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Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

Institute for
Religious Studies

University
of Heidelberg

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(In Lieu of an Introduction)

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Abstract

Using the example of the US American Christian initiative *GameChurch* and their goals and activities in the context of digital games, the authors emphasize the significance of applying an actor-centered perspective on the research of digital gamers and the socio-cultural practice of 'gaming'. While game-immanent topics might be the most obvious area of study, the focus on gamers and their in-game conduct offers exceptionally deep insights into the interconnections of in-game content with the religious disposition of the gamers. Thus, an actor-centered approach can generate important new data and perspectives for the analysis of contemporary (religious) meaning-making processes within individual and group-based pop-cultural contexts.

Keywords

Actor-centered approach, gaming culture, Christianity, *GameChurch*

1   Prelude: "Gaming is not a Crime, it's a Culture"[2]

We believe that games are about more than just entertainment. They have something to say about the way we live, love, hurt, struggle, and overcome–and that is something worth talking about.[3]

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1   „What would Jesus play?" is the title of an article on the *GameChurch.com* website (see: http://gamechurch.com/what-would-jesus-play/). It seems, they also have an answer to that question. See: „Ten 2014 games that Jesus loves (and why)" (http://gamechurch.com/ten-2014-games-jesus-loves/) and *GameChurch* podcast episodes # 23 and # 24 (https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/gamechurch/id900630285?mt=2).
2   Slogan on GameChurch t-shirts. See: http://gamechurch.com/product/gaming-is-not-a-crime/.
3   http://gamechurch.com/what-we-do/.

We, the editors of this second special issue of *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* on "Religion in Digital Games Reloaded – Immersion into the Field" wholeheartedly approve of this statement published on the website of *GameChurch* (if maybe from a different viewpoint). That is why we would like to introduce this issue in a slightly different way, making use of a research experience from recent fieldwork.

An abundance of people! Oh my! Where did these masses come from? We follow the crowd along the walkways between the stalls. – We have no choice anyway, it's so packed. And so hot and noisy! It's mid-August and we are in Cologne, attending the *Gamescom*, the world's largest video games fair together with about 335.000 other visitors, more than 6.000 journalists, and about 700 exhibitors from about 90 countries.[4] We are pursuing a quest. Quite literally.

The trade fair is traditionally used by game developers and publishers to show off their upcoming games, which offers gamers a chance to get a glimpse onto what is about to come, gamewise. And it is visited by all kinds of people, many of whom you wouldn't expect in an environment which is often (and obviously wrongly) asserted to mainly attract the stereotypical 'gamer', presumably unwashed loners who spend the better of their time in front of the computer screen killing … whatever – instead of being social in "real-life" (or so the prejudice, often enough disseminated by the media, goes). We see families, grandparents escorting their grandchildren. We see officials in suits going about their businesses. We see artistically and fancifully made up cosplayers, 'incarnating', 'embodying' … in any case: '(re-)presenting' their preferred and most admired game characters. We even now and then spot guys who seem to fit the above mentioned stereotype. But most of all we see 'normal folk'. We can only guess the number of researchers among these crowds. But there certainly are. (There must be! Like us.) Looking at the visitors is part of our quest. We are scholars of religious studies and researchers of religion in digital games.

Suddenly we catch a glimpse of a well-known figure (at least for scholars of religion). On a huge poster we see a rather traditional depiction of Jesus – except that he holds a game pad in hands and wears a headset. Approaching the stall, we can also read the slogan that adorns the arrangement: "Jesus loves gamers. *GameChurch.com*". We are thrilled. Naturally, we were expecting to find some kind of 'religion' at the *Gamescom*. But that was a real discovery!

Like our quest had succeeded!

It was epic!

But who are these guys? Is the whole stall a prank? Or is *Gamechurch* for real? Could it be? We approach the tall guy named Mikee Bridges, who is obviously the head of the small group, handing out merchandize. And ask him about what they are doing. It turns out, Bridges is a minister of *Epic Minstries*[5] and founder of *GameChurch*. This is pretty much what he tells us:

> Gamechurch does a lot of things, but our primary activity is going to videogame and nerd culture
> conventions across the world to tell Gamers about the love of Jesus. Typically, we purchase a 10 x 20

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4   See press release on *Gamescom 2014* by the fair organizers: http://www.gamescom-cologne.com/en/gamescom/presse/presseinformationen/gc_pressinformationen.php?aktion=pfach&p1id=kmpresse_gamescom_e&format=html&base=&tp=k3content&search=&pmid=kmeigen.kmpresse_1408435283&start=0&anzahl=10&channel=kmeigen&language=e&archiv=.

5   epicworldmissions.org.

foot booth space in the convention expo hall and set up shop. Our booth consists of a giant banner of "gaming Jesus" (see below), two side banners, and two tables covered in free swag and our *Jesus, For the Win!* "gamer-bibles". Nine times out of ten, people see our Jesus banner, get super confused, and walk up and ask us "what is this?", or "are you guys for real?". The response is universal: "we're here to tell you that Jesus loves you, and we've got a bunch of free swag for you if you want." By the time the convention is over, all or most of that swag (including the bibles) will be in the hands of the convention attendees. It's almost painfully simple.[6]

The *GameChurch* definitely is a project we considered to be worth a second glance (and in the long run probably a thorough research) … Because they are a great example for the importance and necessity of actor-centered research (a point we did not stretch so much yet[7]). Not that all the gamers, cosplayers, journalists, fair hosts and hostesses, … were of no interest, because they are! – Just not as obviously. But we are jumping ahead of things.

By talking to the *GameChurch* representatives at the *Gamescom*, by looking at the *GameChurch* website and by collecting and analyzing the material available on the web, we have reconstructed the following facts: *GameChurch* in a nutshell.

2   *GameChurch* – "For the win!"

> We wanted to bring a simple message of hope to the culture of gaming (…) We are all gamers and want to bring this message to our own world of nerd culture. (Mikee Bridges)[8]

According to the founder of *GameChurch*, Mikee Bridges, the multidenominational project that started working in 2010 wanted to fill a void in a huge field of popular culture, otherwise virtually deficient of churches and Christian organization.[9] Even though they have become a cultural asset in many Euro-American and Asian countries and are constantly on the rise as a media industry, digital games and gamers are still subject to prejudice and suffer a bad reputation, partly caused by negative media attention. After a one-year research of the gaming industry at several trade fairs, *GameChurch* has set out to (according to their web site) "bridge the gap between the gospel and the gamer"[10].

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6   http://gamechurch.com/what-we-do/.
7   See: Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014.
8   http://gamechurch.com/press/.
9   For a detailed account of the *GameChurch* history, see: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/
10   http://gamechurch.com/ministry/.

GameChurch has adopted the model of xxx.church[11], a non-profit Christian organization founded in 2002, mainly targeting the porn industry, performers and people struggling with pornography and porn addiction by attending porn conventions and handing out bibles featuring the slogan "Jesus loves porn stars" which has lead to considerable media attention. Ordained minister Mikee Bridges has a reputation of doing (as he himself puts it) "dirty ministry"[12]. He has – in his own words "a heart for the outliers; the people on the fringes of society."[13]

> I like to go where others won't. I like to go to the forgotten places. When we think of mission fields, (…) we don't think of a music venue, a bar, or a restaurant as a mission field. (...) Imagine being in a noisy music venue and being asked about what your tattoos mean. For me it means I get to tell the story of Jesus. I love the spiritually broken and bruised people that the rest of Christianity has left behind. I love sharing a different story about Jesus than they probably have heard before, and bringing the Gospel to culture in relevant ways.[14]

Bridges was the owner of several music clubs in and around Portland, Oregon and is best known as founder of the *TOMfest*, an annual Christian music festival and venue for Christian worship, held between 1995 and 2009 in different locations within the US. It was famous for featuring a broad range of different music styles and bands especially of those genres usually underrepresented in mainstream festivals including hardcore, metal and folk. He was founder and front man of several bands and after moving back to his hometown in Ventura (Florida) he ran an entertainment venue including (among others) a video gaming facility. The center was later overtaken by *Epic Minstries*, of which Bridges was a board member and CEO and turned into the (currently closed down) "The Armory"[15] (a 3000 square foot gaming facility). The *GameChurch* a Christian outreach program directly emanated from these activities[16] and the staff quite obviously and consciously adapted the language and attitude of their target group:

> We are all gamers and want to bring this message to our own world of nerd culture.

Accordingly, the gamer-bible[17] features the trademark Jesus-as-gamer depiction above which the lettering "Jesus For the Win" is prominently placed. Below as a sort of description, one can read the following text:

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11 http://xxxchurch.com/.
12 http://gamechurch.com/press/#.
13 http://epicworldmissions.org/mikeebridges/.
14 http://epicworldmissions.org/mikeebridges/.
15 http://www.armoryventura.com/.
16 http://gamechurch.com/press/.
17 The gamer's bible is available for download: http://gamechurch.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JFTW-Web.pdf.

> A little book about a guy named Jesus, his Guild, and his ultimate quest to save a land known as Earth.

What's behind it, is mainly the Gospel of John (NET Bible, New English Translation) and some additional game and nerd-culture related commentaries by *GameChurch* activists. According to the *GameChurch* website, the handing out of the bibles is the first (and often the only) contact with the visitors at trade fairs. In 2014 GameChurch activists have attended about 25 conventions worldwide and have (according to the *EpicMinistries* and *GameChurch* websites) given out more than 35.000 bibles[18] (which sums up to 60.000 bibles altogether[19]), along with other merchandise.

Concerning the activities at trade fairs such as the *Gamescom* in Cologne, the goals of *GameChurch* is mainly to deliver the message that "Jesus loves you."

> We believe that those three words are the most powerful thing that a person can hear. You don't have to take a shower. You don't need to put on a nice shirt. He loves you even if you believe He doesn't.[20]

While quite offensively taking on and playing with some of the most prominent prejudices against gamers, the GameChurch activists are aware of the limitations of their short encounters at the conventions. According to Mikee Bridges:

> There certainly is more to the Gospel than "Jesus loves you." But as far as my ministry goes, I feel I am not necessarily the guy who goes there—that is not my role. I am starting conversations with people and opening doors to the Gospel. (…) Telling people Jesus loves them is a way to take a step toward that longer more in-depth conversation that we need to have about the Gospel.[21]

The reactions to the *GameChurch*'s activism seem to be quite diverse and – not surprisingly – not always positive. However, the whole design patterns (of which the gamer-bible is just one example) has a professional appearance and a clear focus on the target group.

Apart from the so-called "mission trips" to trade fairs and other gaming events[22], *GameChurch* offers information and educational resources for parents and Christian religious organizations[23] and several game-related content like articles on video games and gaming, game reviews[24], podcast

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18 http://gamechurch.com/ministry/missions/.
19 http://gamechurch.com/ministry/about/.
20 http://gamechurch.com/ministry/about/.
21 http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/.
22 http://gamechurch.com/ministry/missions/.
23 http://gamechurch.com/ministry/education/.
24 http://gamechurch.com/category/articles/.

episodes[25], a (not very active) "Ministry Blog"[26] and several *Facebook* groups[27] for people to chat, among other one exclusively for women gamers[28].

GameChurch skillfully makes use of all contemporary Social Media and additionally uses *Twitter* and runs a *YouTube* channel. All resources merge on the website GameChurch.com[29] which serves as portal and main gateway. The target group is not primarily "Christian gamers" however, "*GameChurch* is a website for everyone looking for a different perspective of gaming and to ask any question about the culture of gaming, religion, gaming addiction or story"[30].

> If you want legitimate interviews, reviews, and news from gamers, that is us. We want to do something that is really good and if you really want to, you can talk about spiritual things. We have a doorway. There is a button on our site that says *church*. If you click on that link you will be directed to the spiritual side of our forum, and you can go on there and ask us any spiritual questions or even argue with us and tell us that we are full of crap. If you are a Christian and you want to share your testimony or do Christiany things, you can go over to this page and do that kind of stuff. But essentially the site is legit news and reviews for gamers by gamers. There is not much spiritual about it.[31]

However, browsing the titles of the articles and podcast episodes, it is evident that the *GameChurch* authors do follow a specific line of argument which emphasizes the religious point of view, when e.g. "Ten 2014 Games that Jesus Loves (and Why)"[32] are being selected and discussed.

A big emphasis on the activities of the interdenominational organization seem to lie on in-game activities however, e.g. via the *GameChurch Steam* community the *GameChurch Teamspeak* server and other in-game resources. Additionally, *GameChurch* has partnered with *GodModeX*, a project that has set out "to reach gamers worldwide sharing God's love and connecting local churches"[33] by "connecting with gamers and building friendships so we can share the love of Christ through the gaming platform/industry/world"[34].

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25 https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/gamechurch/id900630285?mt=2.
26 http://gamechurch.com/ministry/blog/.
27 E.g. "GameChurch City", "The Chapel at GameChurch City".
28 "The Salon at GameChurch City".
29 http://gamechurch.com/.
30 http://gamechurch.com/press/#.
31 http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/.
32 http://gamechurch.com/ten-2014-games-jesus-loves/.
33 http://godmodex.com/mission/.
34 http://godmodex.com/mission/.

> Gamechurch's GodmodeX project goes in-game with the intention of building relationships. This is NOT a gaming community for Christians to play together! This Group is ONLY for those who want to play with non-Christian's and be a part of the GodmodeX mission.[35]

A mission that interconnects Christianity, popular culture, and the 'nerdiness' of the digital natives of the present time it seems … An in-depth research in the context of *GameChurch* is imminent, to be sure!

3   *GameChurch* and Actor-Centered Research of Religion in Digital Games

Why is this (rather lengthy) record of *GameChurch* relevant for the study of religion in digital games and / or for the introduction of this issue?

There is a multitude of reasons, the most obvious probably being the fact, that the existence and the activities of *GameChurch* (even though not an obvious area of research in the field of religion and digital games at first glance) are a textbook example for game-related research topics which strengthen and emphasize the need for a complementary approach which considers and respects the interdependencies of digital games, gaming as practice, and culture (the latter to be understood in a narrow sense as in "gaming culture" as well as in a wider comprehensive sense).

> We are gamers. We were gamers before we started this ministry, and we will be gamers after it. We play videogames. We do it every day in our LAN center. So we are not trying to be something that we are not. We don't have to try too hard, we like games so we play them and we talk about them. (Mikee Bridges, *GameChurch*)[36]

Adopting a constructivist and discoursive approach (e.g. according to Hall 2011), the term "culture" comprises a set of shared meanings as well as a set of social practices by means of which social actors act out, construct and remodel "culture" in the broadest sense. By doing so, "culture" is to be understood as a fluid field of discourse with fuzzy borders, incessantly negotiated by the different actors and underlying continuous change, nevertheless structuring as well as controlling all personal and public forms of social interaction (see Barker 2012). Applying this approach towards digital games research, the perspectives mentioned above can fruitfully be assigned to religion as

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35 Description of the "GodModeX at GameChurch City" *Facebook* group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/576945462432803/?fref=ts.

36 http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/.

significant part of culture in general, and on digital games within the cultural / religious spheres in particular.

> Video games permeate education, mobile technologies, museum displays, social functions, family interactions, and workplaces" and "(...) are played by many if not all ages, genders, sexualities, races, religions, and nationalities (Shaw 2010: 416).

Thus, religion can be regarded as one (of many other) factor(s) which shape(s) the processes of construction and reception of digital games (in a narrow sense) and the discourses on and about the games / the gamers as well as their impacts and repercussions on culture / religion to the point of its respective actors (in a wider and complementary sense). In order to acknowledge and adequately cover both area of discourse, we have proposed a twofold approach towards digital games (see: Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014), namely:

- the game-immanent approach, comprising of the research of narratives, the aesthetics and the game rules and mechanics as well as
- the actor-centered approach, focusing on the dimensions of the game designers and players.

Even though from a Cultural / Religious Studies perspective, a researcher needs to draw from a complementary mix of game immanent as well as actor-centered methods to live up to the complex discursive processes of reception and construction, the game-immanent approach might in most cases be the most evident course of action (depending on the focus of research). In contrast, the huge field of possible topics offered by an actor-centered research focus might often be less obvious. – However, the latter approach might nonetheless produce highly useful results especially in the context of socially relevant themes and topics (where the actual role of digital games unlike in the case of the example at hand might even be somewhat blurred and less conspicuous). Therefore an actor-centered approach towards games, gaming and gamers is a tool that allows the researcher to dive deep into an area often coined as "gaming culture" – but also beyond and above. Among others and on a larger scale, it allows for conclusions and predications in the research field of mediating religions as well as interdependencies of the history of media / mediatization and the history of religion.

In this context, the term "gaming culture" is not to be mistaken as describing a detached part of "culture" in general (or even worse; a "sub-culture" possibly in a pejorative sense), but as an organic part of everyday life. Researchers must therefore choose their research design carefully:

> We must be reflexive and critical of both our object of study and our methodologies. Defining gaming culture as something distinct and separate from a constructed mainstream culture encourages us to

only study those who identify as gamers, rather than more dispersed gaming. That is, we should look at video games in culture rather than games as culture (Shaw 2010: 416).

As such, *GameChurch* is an ideal type example which amalgamates both perspectives: We can find an affirmative connotation of the actor-sided perception of "games as culture" due to the straightforward focus and on and commitment to gamers on one hand. However, in the active 'matchmaking' of digital games and contemporary Christian culture the comprehensive notion of "games in culture" is also clearly visible. Due to the fact, that on the *GameChurch* website a multitude of game-related reviews, podcasts and discussions are visible, we can merge a game-related approach of the games they talk about and correlate the findings with an analysis of the perspectives on in-game content discussed by *GameChurch* activists and members alike.

Thus *GameChurch* is a contemporary game-related religious initiative, tackling games as well as gamers in a broad perspective and at the same time making them a means and tool of socializing, communicating and even religious mission. As Mikee Bridges puts it:

> These people we are ministering to will not go to your church. So the question for us is this: Are you going to forget about them or are you going to get involved with what they do?[37]

The focus on games seems to be a conscious and strategic decision on many levels and can serve as a textbook example for the multi-sided interconnectivities of digital games and religion. According to the *GameChurch* website:

> We don't just want to be another Christian group telling Gamers about Jesus. You see, we are gamers ourselves, and we have just as much of a passion and love of videogames as any gamer, and we want to be a voice in the conversation about games. We believe that games are about more than just entertainment. They have something to say about the way we live, love, hurt, struggle, and overcome– and that is something worth talking about. (http://gamechurch.com/what-we-do/)

However, at a first glance, GameChurch seems to bear great resemblance to other Christian gaming communities such as e.g. *Christ Centered Gamer*[38], *Everyday Gamers*[39], *Christian Gamers Online*[40] or *3 Day Respawn*[41] some of which which have already existed for many years (e.g. Schut 2013). Some of those sites are quite explicit and straightforward about their Christian commitment (Luft

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37 http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/.
38 https://www.christcenteredgamer.com/.
39 http://everydaygamers.com/.
40 http://christiangamers.net/cms/.
41 http://www.3dayrespawn.com/.

2014: 154), others are somewhat more muted and toned down in communicating their religious affiliation. Additionally, many MMOs feature quite a number of Christian clans or guilds, which are listed on sites like *The Christian Gamer Alliance*[42] or *The Christian gamers' Guild*[43].

The open commitment to Christian mission as one of the goals and as self-conception of *GameChurch* stands out from most other Christian gamer communities however. According to *GameChurch's* representatives as well as its website's mission statement, the preachy attitude of many Christian-centered gaming sites[44] as well as the reluctant and mainly pejorative stance of most Christian institutions towards digital games are both criticized, discussed and operationalized:

> With anything that is popular, the church will say it's bad for a while and then turn around and jump on the bandwagon once we figure out that it isn't actually sinful. (...) I don't think it will be very long before the church catches on that if we don't get into this vehicle, it's going to leave without us. (Mikee Bridges, *GameChurch*)[45]

Consequently, *GameChurch* defines their mission as follows:

> It is a call that can seem daunting, but God has positioned and empowered us to effectively preach the gospel to the gaming community. We know that gamers don't just need *fewer* videogames, they need *more* of Jesus. Our heart for gamers is that they would know that Jesus is able to meet their deepest needs. (Brian Buffon, *GameChurch*)[46]

As the material presented above clearly shows, the discourses by and about the *GameChurch* represent a field within the context of "gaming culture" which can be described and analyzed by applying actor-centered focal points, e.g. by posing the following questions:

- What exactly is the self-conception of *GameChurch* members and what role does religion / Christianity actually play in the context of everyday discourse, gaming practice and the reception of in-game content?

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42 http://www.cgalliance.org/forums/.
43 http://www.christian-gamers-guild.org/.
44 "A lot of 'Christian' gaming sites are morality police. I don't want to read another Christian game review of a movie or a videogame. What gamers want to know is whether a game is good or not. We are big boys. We can take care of our accountability—what we should and shouldn't be watching. On the Web site, we just write about videogames. There are a lot of Christian Web sites out there with Christian guilds and teams. It's like going to church, you meet other like-minded gamers. That is cool but that is not what we are trying to do" (http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/).
45 http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/.
46 http://gamechurch.com/ministry/about/.

- How do Christianity and certain Christian points of view affect and shape the line of arguments in articles, podcast episodes and other material featured on the *GameChurch*'s website which discusses and reflects in-game content?

- How do religious identity construction and community building work out, especially in the context and by means of *GameChurch's* different media platforms?

- What role does the selection of games played by the members and the discussions about those games play as indicator for their religious disposition(s)?

- What are the strategies which *GameChurch* applies in order to open up the new and – from the viewpoint of Christian mission – still mainly untouched area of "gaming culture"?

- And in a broader and more comprehensive perspective: Taking the example of *GameChurch*, how do religious ideas and practices change when transferred from a "classical" into a new context, both in regard to media, to mediatized transmission as well as the popular / nerd culture?

- Can *GameChurch*'s approach be put in the larger context of postmodern theology? If so, can the strands of discourse and the processes of reception be traced and originated to certain authors and church affiliations? And is theology also reflected by the reception of in-game content? If so how is theology and in-game content being interconnected and communicated?

Further and based on the specific questions(s) asked, game-immanent perspectives and research foci can (and should!) be added to complement and contextualize the findings, e.g. by actually playing and analyzing the games – their narratives, aesthetics, rules and mechanics – referred to by the players!

By presenting the material on *GameChurch* as showcase example we stumbled upon by accident, we would like to make a case for an emphasis and enhancement of actor-centered perspectives in the field of religion in digital games. We might be repeating ourselves, but

> [D]ealing with religion and 'games in culture' means dealing with complex processes of interaction, exchange, adaption and transformation of cultural and religious practices and beliefs. It is left to researchers of religion and digital games to identify these processes and place them into the broader context of contemporary reception, negotiation and expression of individual religious identity. (Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 40)

Let's go for it!

4   Religion in Digital Games. Immersion into the Field

The research of religion(s) in digital games is still brand new. Therefore, all researchers immersing themselves into this fascinating field are pioneers of sorts. Luckily, more and more research is being done, works are being published, conferences[47] are being held, and journals[48] are being launched, altogether slowly but surely adding to the consolidation of the research field in the contexts of serious academia. Therefore, we are very proud to present the second special issue of *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* on the topic of "Religion in Digital Games Reloaded. Immersion into the Field". To be honest – we weren't planning this issue nor was there any particular Call for Papers! Only after so many authors sent in their high-quality papers dealing with topics of digital games and gaming, the idea for a sequel was born. And here it is!

While the first special issue[49] (which was launched nearly exactly one year ago) was dedicated to reveal the huge range of possible methodical and theoretical approaches to the field (not all of which are necessarily compatible with the basic self-conception of cultural studies as academic discipline), the current issue's focus is on the interconnectivities and interplays of game-immanent content with actor-centered receptions and responses – the implications and consequences of which are being discussed in the papers at hand.

Frank G. Bosman and **Marcel Poorthuis'** contribution *"The Place of Man in the Ontological and Cosmological Dualism of the Diablo, Darksiders and Devil May Cry Game Series"* shows the processes of reception of certain biblical topics and narratives within the context of digital games and offers approaches towards pop-cultural mediations of the theodicy problem.

The adaption of literary narratives (but of a completely different sort) is also the subject of **Christoph Duret**'s paper. In *"Living the Phantasm of Demediation. The Priest-Kings and the Technology Prohibition in the Gorean Role-playing Games"* the author discusses, with an emphasis on the gaming practice, the adaptation of the religiously-loaded science fiction novels *The Chronicles of Gor* (by John Norman, 1966-) as online role-playing game within the virtual 3D environment *Second Life*.

Stephen Jacobs deals with the *Left Behind* multiverse. In *"Simulating the Apocalypse Theology and Structure of the Left Behind Games"* he conducts a structural analysis of the game and compares the findings with the book series and the underlying theology.

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47 E.g. "Playing God" by the Dutch academic research group 'Moving Visions' (which focuses on the interconnections of film, religion and theology) in October 2014.

48 E.g. in late December 2014 the online journal "Gamevironments" (http://www.gamevironments.org/) which is dedicated to the publication of papers on (digital?) gaming and religion.

49 Simone Heidbrink and Tobias Knoll (eds), *Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches. Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* Vol. 5 (2014), available: http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/religions/issue/view/1449.

Marley-Vincent Lindseys paper *"The Politics of Pokémon Socialized Gaming, Religious Themes and the Construction of Communal Narratives"* focuses on the brand new and highly topical field of "Twitch Plays Pókemon". In an actor-centered perspective he offers a first-hand description of the field and the multitude of religious discourses in different media contexts.

Demons in videogames is the topic of **Jonathon O'Donnell**s contribution. *"A Digital Devil's Saga. Representation(s) of the Demon in Recent Videogames"* describes the reception of demonic themes from religious and secular sources and discusses their refiguration and reinterpretation as polyvalent agents in the context of digital games.

The game *Morrowind* (Bethesda 2002) combines a 'prophetic' narrative with free forms of gameplay. In his paper *"Prophecy, Pre-destination, and Free-form Gameplay. The Nerevarine Prophecy in Bethesda's 'Morrowind'"* **Angus Slater** discusses the pluralisation of the ways in which the game's prophetic narrative can be incorporated into individual gameplay and highlights the intersecting discourses of the theological concept with popular culture.

Our own paper *"'Venturing into the Unknown'(?) Method(olog)ical Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming"* (**Heidbrink**, **Knoll** & **Wysocki**) focuses on the methodical and methodological implications of game-immanent and actor-centered research in the field of religions in digital games, applying the MOBA *Smite* (Hi-Rez 2014) as case study.

The second section of this issue features papers held at the conference "Playing God" which was organized by the Dutch academic media research group 'Moving Visions' under the leadership of Frank Bosman in October 2014. After the short introduction *"'Playing God'. On God & Game"* by **Frank Bosman**, three conference papers are being presented: *"Beyond Belief. Playing with Pagan Spirituality in* World of Warcraft*"* by **Stef Aupers** & **Julian Schaap**, *"'Are those the only two solutions?' Dealing With Choice, Agency and Religion in Digital Games"* by **Tobias Knoll** and *"Revisiting Gabriel Knight. Troubled hero and unknowing servant of the King of Kings"* by Connie Veugen.

Two reviews of recent books dealing with religion in digital games complete the issue: Simone Heidbrink and Tobias Knoll discuss Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieves compilation *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (2014) in an extensive review, Jan Wysocki has read *Religion in Play: Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds* (2012), edited by Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger.

We, the editors of this special issue, hope you enjoy reading this edition. We are always happy to constructively discuss any topic related to our research and related to 'religion(s) and/in digital media' in general. Please contact us anytime! And – please like us on Facebook![50] :)

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50   https://www.facebook.com/onlinehjri.

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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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TOBIAS KNOLL is a junior researcher and PhD candidate at the Institute of Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany as well as an avid podcaster on all things related to gaming and geek culture. Having majored in Religious Studies and Political Science of South Asia, he received his Master's degree in 2012. Tobias is currently working on his doctoral thesis on religious implications and reception of moral decision making systems in digital games like *Mass Effect*. His general focus of research is contemporary religion and player agency in video games as well as reception of and discourse on religion in popular "geek and nerd" culture. Together with Simone Heidbrink and Jan Wysocki, he is also planning a research project on Religious Studies and digital games as well as working on bringing the issue of religion and digital games to the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* 2015.

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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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