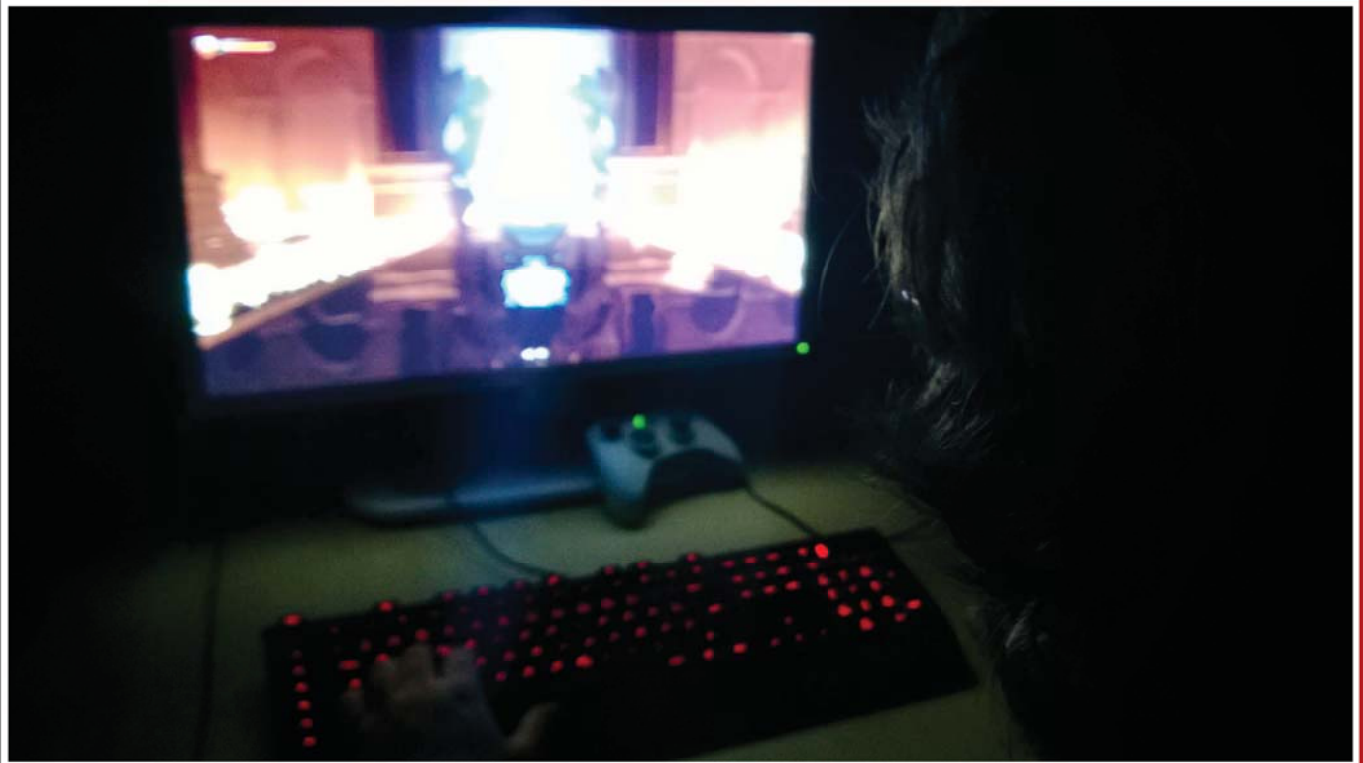




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Review: „eGods. Faith versus fantasy in computer gaming“¹

Moritz Maurer

The author of the monograph under discussion, William Bainbridge, is a renowned scholar of the sociology of religion. In the 1980s together with Rodney Stark he developed his own theory of religion. This model draws a highly economic picture of religion. The model as well as the authors was highly influenced by Christian forms of religion, which also becomes quite obvious in the monograph. To quote Bainbridge: “[...] the borders of religion become unclear, once we move far away from mainstream Christian denominations.” (B. p. 214)

“eGods” focuses on various aspects of religion in terms of the Bainbridge-Stark-theory. This shows itself in the organization of the book, which has eleven chapters with titles like “Cults” or “Quests”. He sees his work in this book as rather ethnographic, “focusing on the culture of the games while playing them” (B. p. 33). To gather data Bainbridge played many games for large amounts of time, including the (notorious) World of Warcraft for “fully 2,400 hours”. (B. p. 19) He also used online resources and the help of other players (B. pp. 19 -21), although it seems like the perspective of those other players did not play a major role in the formation of this book. This is curious given the fact that he mostly analysed massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) and sets out to explore the “culture” of these games. Bainbridge’s enormous dataset presents him with a wide range of examples, which he uses to show what part of game worlds things like “Magic” (another chapter title) form.

The first two chapters differ from the rest of the book insofar as the first one being is a brief introduction in his method and field of research and the second is mainly an introduction to the cultural setting in which he locates this work. His monograph is easy accessible and obviously written for scholars and the public alike. This might explain why Bainbridge doesn’t address or even mention several of the key discussions in the field of game studies. His conclusion is that computer games offer a starting point for a wider consideration of changes in society linked to the process of secularization, which he defines as “the erosion of religious faith [...] a form of cultural progress that liberates the playful human imagination”. (B. p. 24) In some cases he himself offers some alternatives to religious practices to be found in virtual games (e. g. the idea of “veneration

1 Bainbridge, 2013, eGods. Faith versus fantasy in computer gaming, Oxford University Press, Oxford. (cited as B.)

avatars” on page 105). This oscillation between description and scientific analysis on the one hand and his cultural agenda against religion on the other hand shows itself already in the first chapter.

In the second chapter Bainbridge positions the book and himself on one side of a certain struggle: “This book and its topic are enmeshed in a culture war. The two sides are not clearly drawn, but on one side we can vaguely see conservative forces that want to preserve traditional American culture including old-time religion, and on the other side radical forces that are exploring alternative cultural options connected to new technologies” (B. p. 25). This sentence sets the tone for the whole chapter, which, considered by itself, gives some interesting insight into the campaigns launched by Republicans against federal funding for research projects in anyway linked to video games. An analysis of a player-made quest line for the Star Trek game “Star Trek Online” shows another problem with Bainbridge’s work: The analytical parts often remain more than vague. Here it only consists of the following sentence: “This player-created mission clearly implies that humans will be intensely religious only if their culture has regressed to a primitive stage of development.” (B. p. 55) This could on the one hand be a summary of the summary of the quest line given before but sadly, in the broader context of the book, this could also be understood as a moral judgment of Bainbridge. The introduction Bainbridge gives to the chapter “Deities” exemplifies the other problem with this book best: lack of analytical rigor. It has therefore to be quoted in length here:

Some scholars believe that monotheism encouraged the emergence of science during the Renaissance and afterward, because it assumes that all of nature was created by one deity according to one law that can be discovered through research. But humanity is not unified, and nature seems to be a chaos of conflicting forces. Thus, monotheism expresses a utopian ideal, but harsh reality may better be described by polytheism in which multiple deities compete. The computer games described here are about winning, and thus about competition, but with the paradoxical promise that all players can win. From the “winner take all” perspective of chess or tennis, this seems unnatural—even supernatural—and one way it can be accomplished is by letting every player triumph over nonplayer characters, in a fictional struggle between virtual gods, even sometimes fighting against deities. (B. p. 21)

Bainbridge has a predilection for overarching theories and he either presents these completely uncritically or downplays any usefulness by pointing to the fact that it “is a question for historians of the particular time and place” to figure out how “well this all worked”. (B. p. 77) This leaves the reader wondering why he presented them in the first place. He does not argue but rather arranges highly suggestive lines of identification which suggest a logical connection between unconnected statements. A good example stems from this chapter: After describing the religions of “Sacred II”, in which NPCs attend “mass” and only believe in the existence of one single deity out of a group of six, Bainbridge states: “The connection of Kybele to the ancient cultures of the classical world reminds us that real religions were not very different from today’s fictional polytheisms, an

observation reinforced by the MMO ‘Gods and Heroes: Rome Rising’.” In the discussion of the game and polytheism that follows this similarity doesn’t become apparent at all. Indeed it would be just as possible to point out the obvious differences between historical polytheism and polytheism in video games.

Also a recurring feature of all of the book’s chapters are narratives about the adventures he had in the games in question (e. g. B. pp. 60-66, which are preceded by a lengthy piece of Bainbridge’s family history describing how he chose the name for the Everquest II Avatar he deals with on the following pages) that are loosely connected and impressionistic rather than informative.

All the remaining chapters simply contain variations on the patterns described above. They present lengthy narrations of how Bainbridge solved quests and explored certain game worlds combined with vague interpretations of the findings connected to the title of the chapter in various games, as well as quick summaries of sociological theory with only thin connections to the topic, digressions and barbs against religion.

The chapter “Souls” deals with different kinds of player characters and also the relation of the player to NPC-companions in order to explore human notions of identity. The before mentioned “veneration characters” for deceased ones close to the player, which, in Bainbridge’s view, could take over one of the “original functions of religion” (B. p 104), also feature in this chapter. This leads to “Priests”, in which he explores the function of “religious professional” (B. p. 107) in game worlds as playable character classes. This is of course again mixed with a quite fundamental critique of religious institutions, e. g. he offers “plausible theories about shamans: (1) they are crazy, and (2) they are frauds” but notes that he came up with his own theory, which is a combination of the two mentioned before. (B. p. 107) The chapter also offers a quantitative analysis of some gender related issues in World of Warcraft. (B. 120- 127). In the following chapter, Bainbridge seeks to analyse “virtual sacred spaces” (B. p. 134). He also explains the difference between world model and display model of a video game. “Magic” analyses relationships between speech and magic, and the transformations which magic has to undergo to be incorporable into a video game. The next chapter elaborates to what extent religion and morality are linked in certain video games and moral decisions are in general framed within certain games (“The lesson most gameworlds teach is that morality should be limited to members of one’s own faction” B. p. 212). It also explores how ethical religious concepts like “heaven” and “hell” can be reduced to not clearly morally evaluated backgrounds for virtual worlds. The concept of “Cults” is explored in the following chapter. At first Bainbridge reviews the concept within the frame of his own theory of religion before looking at “radical religious movements” (B. p. 218) in game worlds. The second to last chapter, “Death”, explores how it is integrated into game worlds, given the fact that a real end of existence is not part of the possibilities given in the mechanics of video games for player characters. Finally Bainbridge deals in an even more activist chapter with the question, how meaning can be found in life.

As has been shown, for example in Russell McCutcheon's discussion of Mircea Eliade (in: McCutcheon, R 1997, *Manufacturing Religion. The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford) scholars' religious interests tend yield problematic pieces of research, arisen from the ideological slant of the given scholar. A similar problem is at work in this monograph. It seems to live up to its own intentions but fails to convince on a scholarly level.

Biography

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