on the effect we – as researchers – have on people we talk to. The world of MMORPGs is at a first glance a rather anonymous one, as players chose their own in-game names and are normally addressed by these. But a) as researchers we have to adhere to certain ethic principles which includes disclosure of our research intent. b) We are obliged to anonymize “personal” information derived from the games in order to protect our informants. This refers especially to their names, be it the “real” ones or the ones they have chosen for their player characters. And c) even seemingly minor things like our choice of player avatar or character class may change the way other players perceive and react towards us.⁴⁵

How much should I play?

This question regularly arises when facing the sometimes enormous task of doing research on a videogame. Even a single playthrough of a linear game with a fixed ending – be it narrative or through sequential levels which have to be completed to “finish” the game – can take up to several dozen hours of play time⁴⁶. Non-linear and open-world games even may take several hundred hours to see and experience “everything” (including multiple playthroughs). And then there are competitive multiplayer games which feature completely different means of progression through the game. For example, to be able to play all gods in *Smite*, the player either has to pay for them in real currency or “unlock” them spending an in-game currency earned by playing matches. This approach may take dozens of hours to unlock a single god and several hundred hours to unlock all of them. Furthermore, a player’s individual skill at playing the game is automatically measured throughout matches so that he or she can be placed against players of similar skill. “Progression” through the game – and its ‘league’⁴⁷ system – is therefore closely linked to the player’s aptitude at playing the game and mastering its systems and the underlying strategies, a task which requires extensive experience and sometimes even external research or guidance by other players.

44 In some games, especially those with multiple endings or complex decision making systems and branching narratives, multiple playthroughs are even unavoidable.

45 This is for instance described by T.L. Taylor in *Play Between Worlds* (2006: 11ff).

46 The website <http://www.gamelengths.com/> features average game lengths for many games, provided by players.

47 See <http://smite.gamepedia.com/League>.

The actual amount of time which has to be invested in playing, however, has to be decided on the basis of one's own research interests and the games in question. To access the core communities of multiplayer games may require large investments of time to gain the required knowledge, skill or even 'reputation' (Taylor 2006: 43ff) among them to be taken seriously. A researcher with a level 1 character in an MMORPG will be perceived in a wholly different way than a much more experienced one but access to groups of high level players may also bring additional and even more time-intensive 'responsibilities' with them (Taylor 2006: 47ff). Thus the researcher has to reflect on his or her own intentions, goals and research questions to weigh play time against external research.

Documentation and Thick Description

As with any serious research endeavour, proper documentation is key when doing research on digital games and applies of course also to playing research. The extent and type of this documentation is mainly dependent on the focus of research. Games offer several layers of visual, auditive and narrative elements as well as modes of interaction and configuration, all of which can – contain religious elements.⁴⁸ For each of these layers, there are different and overlapping possibilities of documentation including:

- Textual documentation
- Screenshots
- Video recordings
- Audio recordings

These work best in conjunction with one another and their application should be decided on a case to case basis.⁴⁹

One especially useful and important means of recording game content is the method of 'thick description', coined by 20th century anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 3-30). According to his methodical approach, doing ethnography includes not only the behaviour of the subjects of his research but also heavily relies on the context and environment in order to make their demeanour plausible to outsiders (p. 6 f). An example of a 'thick description' in the context of a videogame is the introduction of this chapter.

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement-what manner of men

48 See e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014, section 4 „In Search of Religion(s) in Games: What to Study?“, pp. 18ff.

49 As was stated before, especially in multiplayer games, proper anonymisation of player names should also be considered.

are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. (p. 16)

Thus, ‘thick description’ which is supposed to ‘take us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation’ (p. 18) may also be applied when doing (ethnographic) research in virtual environments⁵⁰ – especially in videogames – in order to convey the basic appearance and the course of moves and actions. In certain cases the analogy of ‘alien cultures’ fits exceptionally well, since the rules of the gameworld, the language which is spoken in-game and the behaviour of the “natives”, the tech-savvy “inhabitants” of the “foreign” environment remains obscure to the unskilled outsider. It is therefore necessary for the researcher to do fieldwork in order to explore and get familiar with the surroundings. ‘The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods ...); they study *in* villages.’ (p. 22) That is – basically – what a scholar of (religion in) videogames is supposed to do. In the process it is indispensable to note that ‘what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to’ (p. 9) – and to reflect on it.

1.2 The Actor-Centered Approach

Throughout the prior sections on ‘playing as method’ and the ‘game-immanent approach’ it has already become apparent that without a more actor-centered view the outcome of any playing research can be somewhat limited with regards to actual reception and processes of construction by the players and designers⁵¹ of a videogame. Citing Robert Jauss:

In the triangle of author, work and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience. For it is only through the process of its communication that the work reaches the changing horizon of experience in a continuity in which the continual change occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production which surpasses them. (Jauss & Benzinger 1970: 8)

Adapting this statement to the area of games and religion one might come to the conclusion that only these processes of reception and discourse convey the real relevance of researching religious

50 For a general account on ethnography in internet research see e.g. Hine 2000, 2005; Horst and Miller 2012.

51 The people behind the production of a game (i.e. the producers, designers, developers, artists, animator, writers etc.) are of course also a part of the reception process and can prove extremely valuable as sources or even interview partners. Unfortunately however, the highly competitive nature of the game industry can make it difficult to approach these actors except through interviews published in gaming magazines and on online news portals like e.g. <http://www.pcgamer.com/>.

elements in digital games. Therefore, while ‘playing research’ and game-immanent analysis are necessary approaches to identify and describe these elements it is also important to acknowledge the perspectives of the players and designers. This can be achieved through various means which will be in part discussed in the following paragraphs.

Of course, when dealing with players and processes of reception and construction as main focus of research, most methods of qualitative social research apply. While it should be stated that knowledge and experience acquired through playing can prove very useful when e.g. contacting players (or designers) and conducting interviews, these methods have been and still are extensively discussed elsewhere⁵². So the main focus of this section will be on approaches specific for analysing digital games which might prove advantageous when planning, preparing and conducting further qualitative research on games, gaming and gamers with focus on religion.

Digital gamers have a tendency to communicate about the games they play, be it in-game or off-game. This is mirrored by the multitude of options offered to loquacious players like community forums, social networks and in-game social features. The official website of the game *Smite* e.g. offers discussion forums⁵³, a chat room⁵⁴ and a wiki⁵⁵ for the players to communicate and contribute. Additionally, external sources like popular social networking sites Facebook⁵⁶ or Reddit⁵⁷ also offer bulletin boards, groups and fan pages. Those are means of communication where in-game content often merge with personal opinion and in many cases also religious discourse. The afore mentioned debate on whether characters from Abrahamic religions should be included into the game can – from the players’ perspectives – be nicely traced, allowing glimpses into the personal religiousness of the actors involved.⁵⁸ An analysis of the game(r) communities therefore presents an excellent means of carving out contemporary religion and the tracing of religious discourse in a qualitative perspective.

Further, there are even more game-specific sources ready to be tapped by interested researchers of games (and religion). Already in 2003, Espen Aarseth mentioned ‘observe others play’ as a viable research method when studying games (p. 3). At the time he meant actually watching a gamer playing a game by ‘looking over his or her shoulder’ – which is of course still

52 See e.g. Flick, Kardorff and Steinke 2004.

53 See: <http://forums.smitegame.com/>.

54 See: <http://smite.boards.net/page/chatroom>.

55 See: http://smite.gamepedia.com/Smite_Wiki.

56 See: <https://www.facebook.com/smitegame> or <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SmiteGroup/?fref=ts>.

57 See: <http://www.reddit.com/r/Smite>.

58 See <http://smite.boards.net/thread/1755/adding-more-gods-religions>. As a side topic an interesting discussion evolved on what constitutes an “actual” god, clearly showing the high potential of reflection in reference to the religious biography and socio-cultural localization in the disputants who are by no means only consuming game content.

possible. But since then the rise of online video platforms like *YouTube*⁵⁹ and screen capture software like *Fraps*⁶⁰, *Xsplit*⁶¹ and *Open Broadcaster*⁶² has made way for huge numbers of freely accessible so called ‘Let’s Play’ and ‘First Impression’ videos. In these videos, players share their own experiences and impressions by recording their gameplay sessions – oftentimes spanning over dozens of episodes and featuring whole playthroughs of a game – and providing commentary. While these ‘Let’s Plays’⁶³ can prove rather static and feature only one sided communication, streaming platforms like *Twitch*⁶⁴ even allow players to actively interact with their audience – including possibly the researcher – while live streaming their gameplay experience. The usefulness of such platforms and tools seems obvious and the interactive nature of live streaming even possesses the potential for specifically constructed research scenarios

Last, there is a multitude of ‘game and geek culture’⁶⁵ related conventions⁶⁶ LAN parties⁶⁷ and e-sport events⁶⁸ where players meet on a regular basis and which in many cases feature speeches, talks and panels by game developers, journalists and game companies⁶⁹. These events provide great opportunities to get in touch with players and game developers alike and to get rare insights into the game development process.

59 See: <http://www.youtube.com/>.

60 See: <http://www.fraps.com/>.

61 See: <https://www.xsplit.com/>.

62 See: <https://obsproject.com/>.

63 The relevance of ‘Let’s Plays’ in general and the context of videogames (‘gamevironments’) for the research of religion in digital games has just recently been emphasized by Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe & Zeiler 2014 who offer a new approach to this field of research.

64 See: <http://www.twitch.tv/>.

65 For a comprehensive discussion of ‘gaming culture’ and the issues of the term see Shaw 2010 and Heidbrink et al 2014, 36ff. Another indicator that videogame culture has become mainstream is the film *Video Games: The Movie* (2014), a documentary released in July 2014 offering a chronology of videogames technology and industry, featuring interviews with important representatives of game design, marketing and game and geek culture. As such, the documentary might very well provide an interesting research focus in itself.

66 See e.g. the PAX Prime in Seattle, USA (<http://prime.paxsite.com/>), the gamescom in Cologne, Germany (<http://www.gamescom.de/de/gamescom/home/index.php>) or the Comic-con in San Diego, USA (<http://www.comic-con.org/>).

67 For example. the DreamHack in Jönköping, Sweden (<http://dreamhack.se/>).

68 For example the International DotA2 Championships in Seattle, USA (<http://www.dota2.com/international/announcement/>).

69 For example the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, USA (<http://www.gdconf.com/>).

2 Conclusion

Many fear change. Venturing into the unknown. Deviating from a path of safety and certainty into something unexpected. But life is change; a journey through doorways both physical and emotional, with every moment a passage to something new (...) ⁷⁰

This phrase most probably sounds like a profound insight into the entanglements of life (as such). But it certainly also rings true for scholars who enter a new field of research – like religion in videogames. In the previous sections, we have – by the example of the fairly new MOBA *Smite* – looked into the many different areas where religious topics might appear in video games. We have broached the theoretical concept and considerations indispensable for analysing religion in videogames. And we have discussed the different hands-on approaches and perspectives a researcher can take on in the course of an actual research project.

However, what looked like an aphorism on worldly wisdom judged by the first few words turns out to be a quote from *Hi-Rez's* website on *Smite's* new god 'Janus' if you continue reading.

'(...) and it is Janus, God of Portals and Transitions that governs this.' ⁷¹

Smite's new god 'Janus' is a nice example to summing up and recapitulating our points. Apart from written information available on a multitude of 'official' and fandom websites ⁷², forum discussions ⁷³ and reviews, 'Let's Plays' ⁷⁴ and other clips ⁷⁵, podcast features ⁷⁶ etc., the developers have (as we have recounted before) also published a making-of video ⁷⁷ on the occasion of the new release. Thus, we have a great amount of multisided and probably partly diverse informations from different sources at our disposal. – And we can go in-game and play the character for the 'ludic experience', evaluating our own impressions compared to the different sources of information as well as other players' notions.

70 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1999>.

71 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1999>.

72 See e.g. <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1999>, <http://forums.smitegame.com/showthread.php?11496-May-22nd-Janus-and-Warrior-Re-purpose>, <http://smite.gamepedia.com/Janus>, <http://massively.joystiq.com/2014/05/25/smites-newest-addition-is-janus-the-god-of-portals-and-transit/>.

73 See e.g. http://www.reddit.com/r/Smite/comments/24rybn/upcoming_god_janus/.

74 See e.g. http://youtu.be/BkMn68_JAnw.

75 See e.g. <http://youtu.be/9US7evaihQM>.

76 See e.g. http://www.podtrac.com/pts/redirect.mp3/pushnc.com/OnSmite_207.mp3.

77 See: <http://youtu.be/ZtsGe5EYID4>. However, we must not forget that this clip only shows what the developers want us to see and is by no means an 'objective' or 'neutral' account! We must not forget that media producers use their agency as well as the means of the media itself to promote their opinion or attain a certain goal.

Which processes of reception (from mythological lore to modern media) have lead to the visual modelling of the *Smite* character ‘Janus’? Which discourses were dominant in the construction of ‘Janus’ story, choice of abilities and weapons? How is the introduction of ‘Janus’ being discussed by the players in terms of appearance, weaponry and lore? How is ‘Janus’ story and mythological background being recounted and discussed in forums by people both familiar and unfamiliar with Roman Religion?

Those are (among others) some topics scholars of religion and game(r)s could be interested in. Hopefully this paper on method(ological) hands-on approaches proves helpful as practical introduction towards religion in digital games research. So don’t fear change and do venture into the unknown! – It’s definitely worth it!

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Biographies

SIMONE HEIDBRINK is a junior researcher at the Institute of Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany. After majoring in Religious and Japanese Studies at the Universities of Heidelberg and Nara (Japan), she received her Master's degree in 2005. Simone is now about to finish her doctoral thesis on a Christian liturgical reform movement called „Emerging Church“ which relies heavily on Web 2.0 Internet applications to distribute their views on Christianity, theology, and the role of rituals. From 2005 to 2011 she was a member of the Collaborative Research Center 619, „Ritual Dynamics“ in the context of which she conducted also research on the virtual 3D environment Second Life. Simone's research focus is Rituals Studies, religion in museum contexts, (digital) Media Studies, the methods and theories of internet research as well as religion in digital games and gaming. With her colleague Carina Brankovic she has curated an exhibition on Religious Studies in cooperation with the University Museum Heidelberg which is currently on display. Together with Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki she is also planning a research project on Religious Studies and digital games and is preparing a talk and a panel discussion on religion in digital games at the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* (German Evangelical Church assembly), a meeting of about 200.000 lay members and clergy of the protestant church in Germany, also attended by politicians, artists and journalists.

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JAN WYSOCKI works at the Institute of Religious Studies at Heidelberg University, Germany. He received his Master's degree in 2014 writing his thesis on the transformation of American religious symbols in *BioShock Infinite* and how religious actors are stereotyped in the game. For his doctoral thesis he is planning on exploring the notion of ‘god’ in digital games based on an article written in collaboration with Markus Wiemker. His main academic interest lies in the synthesis of religious studies and game studies but he is also fond of comparative theory and the religious history of America as well as the great realm of popular culture. Together with Simone Heidbrink and Tobias Knoll he is working on *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* and hopes to promote digital games as a new field of research for scholars of religion.

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