photo by epSos.de (CC BY 2.0)

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

Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

Institute for
Religious Studies

University
of Heidelberg

Table of Contents

Conference Papers: "Playing God" - On God & Game

Reviews

"Are Those the Only Two Solutions"?[1]

Dealing with Choice, Agency and Religion in Digital Games

Abstract

Choice and 'agency' are frequently named as key factors in describing videogames and their unique features in respect to other forms of media. Through a multitude of minor and major decisions (or illusions thereof), players are given the impression of being an integral part of the narrative and ludic experience of a game, oftentimes forcing them to face the consequences of their actions in the game world.

This paper aims at providing some insights into academic and public discussions of 'agency' in the context of digital games and, drawing on the examples of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *The Graveyard* and *Mass Effect 2*. An argument is made for a further emphasis on the role of 'agency' within the field of religion and digital games as well as a more differentiated (yet still complementary) approach toward 'player agency' and 'game agency'.

1   Introduction

Some of my favorite gaming experiences have been those rare occasions when, out of nowhere, a game changes the way you see the world, or teaches you something about yourself. Recently, James told me of such an experience he had: A video game asked him a question he couldn't answer.

He said he was playing the game. He reached a certain part and then he just had to set the controller down and think. He sat there, cross-legged, pondering for more than half an hour. Then he picked up

---

1   This quote is taken from the *Extra Credits* Episode *Enriching Lives*. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8JopdIc (last access 29/01/2015).

the controller. He knew what to do, or rather what he would do. And in doing so, he learned something about himself.

Today we're going to discuss that one question. That tiny moment in one game, and show just how much impact a single well-crafted scenario can have.

For those of you wondering: The game was Mass Effect 2[2]

The *SSV Normandy SR2* is a fine ship. With her length of 196 meters the small frigate is hardly a match for the bigger cruisers of the *Alliance* fleet, let alone the enormous Dreadnoughts of the *Asari* and *Turians*. What she lacks in firepower and pure size, she more than makes up with agility, the latest and greatest in cloaking technology, as well as the finest crew of the whole fleet. And there is something else which makes the *Normandy* special. Something, which singles her out from every other ship in the galaxy: The *Normandy* is *my* ship. Well at least *this Normandy* in *this* version of the *Mass Effect* Universe is my ship, but more on that later.

Mass Effect is a trilogy of singleplayer digital science-fiction role playing games, developed between 2007 and 2012 by the Canadian studio BioWare. The plot of the game starts in 2183. Humanity has, thanks to the discovery of alien artifacts on mars, finally developed spaceships with faster than light capabilities and reached for the stars. Shortly after they joined the people of the Citadel, a "Galactic United Nations" based on a gigantic space station of the same name. The player takes the role of *Commander Shepard*, a soldier of the *Earth Alliance* and captain of the *SSV Normandy*, who during the course of the first part of the trilogy becomes the very first human *Spectre* (a special operative for the Citadel Council) and discovers a threat from beyond the galaxy which could endanger all civilized life within the Milky Way. Over the course of the three parts of the series (and approximately 92 to 126 hours of play time[3]) it is Shepard's task to gather a team of specialists, travel the galaxy on board the Normandy and face this ultimate threat.

For a scholar of religion the *Mass Effect* universe offers many fruitful areas of research. On the game-immanent level, the world of the game series (accompanied by books, comics etc.) was created with much love for detail and populated with a multitude of alien races, each with their very own history, culture and religion.[4] Additionally, the main narrative of the game is ripe with religiously charged elements, references and symbolisms which are actively discussed by the players on various online platforms.[5] On a (more) actor-centered level, the *Mass Effect* franchise has spawned a very active fan community which even three years after the release of the last game of

---

2 Transcript of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8JopdIc (last access 29/01/2015).
3 See http://www.howlongtobeat.com/search.php?t=games&s=mass+effect (last access 26/01/2015).
4 See http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Races (last access 26/01/2015).
5 See e.g. http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/944907-mass-effect-2/56613778 (last access 26/01/2015).

the trilogy seemingly tirelessly takes part in content related online discussions[6], cosplay events[7], fan fiction[8] and various other creative activities signifying their passion and commitment to the series and its already planned successors.[9] But my own interest lies with another aspect of the series which closely combines both game-immanent and actor-centered perspectives and implications. *Mass Effect* illustrates an important facet attributed to the medium of games: 'agency'.

It should be noted that it is not the intent of this paper to present extensive research results to the readers. While fitting examples and case studies will be provided where necessary, the main focus of this work lies on considerations on theory, methodology and practical research methods when dealing with the issue of 'agency' and digital games, combining both game-immanent and actor-centered perspectives, as was proposed in *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games: Perspectives and Approaches (*Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014) and *"Venturing into the Unknown"(?). Method(olog)ical Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming* (ibid 2015).

2   (Player) 'Agency' in Academic and Popular Discourse

The term 'agency' was first brought up in the context of video games by Janet Murray in 1997 in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, where it is described as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices." (Murray 1997: 126) To her, agency is the main source of enjoyment in video games as "[e]very expressive medium has its own unique patterns of desire; its own way of giving pleasure, of creating beauty, of capturing what we feel to be true about life; its own aesthetic." (ibid: 94) Murray does not only regard 'agency' (or the possibility of a game to provide a feeling of agency to the player) as a "unique" feature of games, she also sees it as a qualitative criterion and "source of enjoyment"[10]. A more descriptive approach[11] towards the unique features of games (compared to other media) is taken by game scholar Espen

---

6   See e.g. on *reddit* (http://www.reddit.com/r/masseffect) (last access 26/01/2015).
7   See e.g. https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/mass-effect-cosplay (last access 26/01/2015).
8   See e.g. https://www.fanfiction.net/game/Mass-Effect/ (last access 26/01/2015).
9   A new series set within the *Mass Effect* universe has already been announced although details are hard to be found and the release date is still tbd. (see e.g. http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-11-11-mass-effect-4-everything-we-know-so-far, last access 26/01/2015)
10   It should be noted that the relation of agency provided by a game and the overall enjoyment of said game should be viewed with caution, although this mainly seems to be an issue of game design (see e.g. Johnson 2013). This will also be discussed at a later point in this paper.
11   Still, it should be kept in mind that any kind of discussion about distinct features of video games can and should also be seen in the context of the "ludology vs narratology" debate, especially during the late 90s and early 2000s (see e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 11ff). It is almost ironic (and very telling about the "constructed" nature of the original debate) that key players from both sides – Murray as an ascribed "narratologist" and Aarseth as a convinced "ludologist" - share the same basic notions about the nature and quality of video games.

Aarseth, who in his work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Aarseth 1997) hints at the "configurative" nature of games (ibid: 64). Since then, 'agency' has – either explicitly or implicitly – been used by many scholars to describe games with regard to other forms of media or on their own terms. Thomas Apperley identifies "interactivity" as the binding element of games and, building on Aarseth's critique of the term (ibid: 51), adopts the term "ergodicity", meaning "the role of the human actor in the process of creating the cybertext; specifically *ergodic* refers to the point that 'non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text'" and applies the – originally not media specific – concept to video games (Apperley 2006). Thue, Bulitko, Spetch and Romanuik (2010) state that "Agency, being the ability to change the course of one's experience […] is a central aspect of video games" and *Gamasutra*[12] author Soren Johnson discusses the game design implications when trying to implement the right amount or "sweet spot" for player 'agency' (Johnson 2013).

The latter also exemplifies the shifting of discussions surrounding 'agency' from a mostly academic area to a more public space. Additionally to more practical considerations from the perspective of game designers, debates and remarks on 'agency' in games – or the lack thereof – can also be found in gaming related online media and open gaming communities on the internet, especially with regard to the quality of specific video games. For example, in 2012 artist David Hellman told the gaming website *Polygon*:

> Games are about player agency to a very large extent. […] And I think the problem we have with the more recent Zelda games is that our agency as players isn't as valued as much as we feel it should be, and that's sort of against the nature of video games and against what they do best. (Lien 2012)

And in a recent debate on the discussion forums of the popular *Gamers with Jobs*[13] Podcast, 'agency' was (with reference to Murray) described as follows:

> Agency is the level of control that a player feels they have in a game world. Games with minimal agency are those like the on-rail shooter where your only choice is either to shoot or die. Games with a lot of agency are more difficult to define. One example might be Dragon Age where the choices you make at each major plot point significantly effect the narrative. Another might be a physics puzzle game like Crayon Physics Deluxe where multiple solutions for any given puzzle are possible and the player can come up with whatever solution they feel is appropriate.[14]

---

12 http://www.gamasutra.com/ (last access 27/01/2015).
13 http://www.gamerswithjobs.com/ (last access 27/01/2015).
14 http://www.gamerswithjobs.com/node/48645, answer by user *Latrine* (last access 27/01/2015).

There seems to be a general consensus that games can have varying degrees of agency, with "on-rail ego shooters" like the *Call of Duty* Series at the very bottom and more complex games, which feature a lot of meaningful choices – although the understanding of "meaningful" seems to vary in this context – at the top. Also note, that (at least fort some players) narrative impacts of player choices don't seem to be necessary to convey a feeling of 'agency', as is demonstrated by the mentioning of puzzle games – which in many cases lack any kind of narratives – with multiple possible solutions.

To further pinpoint the meaning and impact of 'agency' (or rather the lack thereof) in games, I think it is necessary to provide two examples of games which feature an (or even 'the') absolute minimal amount of 'agency'. Namely these are the *Call of Duty* series and *The Graveyard.*

2.1 (Lack of) Agency as a flaw: *Call of Duty*

The games of the *Call of Duty* series, developed by Infinity Ward and *Triarch* and published by *Activision*, have since the release of the first iteration in 2003 been immensely popular[15], thanks in part to their very "cinematic" single player campaigns (covering scenarios like World War II, the Vietnam War as well as fictional contemporary and future conflicts) as well as their fast paced and streamlined multiplayer experiences. At the same time, the games are (additionally to some controversial scenario choices of some parts of the series[16]) criticized for the linear level design and the utter lack of player choice during the singleplayer campaigns. Usually the player is confronted with a tunnel-like level architecture filled with enemy soldiers[17] to overcome. Only minimal – if any – deviations from the predetermined path are possible (hence the term "on-rail shooter") and the straight transition through the level is only interrupted by short, non-interactive cutscenes. The game mechanics themselves are mostly based on quick reflexes and the only kind of 'agency' granted to the player is the decision which weapon to use, when to reload and when to take cover to regenerate health.

Arguably this kind of game design is due to the highly action packed and "Hollywoodesque" nature of the story campaigns of the games and is aimed at keeping up the pacing of the main storyline. It is thus addressing a problem of many games trying to effectively communicate a narrative in an entertaining manner, as any player – if allowed to – brings his or her own pacing into the game. This is a problem especially open world RPGs like *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* have to deal

---

15 See e.g. http://www.statisticbrain.com/call-of-duty-franchise-game-sales-statistics/ (last access 28/01/2015).
16 See e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversies_surrounding_Call_of_Duty:_Modern_Warfare_2 (last access 28/01/2015).
17 In earlier iterations of the series, enemies would respawn until the player reached a certain point in the level. This was later changed to fixed enemy numbers.

with, where the main narrative (especially pacing, continuity and structure) can be completely disrupted by the player's own free choice of action. For example, user *Enigma777* on *Giantbomb* writes about *Skyrim*:

> My problem with Skyrim is a fundamental one. Because it's so broad and it tries to give you so much choice, it looses out on the one thing that matters to me the most: great storytelling. Sure you may say you have had great stories like punching a dragon to death with your bare fists or dumping 10,00 cheese wheels from a mountain peak, but those aren't really stories. No, they are experiences. The stories Skyrim does tell are the ones in it's quests; the Companions, the Thief's Guild, the Stormcloak rebellion and the rise of the Dovahkiin. Yet none of these are engaging or deep enough for me. I simply can't get attached to a voiceless character or the supporting cast of characters around him. The terrible, in-game cutscenes and bad scripting don't help either. It all just feels soulless.[18]

So there is an argument to be made about 'agency' as a possible hindrance with regard to effective storytelling in games which somewhat alleviates the notion of 'agency' as a general source of enjoyment. Nonetheless, the reduction of possible player agency can be a difficult balancing act for the game designers and developers as can be exemplified by the opening scene of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, the seventh iteration of the series (not counting mobile and portable versions). The game begins in 1961 during the "Bay of Pigs Invasion" where the player – in typical *Call of Duty* fashion – has to fight his way out of a Cuban town and into Fidel Castro's mansion to attempt an assassination of the Cuban leader. On the day of the game's release, the 9th of November 2010, players, including *Youtube* Let's Player *Bungle[19]* noticed that this first mission of the game could be completed <u>without actually taking part in it</u>. As the player character is accompanied by several NPC companions who fight the Cuban soldiers on their own and the player's health regenerates very fast once out of combat, the player can just watch the action unfold without partaking in it and still win the mission. Or as *Bungle* describes it:

> I'm playing through the entire Cuba mission on the "hardened" difficulty setting, which is the second to highest difficulty setting. I'm not gonna fire a single shot, except during the two quasi cutscenes where the game takes control and basically just tells you to shoot whatever is in the center of the screen. Aside from those two moments in the game it's basically just a movie. All I'm really doing is just watching things happen.

---

18 http://www.giantbomb.com/profile/enigma777/blog/storytelling-in-video-games-or-why-i-dislike-skyri/88971/ (last access 28/01/2015).

19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RULv6HbgEjY (last access 28/01/2015).

So while in a "usual" round or mission of *Call of Duty* the player has at least some degree of influence on success or failure (mostly based on sharp reflexes and 'aiming' skill), even this minimal amount of 'agency' is taken away from him or her by the game in this – to be honest rather comical – instance. What remains to the player is the sole decision if he wants to be an active part of the action (by quite literally "pulling the trigger") or not, the outcome is the same. Figuratively speaking the player decides if he or she wants to play a game or watch a movie.

2.2   (Lack of) Agency as a tool: *The Graveyard*

While (unintentional) lack of 'agency' can and is very well seen as a flaw in some games, 'intentional' lack of 'agency' can also be a tool by game developers and designers to achieve certain effects or even trigger emotional responses.

It has already been described how the taking away of 'agency' is used by the developers and designers of the *Call of Duty* games to control pacing and flow of the story campaign. But there are games which go even further in instrumentalizing lack of 'agency'. One prime example for this is Tale of Tales' game *The Graveyard.* The game itself is often described as "walking simulator" (a "genre" of games surprisingly not too uncommon[20]) and is basically just that. The player takes the role of an elderly woman, traversing a graveyard on a straight pathway. At the end of the way the player can sit down on a bench. Then, a song starts playing (composed by Gerry De Mol[21]), together with a camera closeup of the old woman's face. The song's lyrics (translated from Flemish into English) are as follows:

> From year eight to year forty. Yes, Irma was still young.
> 't Was a German with consumption. Too big a heart, too weak a lung.
> Renee, she had fibroids. Auntie Mo, while she was asleep.
> Fell down into a dream. And was never picked up again.
>
> Look that's Emma, stillborn. Take care you don't step on her.
> Her portrait is long lost. A little blue cross, never baptized.
> And Roger, that was cancer, grew too big for his own good.
> When ivy gets too tall, there's too much shadow. Pruned away.

---

20 See e.g. http://store.steampowered.com/tag/en/Walking%20Simulator/?l=german#p=0&tab=NewReleases (last access 28/01/2015) for a list of games on steam tagged with the term "Walking Simulator".
21 http://gerrydemol.be/ (last access 28/01/2015).

Acid on granite. White bubbles, yellow foam.

Steel wool to clean the rust. Scratch away the year and date.

And a chisel for your own name. For when we come to go.

From between Jesus's legs, I would like to pluck those webs.

I'd wipe the sand between his toes, if I could still bend over.

I want a cherub made of china, a black marble bedspread.

Stone flowers will suffice to keep me nice and warm.

Acid on granite. White bubbles, yellow foam.

Steel wool to clean the rust. Scratch away the year and date.

And a chisel for your own name. For when we come to go.

Here is calm, here is safe. Maybe next time.

Next time perhaps, I will stay. Then I'll be here no more.

No more. No more. No more. No more. No more.[22]

In the freely available demo of the game the player can get up and walk the same way back to the exit of the graveyard after the song has ended, then the game is over. In the full (payed) version of the game, the old woman dies during the song and the game ends. The lyrics of the song only intensify the theme of the game. The graphics are very dated and held completely in gray tones. The elderly woman moves very slowly and therefore the game controls feel unresponsive, leading to a feeling of frustration about these movement restrictions on the player side.

Attempts at interpretation of the game are spread wide over the internet. But there seems to be some consent that the game is about coping with death (sudden or slow, based on the version of the game), growing old and loss of friends or family members. Especially the topic of 'agency' is discussed multiple times with regard to *The Graveyard*. For instance, the online magazine *Wired*[23] writes:

Interactivity is a powerful thing. *The Graveyard* could have been a short film on YouTube and lost none of its presentational qualities, or its message. But the very limited interaction you have with the character — you can walk her forward and backward, or turn — instantly makes the connection deeper and more powerful than it would have been if you were simply watching.

---

22 The translation is taken from the subtitles of the game. A complete gameplay video (including the song) can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73l1VfzeRYY (last access 28/01/2015).

23 http://www.wired.com/ (last access 28/01/2015).

One very specific reason for this is that by controlling the woman, you immediately understand how old and frail she is. She hobbles convincingly toward the bench, which seems very far away. After a few steps, she can't keep up the pace on her bad leg, so she starts limping, leaning on her cane for support.

By the time she makes it to the bench, you're glad to be able to just sit down and rest.[24]

And Wildo Rafael Perallon, in a review of *The Graveyard* shares his view on the specific design choices with regards to 'agency' and their impact on the game experience:

In the end the player has very little to do except act as the games/narratives avatar for the duration of the game. This design decision combined with the vague and little amount of backstory given does however allow the player to come up with their own ideas to fill in the blanks. This could be seen as a form of agency that the player is giving. It would make the player more invested and speaks to their creativity.

[…] Tale of Tales was trying to create a game with little agency. All of the gameplay decisions point to that but in leaving the plot vague they allowed some agency, in the narrative.[25]

So evidently 'agency' or the lack thereof can be perceived by players and critics as both a flaw and an advantage or even as a design tool, based on scenario, design choices and – of course – individual taste. The question still stands however, how the concept of 'agency' can be made fruitful with regard to the research of digital games and – in this case – religion and digital games.

2.3   'Player Agency' vs 'Game Agency'

Up until this point, the term 'agency' has been used somewhat interchangeable as to its actual nature, source or 'agent', both throughout this paper as well as most of the public (and academic) discussion surrounding the issue. One notable exception being the review by Wildo Rafael Perallon, mentioned in the last section. In recognizing that the lack of 'agency' in *The Graveyard* opens up room for 'agency' from the player side, he makes a very interesting point which I would like to expand upon.

In *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games: Perspectives and Approaches*, Simone Heidbrink, Jan Wysocki and myself (2014) have proposed a twofold approach towards researching religion and

---

24 http://www.wired.com/2008/03/the-graveyards/ (last access 28/01/2015).
25 http://www.northeastern.edu/gamedesignpatterns/graveyard-review/ (last access 28/01/2015).

digital games, consisting of a game-immanent approach, focusing on religion in game narratives, aesthetics, world building, game mechanics and rules and an actor-centered approach, focusing on processes of reception and discursive practice both by players and game producers (developers, designers, artists, writers etc.) (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014). However at the same time we stated, that both approaches should be regarded as complementary, each giving important insights for the respective other:

> […] a strict separation of "game-immanent" and "actor-centered" approaches rarely helps in highlighting the bigger picture of interactions between religion and games. Asking for the constitution of coherency and consistency or the process of "othering" by means of religiously charged narratives, aesthetics or gameplay mechanics is of little use if we don't involve the game designer, who decided to implement these elements into the game and the player, who is confronted with them, thereby starting his or her own process of reception and occasionally public discourse. Likewise, following the various discourses in the context of religion and digital games is of little use, if we don't have a solid comprehension of the games in question. Generally speaking, "game-immanent" and "actor-centered" approaches remain a question of perspective, influencing mainly the focus of study rather than its practical methods. (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 41-42)

Based on this theoretical and methodological foundation, I would like to give two perspectives on 'agency' in digital games:

- <u>'Game Agency'</u>: This game-immanent concept focuses on the degree of 'agency' <u>provided</u> by the game through game mechanics, rules, level architecture as well as narrative (and even aesthetic) structures directly dependent on these systems.

- <u>'Player Agency'</u>: This actor-centered perspective centers on the actual 'agency' <u>of the player</u>. This form of 'ageny' can take various forms and is heavily dependent on individual expectations of a game, personal preferences and of course socialization and in some cases even religious denomination.

The examples provided in the last two sections of this paper are mainly examples for 'game agency' in that they describe, how games use (or misuse) agency or a lack thereof to achieve certain effects. 'Player agency' on the other hand is a wholly different matter and – like any kind of information based on personal and subjective experience – painfully hard to grasp. Still, from a cultural studies perspective, actor-centered data is most valuable and luckily 'player agency' can become somewhat visible when interacting or even "colliding" with 'game agency' because both are more often than not non-congruent. While this may lead to frustration for some players, it is also fertile ground for various reactions, both through open discussions on online community platforms as well as various

strategies to actually act out one's own 'player agency' despite or in line with the limitations of 'game agency':

- Players may try to use the game rules to their full advantage to maximize their power or effectiveness within the game, disregarding all narrative implications (if present).

- Players may use 'minor' mechanics of a game to their advantage while choosing to ignore 'main' features.[26]

- Players may try to use glitches and gameplay "loopholes" to act out their own agency.[27]

- Players may even modify the game itself to change elements of gameplay, aesthetics, narratives etc. to their liking.

- And players may decide to stop playing a game altogether, because of the discrepancies between 'game agency', 'player agency' and personal morals and beliefs.[28]

Some (if not all) of these practices have already been recognized by scholars within a religious setting. For instance Shanny Luft, in dealing with evangelical gaming communities, describes how some players from these communities make a habit of making "Christian choices" when being prompted by a video game to make a moral decision. If not possible, then they are trying to navigate around "offensive" elements of the game – without rejecting to play it alltogether. (Luft 2014: 162ff). And Kevin Shut, examining "mechanistic" representations of religion in digital games, deals with player creativity or "emergent play" - meaning the playing "against the rules" of a game – and its impact on individual meaning-making (Shut 2014).

And even outside the games, players develop strategies to act out their own 'player agency'. For instance by writing 'fan fiction' (replacing unwanted narrative elements and working outside the confined structures and rules of the game) and 'fan theories'. A great example for the latter one is the "indoctrination theory", dealing with the controversial ending of the *Mass Effect* series and described in detail by Joshua and Ita Irizarry (2014) in their paper *The Lord is My Shepard. Confronting Religion in the Mass Effect Trilogy*.

All of these scenarios are well worth closer analysis, but to effectively analyze the impact of 'agency' on these practices, processes and dynamics, it is necessary to address both 'game agency' and 'player agency' on their respective own terms as both are subject to different (if sometimes

---

26 For example, a player of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* decided to play a "pacifist" character by refusing to partake in any kind of combat (a main element of the game) and instead leveling up through exploration, mining, herbalism and archeology which are minor skills and occupations and only meant to support the more combative elements. See http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/2661036606 (last access 29/01/2015).

27 This is especially used in the "speed run" scene, where games are to be played in the shortest timespan possible. See e.g. https://gamesdonequick.com/ (last access 29/01/2015).

28 As was the case with the "baptism scene" in *BioShock Infinite*, described e.g. in Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki (2014).

intertwining) influences and factors. Only then we can draw an accurate picture of contemporary reception and discourse of religious elements within (and outside of) games, negotiation of personal and cultural identity as well as "the complex processes of interaction, exchange, adaption and transformation of cultural and religious practices and beliefs" (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 40) involved in dealing with 'agency', religion and digital games.

In the next section, I will try to further strengthen my point by returning to the example of *Mass Effect* and more specifically *Mass Effect 2*.

3   'Agency' and the *Mass Effect* Series

Traditionally, games by the Canadian developer studio BioWare offer a great deal of 'game agency' to the player. Through their actions and choices within the game, the players influence and configurate the game world. This notion is already present at the very start of the game, the character creation. Players can choose Shepard's appearance, gender[29], first name and personal history prior the the plot of the game. Only the surname *Shepard* always stays the same. This way the players are allowed to have a very individual experience with *their own Commander Shepard*. But the choices do not end here. The game is filled with moments and scenarios especially constructed by the game designers to confront the player with (forced) decisions of oftentimes great ethical and philosophical brisance. The consequences of these choices on the overall narrative or the fate of others (friend or foe) most of the time become very clear. This narrative (and gameplay) structure is complemented and accomplished through a 'moral decision making system' which rates "good" (*Paragon*) or "evil" (*Renegade*) decisions made by the player with points on a two-sided scale. The position of the player on this scale again has various effects on dialogue options, relations to members of *Shepard*'s team and *Shepard*'s facial features.[30]

A great example for a meaningful and much discussed forced decision – or rather a very detailed and specific reception of it – within the *Mass Effect* series is represented by the quote from the beginning of this paper. In this instance the act of playing is not seen as dull "consuming" of content but rather as an active form of engagement of the player (James) with the game (*Mass Effect 2*). The quote was pulled from an online video series named *Extra Credits*. In the episode *Enriching Lives* the scenario in question is described in more detail:

---

29 This does not influence the choices of romantic engagements the player can partake in throughout the game.
30 A Shepard leaning towards the Renegade side of the morality scale develops scars and overall very "unnatural" facial features (red glowing eyes etc.). These aesthetic effects can be removed through the spending of in-game resources.

There comes a point in *Mass Effect 2* where the player is asked to decide the fate of a faction of the Geth, a sentient machine race. Here's the setup: The Geth where initially one unified group. Then they began to have ideological and religious differences. Now one sect of the Geth has come to believe that it is the will of God to destroy Shepard. That's you. And the other sect believes that they should protect Shepard. The player is given the choice to either destroy the Geth sect that wants Shepard dead or reprogram them in such a way that they share the believes of the group of Geth that want to protect you. They won't even know they've been reprogrammed. So yes, there is a clear story line question being asked. But what's really being asked of us, the player here?

On a surface level this is a question of how to deal with religious fundamentalism. It's meant to lead us to consider current world affairs and ask ourselves: "Are those really the only two solutions? Are there options other than total destruction or the fundamental undermining of belief?" But there's another question here, a more introspective one. Just as serious as any question about modern life (if a little more abstract). Fundamentally, the player is being asked: "What does it mean to be human? What is at the core of being a sentient being?"[31]

On the game-immanent narrative level, there are already some very interesting starting points for any scholar of religion. But what interests me most in the context of this paper is how the described decision is integrated into the game systems, how it is used to create 'game agency' and most of all, how it interacts with individual 'player agency'. At least one possible reaction is provided by the creators of *Extra Credits*:

This moment in the game really only falls short in one way: Not embedding the question into the game mechanics. As our medium evolves, designers are learning to embed and reference these sort of dilemmas with all the tools that games provide. *Mass Effect 2* does a brilliant job of making you live the dilemma of choosing between what could well be genocide and the utter subversion of an entire race's free will. Unfortunately the designers missed a great opportunity to reinforce this dilemma at its conclusion. If both choices had resulted in "Renegade" points, instead of one being labeled the "Renegade" and the other being the good "Paragon" choice, this would have been a fully realized attempt at using the medium of gaming to provide the player with a moment of introspection.[32]

So on the level of 'game agency' it is noteworthy, that this forced decision is not only related to the overall game narrative, but also closely connected with the 'moral decision making system' of mass effect which forces it into a perceived duality between a "good" (Paragon) and "evil" (Renegade) decision, while at the same time connecting it to other gameplay, narrative and aesthetic elements as

---

31 Transcript of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8JopdIc (last access 29/01/2015).
32 Transcript of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8JopdIc (last access 29/01/2015).

described above. Based on individual 'player agency' this opens up a multitude of possible reactions and conflicts of interest:

A player trying to maximize his or her "Paragon" or "Renegade" meter (to get a better standing with teammates, intensify or alleviate aesthetic effects or just for the sake of "achievements") might ignore the overall narrative implications altogether, trying to make a 'strategic' decision[33] based on his or her own goals instead. For example, on *gamefaqs.com[34]*, user *gameingkiller69* asks: "Anyone knows the best way to max the paragon bar or at least the way to keep both [miranda] and jack [loyal] so i can keep everyone alive." He or she is answered by *pprinces*: "Obviously you know about picking all the good guy answers. Talk to every teammate after missions to see if they have any new conversation, each one is a chance to pick up points."[35]

While at first this may seem irritating or even "irrelevant" in the context of player reception of religious elements in games, it helps in understanding player behavior and keeping in mind that not every "deep" narrative decision forced by a game also triggers a "deep" emotional reaction for every player, as the degree of implementation and integration of a scenario into the game mechanics and rules can have an important impact on its reception.

On the other hand, a player poised on having a strong and consistent narrative experience, trying to immerse him- or herself into the game world, character and narrative might be annoyed by the seemingly arbitrary "moral judgment" on both choices and painfully reminded that he or she is actually playing a game. Or players might have a problem with the actual narrative choice and forced nature of the decision (there is no way to get around the two possible options), either because of personal moral concerns or because of perceived narrative inconsistencies.

A more comprehensive analysis – together with more empirical data – would be necessary to get into further detail on this topic. But I hope that at this point, the possibilities and implications of taking into consideration both the game-immanent perspective of 'game agency' and the actor-centered perspective of 'player agency' as well as their interactions and dynamics have become apparent. Especially in the context of the research of religion and digital games.

Last, I would like to share some minor methodological and theoretical considerations when trying to tackle 'agency' in digital games.

---

33 Many games with 'moral decision making systems' (including most BioWare games) add a 'color coding' (e.g. red for "Renegade" and blue for "Paragon") to relevant dialogue options. This way – in theory – 'moral' decisions can be made without actually recognizing the narrative aspects.

34 http://www.gamefaqs.com/ (last access 29/01/2015).

35 See http://www.gamefaqs.com/xbox360/944907-mass-effect-2/answers/245809-how-to-max-paragonthe-blue-bar (last access 29/01/2015).

4   Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The research of religion and digital games can only produce worthwhile, credible and relevant results when following a complementary approach of both actor-centered and game-immanent perspectives and methods. This is of course also relevant for the research of the dynamics of 'game agency' and 'player agency' with relation to religion. However, methodological and theoretical approaches toward the research of religion and digital games have already been thoroughly discussed in *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches* (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014) and *"Venturing into the Unknown"(?). Method(olog)ical Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming* (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2015). In my view, they are also applicable to the issue of 'agency' in games, as hopefully was shown during the course of this paper. Hence, I would like to point anyone interested in comprehensive theoretical and practical considerations on research methods in that general direction.

Instead, I would like to provide some brief thoughts on two concepts which are – in my view – especially relevant for the topic of this paper, but also for the research of digital games and (including but not limited to) religion. Namely the concept of 'thick text' by Roz Kaveney (2005) and my own thoughts on playing as a research method or 'explorative game analysis'.

4.1   Games as 'Thick Text'

I would again like to draw attention to the quote in the beginning of this paper, or rather on a short, easily overlooked part of it: "[...] just how much impact a single well-crafted scenario can have." The scenario in question is seemingly casually described as "crafted" in the sense of "artificially created". I assume that the creators of *Extra Credits* used this term in its 'artistic' sense to express their respect for the designers at BioWare. But from a more scholarly perspective this brings up some very interesting additional viewpoints. When talking about digital games and their impacts one should not lose sight of the fact that they are the result of a (most of the time) highly complex production process, involving – based on the size of the project – from a few to hundreds of people with very different, creative, economic and personal interest. The British author, critic, poet and transgender activist Roz Kaveney coined the term 'thick text' in the context of general media productions (Kaveney 2005) – most likely drawing on Clifford Geertz concept of 'Thick Description' (Geertz 1973). She describes the concept as follows:

> The precondition of reading or recognizing a thick text is that we accept that all texts are not only a product of the creative process but contain all the stages of that process within them like scars or vestigial organs.

The film we first see in the cinema may be further revised to the final form of an extended director's cut; our knowledge of it may be transformed when viewing it on DVD by the presence of deleted scenes – and we may not necessarily agree with the decision to delete them, even where we understand what the arguments in favour of that deletion were.

We have to learn that most works of art are compromises – compromises with imperfectly developed visions, with imperfect technique, with the demands of patrons, studios, the Church or the State. To read a film, a novel, a great choral work in the light of these awarenesses is to see it as a thick text. Reading a film as a thick text encourages us to see it in its context, both chronologically in terms of its being influenced by other films, or influencing later ones, or re-imagined by critics or even its original makers in the light of that influence and its consequences. (Kaveney 2005: 5)

While Kaveney does not explicitly name digital games, the concept is still perfectly applicable to them. In the context of this paper and the case study of *Mass Effect 2*, this means taking into consideration other games by BioWare with special emphasis on design decisions related to 'game agency' as well as other franchises which have let to the current iteration of the game and game systems as well as possible knowledge of these games by players of *Mass Effect 2*.[36] It also means regarding a game not as a "final" or "finished" product, but rather taking into account that artistic as well as economic considerations can always lead to a reiteration, modification or extension of a game. In some cases, 'player agency' can also play a role in these processes, as was shown by the decision of BioWare – after massive protests by the players – to extend the original ending of *Mass Effect 3* to include more direct consequences of the players' decisions and actions throughout the game (Irizarry 2014).

Last, taking into consideration the complex decisions, negotiations and possible tradeofss involved in the production of a game as well as the socio-cultural context of game and designers might actually help in staying clear from too much ascription and intentionalism.

4.2   Playing as Research: 'Explorative Game Analysis'

As a second (and last) point, I would like to give some considerations on playing as a method of research or, as I would like to describe it: 'explorative game analysis'. As was described throughout this paper, 'agency' (both 'player agency' and 'game agency') is a crucial element of digital games. As almost any form of 'agency' in the context of a game involves direct interaction with its systems,

---

36   Arguably the 'moral decision making system' is an iteration of an earlier game by BioWare: *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. The game (and its morality system) heavily draws on the duality of the "good" Jedi and the "evil" Sith within the Star Wars Universe and also features e.g. aesthetical effects of "evil" decisions. See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars:_Knights_of_the_Old_Republic (last access 29/01/2015).

mechanics and rules. In order to form a basis for any kind of research and analysis on games, it is imperative to get to know this aspect of the game(s) in question. In practice this means a firm examination of all game mechanics, systems and rules of a game as well as of course it's narrative(s), aesthetics and overall structure. Simply "trying" a game or even just watching video footage is by no means enough to accomplish this. Especially when the player is presented with more than one possible way through the game (as is the case in the *Mass Effect* series), simple "over the shoulder" watching of a game leads to an overly narrow perspective. 'Explorative game analysis' in this context does actually mean playing a game not only once but several times[37] without always taking the shortest route but fully using all features of the game and more.[38] The goal has to be to "explore" the game(s) in question as thoroughly as possible and with open eyes for elements not considered beforehand. This way, a game is studied "on it's own terms". No (serious) scholar would dare writing about a book he or she hasn't read or a movie he or she hasn't watched. Hence a game, in order to be seriously studied, has to be played.

At the same time it is imperative to not lose the analytical perspective when "exploring" a game. This means regarding game elements (scenarios, narratives, game mechanics, rules etc.) not as given but as the result of multilayered processes of production and negotioation to be considered and studied, including the involved actors (game designers, developers, producers, artists, writers etc.).[39]

Still, while actual gameplay is non-replaceable as a source of game-immanent data, it can only form the basis for any kind of further actor-centered research. It is the dynamics between player and game, or – in the context of this paper – of 'player agency' and 'game agency' which make the research of religion and digital games so interesting and fruitful for every scholar of religion. On the one side, there are the (self-)reflections and receptions by the players, amplified by their own sense of 'agency'. And on the other side, there is the complex nature of scenarios, game systems and rule sets on which these processes of reception are based and which again are themselves products of a long row of processes of reception, negotiation a choices. Researching digital games, their impact on players and the role of religion within all of this means taking all of these aspects into consideration.

---

37 Multiple playthroughs are a common practice of gamers especially in the context of role-playing games.
38 It could for instance be worthwhile to take a look at the modding scene of a game. Especially older games with modding support tend to have one or more 'recommended' modifications which improve on the original ("vanilla") game and have over time developed into the preferred mode of playing for the players.
39 A more comprehensive discussion on playing as a method of research, together with practical implications, can be found in Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki (2015).

5   Conclusio

I hope that throughout this paper, I could make a convincing argument for a further emphasis on the the role of 'agency' within the field of religion and digital games as well as a more differentiated (yet still complementary) approach toward 'player agency' and 'game agency'.

And right at the end a little warning, regarding the application of 'explorative game analysis', from my own research experience: Consequently following this method of research means a tremendous investment of time, efforts and hard disk space! But it also brings about many valuable insights and most of all the personal realization, that some things grow on you faster and more lasting than expected.

In the meantime I know every inch of *my Normandy.* I could describe with closed eyes the way from the main battery, where *Garrus Vakarian* in solitude does the calibrations for the weapon systems of the ship, to the CIC (Combat Information Center), where *Samantha Traynor* – my expert of communications – keeps me up to date on the newest galactic events. I find myself thinking about *Thane Krios* – the silent assassin – and his lost son, when I pass the room with the life support system. And of *Morin Solus* – the ingenious, eccentric and lovable scientist – when I visit the laboratory. Both gave their lives for *my* mission and died as a consequence of *my* actions and choices. And of course I also know my way to the captain's quarters, *my* quarters. There, on the right hand side from the entrance, inside an illuminated cabinet, stands a small model of the *SSV Normandy SR2*, not unlike the one standing on my desk right now, reminding me of how fluid, how indistinguishable the borders between the game and the player sometimes are.

Literature

Aarseth, Espen J., 1997. *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.

Apperley, Thomas H., 2006. Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres. In: *Simulation Gaming* 37 (1): 6-23.

Geertz, Clifford, 1973. 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in C. Geertz (ed), *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz,* New York: Basic Books Inc., pp. 3-30.

Heidbrink, Simone Knoll, Tobias & Wysocki, Jan, 2014. 'Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches', in 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), 5-50, <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/religions/article/view/12156> [accessed 29/01/2015].

Heidbrink, Simone Knoll, Tobias & Wysocki, Jan, 2015. '"Venturing into the Unknown" (?) Method(ological) Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming', in Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki (eds), *Religion in Digital Games Reloaded. Immersion into the field. Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* Vol. 7 (2015). <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php> [accessed 29/01/2015].

Irizarry, Jushua A. & Ita T., 2014. 'The Lord is My Shepard. Confronting Religion in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy', in 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), 224-248, <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/religions/article/view/12168> [accessed 29/01/2015].

Johnson, Soren, 2013. When choice is bad: finding the sweet spot for player agency. Available http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/197181/ [accessed 29/01/2015].

Kaveney, Roz, 2005. *From Alien to Matrix. Reading Science Fiction Film.* London, New York: I.B. Tauris.

Lien, Tracey, 2012. *Exploring Player Agency Through Art*. Available http://www.polygon.com/2012/10/31/3580366/second-quest [accessed 29/01/2015].

Luft, Shanny, 2014. 'Hardcore Christian Gamers: How Religion Shapes Evangelical Play', in H Campbell and GP Gregory (eds), *Playing with Religion in Digital Game*, Bloomington, IN Indiana University Press, 154-179.

Murray, Janet H., 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* New York: Free Press.

Shut, Kevin, 2014. 'They Kill Mytery. The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality', in H Campbell and GP Gregory (eds), *Playing with Religion in Digital Game*, Bloomington, IN Indiana University Press, 255-276.

Thue, David, Bulitko, Vadim, Spetch, Marcia & Romauik, Trevon, 2010. Player Agency and the Relevance of Decisions. In: Aylett, R., Lim, M., Louchart, S., Petta, P. & Riedl, M. (eds.), 2010. Interactive Storytelling. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer.

Biography

> 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.

Tobias Knoll
Institut für Religionswissenschaft
Universität Heidelberg
Akademiestr. 4-8
D-69117 Heidelberg
Germany
tobias.knoll@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de