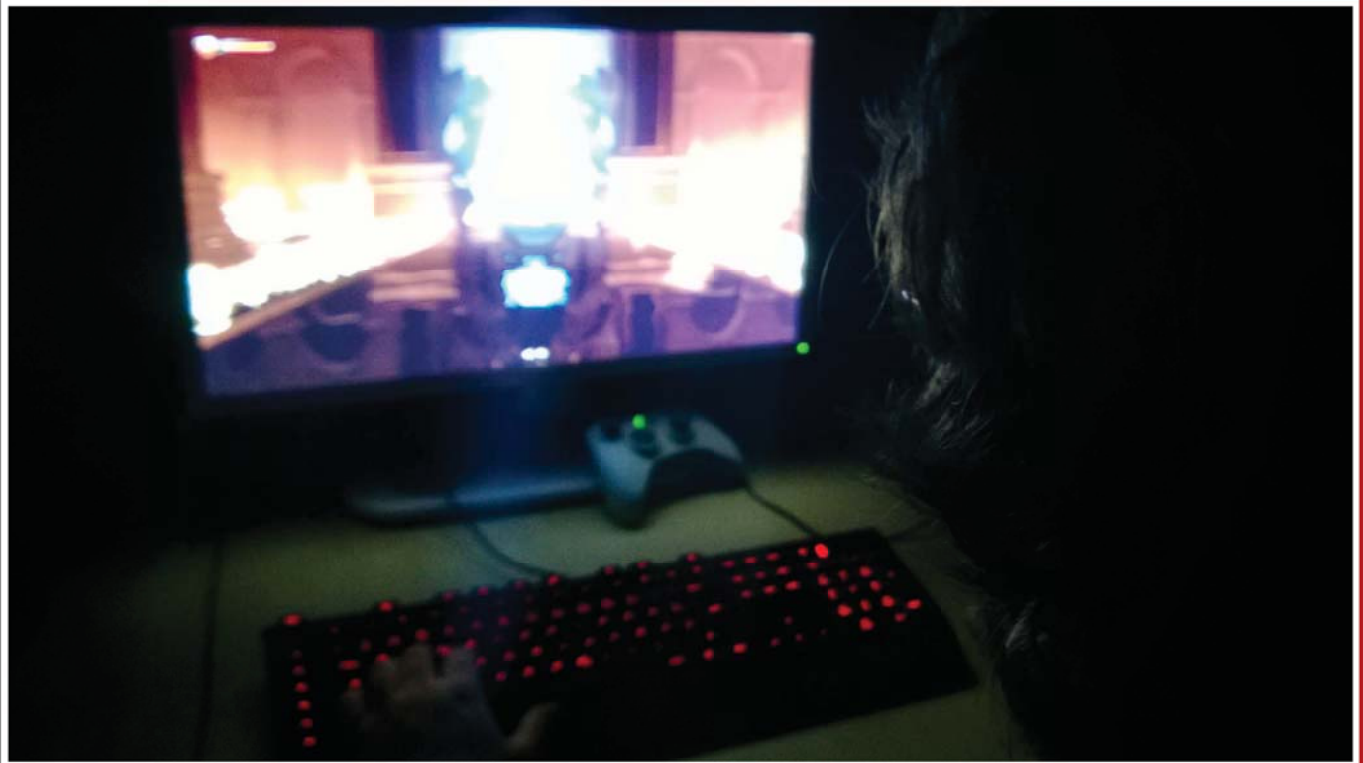




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Let's Talk Video Games!

Introduction to the Special Issue on Religion in Digital Games

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll

When researching a rather new, unusual or controversial topic in nowadays academia it seems to be a new kind of “tradition” to apologize in great length for doing something the scholar thinks the readership thinks he is not supposed to study (or something equally confusing along those lines), based on the assumption that it is scientifically unworthy, insignificant or plain nonsense. That was our experience with the topic at hand, but we are not the only ones and we can prove it. “I do not wish to criticise those who would think that the study of video games in Religious Studies isn't a credible activity. I understand their scepticism. We're breaching new territory, charting a region on the social scientific map that we may very easily fall off,” as Jonathan Tuckett (whom you will re-encounter if you keep reading this issue) so aptly puts it, remembering a rather disenchanting encounter with some grey eminences of the conservative academia on the occasion of a conference.¹ In order to follow the apparently mandatory academic ritual of apologizing and legitimizing, we would herewith like to express our deepest regrets for publishing this special issue of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* topics on “Religion and Digital Games. Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches”.

However, the reason we nonetheless think the subject is of great scientific relevancy is not only (if a little bit) because we, the publishers of this special issue, have a great affinity towards digital games and have always wanted to talk about it in academia², but mainly due to the fact that religion (in the broadest as well as the narrowest sense of the term)³ is to be found in computer games and thus at a matter of course constitutes research. Religion and religious elements make appearances in the storylines narratives, the aesthetics, the construction of gameworlds, gameplay mechanics and the players' receptions like in any other popular media. And in the same way as bestsellers, blockbuster movies, comics and TV series have already become subject to research in

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- 1 See: Tuckett (2013): „Here be Dragons. The Quest for Academic Credibility“. Available: <http://criticalreligion.org/2013/10/21/here-be-dragons-the-quest-for-academic-credibility/> (last access 13/02/2014).
 - 2 Some authors of this issue seemed to feel the same way. See the paper by Tucket & Robertson in this issue.
 - 3 In this context, we do not want to enter the discussion of defining a seemingly undefinable term. We would like to localize the term in a broad discursive and actor-centered field. See e.g. Bergunder 2011.
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the field of Cultural Studies, so should games and the socio-cultural and religious discourses surrounding them!

Thus, in order to underline the importance of video games as new field of Religious Studies we have decided to dedicate the special issue of this journal to the different interdisciplinary approaches to this research area. In order to attempt a mapping of the new research field of religion and digital games, we have called for and received articles from a multitude of disciplines, ranging from theoretical works to rather normative considerations. Herewith we are pleased to present an indeed “multiperspective and interdisciplinary” issue, hopefully contributing to further research!

In the first part of the journal we have assembled articles on theory and / or method, beginning with our own contribution “*Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches*” by **Simone Heidbrink**, **Tobias Knoll** and **Jan Wysocki**. The paper tries to give insight into different academic discourses and possible approaches focusing on the interdependencies of religion and video games, both from a game-immanent and actor-centered perspective. The article is the result of a university course taught in cooperation with our supervisor Prof. Gregor Ahn. Indeed it was this course and the cooperation with Gregor Ahn which initially gave the impulse for a further opening up of the field by compiling this issue. The next article „*Studying Religion in Digital Gaming: A Critical Review of an Emerging Field*“ by **Gregory Price Grieve** and **Heidi A. Campbell** also gives a summarizing view on the field drawing on the forthcoming volume *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Campbell & Grieve 2014). The authors highlight dominant subjects and methodological approaches in the area of religion and digital games including games with direct and indirect references to religious contents and discuss how gaming can be seen as a form of “implicit religion”. Implicit and explicit factors of religion or religious aspects also play a role in **Richard E Ferdig**’s paper “*Developing a Framework for Understanding the Relationship Between Religion and Videogames*”. Presenting a framework of the four key areas “game-content”, “game-context”, “game-challenge” and “player capital” where religious topics occur, the author discusses what people learn about religion while playing and how religion can change gameplay. In the article “*Locating the Locus of Study on ‘Religion’ in Video Games*” **J.D.F. Tuckett** and **David G. Robertson** identify in a mainly phenomenological approach three related areas of analysis, namely the “religious” response gamers have towards their games, how religions are referred to in computer games and fictional religions in game worlds. By transferring Tolkien’s literary concept of “sub-creations” to the field of new media studies and computer games, **Elke Hemminger** in her paper “*Game Cultures as Sub-Creations: Case Studies on Religion and Digital Play*” states, that game cultures mirror cultural practice in general and thus essentially contribute to the social construction of reality.

The second part of this special issue assembles case studies mainly focusing on the analysis of religion in game narratives. In her paper “*Maker’s Breath: Religion, Magic, and the ‘Godless’*”

World of BioWare's Dragon Age II (2011)", **Kristin M.S. Bezio** traces the game's storyline of religious conflict and identifies an inherent ethics consisting of the value of interpersonal relationship rather than religious morals. **Frank G Bosman** focuses on the dystopian settings of four different commercially successful video games. In his article "*The Lamb of Comstock: Dystopia and Religion in Video Games*" the author argues in favor of the important but often implicit role of religion in game narratives, sometimes supporting the dystopian setting of the game, sometimes opposing it. **Ryan Clark Thames** identifies "*Religion as Resource in Digital Games*" by exploring the role of religious storylines and gameplay in different video games in relation to the player character whereas **Markus Wiemker** and **Jan Wysocki** in their article "*When people pray, a god is born ... This god is you! An introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games*" take a closer look at so-called "God Games", regarding the specifics of the "genre" as well as the "game-text" together with its production contexts and acquisition processes.

The following articles combine a material-immanent approach of the game contents with an actor-centered analysis of discourses in the context of the games. In their article "*The Lord is My Shepard. Confronting Religion in the Mass Effect Trilogy*", **Joshua A. Irizarry** and **Ita T. Irizarry** are analysing the series' overarching narrative as well as players' reactions towards the controversial ending. They argue that in the *Mass Effect* universe religion is shown to be culturally and politically disruptive and players were irritated by the final "confrontation" requiring them to make an overtly religious choice. In **Alessandro Testa's** study on "*Religion(s) in Videogames: Historical and Anthropological Observations*", the issue of religious representations, its usage and reproduction in fantasy and historical videogames is addressed. The focus of the study lies on the social relevance of "gaming" and its impact on the shaping of popular and global imaginaries, especially for young generations.

A strictly actor-centered approach is represented by **Pascaline Lorentz's** paper on "*Socialization of Teenagers Playing The Sims. The Paradoxical Use of Video Games to Re-Enchant Life*". By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the author claims that, in accordance with Max Weber's philosophy, digital games can serve as means for the "re-enchantment of the world".

Aside from articles from the field of Cultural Studies, we were able to include two articles from different scientific perspectives on the subject. One example for a designer's perspective on religion in digital games is represented by the article on the game design and evaluation process of the religious themed video game "*Fatima Postmortem*" by **Luís Lucas Pereira** and **Licínio Roque**, picking up the sightings of the Catholic saint Mary by a young shepherd in 1917 and reprocessing them in a computer game. With "*The Mythic Scope of Journey. A Comparative Assessment Concerning the Spirit at Play and Cybernetic Shamanism*", **Robert William Guyker** presents a normative approach from the field of "Mythological Studies", tracing back motifs from

the game *Journey* to the works of 20th century “mythologist” Joseph Campbell. Guyker interprets the storyline as “mythic text”, assembled from a multitude of cultures and traditions and argues in favor of the computer game as means of mythological engagement.

Finally, the issue includes a critical review of William Bainbridge’s book “*eGods. Faith Versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*” (Bainbridge 2013), written by **Moritz Maurer**.

The editors of this special issue hope the articles assembled here will contribute to encouraging further academic debate on the topic of religion in digital games and help opening up the field for even more motivated and enthusiastic scholars and research projects. Perhaps some day it might even be possible to write about religion and video games without at first feeling the need to apologize for it? Until then, we hope you enjoy the issue and are – again – very very sorry!

If you would like to submit a paper for a future issue of *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, feel free to send an abstract or full article to online.religion@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de. We will gladly consider the publication of further articles related to religion and video games as well as any other topic fitting the scope of the journal. (For further information please see <http://online.uni-hd.de>.)

Literature

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