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## Game Cultures as Sub-Creations

### Case Studies on Religion & Digital Play

Elke Hemminger

#### Abstract

As online and offline spaces, digital and analogue worlds merge into each other and saturate our everyday lives, concepts of reality and its social construction need re-thinking. Digital game cultures, formerly often regarded as not only separate from reality, but also secondary in their importance for ‚real life‘, can give us insight into processes of cultural construction und re-construction, relevant for our mediatised society in general.

This paper analyzes digital game cultures as sub-creations (Tolkien 1947) that are consistent, significant and serve as comments on and additions to society. Focusing on religious elements in digital games, the paper states that game cultures reflect cultural practice in general and therefore contribute to the social construction of reality in essential ways.

The paper is based on the results of several case studies on digital games during which a system to categorize digital games concerning the way they use religious elements was developed, going beyond existing game categories.

The paper will introduce these classifications in order to support the assumption that religion in games can be seen not only as a key element in game cultures, but also as a reflection of social attitude towards and social status of religion in a wider prospect. Following this assumption, the paper will show how the analysis of digital games and their religious contents can help us observe and understand processes of social reality construction that might not be accessible or visible in other social contexts.

#### Keywords

game cultures, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, sub-creations, cultural practice, Sociology, new media studies

## 1 Religion & Digital Games: Introduction to an Ambivalent Coexistence

Every year in August, Cologne in Germany is hosting the world's biggest digital game exhibition, the ,gamescom'. Every year, the ,gamescom' is taken as an occasion to publish articles and comments on digital gaming, its vices and - in rare cases - its virtues. One especially interesting article this season was focussing exclusively on ,christian computer games' (Städter 2013). Religious bodies seem to have an almost traditional interest in digital games and media; they try to keep up with developments, use platforms and networks for communication and even develop their own digital games, although with little funds and even less economical success (ibid.). With the title ,Computer Games: Christian Content Nil Return (Städter 2013:16, author's translation), the article tries an analysis of religious contents in digital games. Apart from listing facts about the number of gamers in Germany, the average time they spend playing and how they differ in age and sex, the article's issue is foremost to lament the lack of ,christian computer games'. According to the text, it would be ,important to provide children and adolescents with a christian alternative not only in books and films, but also in computer games' (ibid.: 17), what is meant by the term ,christian computer game', how a player of games is defined and why the lack of ,christian computer games' might be a problem, stands without further explanation. From an academic perspective, the article is not interesting for its content, but more for its lack of it; obviously some of the problems a researcher on digital games has to face, especially if his field is in any way connected to religion in digital games, are reflected here in the obscure use of definitions and technical terms.

One problem researchers are frequently facing is the vast amount of digital games on the market. Even if we take into account only games available in Europe or the USA, neglecting the even more unmanageable Asian market, it is impossible to keep informed about every single game of every possible genre. Researchers therefore have to limit themselves to analyzing specific games or categories of games leaving any claims on totality behind.

The second standard difficulty is the classification of games. Even though there are genre theories to fall back on if necessary, they usually show serious demerits the moment you try to actually apply them on a specific issue such as religious content in digital games. Again, no genre theory is able to comprise and classify every single game on the market. They can only be used as a basis for comparison, presentation and description (Raczkowski 2012).

An additional challenge in game studies is the distinction between games and phenomena that merely resemble games, but are somehow different from a ,real' game. Again, there are elaborate theories to revert to and in many cases they will indeed help with this distinction, but as the gaming industry is a dynamic and creative one, there will always be games or not-quite-games that are hard to classify and therefore to analyze.

This paper will tackle the major challenges presented here with the help of case studies focussing on digital games and religious content. In analyzing these games, a new system for the classification of games and religious content will be introduced, going beyond existing game categories. The paper will also provide the case studies with a theoretical frame, allowing the analysis of game spaces as sub-creations (Tolkien 1947) and significant entities in the social construction of reality.

## 2 Digital Games: Genre Theory and Classification Levels

As stated above, academics in the field of digital game studies are still engaged in working on a generally accepted genre theory<sup>1</sup>, but for classifications so far, we have to use categories as they are employed by game designers or the players themselves (Hemminger 2013: 25ff.; Raczkowski 2012: 61-74). These categories can be encountered mainly in relevant media such as game journals and are in no way meant as scientific classifications, but as a means to make communication about games, their content, development or design possible in the first place (ibid.). In the following, the commonly used terms for computer game genres will be explained in order to show why a new approach is necessary for the analysis of religious content in digital games. The presentation has no claim on completeness, as the existing genre categories alone would easily fill this paper on their own, but will offer a basis for the subsequent proposition of approaching the problem from a new perspective.

### 2.1 Four Categories of Digital Games

Digital games are usually grouped into four general genres and appendant sub-genres: simulation games, strategy games, action games and role-playing games (Apperley 2006: 6-23). Taking on myriad themes, simulations are characterised by simulating specific activities or actions such as racing (Gran Turismo Racing, SimBin Studios 2004), economy (Anno Series, Max Design & Sunflowers 1998-2012), piloting a plane or spaceship (Star Wars: X-Wing LucasArts 1993) or the evolution of an entire civilisation or environment, as in the sub-genre of god games (Populous, Bullfrog 1989; Spore, Maxis 2008). Regarding the fact that essentially every digital game can be interpreted as a simulation, definite classification is difficult, which is why usually for simulation games a certain authenticity of the visualisation is presumed as constitutive (Frasca 2003).

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1 e.g. Dr. Gareth Schott (University of Waikato, Hamilton, NZ) in the Marsden Fund Project: Classification of Computer Games.

Strategy games are further divided into real-time strategy and turn-based strategy games; both sub-genres share certain visual features and technical rules, e.g. the bird's eye view for the players and the digital conversion of scenarios and systems of rules, based on traditional board games. Most important element of strategy gaming is the planning of a tactical course of action to achieve a goal which can range from destroying opposing military forces, populating new territories or the construction of buildings. These actions can be performed in limited turns (turn-based strategy games) as in *Civilization* (Sid Meier, series starting in 1991) or they are simulated in real-time (real-time strategy games) as in *Age of Empire* (Ensemble Studios 1997-2011). Apart from differences in themes and technical rules, strategy games use a great variety of settings (science fiction, fantasy, historical) and therefore differ greatly in their graphical realisation which again is challenging for definite classification.

Action games are essentially highly performative games; they can be further sub-divided into first person games (usually shooters) and third person games, relating to the perspective of the player on the screen. Both sub-genres are markedly fast and characterised by the necessity of quick decisions and continuous concentration, as well as the competent application of avatar skills (Apperley 2006: 16).

Especially complex in its appearance is the genre of role-playing games (rpgs), based on classic tabletop or pen-and-paper role-playing games. Rpgs are closely connected to fantasy literature, but use other settings like science fiction or historical scenarios as well. Often based directly on one specific tabletop model, rpgs visualise fantastic worlds as settings for sometimes intricate stories, in which the players move and act in the role of an avatar, accomplish quests, develop their characters and learn skills. These digital fantasy spaces and stories are limited by technical parameters, but still remain complex and multifaceted in both graphical realisation and gaming experience. Influenced by their roots in pre-computer gaming, digital rpgs still focus on the active role of the player, the engagement and immersion into the setting, the story and the character of the avatar. Manifold technical options for creative configurations of avatars, gaming experience and visualisation of setting has given the genre, especially the sub-genre of online role-playing games (MMORPGs), an almost artistic touch. Single-player rpgs as *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998) or *Diablo* (Blizzard 1997) and MMORPGs as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) or *Everquest* (Verant Interactive 1999), in which thousands of players move in the game on central servers at the same time, differ massively in the way players experience the game; single-player games offer less creative possibilities and no in-game communication with other players. Even though the stories are usually multi-linear, varieties of action are more limited than in the online worlds of MMORPGs, which are meant to be explored according to the skills of the player, the characteristics of the avatar and the current season (christmas events are very popular in *World of Warcraft*). Especially MMORPGs can be played in myriad different ways, including the use of the game space as an



economical simulation, communication platform or social networking site. Therefore, the gaming experience of rpgs in general and MMORPGs in particular is hard to comprise by definite classification systems.

In describing the approach to game genres generally seen in relevant media and used by gamers and game developers for communication about games, the difficulties in using these terms for academic purposes have become clear. Even though the four categories simulation, strategy, action and role-playing game can give us insight into certain aspects by which games can be distinguished, it is also obvious that the margins between the genres are anything but marked and self-evident. In order to make the genres as defined by the gamer community more applicable for academic research, King and Krzywinska propose to consider genre as only one of four levels of classification for digital games (King & Krzywinska 2002: 26). These levels will be introduced in the following as this gives us the groundwork for the analysis of digital games and religious content from a further developed perspective later on.

## 2.2 Four Levels of Classification

King and Krzywinska (ibid.) use four levels to categorise digital games: genre, platform, mode and milieu; established terms of the genre level have already been discussed above. The platform level attends to the hardware system that is used for a specific game, e.g. a PC, Sony Playstation, Microsoft XBox or Nintendo Gamecube, to mention the most common ones. A possible other platform today are smartphones, which can be used to play various games that originally were developed for a specific hardware system. To differentiate between games by comparing gaming platforms is sensible in so far as the platform can have an impact on gaming experience, due to the fact that the means of controlling game mechanics or the graphic representation alter with the adaption for different hardware systems. However, in view of increasing media convergence<sup>2</sup>, the platform level is not useful to establish fundamental criteria for game classification

On a third level, King and Krzywinska classify digital games by the mode, including every aspect of game settings and game characters that influence the experience of the game space. On this level, options for movement and decisions in the game as well as avatar creation and the difference between single-player and multi-player mode are analyzed. As already shown on the genre level, rpgs usually offer greater variety of options for the player than single-player simulations in having multi-linear stories and multifaceted avatars, examples as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar 2004), which is, depending on the interpretation either race simulation or

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2 Media convergence means the increasing mergence of different media such as television, internet, radio and phone into single devices offering varied user options, the most obvious example being the smartphone.



action game, illustrate however, that even these games can offer manifold possibilities for creative and individual gaming experiences.

According to King and Krzywinska (ibid: 26ff.), the level of milieu can be interpreted as a visual genre classification, taking into account the visual aspects of games in combination with typical structural and mechanical rules. Specific milieus are more likely to be combined with certain genres as the most popular milieus of fantasy, science fiction and horror illustrate; numerous fantasy rpgs and MMORPGs stand opposed to the rare fantasy simulation, whereas science fiction is utilised quite commonly for both MMORPGs and simulations. Horror scenarios appear in a variety of genres, most often in the action game sub-genre of ‚horror survival adventure‘ (Apperley 2006: 6-23).

In describing the existing concepts for game classification, it has been demonstrated that so far digital game studies lack an approach that shows the ability to manage the complex and rapidly developing field according to academic standards. After introducing relevant cases of games with religious content, the paper will therefore establish a new concept of game classification. In re-thinking genre theory, it provides a multi-faceted and dynamic system as an academic tool to analyze digital games by relating them to specific points of reference instead of trying to put them into definite categories.

### 3 Of Demons, Gods and Fallen Angels: Digital Games and Religious Content

In a perfect world, people wouldn't need gods. But perfect worlds can't exist and sooner or later someone, in trouble, desperate, will pray to the heavens. This is what happens in the beginning of *Black & White*. Your new tribe bows before you in awe, and from this moment your prayer power starts to grow.<sup>3</sup>

The above paragraph is part of a description for *Black & White* (EA 2001), a widely popular real-time strategy game, in which the player is acting in the role of god, which makes the game a god mode simulation as well. As the player takes over the role of god, his cursor appears on the screen as a hand that changes in appearance according to the player's interpretation of his role; the hand of a malicious or vengeful god will look more like a claw with withered dark skin and long fingernails, whereas a kind and caring god is represented by a gentle and neat hand. *Black & White* can be

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3 [www.lionhead.com/games/black-white/](http://www.lionhead.com/games/black-white/): 25.september 2013.

played in single- or multi-player mode on PC, controlling is done with mouse and keyboard. The milieu of the game, based on classical fantasy settings, is loaded with historical motives from various cultures and eclectic religious aspects: as a god, the player can use mana (magical energy) to cast spells and he control a creature that takes on the form of an animal and learns to act as a representative of the god (similar to conceptions in egyptian mythology). The battle of God and Nemesis, the greek goddess of vengeance, is used in addition to a great number of elements common in christian as well as in other religions, such as the working of miracles by a god, punishment through plague and draught, but also the motives of salvation and godly assistance in battle. Dependent on the interpretation of the player, god can be worshipped in a sparkling white temple, reminiscent of an ancient greek building, or in a black, fire scarred temple.

In summary, we can state that referring to conventional classification, *Black & White* is a real-time strategy or god mode simulation game for PC (platform), set in a fantastic milieu and can be played in both single or multi-player mode<sup>4</sup>. The game offers a great number of options for creative decisions and gaming experience in a multi-linear plot. Religious elements are taken from various different religious traditions and mixed with historical motives; game space is, however, clearly separated from the offline spaces of the players' everyday lives (the relevance of this will be discussed below).

Whereas *Black & White* is set in a fairly familiar milieu for western conventions, the following case again shows the elusive diversity of digital games. Based on japanese culture, *Ōkami* (Capcom 2007) contains for us unfamiliar elements of design and content. *Ōkami* is a single-player action adventure game for Sony Playstation and Wii<sup>5</sup>. Just as in *Black & White*, the player takes on the role of a god, but here in form of a visible avatar, who is moving in the game world. A by now rare gaming element is the solving of riddles and puzzles as it was common in adventure games, for example in the popular series Legend of Zelda (NES 1986-2011). *Ōkami* means ‚great God‘ or ‚spirit‘, but also ‚wolf‘, and the player is accordingly navigating the game world in the role of the goddess Amaterasu, goddess of the sun, meant to save the world from eternal darkness and capable of transforming into the form of a wolf. The game is set in historical Japan (Nippon) and is visualised as animated calligraphy, a non-realistic design called ‚cel-shaded animation‘. In the space of this unusual milieu, *Ōkami* comprises manifold elements of japanese mythology and folklore. The mode is determined by a relatively strict story, which is compensated by a number of options for sideline activities, such as helping trees to bloom, markedly reducing the pace of the story. One special feature, the ‚celestial brush‘, is closely connected to the platform of game consoles<sup>6</sup>: with the

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4 There are no official multi-player mode options for the more recent sequels of the game.

5 [www.okami-game.com/gameinfo.php](http://www.okami-game.com/gameinfo.php): 25.10.2013.

6 With the further development of touch screens, other platforms as PC or tablet computer can by now offer similar features to the players.

help of the consoles controller, the player is able to draw magical symbols on a canvas, helping him to solve riddles, defeat enemies in battle or conjure wind or fire. By summoning different gods, all highly influenced by the chinese sign of the zodiac, the player learns the necessary symbols and improves the ability to use the celestial brush during the game (ibid.).

In comparing *Black & White* with *Ōkami*, the heterogeneity of digital games is again obvious. Even though in both games the player acts in the role of a god, the games differ so completely on other levels as platform, milieu and mode as to make them almost incomparable. Even in genre, they can hardly be comprised in the same category, as *Black & White* is more a strategy game, whereas *Ōkami* is rather an action game. One similarity are the religious elements, which are constitutive for the game in both cases, but eclectic in one case (*Black & White*) and more consistent - namely adapted from japanese Shintoism - in the other (*Ōkami*).

In the following, the paper will introduce two more games comprising religious elements in a completely different way than in the above cases. The first game is *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2008), developed for Sony playstation and later also for PC. *Assassin's Creed* is a single-player action game, set in the time of the Third Crusade in the Holy Land (1191). Initially in the role of Barkeeper Desmond Miles in the year 2012, the player is kidnapped by a modern Knights Templar organisation and sent back into the memories of his ancestral assassin Altaïr by a computer device. As Altaïr, the player now lives through a story mostly based on historical facts, in which he fulfills various missions for the secret society of the Assassins. While moving through game space, the player can interact with his surroundings and his actions have immediate influence on his missions, as non-player characters react to him. A player can acquire respect and support among townsmen by showing consideration for them, whereas thuggery will only gain the player commotion and tumult, ultimately alarming the guards. Apart from this interactive feature, the plot is rather linear and missions follow the same basic course throughout the game. There is, however, a special feature to *Assassin's Creed* concerning the control of the game avatar, making the gaming experience somehow unique: instead of following the common assignment of specific keys to certain functions or performances, the keys control body parts of the game character instead. Initially presenting the players with difficulties, they now mostly regard the control system as logical and comfortable<sup>7</sup>. Religious aspects as stylistic devices are ever-present in the game and as the plot revolves around the rival secret societies of the Assassins and the Knights Templar, they are used to tell a historically coherent story. While the religious content is omnipresent and essential for the design of plot and setting, the game mechanics and missions of the game character could easily be transferred into other milieus.

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7 As can be seen in numerous discussions on online gaming platforms, e.g. <http://www.spieletipps.de/pc/assassins-creed/meinungen/id-36154/>: 28.09.2013.

The last case introduced here for the time present is the very well known and immensely popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004), a fantasy role-playing game for PC that can only be played online, so that in addition to the PC an efficient access to the internet is required. *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) offers so many options to the player that it creates manifold types of user practice, ranging from complete immersion into the role of the avatar, to the focus on economical aspects of buying and selling artefacts, potions or pets, to the use of communication channels as social networks or chat platforms (Hemminger 2009 & 2010; Hemminger/ Schott 2012). The graphical design with its comic-like characters is reminiscent of *WoW*'s roots in tabletop role-playing games, which is also reflected in the great number of creative options for playing the game. The digital game space is wide and multi-faceted and can be explored according to the status and skills of the player; depending on the initial choice of avatar, the player begins his story in different parts of the game world and the gaming experience varies immensely as both the quests to be solved and the skills to be learned differ greatly between races and classes. While a player in the role of a troll shaman will be engaged in using spells and totems to heal or make battle, a dwarf warrior will probably focus on close combat and learning weapon skills. In addition to the classical quests (the solving of tasks for rewards in form of experience points, money and items), the players can choose from a variety of professions to learn and activities to try. Some players fancy spending their time in dealing with items for hours, others like to enhance their cooking skills or to gather plants for potions. If you need to relax, you can sit down with your fishing tackle on the shores of a quiet lake anytime. Other activities include raids (the organised attack on hostile territories or powerful adversaries in a selected group of players), competing in battlegrounds or arenas and the playing of dungeons in groups. Many players are affiliated in guilds, differing widely in their focusses: a guild can offer the players anything from a familial and comfortable union of fun-seeking gamers to a highly competitive and strictly organised system for efficient gameplay. Typical for MMORPGs, online and offline spaces mingle frequently in *WoW*. The mergence of spaces is a special development in digital media with serious impact on our views of reality and virtuality, as will be discussed in this paper later on (Hemminger 2009 & 2011).

Religious elements are apparent in many places in *WoW*. Different races are provided with individual religious systems, partly taken in entirety from existing religious traditions in order to design a race. The tribal culture of the Tauren is clearly inspired by North American native cultures, admittedly in a simplified and idealized form. Many fundamental game aspects can be traced back to classic christian motives such as helpfulness, readiness to make sacrifices for others or the courage to fight evil; in all cases, religious elements in *WoW* are eclectic and serve as stylistic devices (ibid.).

The above cases show the complexity and heterogeneity of popular digital games in its full dimension and illustrate once more the difficulties involved in trying to analyze these games

according to a coherent system of classification. As already pointed out, existing classification systems so far can only serve as indications regarding content and mechanics of a game. In order to analyze digital games in detail - as we need to do regarding religious aspects in gaming - conventional classification must be abandoned in favour of innovative approaches. The following chapter therefore presents a dynamic concept of analyzing digital games.

#### **4 Re-Thinking Game Genre: Relation Parameters as Reference Points**

For the analytical concept of relation parameters, four basic questions, partly refining the classification levels of King and Krzywinska (2002) as described above, have been identified, which allow the systematic analysis of digital games in respect of specific elements, in our case religious motives. At this point it has to be made clear, that even though the following illustration refers to religious elements, the concept can be adapted for an analysis concerning other cultural elements (e.g. communication options, immersion enhancing elements, social learning et al.). The four basic questions each supply two opposed reference points or poles; in between these reference points, the games can be arranged according to their proximity to the poles, thus giving us relation parameters rather than fixed and definite criteria for classification. The relation parameters include the following reference points:

1. Player Perspective: between god mode and hero mode;
2. Significance of Religious Elements: between constitutive and stylistic;
3. Origin of Religious Elements: between specific and eclectic;
4. Relation of Online- and Offline Spaces: between Magic Circle and Mergence of Spaces.

In order to further explain how the above relation parameters can be applied and what they exactly mean, I will fall back on the already described cases, before elaborating on the interpretation of digital games as culturally significant sub-creations.

Parameter number one refers to the player perspective and opposes the two poles of god mode and hero mode as reference points; in a god mode game, the player takes on the role of an ever-present god, overseeing the entire game world from a bird's eye view, whereas in hero mode, the player moves through game space in third-person mode as a game avatar or hero. In between can be settled the first person mode (common in shooters), where the player experiences the game

as self, often represented by a weapon-wielding hand. With the exception of *Black & White*, where the player experiences the game world in god mode represented by a hand on the screen, the introduced cases are all played in hero mode. Even though the player takes on the role of a goddess in *Ōkami*, the avatar is visible on the screen as a third person, *Assassin's Creed* is entirely experienced in the character of the hero and in *WoW*, after creating and modifying the game avatar, the player is meant to immerse into the role and move through game space as a coherent third-person character.

In contrast to classifications in traditional game genres, which usually comprise the players' perspective as given for specific categories (Shooters are played in first person mode, action games in third person mode etc.), the implementation of a parameter of player perspective allows the analysis of games concerning possible effects of the perspective on gaming experience. No doubt, the differences in player perspective can have great impacts on gaming experience, such as immersion or the identification with the game character (Gomes 2005). It can be a vastly overwhelming or gratifying experience to act as omniscient and mighty god, whereas in contrast, the sudden onslaught of a wild wolf on a newly created avatar can make the players heart jump, just as the exploration of a beautiful landscape or dwelling is comforting and soothing to the mind. There is, so far, no research existent regarding a possible impact on religious experience and player perspective. By adopting the here proposed system of reference points, an analysis in this direction becomes feasible and might render interesting insights in player motives and immersive narratives.

The second parameter refers to the significance of religious elements for a game. In the previous case descriptions, this has already been addressed to some extent. For both *Black & White* and *Ōkami* the religious content is constitutive for the game, as the player is slipping into the role of a god and the entire gaming concept is based on the comprehension of religious aspects. *Assassin's Creed* and *World of Warcraft*, although full of religious elements per se, are not constituted by them, but rather rely on religious or spiritual aspects for a dense and coherent story and atmosphere, as well as the stylistically conclusive design of game characters and cultural details. In further comparing *Assassin's Creed* and *World of Warcraft*, the benefits of a classification of games by reference points is again obvious. Even though in both games the religious elements are omnipresent, their importance for the setting, the plot and the game mechanics are rather different. *World of Warcraft* relies on the dense atmosphere of a fantastic setting that is endowed with detailed cultural depictions of the lives and traditions of the peoples. These depictions naturally include references to the religious and spiritual traditions and practices, because they are needed to show a consistent picture and thus construct a believable game world. For *Assassin's Creed*, religious elements are not especially important for the creation of credibility, because the setting is based on historical facts rather than a mythopoetic fantasy. But in contrast to *WoW*, *Assassin's Creed* takes religious elements as a device to construct an exciting and consistent narrative. The plot



is staged as a religious quest and while the game mechanics and actions would easily function in other contexts, the religious content is used as a stimulating device to keep the story moving. We can therefore state that in our cases the significance of religious elements ranges from constitutive for the game (*Black & White*, *Ōkami*) to essential element for the plot (*Assassin's Creed*) to merely stylistic device (*WoW*). By using a system of reference points, it is possible to analyze these subtle differences and place *Assassin's Creed* closer to the pole of religious elements as constitutive elements than *World of Warcraft*. To comprise fine distinctions between games as shown above - and these distinctions can, after all, make for some players all the difference between a game that is worth playing or not - is not possible in an inflexible classification system solely concerned in placing a game in a ready-made casket with no regard to specific plot elements or stylistic devices.

On a third level, the system of parameters relates religious elements according to their origins. Both *Black & White* and *WoW* use eclectic religious and spiritual motives based on diverse traditions as greek mythology, animism, aztec sun worship and many others. One conspicuous concept noticeable in both games and in fact very common to games in a fantastic setting, is the idea of an all-pervasive force (mana) as a technical adaption of a spiritual life force that can be regulated, channelled and systematically applied, but also choked by evil influences or dwindle. The term ‚mana‘ is borrowed from polynesian mythology and means power<sup>8</sup>. The concept of an elementary, ever-present energy or cosmic force is present in various other traditions, comparable to Prana in Hinduism, the japanese Ki or chinese Ch'i. In digital games the concept of a spiritual energy is frequently used, but hardly ever a specific issue. As part of the game mechanics it is taken for granted and used as any other skill or power a game character might possess. Usually, the avatar needs only simple mechanical procedures to apply or replenish the force, such as drinking a potion or water in *WoW*, and thus the game adaption has only little in common with the complex models in religious culture.

*Ōkami* and *Assassin's Creed* present themselves as more specific in the origins of religious elements. *Ōkami* is largely based on japanese shintoism with assets from chinese signs of the zodiac, *Assassin's Creed* is framed by the history of christianity in a coherent setting. Elements taken from historical reports around the time of the Third Crusade as well as legends ranking around the Knights Templar and the Assassins complete the christian-occidental milieu. Even though many historically correct details are portrayed in *Assassin's Creed*, the presentation of the ancient secret societies of the Knights Templars and Assassins lack historical accuracy and partially rather depend on common modern conspiracy theories e.g. in depicting the Assassins as an atheistic society<sup>9</sup> or the Knights Templar as a secretly operating and ruthlessly powerful society.

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8 [www.allenvarney.com/av\\_mana.html](http://www.allenvarney.com/av_mana.html): 28.09.2013.

9 The Assassins are in fact an ancient ismailitic order. See: [www.eslam.de/begriffe/a/assassinen.htm](http://www.eslam.de/begriffe/a/assassinen.htm): 25.11.2012.



Again, the relating of the origins of religious elements in different digital games illustrates the multifaceted adaption as a mere matter of course. In anticipation of the following analysis of game cultures as sub-creations, it can already be stated that the implicit use of religious content is significant in itself as a reflection on modern society. It is again obvious that an analysis like this can only be attempted on the basis of a dynamic classification of games as proposed above, because a rigid genre theory offers no possibility at all to distinguish games according to the origin of innate religious elements.

Referring to a last parameter, digital games can be arranged according to the relation of offline and online spaces. The opposed reference points ‚magic circle‘ and ‚mergence of spaces‘ are terms from the discipline of game studies and therefore in need of exemplification.

The emergence of digital media, especially the internet, has resulted in the creation of new spaces, in which people communicate, learn and experience social companionship. Despite all scepticism, these spaces have become an essential part in everyday life for a great number of people and are used in differing ways and circumstances. The virtual spaces of games (always excepting game spaces of online multi-player games; see below) represent a unique type of space, detached from everyday offline spaces by intrinsic rules and definite boundaries, which is entered with the particular intention of playing the game. The magic circle, a term originally coined by ludologist Huizinga (1955), tries to comprise just these special characteristics of game space (Rodriguez 2006). Ludology classically distinguishes games according to the significance of rules, on the one hand the clearly defined, systematic and rule-based game with a defined goal (*ludus*) and the free and unsystematic play (*paidea*) that usually has neither clear boundaries nor a defined purpose (Dormans 2006). The english language offers two different words for the purpose of distinguishing between the types, in other languages, such as german, there is only one word for both game and play, so that the difference is not always readily understood. It is, however, fundamental for the analysis of digital games.

With the development of online digital games, which are shared by a multitude of players competing, communicating and cooperating at the same time, the boundaries between offline and online spaces, between everyday life and game world, can no longer be retained. The moment people engage in social interaction in a game, spaces can mingle; this process is not an imperative, it is perfectly possible to experience online game spaces in interaction with other players as definitely bounded off from everyday life, but the option to start communicating about or commenting on completely irrelevant (for the gameplay) everyday issues using trade channels or guild chat is at hand and can be seized anytime. In doing so, players transgress boundaries of everyday life and game world easily, the spaces mingle and naturally merge into each other: a mergence of spaces, as this process has been called in digital game studies (Hemminger 2009; Hemminger/ Schott 2012). Various academic disciplines are engaged in analyzing the impact of this

mergence of spaces on social interactions, individual development and society as a whole. These questions, although highly significant, cannot be addressed in detail in this paper. For the issue at hand, mergence of spaces is most notably relevant, because it illustrates once more the significance of game spaces, particularly online game spaces as culturally and socially important spaces for experiences and learning which cannot be ignored in analyzing social conditions in general and the construction of reality in particular.

Returning to the selected cases and the classification of digital games, the relation of online and offline spaces once more presents itself diverse. Two of our cases (*Ōkami* and *Assassin's Creed*) are straight single-player games without options for interaction between players. The magic circle of game space manifests itself with clear boundaries and is entered with a definite intention to play. As will be demonstrated below, this does not mean that everyday life and game space are entirely separated, but share elements from our everyday experiences.

*Black & White* can be played in single-player or multi-player mode. If the option of multi-player mode is chosen, the game offers more possibilities for interaction, but still takes place in the magic circle of the game space. As the game is not played online, the players communicate simply by talking to each other (in the case of LAN gaming by headsets). Mergence of spaces in the sense of a mingling of online and offline spaces is occurring in *WoW* and other online games, particularly in MMORPGs, offering highly versatile experiences and creative options for gameplay. Moving away from playing in the boundaries of a magic circle, MMORPGs range into our everyday lives, boundaries dissolve, mechanical rules are flexible and not crucial for the game, the individual game experience coming to the fore instead. For the classification of games, the relation of offline and online spaces is therefore instrumental, not only regarding religious elements. Once more, the dynamic system of reference points offers important advantages to a rigid genre theory in providing the means to include the all-important aspect of merging spaces in the analysis of gaming experience. In the following chapter, the paper elaborates on the significance of the mergence of spaces as well as on the general relation between game space and everyday life.

## 5 Game Spaces as Sub-Creations: Religion in Games and Everyday Life

As already stated, game worlds are never utterly separated spaces, but always share elements - however remote and fantastical - taken from the everyday lifeworld of the players, as indeed all creative work does. As strange and unfamiliar as a virtual world may seem to us, they are invariably re-constructions of the world we live in and therefore part of this world. The concept of literary work as sub-creations can be found in English literary studies since the Cambridge Platonists and

their philosophy of a compatibility of reason and faith (Hutton 2013). It was, however, the author of one of the most beloved and discussed fantastic stories ever, J.R.R. Tolkien, creator of Middle Earth and the Hobbits, who in one of his rare excursions into the academic discussion of fairy-tales (Tolkien 1965) coined the term ‚sub-creation‘ in literary discussion of this phenomenon. The ability of creating a secondary world with its inner consistency and laws is for Tolkien one of the fundamental characteristics of humans. To reflect and portray God's good creation in mythopoetic work is a gift that enables us to become makers ourselves, always drawing on primary creation, reflecting it, interpreting it, idealising it. In his comments on *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954 & 1955), C.S. Lewis (1982: 90) put it like this: „The Value of the myth is that it takes all the things you know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity.“

The successful creation of a secondary world allows us to step back and take a look at ‚all the things we know‘ from a distance. This has nothing to do with retreating from reality or escapism, but with a rediscovery of real things. „By dipping them in myth, we see them more clearly.“ (ibid.)

What C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien state for fairy tales and myth can be - and indeed should be - applied on game spaces today. What the consistent fairy tale can do for us, the game set in a world „with the inner consistency of reality“ (Tolkien 1965: 47) might do in its own way also. Weaving a story from the material of the primary world in words and vision, digital game spaces draw on everyday life, are derived from reality and flow back into it (Tolkien 1965). For both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, the concept of sub-creation is as much a literary term as a reflection of their religious beliefs. A secularised use of the term as a metaphor for the adaption and construction of game worlds from the material of reality proves to be prolific and valuable for the analysis of digital games as will be shown below.

Before further elaborating on the process of constructing reality (a term which certainly needs explanation) in digital game spaces, the paper is delving deeper into the issue of religious elements in the sub-creations of digital games; for this purpose we will draw on the already analyzed cases once more, adding new, illustrative cases as needed.

The analysis of the exemplary cases has shown that religion in digital games is frequently connected to battle, conflict and violence in general, most obvious in *Assassin's Creed* and *Ōkami*. Research on the US market of digital games found similar results (Hurst 2012). In its extremes we find the connection in *Messiah* (Shiny 2000), a first-person shooter played in the role of the fallen angel Bob, who is sent to earth in order to fight against sin and corruption. Bob, a chubby and harmless cherub, is capable of inhabiting external bodies and using their skills, thus transforming into a killer, a pimp, a policeman or a superhuman battle machine. With might and main he is engaged in his battle against sin by abusing the sinners bodies themselves. Depictions of violence

are bloody and realistic and are found to be extreme in their detailedness by the general gamer's community.<sup>10</sup>

The frequent depiction of religion in connection to violence in digital games is not due to an intentionally negative presentation of religion by game designers or developers, but are based on rather more trivial ground. Looking closer at the in-game conflicts, superficially caused by religious aspects, it turns out that in many cases the real cause for violence is money or power (as in *Assassin's Creed*). As this perception is coherent with most people's everyday experience, games with this kind of setting and story are found to be authentic and substantial. Religion is perceived merely as a story element, not as an issue in itself. The implementation of religion into a story as stylistic device for creating a consistent setting is therefore nothing less than the sub-creation of reality, a reflection of everyday experiences of both player and game designer.

On a second level, the implementation of religious content in game worlds is significant for being multi-faceted and often eclectic. Drawing again on the concept of sub-creation we have to ask in what ways this might be an interpretation of the primary world. The answer can come hardly as a surprise for anyone who is engaged in the field of social analysis and religion; it has long been obvious that the social and cultural significance of religion in modern society is, if not exactly declining, certainly changing (Hemminger, H. 2003: 17ff.; Utsch 2011). The modern individual is not educated and socialized by religious capacities of one single faith, he does not grow into a society that is influenced in all its facets by a christian code of ethics and conduct. The modern individual is a tinkerer, a handyman, constantly serving himself on the market of options for composing faith, religion, spiritual attitudes and practices (Beck 1986; Eickelpasch/ Rademacher 2004). In taking what seems to be practicable, using what seems comfortable and discarding unloved elements, religious and spiritual traditions are re-interpreted, re-combined and individually applied. Again, this cultural practice of patch-working is reflected in the implementation of religious elements into digital game settings. Whereas some games (as shown for *Ōkami* and *Assassin's Creed*) draw mostly on one religious tradition and depict them historically correct to some extent, alterations and modifications are made and accepted if suitable for the story or game mechanics. In a similar way, religious and spiritual elements are mixed and re-matched for other games in order to create a consistent game world and a dense atmosphere for the plot (e.g. in *World of Warcraft* or *Black & White*). Transcendancy in game worlds as in the god mode simulation *Black & White* is an exception and even though the player in the role of god is representing an incomprehensible power and dark secret for his people, the transcendancy is part of the game world and therefore not genuine in the sense of occurring out of the familiar world of the player himself. The simulation of such a power that is genuinely transcendent for the player might be possible in a

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10 All information on game and story are taken from several user platforms and descriptions of the producer, e.g. on [www.ciao.de/Messiah\\_CD\\_ROM\\_Test\\_2756211](http://www.ciao.de/Messiah_CD_ROM_Test_2756211): 29.11.2012.

game, but the question remains if such a game would be attractive for the users. It seems that even in this aspect the virtual game space is a reflection of everyday life: in the course of individualization and pluralization, individuals are searching for useful cosmic principles and recipes for applicable religious or spiritual motives. Just as a mage in *World of Warcraft* channels energy to cast a spell, religion for most people nowadays should be easy to use for specific purposes like solving a problem. The eclectic supply of religious and spiritual choices on offer in modern society is naturally taken from the primary world and woven into the material of the sub-creation.

Religion seems to constitute an essential part of our culture, despite every prophecy of doom for it. True, very often it serves as a mere stylistic device both in the primary and the secondary world. But the fact remains that for the human mind religion is still an important element of the coherent story, the consistency of characters and cultures. Some games can go without religious aspects entirely as can some individuals; for many, religion is a stylistic device, an embellishment for padding the story of life in-game or out of the game; and still for some, religion is the constitutive part of the story, life being unthinkable without it, for reality is both an individual and a social construction and therefore differs and changes within persons and time.

## 6 The Digital Construction of Reality: Game Space as Lebenswelt

Game spaces as sub-creations are part of our everyday life; as players make experiences, interact and merge their online and offline spaces, the secondary creations of game worlds become a space of cultural and social significance, constructed from the material of the primary world, from what seems real and natural to us in everyday life.

The concept of a socially constructed reality as well as the all-important terms reality and knowledge have been philosophically discussed since the beginnings of the discipline, whereas social sciences are concentrating on the question of what constitutes reality. Alfred Schütz' description of the universal structures of human lifeworlds or Lebenswelt (Schütz 1932 & 1971), based on Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy (Husserl 1936), as well as the analysis of a social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966) are by now scientific classics.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) can be seen as the founder of phenomenological philosophy and greatly influenced a number of important philosophers as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre or Jaques Derrida. Husserl's philosophy breaks with the then predominant tradition of psychologism and states that the analysis of reality should be based on phenomena that can be perceived by consciousness thus discriminating between a natural and a phenomenological mode of understanding reality (Husserl 1936). Husserl also introduced the term lifeworld (German:

Lebenswelt), meaning the world that is closest, the everyday world of an individual (ibid.). The term Lebenswelt is standing for the world that an individual experiences as given, self-evident and shared with others. It is a subject's everyday reality in which there is generally no need to challenge what is real or not. Even though every individual carries his or her personal lifeworld, it is characterized by intersubjectivity, meaning that it can be communicated to others and shared in its essentials. This is not to say that lifeworld is a static concept, but it must be understood as the dynamic and developing surroundings of individuals and their everyday lives. As they move and develop, their lifeworlds change and the horizon moves with them, but remains obvious in that the subject lives (German: *erlebt*) the lifeworld and shares it with other individuals (ibid.).

It is Alfred Schütz (1899-1959) who takes Husserl's concepts of consciousness and phenomena as well as the term Lebenswelt and integrates it into his own theory, thus creating a phenomenological sociology. Alfred Schütz' description of the universal structures of human lifeworlds (Schütz 1932 & 1971) is following the initial assumption of phenomenology of a reality constituted by human consciousness. Its issue is not reality as such, but always reality as related to individual interpretation.

Alfred Schütz continues to develop Husserl's philosophy of lifeworld, meaning and consciousness in his concept of a phenomenological sociology by combining it with Max Weber's focus on subjectively meaningful actions (Schütz 1932). Schütz interprets the social world as both constituted by individual experiences and constructed as the world that we take for granted for ourselves and others. The everyday life is special for Schütz in that it is generally taken for granted in contrast to other systems of meaning like the sciences or religion. Schütz' concept of subjective meaning in everyday lifeworlds as the constitutive elements of prime reality for individuals influenced a number of highly relevant theories in the social sciences, among them the sociology of Ervin Goffman and the sociology of knowledge by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Berger/ Luckmann 1966; Schütz/ Luckmann 1979 & 1984). Both concepts share the basic assumption coined by Schütz of social meaning being the result of intersubjective interpretation and assignment of meaning by the acting individuals (Abels 2009: 49ff.).

The analysis of social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966) can be considered to be among the classics of social science theories and has for some paradigmatic character. Berger and Luckmann are well aware of the intellectual roots of their sociology of knowledge in the concepts of Marx, Nietzsche and Dilthey (ibid.: 17 ff.). They also relate their own theory of the social construction of reality to Scheler's and Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, if only to set their own work apart from these conceptions, especially in excluding the „epistemological and methodological problems that bothered both of its major originators“ (ibid.: 26). In stark contrast to Scheler or Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann are interested in everyday knowledge of everyday lifeworlds, not in theoretical ideas or concepts. If we seek to understand the



processes of constructing knowledge in society - so Berger and Luckmann - we have to concern ourselves with everything that is knowledge, not only with theoretical interpretation, ideologies or philosophical truth (ibid.). Therefore for them,

sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people ‚know‘ as ‚reality‘ in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. (...) It is precisely this ‚knowledge‘ that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist. (ibid.: 27)

Berger and Luckmann's concept of social reality is the result of combining central elements of Weber's and Durkheim's sociology. In doing so, they ask both for the subjective meaning-complex of action (Weber 1920) and for the objective facticity of society (Durkheim 1903) and thus attribute to society the essential characteristic of duality. For Berger and Luckmann the elementary concerns of sociological theory merge into the central question: „How is it possible that human activity (Handeln) should produce a world of things (choses)?“ (ibid.: 30) The analysis of this process, which also effects the constructing individuals, is the task of the sociology of knowledge.

Berger and Luckmann take into account anthropological assumptions, in particular Gehlen's and Plessner's concept of the peculiar position of man as a being with under-developed instincts (Abels 2009) that is characterized by a general world-openness and cultural formability: „(...) man constructs his own nature, or more simply, (...) man produces himself.“ (Berger/ Luckmann.: 67) For this act of construction Berger and Luckmann describe three dialectically aligned and interacting processes, externalization, objectivation and internalisation, which result in the construction of social order. Permanent externalization or human activity lead, by producing shared complexes of meaning through interactions, to habitualisation and institutionalisation (ibid.: 69ff.). The products of externalization, like meaning-complexes, institutions or artifacts gain a certain independent facticity which in turn affects the subjective human consciousness as compulsory and binding and an objective institutional world is constructed in a process of objectivation; the product acts back upon the producer. Externalization and objectivation are moments in a continuing dialectical process. (ibid.: 78). The third moment in the process is internalization, which in the broadest sense can be interpreted as socialization by which the „objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness“ (ibid.). Summarising, Berger and Luckmann express their theory in the following declaration: „Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.“ (ibid.: 79)

Current approaches to research on social communities, in which influences and user practices of digital media become increasingly important, are following in the tradition of Berger and



Luckmann's sociology of knowledge. Included in these concepts is the basic notion that reality can not be seen as absolute. Rationalities are pluralized, reality and accordingly everyday lifeworlds are not implicitly and automatically identical for every person involved. Reality and knowledge are socially constructed as a means to reduce complexity, which is only possible by tagging events, interactions and communication with specific meaning. Reality therefore constitutes itself through interaction and communication and must be interpreted by individuals. This interpretation, so the social sciences state, has become increasingly difficult in the course of meta-processes of social change such as individualization, pluralization and globalization, followed by diverse challenges and risks for individuals and societies alike. Depending on which aspect is to be emphasized, society is tagged with different names, ranging from risk society (Beck) to network society (Castells).

With Jürgen Habermas we can state that modernity shows itself like the ancient Roman god Janus with two socialisation faces (Habermas 2001), leaving it to individuals and their ability to cope with these challenges whether they experience their personal lifeworlds as pluralized and individualized in the sense of creative freedom or rather in the sense of a risky lack of security. These pathologies of modern society have been identified and analyzed for decades with focus on different aspects; recently social sciences have been confronted with a - at least historically - new and rapid development, changing the lifeworlds of individuals as well as structures and communication in entire societies: the permeation of life by digital media. The concept of mediatization (Krotz 2007) comprises among other social meta-processes as individualization, pluralization and globalization also the meta-process of mediatization.

Mediatization is understood as a meta-process - meaning a long-term process with unforeseeable effects and duration on a global scale - of social change, including various developments resulting in the acquisition of media skills and knowledge, the permeation of media in varied sectors of everyday life and the following changes to individuals and their environments. The process of mediatization is both a condition and a result of other meta-processes as can be clearly demonstrated in the cases of globalization and pluralization, without which the development of digital media would be unthinkable on the one hand, which are on the other hand fundamental causes and conditions for this development and therefore constantly influencing each other.

In a mediated society communication and interactions are increasingly effected through digital media. Communication generates social relationships, identity, cultural and social structures. In consequence, mediatization becomes significant as an extension to the concept of a social construction of reality: Mediatization is conceived to be a „basic process of everyday life and the pre-condition for the constituting of the individual and his identity, as well as his interpreted world and reality.“ (Krotz 2007:17, author's translation)

## 7 Game Spaces as Looking-Glass Realities: Conclusion

Berger and Luckmann have demonstrated in their classical work on the social construction of reality how all our individual *Lebenswelt* is socially constructed by processes of externalization, objectivation and internalisation. Today, social construction of reality connotes a digital construction of reality as well, as the digital spaces of world wide web, digital games or social networking sites can no longer be separated from offline worlds, but are indeed essentially part of everyday life for many people. In interpreting game spaces as secondary worlds, the process of construction and re-construction of *Lebenswelt* is a constantly shifting and dynamic reciprocal development: as we design game worlds, a digital reality is intentionally constructed from material of the primary world; every impression, every action or word that carries back into the primary world from these game worlds again influence our concept of reality and thus again the design of future game worlds. As we have seen in the analysis of our cases *Black & White*, *Ōkami*, *Assassin's Creed* and *World of Warcraft*, the sub-creations of game space reflect and interpret their origin in the primary world in manifold ways. With a view to the implementation of religious aspects this might feel uncomfortable for some, but this is not the crucial point. It is only of consequence regarding the ways we can or have to react to this development of new and in some respects unregulated spaces of social construction of reality. Digital game spaces are as real as we perceive them to be, as important for individuals and significant for society as everything else that we take as a given reality in our everyday lives. That might be one reason for skepticism and in some cases even fear of virtual worlds: they are not yet taken for granted by everyone, they still might seem unfamiliar and strange and therefore not completely internalized. The fact remains that for a majority of people, game spaces and other digital spaces constitute their reality, their everyday life, their *Lebenswelt*. Maybe for this reason the initial lamentations over the lack of ‚christian games‘ (Städter 2013) seems now even more absurd: if a ‚christian game‘ is a game were christian knowledge or content is intentionally conveyed to the players (at least this is the most obvious interpretation of the author’s meaning), it is no wonder that such games hold no great power of attraction to the general player, who is seeking for a sub-creation with the inner consistency of his *Lebenswelt*. For how can an educational game without a coherent story and setting, without the conflicts, suffering and rejoicing of the human mind and soul ever be alluring to a player? If we wish to learn about facts, we can choose such a game, but usually this is not the motivation that drives the player. It is the eventual challenge, the new and creative experience, the trying out and failing or succeeding that makes a game. A good, alluring game in a christian setting is certainly possible, why not? The bible is full of deeply moving stories, featuring battle, love and sorrow - which only emphasizes the absurdity of the notion of a consistent sub-creation without the characteristics of human life itself.

The ability to create a secondary world, so Tolkien (1965), the gift of fantasy „remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker“ (ibid.: 55). On this note of the creation of game worlds as an emulation of God’s primary creation by His subjects, the presence of religious elements in digital games gains a new and rather surprising quality. Even if used merely as decorating elements in a story or in order to give consistency to a character, religion in its many peculiarities is so frequently implemented in game worlds as to seem almost indispensable. Maybe religion is more essentially present in human mind and the individuals Lebenswelt than we commonly choose to recognize. Maybe the loss of the myth, the disenchantment of the world, is compensated in this playful and creative way. This might be what another master of the written word, G.K. Chesterton, meant by stating that „it might reasonably be maintained that the true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground“ (Chesterton 1908).

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