Volume 13 (2018)

Table of Contents

Editor in Chief:
Prof. Dr. Gregor Ahn, Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Editorial Team:
Tobias Knoll, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany
Simone Heidbrink, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Members of the Editorial Board:
Dr. Frank G. Bosman, Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Netherlands
Prof. Dr. Oliver Krüger, Chair for the Study of Religion Department of Social Studies, University of Fribourg, Switzerland
Dr. Gernot Meier, Studienleiter Ev. Akademie Baden, Karlsruhe, Germany

Contributors to this Issue:
Benjamin Banasik
Stefan Piasecki
Heidi Rautalahti
Maria Sharpan
Michaela Simonova
Franz Winter

© 2018

Cloud Strife: The Intertestamental Hero

A Theological Exposition of the Differentiation of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*

Benjamin Jozef Banasik

Abstract

This article focuses on the differentiation between the two representations of Cloud Strife in *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*. Investigating the presentation of the imagery of the hero, this article uncovers the aspects of the Hebrew Bible in the original game, then the adopted motifs from the Christian New Testament in the sequel movie. The article tracks through the journey of the hero with the original game focused on a promised land, the revelation of the purpose of the reluctant hero and focus on an enemy as an external force. Alternatively, the movie is shown to focus on the hero that knows a purpose, adopting the imagery of baptism and focusing on an enemy that becomes an internal force. The author argues that this differentiation results in Cloud existing as a hero with two causes, resting between the testaments of the game and movie.

Keywords

1   Introduction

"Anyone may claim that he will act in the direst times, yet only a brave man acts in times great and small" – Cloud Strive, *Final Fantasy VII*.

"I'm not fit to help anyone. Not my family. Not my friends. Nobody." – Cloud Strife, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*.

Despite selling over 10 million units on release and being the most successful Japanese Role Playing Game (JRPG) game ever released by Square (Ervin 2017, p.108), there is very little written about *Final Fantasy VII* in scholarly circles. This is extraordinary for a game that has reportedly reduced gamers to tears (Juul 2013, p.28) and held the very framework of player's lives together in times of great tragedy (Parkin 2015, p.176). When released in 1997, the game stretched the limits of

technology, boasting to be the longest and largest ever JRPG. *Final Fantasy VII* filled three PlayStation CD-ROMs, outgrowing the cartridge technology of the Nintendo 64 (Barton 2008, p.385). The game still features in headlines, most recently recognised as being an inductee to the *World Video Game Hall of Fame* (The strong: National Museum of Play 2018). To date there has been very little in relation to the study of the religious elements of a game that defines a generation. The exception to this, which will be discussed further below, is a chapter by John Mitropoulos on Shinto elements that are evident within the story arc (Mitropoulos 2009). Aside from this chapter there is much that is left unexplored, in particular the Judeo-Christian elements found throughout the series, such as the various motifs which are explored below or even the Churches that were renamed clinics for the Western release of the first game due to fears of censorship. On the eve of the release of the much anticipated *Final Fantasy VII: Remake*, this article aims, in part, to fill this lacuna.

Released in 1997, *Final Fantasy VII* follows the story of the main protagonist Cloud Strife and his journey towards self-discovery, building relationships and ultimately facing a nemesis to save the world. The sequel film released in 2005 and revised in 2009, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, follows a similar story arc. The differences reach beyond the adoption of religious motifs which appear throughout both titles, it is the key differences of Cloud as a character which shows a divergence of being, resulting in the main protagonist existing as a intertestamental figure with an active duality of nature. This article will explore the religious motifs of both the game and sequel film in relation to the main character. I will trace the journey of the hero within both movie and game by using the archetypes of Joseph Campbell's hero while introducing the relevant heroes in the Exodus and New Testament narratives. Through this journey and the reactions of Cloud, I show that a duality of being exists for Cloud Strife who is destined to exist between the testaments in a perpetual state, with his final chapter remaining open. We will see that the producers of the game have made a choice to present a character based on the unrequited desire and perpetual journey who is later replaced with a broken spirited figure who is transformed into the salvific Christ-like redemptive figure at the end of the film. Prior to introducing the religious archetypes and imagery, it is useful to revisit the complexities of the story and highlight the heroic journey of Cloud. I do not intend to give a full retelling of the video game or movie, with the nine main characters and all their interactions. The intention here is to provide an overview of Cloud's particular journey, highlighting the religious motifs and interactions.

2   The Journey of a hero: Final Fantasy VII

Reluctantly joining in the fray, the opening scenes of *Final Fantasy VII* places the player in control of Cloud, a blond spikey haired young male with a comically oversized sword who is revealed as being a former member of *SOLDIER*. As the gameplay progresses it becomes clear that Cloud is reluctant to get involved in the politics of the mission, he states that he has no affinity to the eco-terrorist *AVALANCHE* group led by Barret who has hired him as a mercenary. Completing the mission at hand is his one motivation and he does not consider the possible consequence of the individuals involved. Nor does he care for the reason of *AVALANCHE*'s existence, namely to save the planet from power plant reactors sucking the lifestream, or *Mako*, from the planet by the *Shinra Electric Power Company*. After the success of the first mission with the destruction of the reactor which destroys part of the city Midgar, he meets with Tifa, a female who he knows from his childhood. It is later revealed he actually only had a few fleeting interactions with her and has a constructed memory adopted from her true friend, the fallen hero Zack.

Convinced by his friend Tifa, he agrees to continue with the party as a mercenary and on his next mission he is thrown from a great height and falls into a church laden with flowers. The flower bed, unusual to the bleak dark and mechanised city landscape that is experienced by the player thus far, is tended by Aerith, misspelt as 'Aries' incorrectly in the original English translation, the flower selling Ancient. Aerith is a clear love interest of Cloud as she offers to romantically date him if he protects her from Reno of the *Turks*, the investigation arm of the *Shinra* company. Cloud agrees to protect, and subsequently rescue, Aerith.

Once Cloud learns of the plans of his nemesis, Sephiroph, to harm the planet and join with the energy of its destruction he commits to his journey. Through this commitment it is revealed that there is a *Promised Land* which *Shinra* are seeking to tap into as an unending font of *Mako*. The motivation for our hero however is not so much a protection of the planet but the search for Sephiroph. Cloud's motivation reaches its zenith with the death of the party member Aerith. The party is wracked by sadness and guilt at the graphic death of Aerith by Sephiroph's sword and gives Cloud the opportunity to step in as a leader and take command. The death of Aerith caused such public outcry that rumours circulated at the time of ways to bring her back to life, players resorted to following falsely constructed and convoluted instructions which were shared online (Parkin 2015, pp.194–195). After her body is lowered into the lifestream of the planet Cloud takes the opportunity to step into the leadership position. Taking over Aerith's attempt to save the planet, which is biproduct of his mission to search for Sephiroph. Cloud says,

"He destroyed my hometown five years ago, killed Aeris [sic], and is now trying to destroy the Planet. I'll never forgive... Sephiroth. I... I must go on... I have a favour to ask of you. Will you all come with me?"

Cloud's love interest and destruction of his life to date by Sephiroph remains the main motivating factor but he fills the leadership position of the hero and journeys to save the planet and implicitly his people.

As the story progresses, it is revealed from a scene within Cloud's psyche that he never had a real relationship with Tifa, his constructed history is an adoption of memories from a fallen *SOLDIER* Zack. In reality, he was a guard of *Shinra*, infused with the cells of the extra-terrestrial lifeform Jenova by Hojo, a scientist working for the science division of *Shinra*. Cast out by Hojo as a reject, Cloud's memories were lost and reformed when first approached by Tifa. The revelation of this information to the player is while Cloud is in a paralysed state and is taken into the lifestream of the planet then guided by Tifa. The revelation of this information closes the link of the story, with Cloud awaking and ready to finalise his journey to save the planet, first atoning for his sin by acknowledging his errors including the adoption of Zack's memories. He then reaches the height of his power, his apotheosis, finally beating Sephiroph with his ultimate attack the *omnislash*. The culmination of Cloud's adventure is his revelation that the *Promised Land* is a place where he can visit to meet Aerith.

"An answer from the Planet…

the Promised Land...

I think I can meet her... there." – Cloud Strife, *Final Fantasy VII*.

The next scene shows Cloud and his party propelled from the crater where the battle took place, a meteor stopped by the spell *Holy* and the lifestream rising from the planet tearing the meteor apart. The credits roll and Cloud's journey to the promised land remains unfulfilled. Only the scene of an overgrown Midgar, the city at the heart of *Shinra's* empire, which is over looked by Red XIII, the talking red wolf-like party member, five hundred years after the events of the game.

3   The Journey of a hero: Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children

Commencing at the same scene from the end of the game Red XIII looks over the overgrown Midgar, the screen fades and the title prompt announces that the events of the movie are from 498 years ago, or two years after the end of the game. After the events of the game there is no further mention of the *Promised Land*, Aerith has not returned from the afterlife and Cloud runs a delivery company with Tifa called *Strafe Delivery Services*.

After a short recap explanation of the video game storyline, people that are suffering with the black skin disease known as *geostigma* are seen throughout the city. Amongst these is a young child named Denzel, who is staying under the care of Tifa. Denzel, a former resident of *Sector 7*, the section of the Midgar destroyed by the eco-terrorist *AVALANCHE* group, comes to live with the party by a circumstantial meeting with Cloud. Wandering through the wasteland he approaches Cloud's parked motorcycle outside the church of Aeris. He takes Cloud's phone and tries to call his home, the call is refused as the *Sector 7* is destroyed. He then checks the previous calls which reads 'Heaven', dialling the number, Tifa's voice is heard on the line who is then alarmed when Denzel becomes delirious and faints, due to the *geostigma* infection on his forehead. Cloud finds Denzel and takes him under his care, returning home.

In the opening scenes of the movie Cloud is pursued by three brothers led by Kadaj, who resemble and introduce themselves as remnants of Sephiroph. They repetitively ask for 'mother', the remaining parts of Jenova – the alien life form that came to the planet whose cells were harvested and injected into Sephiroph and Cloud during the story arc of the video game. Escaping, Cloud is called on by the *Turks* Reno and Rude who represent Rufis, the leader of *Shinra* who survived the attack on Midgar. Rufis, who is affected by the *geostigma*, seeks Cloud's assistance with the *geostigma* problem. Although Cloud believes he is dead, Rufis considers Sephiroph to be a possible cause of the *geostigma* as he may have entered the very lifestream of the planet. Cloud refuses the request to help find the answer to the geostigma due to it involving *Shinra*.

Later, inside Aerith's church Tifa discovers that Cloud is also affected by the *geostigma*. Tifa here states that she believes Cloud will not fight. Kadaj then kidnaps Rufus and reveals his plan to resurrect Sephiroph by having a reunion of those who have *geostigma* and the cells of 'Mother' or Jenova. Meanwhile, the other brothers of the Remnants of Sephiroph, Loz and Yazoo kidnap and gather children who are affected by the *geostigma*, including Denzel. The children are driven in a truck to the *Forgotten Capital*, the abandoned Ancient capital. The children are instructed to enter a body of water, dark with the *geostigma* and drink. They are then informed by Kadaj that they have become 'brothers and sisters' of the 'Remnants of Sephiroph'.

Cloud then returns to the church to find Tifa lying on the flowerbed passed out and then faints from his own *geostigma* injury. Both are returned home by the *Turks* who followed them. When Tifa awakes she questions why Cloud would give up and die. Cloud states that he is not fit to help anyone, essentially having lost all hope. Tifa then tells Cloud to get over it by saying 'dilly dally shilly shally', convinced to take action he leaves to rescue the children. Whilst travelling to the *Forgotten Capital* he has a vision of Aerith in the lifestream, he has a discussion and states that he wants to be forgiven. Cloud reaches the Remnants who are protected by children who stand in the way, telling the children he considers Cloud to be the black sheep of the family. Rescued by the party member Vincent, Rufis' theory is confirmed that the *geostigma* is the cells of Jenova, also referred to the Sephiroph gene. He then has another vision of Aerith and he says he can never forget her death and letting her die, she responds with 'Dilly dally shilly shally, isn't it time you did the forgiving'. Aerith says she never blamed Cloud as he came for her and that is what matters. Asking Vincent if sins are ever forgiven, Cloud answers himself by saying he is going to try.

Returning to the city Cloud arrives to deliver the finishing blows and defeats the Bahamut summon. Kadaj meanwhile captures the piece of Jenova and is pursued by Cloud into Aerith's church, during a battle Kadaj cracks the floor of the church where the flowers grow. From the floor a spring of water appears which washes away the *geostigma* on Cloud's arm, curing him. The voice of Aerith is then heard, guiding him and telling him to go, continuing the pursuit of Kadaj he is now ready to face his final battle alone. Kadaj then evolves into Sephiroph after fusing with the cells of Jenova. In the final battle that ensues Cloud is run through with a sword in his torso, face and hands. He finally defeats Sephiroph who then turns back to Kadaj dissipating into the lifestream of the planet. The rain of lifestream that falls clears the skin of the children in the street and people that are affected by *geostigma*. However, Cloud is unexpectedly shot by Loz and Yahoo, who then blow up the platform they stand upon. While Cloud is gone the scene changes to the children who say that Cloud will return.

As people are seen answering telephone calls and running towards Aerith's church, Cloud is shown with a divine white background. He hears Aerith and Zack's voice who say he has no place 'here' yet and is resurrected into the body of water of the church. The children still affected by the *geostigma* are invited into the water by Cloud who washes away their disease by pouring water over them with his own hands.

4   The journeys of the intertestamental hero

While it is evident the video game and movie have significant differences of conceptual ideas, the responses of the same figure, Cloud, can be seen to match archetypes from classical religious documents, namely the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. There are many typological motifs that can be found throughout *Final Fantasy VII*. Sequentially examining each of these along Cloud's journey enables us to consider his progression through the story within what Joseph Campbell identified as a hero's journey (Campbell 2004). This is not an exhaustive list of the full archetypal journey of the hero, rather the selection here is to portray the similarities and differences of the relative heroes with brevity in mind. While resisting the allure of a reductionist approach in categorising many religious and mythic journeys into simple archetypes, it is nevertheless useful to engage with Campbell who assists in organising the heroic journey of myth into these stages. The endeavour is to show differentiation in the commonalities of experience, the stages therefore will provide clarity for our respective heroes in what are complex narratives.

4.1   Call to adventure

The call to adventure for all four of the hero narratives come early on in the story. Cloud in both the movie and film are thrown into the action. Moses and Christ likewise grow up in their respective communities, surrounded by the people they must save. However, there are nuanced differences in these narratives. During the video game Cloud's meeting with *AVALANCHE* makes him aware of the need for someone to step in and stop *Shinra*. Cloud is ambivalent to the need of the planet and the damage of the Mako reactors. He cares for little more than the task at hand and when called upon by the group he agrees to help in the current mission but any further proves too much of an effort and not his problem. Similarly, in the Hebrew Bible Exodus narrative Moses leaves his people, the Hebrews, to their lot in life despite growing up in Egypt and seeing their plight. He escapes and raises his own family away from Egypt and away from any personal risk. Called upon by God (Exodus 3), Moses is reacquainted with his people's need. Differentiating from this ambivalence, in the movie Cloud is intimately aware of the effect of *geostigma*, not only affecting Denzel who is close to him it also affects him personally. Further, as a delivery driver and someone who lived in Midgar he would be well aware of the effect of the *geostigma* on the population. Likewise, in the New Testament narrative Christ is intimately aware of his mission in life, he is announced as a child to be a saviour by Simeon in the temple (Luke 2:28-32) and later by John the Baptist as being the one to fulfil the prophesies (Matthew 3:13). He intimately is aware of the plight of the poor, being born in a manger and growing up in Nazareth. He also recognises as a child what is required, leaving his parents to learn in the Temple at twelve years old (Luke 2:49). The

similarities here between Christ and the movie iteration of Cloud have to do with the intimacy of the mission at hand. While the game and Exodus heroes are as close to the mission they require a further leap in order to live up to their mission. As each of our heroes are given the opportunity to step into their called mission, the response, according to Campbell's archetype, will usually follow with a refusal of the mission at hand, to which we now turn.

4.2   Refusal of the call

The refusal of the call is similar in the video game, movie and Exodus narrative. In the game Cloud wants nothing to do with the *AVALANCHE* group beyond the initial mission he is hired to help. He repetitively says he is a mercenary and does not care for the politics or plight of the planet. Approached by the group he continues to refuse adopting their beliefs or understanding. Similarly, as Moses is called on by God he accepts the discussion but continues to ask for someone else as he cannot speak publicly and believes someone else should be chosen for the task (Exodus 4:13). Likewise, Cloud in the movie does not view himself as worthy when he speaks to Tifa and just walks out when asked by *Shinra* to assist. Scenes of Tifa phoning Cloud which are left on his voicemail reveal he is absent from the city and is completing jobs for his business away from everyone. Christ differs with each of these accounts and only falters at one point, during his final days he prays on the Mount of Olives and asks if he may be absolved of his responsibility. In response to his call to the Father, an angel appears in order to give him strength (Luke 22:39-43). Whilst there is a similarity here with both of our Clouds it is in the meeting of the mentor that the story diverges even further.

4.3   Meeting the mentor

The mentor through the game and Exodus narrative are intimately close to our respective heroes, guiding them to their destined role and mission. After refusing to join the party, Cloud has an unexpected meeting as he falls from the sky into Aerith's church. Asked to protect her and then help the planet, Cloud accepts the mission and no further mention of being a mercenary takes place. The guide of the Ancient for Cloud is real in the sense of an actual person he can openly discuss things with, she approaches him for a date and actively wants to be part of the main party character choices by the player. Similarly, as Moses leaves his peaceful life outside of Egypt he is convinced as he is promised that his brother will be his voice and that God will be his active guide. While God is abstract in much of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, God speaks face to face with Moses (Exodus 33:11) and guides the people as a cloud by the day and fire by the night (Exodus 13:21). In contrast to these intimate relationships of the guide in the game and Exodus narrative, the mentor in

the film and New Testament are abstract and removed. In the game Cloud is constantly guided by the visions in his memory of the dead Aerith. She appears as a spirit in the lifestream, often turned away from Cloud or at his back, removed from the physical world and not contactable by any of the other members of the main group. She speaks in short sentences and directs Cloud to act, she does not appear to be as accessible as when she was alive in the game with involuntary visions that come to Cloud. This is akin to the New Testament narrative where the guide of Christ is abstract and is referred to as his Father. It is beyond the scope of this current study to discuss the interpretations of the Trinity and natures of Holy Spirit, Christ and God. Nevertheless, the mentor of Christ is removed or abstract in the worldly sense. Christ does call out to God throughout the scriptures, is guided to complete his mission and is encouraged by angels (Luke 22:43). This is akin to the spirit of Aerith who speaks from the lifestream, answering only at times and encouraging Cloud on his mission as he approaches the first threshold of his journey.

4.4   Crossing the First Threshold

What binds the game and the Exodus narrative is the sense of community and the relationship the hero has with a close group. The death of Aerith ensures Cloud crosses over to take on his adopted role of party leader and hero of the *AVALANCHE* group. This binds him closer with the group and ensures that their mission becomes his own. At no point does the player through the narrative leave the group and they are bound with the story of the hero along the journey. Leaving Midian, Moses is accepted when convinced by his brother Aaron he is then welcomed into the community back in Egypt. While Moses is questioned in the desert during the adversity for the Israelites, he is always accepted by the great acts that surround him, such as the passing over the river when escaping from Egypt (Exodus 14:21). Differentiating from these communal relationships the movie portrays Cloud crossing the threshold alone. Fainting in the church of Aerith, Cloud awakens to Tifa who convinces him to take action, he leaves alone to face the brothers in the *Forgotten Capital*. The journey alone sees him successively return to the city to face the summoned Bahamut, Kadaj and then Sephiroph. This solitary journey beyond the threshold is akin to what Christ must go through in order to cross the threshold. Left alone Christ goes willingly into capture and stands before the priests of the Temple (Mark 14:50). The lonesome journey for both Christ and Cloud in the movie see them making the ultimate sacrifice.

4.5   Belly of the Whale

While the heroes of the movie and New Testament narrative continue along alone, the community are left alone for a period and are lost through the game and Exodus narrative. Cloud loses his mind

and is in a vegetative state, his friends believe him to be gone and are lost from their path. The player at this point controls Tifa and is broken away from the regular narrative and focus of the game. Tifa ultimately enters into the lifestream guiding Cloud through his memory to rediscover himself. In a sequence within his own psyche Tifa guides him to recollect his selfhood and return from the lifestream. Although not losing his selfhood, Moses does leave the Hebrews at the base of a mountain as he goes to meet with God, staying away for forty days and forty nights. The community here lose their way and convince Aaron to craft a cow from gold so they may worship (Exodus 24). God guides Moses back down the mountain to return the community back to their path. This break away from the group or community is in sharp contrast to the movie and New Testament narratives. Here both Cloud and Christ are already alone away from their group or community. In the place of the intimate guide of the game and Exodus narrative and the lonesome journey they find guidance through the appearance of angels. Rescued by Vincent standing in the forest in the *Forgotten Capital*, Cloud recognises what he must do, shown by the angelic appearance of Aerith in his vision. Here he faces his demons of guilt and takes ownership of the mission at hand. After Christ's capture any doubt or question of the mission is now left behind who alone willingly faces what he must ultimately do. After asking for absolution of his mission Christ is sent onwards by the strength given to him by the angel (Luke 22:39-43). Our heroes are now ready to for their final journey towards the ultimate battle that they must overcome.

4.6   Road of Trials

Returning to the community and group, both Cloud and Moses now set upon their road of trials. The successive battles with Sephiroph and the planet's *Diamond Weapon* are one of the many steps in the road of trials for Cloud and the party. The zenith of this struggle is the final sequence of battles in order to stop the meteor summoned by Sephiroph coming to the planet. This battle is fought together as a group, until reaching his final apotheosis, Cloud is ingrained into the group. Similarly, Moses' road of trials is long, whilst in Egypt it is not his actions which guide the people, rather the plagues are sent by God as he facilitates these by direct instructions, such as placing his rod in the sea as God orders (Exodus 10:12). His personal trial begins as he comes down the mountain and then leads his people through the desert in an effort to reach the promised land (Exodus 33). In contrast, while all the battles in the movie can be viewed as trials, the battle that Cloud must face alone involves facing Kadaj who then changes into Sephiroph, this culminates in a final trial of overcoming death. The personal journey here is highlighted in the film with his party members looking on in hope that Cloud will succeed. This lonesome final trial is similarly personified with the figure of Christ who, only a few years prior was surrounded by thousands and is destined to hang lonesome on the cross. The battle alone, left to die whilst his loved ones look on,

is only reached after having to drag the cross himself to his place of crucifixion bringing on the culmination of his ministry in a final act, death (John 19:16-30).

4.7   Atonement

Admission of guilt and forgiveness are two distinct motifs that are evident with the four hero narratives. In the game, prior to meeting Sephiroph in the final battle, Cloud admits to the party that he was wrong and made a false representation of a personality and an adopted memory from the fallen hero of Zack. This admission enables him to continue on with his newly found personality built on his own memories, rather than the construction of the personality he has relied upon thus far. Despite guiding his people out of Egypt, through the desert and through danger, Moses cannot reach the promised land. However, Moses gets to see the promised land and is atoned for questioning God by facilitating a successor (Numbers 27:12, Deuteronomy 3:23-29). He then admits this fault of the people and takes ownership of the error (Deuteronomy 4). Both Cloud and Moses are atoned for their sins with the group looking to Cloud to continue to lead through the final battle and Moses is recognised as an irreplaceable leader like no other (Deuteronomy 34:10). In the movie and New Testament narrative there is no guilt by the heroes. Cloud is directed by Aerith's ghost to do the forgiving rather than being forgiven. Her death is not his fault and despite his feelings he is absolved of any error. He is also cured by the *geostigma* by the lifestream, before the children or anyone else is fully cured. Christ goes through a trial and does not please innocence nor seek a deal for release. He commits to the journey which takes him to his final battle with death. As Christ calls out from the cross asking why he has been forsaken he commends his spirit to the Father. This commendation of a spirit enables the resurrection to take place and completion of the mission. Sinless and dying on the cross Christ in death is then declared as innocent by the centurion bystander (Luke 23:67).

4.8   Apotheosis

The zenith of both Cloud and Moses' journeys end with a reference to the promised land. Yet, their final action does not see either reach these places, rather the culmination of their efforts is an action so perfect that it is unlikely to be repeated. After meeting and defeating Sephiroph's many forms, each more removed and monstrous from the original person he knew than the last, Cloud can only defeat the final boss by reaching his peak and using *omnislash*. This ultimate attack is against the Sephiroph character, returned to the human bodily representation that he once knew. After defeating the final representation he tells Tifa that he can meet Aerith in the *Promised Land* and that he should go there. Moses' apotheosis is reached by finally seeing with his own eyes the land that will be

given to his decedents. This is only given to him after he delivers the commandments and instructions at length to the people, forming the final books of Moses (Deuteronomy 33). It is in these books and the very words that pass on as the Torah which is the perfection of Moses. As stated in the final words in the books of Moses, there is and never has been a leader like Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10). The references to the promised land are absent from both the movie and New Testament, instead the apotheosis is the stunning resurrection of both heroes. After winning a battle with Sephiroph, Cloud is blown up by the two remaining remnant brothers. He only reaches this end after being tortured by Sephiroph, being physically run through with a sword and injured in the hands and face. The victory is then taken away from the hero as his body is consumed in an explosion and he dies. As his spirit enters the lifestream he is returned and is resurrected from in the water inside of the church of Aerith, here he cleanses children by pouring water on them in a scene that looks like a Baptism. The water that he pours on the children purifies their *geostigma* and cures their state. Similarly, after his crucifixion and death on the cross, Christ is resurrected and appears to his Disciples. The baptism motif returns to the New Testament narrative as Christ reaches his apotheosis and promises to send his Spirit to return, telling the disciples they will baptise with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). The difference here can also be termed in conclusiveness. The game and Exodus narrative end with a perpetual look towards the *Promised Land*, unachieved but promised, the heroes journey do not reach the finality which was sought throughout the narrative. Alternatively, the movie and New Testament narrative deliver a conclusion and the apotheosis of our heroes is through the redemption of their community, delivered by their resurrection.

5   Shinto and Judeo-Christian interpretations of our hero

It is evident there are a number of religious motifs along the hero's journey for both of our Clouds. Beyond these hero motifs there are nods to Judeo-Christian understanding of God and religion. Cloud's home with Tifa is referenced as 'Heaven' on his phone and the names of Sephiroph and Jenova are similar to terms from the scriptures. There is also the abstract understanding of the Trinity which can be seen in the parallels of the cells of Jenova, referenced by Vincent, as the 'Jenova or Sephiroph gene', which then becomes the embodiment of physical beings on the planet. This Judeo-Christian reading of the narrative however is not the only interpretation that can be made from the complex story arc.

As noted earlier John Mitropoulos has written a comparison of the Shinto elements found throughout the narrative. While Mitropoulos argues that Jenova, the alien enemy, of the game is reflective of the Japanese experience post the Second World War (Mitropoulos 2009), it is evident

that the internalisation of the movie and the existential battle that Cloud has with the guilt, and ultimate forgiveness has more to it. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the obvious linkages to esoteric early Christian and Jewish traditions. It is not possible to gloss over the linkage such as Sephiroph, with his name very similar to both the Seraphim (Isaiah 6:1-3) are which the angels which cries from heaven and the Hebrew Sephirot (סְפִירוֹת) meaning 'emanations' in the Kabbalist tradition (Likutey Moharan 1). The arrival for Jenova, with a similar name to the Judeo-Christian God Jehovah, for Mitropoulos is paralleled with the arrival of Christianity to Japan. He then goes on to recognise the motifs adopted from the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as the broader field, such as Sephiroph's mother Lucretia named after the woman raped by Sextus Tarquinius causing the rebellion which ended the monarchy of ancient Rome (Mitropoulos 2009). Although there are parallels with Japanese Shinto culture and the recognition of an overtaken statehood, the cure given through the game and movie are using Christian motifs. Furthermore, as demonstrated the parallels between Moses, Christ and both Clouds are clearly adopted motifs, evident throughout the respective journeys of the hero. There is also the evidence of the Gaia hypothesis of biological and ecological science matching that of the planet's energy in the game elucidated by Jay Foster, in the very same volume as Mitropoulos' chapter (Foster 2009). The point is that we should not be so reductionist when approaching the complexities of a game such as *Final Fantasy VII*. It is evident that the producers have created a game which is both the product of their own cultural upbringing, however, the motifs are not from this perspective in absentia.

6   Conclusion: Cloud, the tale of two heroes

> "…if we were to make a sequel, we would have to be very careful not to disturb fans' own individual picture of that universe." – Yoshinori Kitase (Kitase and Toriyama 2011).

The care of the franchise that is held with such high importance with so many gamers has created a situation for Yoshinori Kitase with the upcoming *Final Fantasy VII: Remake*. In over twenty years the technology has changed significantly. Dialogue is no longer presented with single lines, prompting the player to click through and read at their own pace, characters on screen are closer to resembling real life people than ever before and gaming is providing more in-depth experiences. As demonstrated, the differences between the movie and video game iterations of Cloud are significant and go beyond the responses of a character who has grown over time. The Cloud from the game at the end of the narrative is full of optimism, ready to journey towards the *Promised Land* and meet his friend Aerith. This is dismantled in the movie to a character who fails to step in and assist his

friends, full of guilt at his friend's death. This Cloud is broken socially and purposefully distant, he is evidently a different person entirely.

Yoshinori Kitase, the Director of the original game and Producer of the movie and the remake has a decision of the representation of the character of Cloud. In 2011 he was hesitant to touch the franchise as he did not wish to disturb the narrative that fluidly rests in the fanbase' mind. The reasons for Kitase's decision in altering the character for the film could be on aesthetics, or the time limitations of the film which forces a concise story line, a struggle for anyone to show a perpetual journey of a Moses like figure. It could also be an assumption by Kitase of the fan base's desire for a more redemptive figure. This may never be clarified as he has been hesitant in the past to comment at any length about the game beyond the structure and technological advancement of the creation. This is compounded in the past few years, as the release of *Remake* has been delayed and fans eagerly await any news of the release. At present, as Kitase has recognised, fans are creating their own narrative with the complex storyline that his portrayed in a game over two decades old that relies on nostalgia and fleeting memories of players (Kitase and Toriyama 2011). The intertestamental figure of Cloud who now exists, torn between the game and movie, needs to be conclusively set using a single archetypal line. I would argue that it is the unfinished perpetual journey of the character at the end of the game that solidifies the experience for players. Likewise, it is the redemptive and resurrected Christ-like figure in the movie is what many fans would hold dear. The decision for Kitase therefore is to either return to the original narrative, as problematic and complicated it is, or to dismantle the memory and rebuild the narrative at the risk of alienating a fanbase. Time of course will tell.

For the moment we can conclude that there are significant differentiations of both Clouds from the original game and movie sequel. Examining these with the lens of the Judaeo-Christian tradition enables us to see the archetypal journeys that are significant in their own right. It is clear through the journey of the hero that Cloud from the game reacts with similar, if not a directly parallel, response to that of the Exodus' narrative hero Moses. Both are ambivalent to their respective people's causes before being called upon and shaken from their state. They require intimate personal prompting from a guide throughout their lives in a journey towards the promised land. Along the way they try to refuse the call but are brought into the fold through the intimate personal relationship with their people. Bound together as the respective leaders of their communities, both Cloud and Moses are then subsequently removed from their group who are lost without their leadership. They are called back to set upon their final task but are still held within a group the entire way. They seek atonement for their errors and finally reach the apotheosis with the perfect act that is unlikely to be repeated, whilst never reaching the promised land that they sought.

These similarities are contrasted by the linkages with the movie and the New Testament Christian motifs. Forgiveness, the solitary journey of the hero, absolution of sin and resurrection all

feature in the film which is laden with Christian images. Both Cloud of the movie and Christ have an intimate knowledge of their mission with their mentors removed and abstract. This abstraction compounds the lonesome battle that the heroes face, willingly facing the battle with the strength of the motif of the angelic guide. Facing the ultimate sacrifice as both Cloud and Christ are able to deliver forgiveness and achieve the final victory over their own death. Where the film and New Testament deliver a finality of the hero's journey, it is unlikely for there will be a finality or a bridge to be made between the two Clouds and the upcoming *Final Fantasy: Remake*. We eagerly await the next chapter of Cloud and the journey of yet another archetypal hero with a comically oversized sword.

Bibliography

Barton, M. (2008). *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games*. Wellesley, Mass: A K Peters.

Campbell, J. (2004). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ervin, A. (2017). *Bit by Bit: How Video Games Transformed Our World*. New York: Basic Books.

Foster, J. (2009). The Lifestream, Mako, and Gaia. In: *Final Fantasy and Philosophy The Ultimate Walkthrough*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons. Available at: http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201502062193 [Accessed: 29 April 2018].

Juul, J. (2013). *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Kitase, Y. and Toriyama, M. (2011). *An Interview with the Men behind Final Fantasy* [Online]. Available at: https://www.destructoid.com/an-interview-with-the-men-behind-final-fantasy-216354.phtml [Accessed: 17 April 2018].

Mitropoulos, J. (2009). Shinto and Alien Influences in Final Fantasy VII. In: *Final Fantasy and Philosophy The Ultimate Walkthrough*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons. Available at: http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201502062193 [Accessed: 29 April 2018].

Parkin, S. (2015). *Death by Video Game: Tales of Obsession from the Virtual Frontline*. London: Serpent's Tail.

The strong: National Museum of Play (2018). *2018 World Video Game Hall of Fame Inductees Announced: Spacewar!, John Madden Football, Tomb Raider, and Final Fantasy VII* [Online]. Available at: http://www.museumofplay.org/press/releases/2018/05/4748-2018-world-video-game-hall-of-fame-inductees-revealed [Accessed: 3 May 2018].

16

Biography

BENJAMIN BANASIK is a PhD candidate within the Studies of Religion department at the University of Sydney and former Mayor of Wollondilly Shire Council. Benjamin holds a Bachelor of Theology and completed his BA Hons in 2016 at the University of Newcastle, focusing on the Jewish exegetical similarities in Origen of Alexandria's writings. Benjamin's PhD is focused on the religious experience of perpetual gaming.

Studies of Religion Department
John Woolley Building A20
Science Road
University of Sydney, NSW 2006
benjamin.banasik@sydney.edu.au

VR Mediated Content and Its Influence on Religious Beliefs

Stefan Piasecki

Abstract

This article discusses technical features and perspectives of current "Virtual Reality" (VR) technologies and their potential impact on religious beliefs. The arising questions should be assessed in regard to the use of hard- and software devices in religious educational contexts. While touching the history of VR only marginally, this article focuses on observations and considerations regarding the players' and users' personality development in the context of their socialization and enculturation. In addition, an insight to VR applications in the fields of education, training and psychotherapy is provided.

Examples of research illustrate that today VR has become more than just a game or a tool for the visualization of objects and spaces. Can the technology, however, be used or applied in religious contexts? Would it give rise to new questions or can old questions be revised to facilitate a different approach?

After a definition of the term and basic functions of VR are provided, perceptional and emotional aspects as well as questions concerning transitions and boundaries that actually exist between *real* and *virtual* reality are discussed.

In individual practice, religiosity is mediated through objects, texts, rituals and community as well as certain expectations of believers, their duties and rights and, of course, through multipliers like clerics or teachers. However, are all of these necessary, existent or even realizable in VR?

Ultimately, a few questions are asked about the different implications of religion in virtuality: how do rules and rites communicate? What is the role of fellowship? How are believers and non-believers depicted in VR? Who is included or excluded?

Although the article cannot provide definitive answers in the face of a rapidly evolving technology, it would like to draw attention to important issues that can be harnessed in religious education and presumably also theology.

1   Introduction

The real and the transcendental, spirituality and the technically endorsed imagination and also religious communities in comparison to gamer clans make both the contentual and technical possibilities and restrictions in Virtual Reality (VR) apparent. The physical consumerist globalized world of today implies that every new invention is an add-on to simplify life and to enhance experiences of any kind, often without reflecting on the consequences like whether an enjoyable or engaging experience really is a valuable outcome per se or if "fun" elements are truly desirable (Rapp 2017, 396).

VR expands and extends what people have been dealing with since primeval times - namely the visualization of the present, the past, the imagined and the future. VR takes what mankind has developed so far to narrate its beliefs and values to a new level. Campfire tales, ancient heroic epics, stage plays and films were mainly media for "reception" only; they allowed a very limited interaction. VR, however, as it will be shown, informs, entertains, visualizes and most of all binds the individual to the technical framework and its content and gives it an active role. For theology and religious education this leads to a multitude of possibilities to mediate and visualize beliefs. Network technologies cross national and cultural borders and pave the way for decentralized and international experiences through VR. Spencer-Hall compares movies (which are mainly a 20th century technology with roots in the very late 19th century) with medieval hagiography:

> "(...), cinematic spectatorship affords, at times, a (more or less) secular experience of visionary transcendence: an 'agape-ic encounter'. This transcendent experience is functionally identical to the episodes of ecstasy which are the mainstay of medieval hagiography. (...) I attest that our use, enjoyment, and conceptualization of cinema - and more recently, three-dimensional virtual environments online - reflect our enduring preoccupation with those topics which were previously the domain of religion, and thus hagiography. This includes: our fear and anxiety of mortality; our quest to understand the intersection of body and soul (...); the need to know what 'lies beyond' our present reality (...)" (Spencer-Hall 2018, 11).

VR is yet another leap further ahead in terms of the technical and cultural evolution. The author's result, in reference to media, is nothing entirely new. "Last questions" about death, eternity and so on have always been central to humanity's grand narratives. Still, VR is different: VR is a tool of the future for working and socialising and offers a multitude of economic promises. Then again, VR allows the use of such technology also for private social networking, recreation and even spiritual experiences and relief.

It is not only companies and individuals that want to participate in these new socially and economically evolving worlds, but religious communities too. One is reminded of church representations in "Second Life"[1] or attempts to bring churches into "the new media"[2] making corresponding strategy concepts necessary[3], which also led to legal gray areas on top of that (Cosson 2018). Attempts to set up online confession services made clear that new technologies often get used first for established contents and traditional forms of action, disregarding the additional possibilities a new medium provides.

The contradiction does not exist between faith and virtuality - the idea of a Kingdom of God, Paradise, or a better world is not a too different form of a prospected and to-be-experienced virtuality with the demand for realization. The virtual is a constant companion of human evolution and accessible to humans alone.

Therefore, it is not the "Clash of Realities", to modify a phrase coined by Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s referring to political and cultural hemispheres, that is new. What is "new" is that more and more technologies are becoming part of individual identities. Such enhancements for the perceptions of a subject have had no forerunners in human history. Each of these fresh technologies had to be functionally learned from the ground up, understood in terms of content, and accepted in everyday life. While the movie had the stage play as a predecessor, most of the usage of computer technologies seemingly appeared out of the blue, transported by marketing and pop-culture. They are subject to a technically justified "foreignness" which is transferred to the associated social and communicative processes.

An example would be the cave paintings of the Chauvet Cave in France which are in fact a diary, a guide for hunter training, a heroic epic and also a nature documentary all in one. Their mediated messages are future projection and transcendent appeal. Therefore, they are part of the same practice as antique floor mosaics, native American rituals, Islamic and far eastern calligraphy and church paintings as well as religious symbols in video games. Religious subjects and rites as part of oral narration were and are also taught through play, physical games and dances of indigenous people. Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois reported extensively on the interaction of play, religion and virtuality in the 1930s and 1950s (see: Piasecki 2018, 141 - (German) - or a good English language source: Burrill 2008, pp. 37) before the term "virtual reality" was coined by Jaron Lanier (Stanovsky 2004, p. 175) in the very early 1990s.

After paintings which especially in the Renaissance attended to dying and death in a particularly drastic way, as in Pieter Brueghel, the Elder, ("The Renaissance and Baroque periods

---

1 https://secondlife.com/destinations/belief, 18.06.2018
2 https: //www.churchofengland.org/digital-labs, 18.06.2018
3 https://ministrytech.com/social-media/how-to-use-social-media-to -really-increase-your-ministry /, 18.06.2018

are in fact a time of increased preoccupation with death": Guthke 1999, 85) followed the technology of photography in the 19th century. Immediately this new visual medium was again used to portray life and death as comprehensively and multi-layeredly as possible in order to let the viewers participate virtually. A stereoscopy from 1863 shows a fallen soldier of the American Civil War in the trenches, almost presented as if on a stage. One does not know his name or his background or the circumstances of his death. He has no grave and no one mourns him anymore, but 150 years later stereoscopy still allows a virtualized notion of the environmental reality of his death (Böger 2010, 112).

Perception of transcendence and cognitive conditioning and processing are, therefore, genuinely work of man and not creations of an ominous "technology". It makes sense that religious contents manifest themselves in the virtual and visualized space: religion conveys itself at most in gestures and rituals, but can hardly be spiritually materialized. With modern digital media ways to transmit and share information of any kind spread. These were and will be commercialized since only the economization secures a technical development and perfection. Fantastic worlds, magic and magical beings and heroes enriched campfire stories and populated easy reads for centuries - today they are important subjects in movies and computer and video games. Their multiplayer option copies functions of social communication that books, comics, and movies could not provide. At the same time they freely use motifs and apocalyptic visions from mostly biblical sources and separate them from their original meaning (Wagner 2012, p. 187) turning them into factors merely for entertainment. Aupers analyzes game content:

"More than 95 percent is based on the fantasy genre [Woodcock 2009] and virtual worlds display Tolkienesque environments brimming with spirituality, legends, mythical creatures, mysterious forces, and magical opportunities. Players, who play on average more than 23 hours a week [Yee 2006], are totally immersed in this otherworldly environment. (...) Religion, various academics comment, is not just a spiritual or otherworldly enterprise since it has always been embedded in and mediated by material culture – including commodities representing images of Jesus, Biblical scenes or vessels containing holy water [i.e., Meyer and Houtman 2012]. 1 f. (...) A basic assumption in the milieu is that the Self has been socialized in modern values, i.e., external perceptions of how to be, how to think, how to feel and how to act, which leads to feelings of alienation. Underneath these layers of socialization, however, one finds the "real," "authentic," "higher," "spiritual," or "divine" self that can and should be contacted by every individual. The self is, essentially, sacred and modern people are considered to be gods and goddesses in exile. "We are all gods!," one of my respondents typically stated. 3 f." (Aupers 2014, p. 1)

The individual, who occasionally feels lost in a commercialized world, has, therefore, the opportunity of visiting alternative worlds in addition to existing real and spiritual worlds offered by established religions and confessions, where s/he can realize her/himself as s/he likes according to her/his individual self-conception. VR worlds are one option among many. Gamers can develop their own social environment within the world of the game(s) and are not completely bound to geographical conditions of the real world. Nevertheless, they are only experiencing transitions in space. They can never be fully present in virtuality. Acting in virtuality does not become a "colonization", one cannot really own (or inherit?) property (except by buying digital items and maybe estates by performing microtransactions resp. buying digital content). The VR always remains only a pseudo space. Online players can not use every single place in the game for themselves. As in reality, there are governed and locked spaces that can not be changed. A virtual lake can probably be used for diving but can not be filled with soil as one might wish, while boats can not be built unless this was intended by the developers. Man cannot change the virtual world with his own hands. The "reality" in the VR thus remains "virtual" and yet it is taken "really" seriously.

2   Virtual Reality - Terms and Definitions

The terms Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Cyberspace label forms of additions to reality that can be used for a variety of purposes - in education as well as for entertainment. They are used by architects, vehicle manufacturers, the military, medical practitioners, psychotherapists and many more:

> "Virtual Reality is a complex user interface that includes simulations in real time through multiple sensorial channels. These sensorial modalities are visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, etc." (Burdea & Coiffet 2003, cited by Soares / Rebelo 2017, 360)

This shows that VR is both immersive and interactive requiring appropriate user behavior. Virtual Reality is immersive because users use technical accessories to enter an otherwise inaccessible artificial environment that presents itself to the individual senses as an extension of their own reality. VR is interactive because it is not just a series of automatically played animations. Users are actively engaged into the processes, changing them, and then reacting according to the returns of the system. They can pick up objects or knock them down, change layouts and much more - the VR responds in real time.

The central concept of "virtual reality" was first described in 1991 by Jaron Lanier. Lanier foresaw the benefits of VR, especially for private users, from the beginning. This explains why VR meanwhile has become an overall cultural concept (Biocca / Lanier 1992, pp. 152).

The technology has been evolving since the early 1990s and VR is already being used in a variety of fields although, according to the "Gartner Hype Cycle", VR as a consumer product is still at the very beginning of market penetration. After the innovative start-up phase and the first grand "Peak of Inflated Expectations" AR and VR are currently still in the "Trough of disillusionment", VR being already moving into the "Slope of Enlightenment". Before a mass market can be installed, some time may pass (Gartner 2017), analogous to the big and heavy "Brickphones" in the early 1990s. They reached their peak in the mobile communications sector not earlier than 15 years later, with the introduction of smartphone technologies.

The goal of VR/AR technology is to make the user's experience exceed the actual space and by doing so dissolve the boundaries of perception.

It focuses on the aspect of interactivity which means the users' ability of getting engaged in depicted environments and processes for the purpose of modification. This leads to an "eroding physical place" (Traxler 2010, 104). Heim in 1993 (pp. 109) already defined seven different virtuality concepts: Simulation, Interaction, Artificiality, Immersion, Telepresence, Full-Body Immersion and Network Communication. Today, visual and immersive VR and AR applications are roughly distinguished but in the face of technical developments the boundaries are getting blurred:

Immersive Systems: applications that want to or have to appeal to as many senses of their users as possible, in order to break down the barrier of a screen's two-dimensionality, trying to completely seal them off from the potentially disruptive outside world. This includes classic applications where users wear VR glasses: "Dreams (...) may be one of the best, and most familiar, comparisons for virtual reality" (Stanovsky 2004, 171).

Window on the World: the three-dimensional environment is entered and viewed through a "magical window on other worlds" (Stanovsky 2004, 168), usually a PC monitor as in most 3D games.

Video mapping: using this technology, user movement is broadcasted to a screen. The motion games of Nintendo´s Wii console (released 2006) fall under this category, basically already envisaged in a conversation between Biocca and Lanier in as early as 1992: "So, you can almost picture a situation where you can learn a variety of new cognitive skills, where you're changing the sense of what you're doing, and the inferences you're getting from what you're getting back from the environment" (Biocca / Lanier 1992, 162).

Telepresence: connects signals from the real and virtual world, giving the impression of being in a different place. A videoconference in close-up, which gives the impression of a direct

conversation, is considered as such. Likewise, the help of a hotline employee who has remote access to functions of a faraway user's computer and then controls the mouse pointer almost like a "ghost hand" (Stanovsky 2004, 169). Burrill also discusses the split of corporality in more than one actual "presence": "In some ways, telepresence is the Cartesian mind / body split made real (and then made unreal), the mind reaching across vast spaces, becoming tangible in the form of robotics or prosthetics or, as Virilio points out, as signs. In essence, whenever we log on, we experience (through the spatial cues of the browser) telepresence, as if we are traveling to somewhere and performing some kind of work" (Burrill 2008, 96).

Augmented or Mixed Reality: Data from multiple sources can be simultaneously retrieved and presented to a user in order to perform actions in reality and real-time, while these actions alter the flow of data at the same time which then again influences the user's actions. The work of a surgeon who receives patient data and other visual representations via AR glasses during the operation falls in this category. Similarly, the work of an archaeologist who uses artifacts within a virtual environment to decode its function (Théophane, Nicolas / Gaugne , Ronan / Tavenrnier, Cédric et al., 2015, 273) could be another example.

Figure: Use of VR in archeology (ibid., 273) (Picture: © R. Gaugne, IRISA)

VR applications put users right into a new reality or rather new contexts. This can happen by means of a so-called "headset", meaning a pair of glasses which completely shuts off the visibility range and fills it with new images. In some cases the aural sense is sealed with headphones correlatively. This makes users vulnerable in real space, because the bulky headset is limiting their sight and movements but allows a more immersed access to the virtual space. Within this graphical environment, however, the user is utterly free and can perform functions using various input devices (similar to joypads, data gloves, etc.).

In a CAVE (Cave Automated Virtual Environment) setting, the user is inside a specially arranged room which is partially adjusted to the expected virtual reality. In order to treat phobias some areas might be equipped accordingly and for example be fitted with the replica of a bridge railing. In some caves, images or animations are projected onto the walls the user has to respond to, as when using a CAVE training system for firefighters (Backlund / Engström / Gustavsson / Johanneson / Lebram / Sjörs 2009).
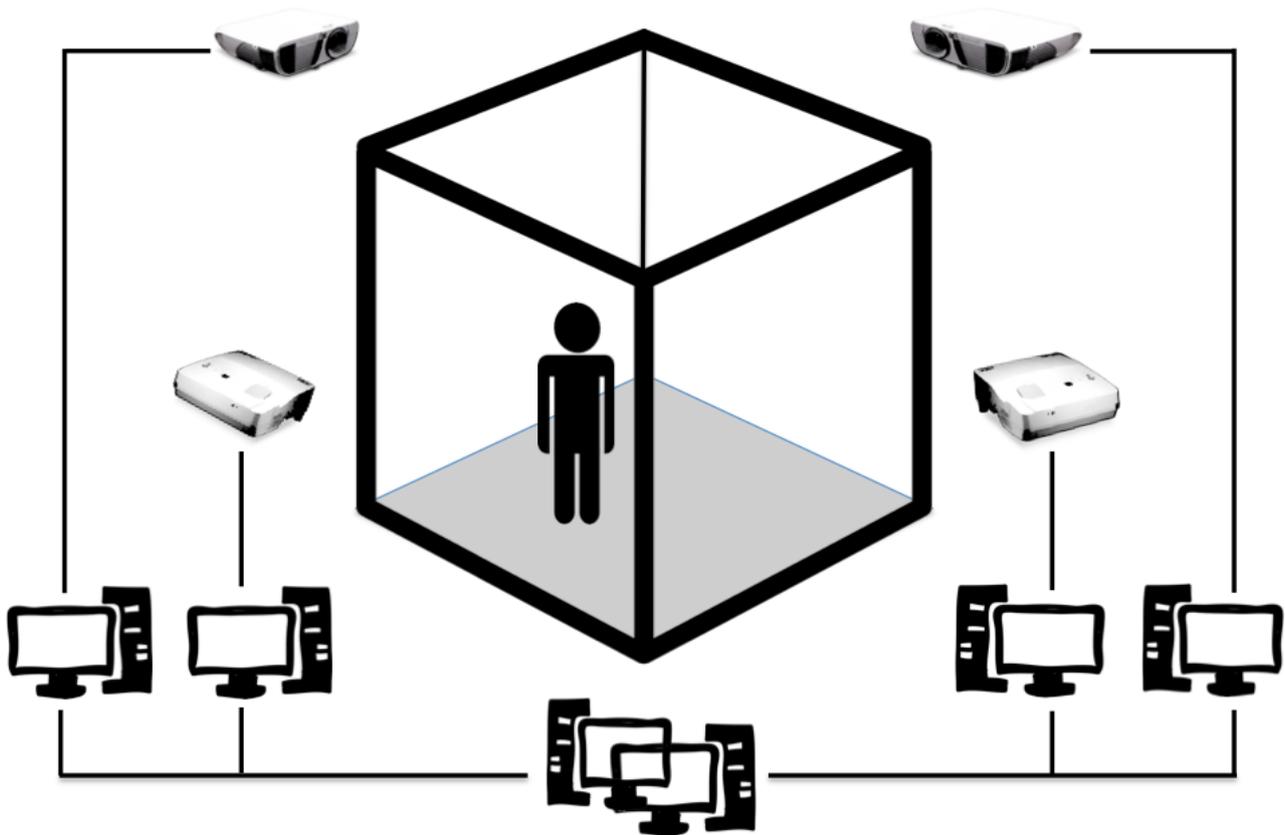
Figure: CAVE setup (Illustration: Piasecki, inspired by Backlund et al.). The user is surrounded by image projectors, which depict the modified environment in a in a computerized manner based on the user's actions

Augmented reality overlays perceivable reality with new experiences. In the case of AR glasses like "Google Glass", information is projected into the field of view. If a user passes a restaurant, images of the interior or menus and comments of previous customers can be displayed. A well-known example of AR methods is Pokemon Go. Here, players can use their smartphones to see objects that are tied to specific GPS data and only appear on the display of the mobile device.

Figure: The non-real cartoon character is projected via the smartphone display into a real environment (Picture: Dimitar "Mix" Mihov / KeongDaGreat / Shutterstock, Inc.)

The basic idea of a VR was first described in Stanley G. Weinbaum's short story "Pygmalion's Spectacles", a science fiction novella from 1935. Here, the author invented a method for experiencing artificial worlds, smells and touches through holographic aids. The fictional first impressions of putting on a VR headset described over 80 years ago are surprisingly close to the sensations that can be experienced today:

"There was a moment of chaos. The liquid before Dan's eyes clouded suddenly white, and formless sounds buzzed. He moved to tear the device from his head, but emerging forms in the mistiness caught his interest. Giant things were writhing there.

The scene steadied; the whiteness was dissipating like mist in summer. Unbelieving, still gripping the arms of that unseen chair, he was staring at a forest. But what a forest! Incredible, unearthly, beautiful! Smooth holes ascended inconceivably toward a brightening sky, trees bizarre as the forests of the Carboniferous age.

Infinitely overhead swayed misty fronds, and the verdure showed brown and green in the heights. And there were birds—at least, curiously loving pipings and twitterings were all about him though he saw no creatures—thin elfin whistlings like fairy bugles sounded softly.

He sat frozen, entranced. A louder fragment of melody drifted down to him, mounting in exquisite, ecstatic bursts, now clear as sounding metal, now soft as remembered music. For a moment he forgot the chair whose arms he gripped, the miserable hotel room invisibly about him, old Ludwig, his aching head. He imagined himself alone in the midst of that lovely glade. "Eden!" he muttered, and the swelling music of unseen voices answered.

Some measure of reason returned. "Illusion!" he told himself.

Clever optical devices, not reality. He groped for the chair's arm, found it, and clung to it; he scraped his feet and found again an inconsistency. To his eyes the ground was mossy verdure; to his touch it was merely a thin hotel carpet" (Weinbaum 1935, p. 6).

The very first word the fictional viewer in the novella uttered at the sight of the new world, sharing it with the readers as witnesses of the first emotions in the face of VR ever, is striking here: "Eden". The crossing into the new world is evidently involuntarily equated with a religious experience of transcendence— the glimpse either of paradise or maybe the afterlife— *before* it is understood as an extension of the individual and personal reality that it actually is.

Starting in the early 1960s, the first devices for public use within the leisure sector were tested, which, combined with auditory and visual stimuli, odors, and fans, supported the visual impressions of images. Unfortunately devices like Morton Heilig's "Sensorama" failed to have significant commercial success (Brookwell 2016).

Other systems focused on very specific effects only, such as Universal Pictures' "Sensurround" technology used for the films "Earthquake" (1974) and "Battlestar Galactica" (1978), which literally shook the movie theater (Konow 2013).

Other historical precursors included oversized and wall-filling images, which, as in the case of the newly created "Atlanta Cyclorama"[4], showed battle scenes in a giantic scale to appropriately display the military course of a fight. The intention was that the presentation would be absorbed as a truly "immersive" experience.

4　http://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/ explore / destinations / atlanta-cyclorama, 20.06.2018
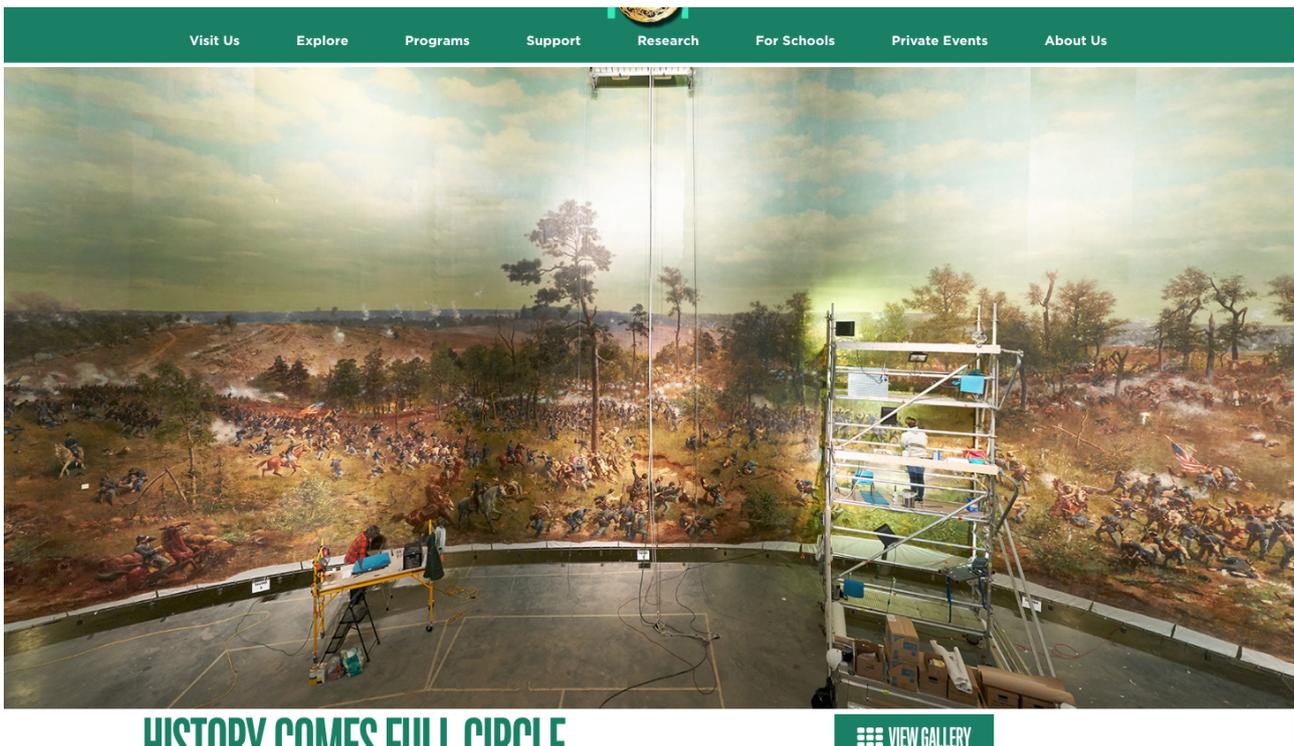
Figure: "Atlanta Cyclorama" on the Atlanta History Center´s webpage (Screenshot: Piasecki)

Different methods and concepts to represent a virtual within a physically real reality can be distinguished. VR is an oxymoron since "Virtual Reality" also contains the contrasting "Real Reality" within itself.

2.1   VR in use

VR's cyberspace is a space consisting of artificial "narratives" (processes, methods) and "images" (objects, subjects, functions). However, unlike two-dimensional images or texts such as manuals, they need to be self-explaining to the user, make its functions immersively plausible and include social functions to connect multiple users (Sherman / Craig 2003, p. 17).

This description matches Heim's basic definition of a VR as a *Triple-I* realm of experience: Information *Intensity, Immersion and Interactivity* (Heim 1998, p. 7). This means that the user of a VR environment acts "embedded" and also "interactively" with the elements of the (virtual) environment. The user is an integrated part of the information system. Almost 20 years later Heim wrote:

> "(...) bodily sensations might also become data. If a sensation can be noticed, why not digitize it? Why not have it represented in the virtual world just as we represent musical tones in binary digits? As components of the ego's experience, why not add physical sensations to the map of virtual worlds?" (Heim 2017, 165).

In contrast, the Internet browser on the real world screen would also be an information set, but the user does not abandon "his" reality. For Straaten the four components *Purpose*, *Participant*, *Medium* and *Content* are keys to the content design of an effective VR (Straaten 2000, 2-1). The "participant" has a "purpose" to apply or change the "content" within the "medium". The number of contents (Range), the efficiency of the technical design and graphics performance (Speed) and the form of the interaction options (Mapping) decide on the overall credibility of the (thus) described space for the user who is at the same time physically and mentally present. The earlier mentioned state of "Telepresence" is underlined by Steuer to put emphasis on the factor of "Presence":

> "In unmediated perception, presence is taken for granted: What could one experience other than one's immediate physical surroundings? However, when perception is mediated by a communication technology, one is forced to perceive two separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present and the environment presented via the medium. (...) Telepresence is defined as the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium" (Steuer 1992, p. 75).

Especially the credibility of "telepresence" or of "immersive embedding" should be considered more closely depending on the application. A learning environment that is supposed to represent a complex environment as realistic as possible must place more importance to appealing to all senses than the virtually tangible representation of the function of an engine. In this case, additional information components that distract user's attention from the pure object would be even counterproductive. An example would be what the game manufacturer UBISoft has done with its highly realistic action game "Assassins Creed Origins". Based on the game, a "Discovery Tour" version was created, with the in-game missions being removed, allowing players to examine Ancient Egypt and learn about it in an environment that feels very much like a game (Hardawar 2018).

For video games, credibility is one of the most important factors. Large, almost unlimited three-dimensional worlds that human players can discover and submit to have always been the dream of gamers and game developers alike. Although the early systems were technically still very limited, the success of Nintendo's Wii console showed the willingness of players to use their bodies and to control its game functions with their movements (mapping).

Recent approaches also aim at evaluating the users' brain activity and adapt the flow of information accordingly[5]. A method that is also used to study the effects of religious states of consciousness.

AR and VR are flourishing in the industrial, educational and, of course, military fields. In the future, devices will be light and flexible enough for everyday use and can be connected to portable devices. The company ODG[6] has been offering such eyewear for professional and military use for years. AR can be connected via several levels of detail such as a pure additional information supply as Google Glass has already offered but also as a reality supplement, with the result that the existing environment is not only expanded, but also visually changed (Levy 2017).

3   Current practical uses of reality enhancements

VR and AR techniques are used in many different contexts. At NASA it is used for training, criminology uses it for crime scene reconstruction (van Gelder / Otte / Luciano 2014). Dath discusses the benefits of high-resolution 360-degree views for crime scene reconstruction, which have the advantage of static quality over blurry video. VR could counteract the "flood of information" at the real crime scene, as this could be visited again and again in the VR, without the hustle and bustle of the actual site:

> "Also moving the video camera too quickly over areas with low resolution might result in poor visualization. This is addressed when 360° photos are taken so that they cover the whole crime scene, enabling the user to "return" to the initial scene. VR could thus act as a complement to images and video recordings, aiding the investigation with spatial and holistic information [10] that might be lacking otherwise. VR could also address the issue of excess of visual material existing during an investigation, mentioned by a CI. This could be done by compiling large amounts of visual material in one place. A VR design could thereby act as a complement and compiling tool, gathering all digitalized documentations and putting them in context and correlation to each other" (Dath 2014).

---

5   NeuroSky Inc.: http://www.neurosky.com, 10.6.2018; Emotiv Systems: http://www.emotiv.com, 10.6.2018
6   Osterhout Design Group - http://www.osterhoutgroup.com/home, 20.06.2018

The consumer goods industry uses the illustrated technologies for the design of retail space (Guidi / Micoli / Casagrande / Ghezzi 2010, 288).
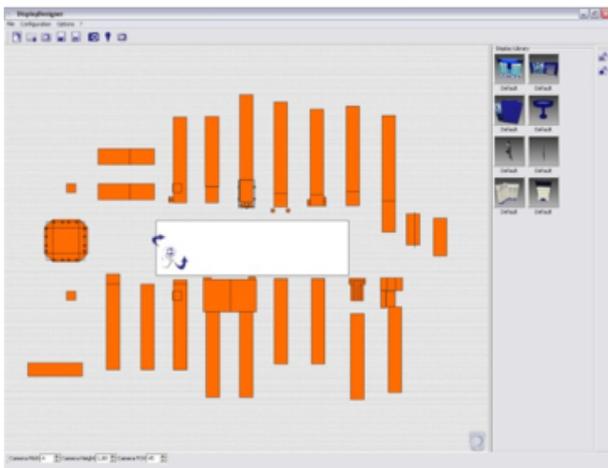
The question of how technology can influence the will and perception of people is one of the most exciting challenges. The use of VR for crime scene reconstruction as well as for organizing retail space shows that people use virtuality to understand, control, or manipulate other individuals:

> "People often react to virtual experiences as though they were real-world experiences. And it´s this reaction that sets the stage for influence dynamics to play out. Technology innovators have only begun to explore the persuasive possibilities of computer-simulated experiences. This is perhaps the most promising new path for computers as persuasive technologies" (Fogg 2003, 61).

But unlike the "real" reality, the virtual reality can be changed and restarted. However, Fogg also reports the opposite case: to simulate drunk driving, the car ride does not take place in the VR, but in true reality. Instead of a joypad and a VR headset, a modified vehicle, which can be driven both

in "normal" as well as in "drunk driving mode", is used. The vehicle reacts unpredictably and with the tools and sensations of real reality, which lets the sober driver experience the quality of driving in a drunken mode (ibid., pp. 79).

Museums like the British Museum[7] or the American Museum of Natural History[8] use the technology for virtual tours - whereby it has to be noted that both museums selected a different partner from the industry, whose products (Oculus eyewear in the case of the British Museum, Google at the American Museum of Natural History) are featured. Nevertheless, Rae / Edwards (2016) after an evaluation of the British Museum reported that the immersive experience was highly welcomed and a learning effect was recognizable and that prior to their visit many potential visitors found the technology itself interesting enough to become interested in the museum:

> "On review, the evaluation from the Virtual Reality Weekend suggests a VR environment helped the family audience to understand the Bronze Age, a complex part of the British Museum's collection, and that VR environments are of value to understanding our collection objects. Feedback and visitor demographics show that Samsung Gear VR headsets were a particular draw for teenagers and adults and that many visitors saw value in using the headsets alongside interacting with handling objects to learn about historical periods" (ibid.).

Even the evacuation of aircrafts can be practiced and optimized using VR methods. Chittaro (2012) reported on the attempt to simulate the aircraft evacuation as a "serious game". While this is not a CAVE VR environment according to the reported definitions (the control was done on a PC using a standard keyboard), the results are described as convincing:

> "Overall, the experiment showed that serious games that simulate risk experiences can be a very effective tool for changing attitudes concerning personal safety topics, as well as for learning purposes: just playing a game level for 2-3 minutes resulted in a considerable improvement of users' self-efficacy and knowledge" (ibid., 224).

Out of these described possibilities, those that occur in the social or psychological/therapeutic area are of particular value as they suggest to what extent religious beliefs can be studied, probably in combinatation with methods for brain wave measurements which are known for localizing religious emotions in the brain (see below). The combination of VR/AR by using, for example, the "Emotiv BCI Mind Controller" could provide interesting results by replicating the findings of Newberg and Sayadmansour (see below) with gamers or users of VR environments.

---

7   https://blog.britishmuseum.org/new-virtual-reality-tour-with-oculus/, 20.6.2018
8   https://www.amnh.org/explore/news-blogs/news-posts/museum-joins-with-go-to-launch-virtual-reality-visits,
     20.06.2018

3.1   Selected Examples of previous research on the use of VR

Theatrical Performance: An experiment conducted in 2000 sought to find out if the number of stage rehearsals (and the associated costs of travel, stage design, lighting, etc.) could be reduced if actors were rehearsing interacting in a VR space while being instructed by a director. The possibilities of acting out and, above all, showing emotions were technically very limited at the time of testing, but the result is described as impressively positive since the necessity of physical contacts and thus number of rehearsals could be reduced while the actors were still able to get into their roles and integrate into the mix of characters (Slater / Howell / Streed / Pertaub / Gaurau 2000).

Archeology: As it was mentioned earlier in this article, applications with a cultural and sensual relevance to VR/AR are used in archeology. In addition to the restoration of objects and buildings, the psychic effect of lighting, size and acoustics seems to be important for the issues discussed here. Since the impression of sacral objects or buildings as well as of rituals (and their binding and socially integrating effect) is not only a consequence of their meaning for an expression of faith but also the exhibition of authority and power and the way these are shown. With the help of VR it is possible to get a better understanding of them in terms of context than just by means of descriptions or reconstructions (as models) (Cassidy / Robinson 2017). In the context of real-world embedding, for example in the surrounding landscape or in comparison to today, VR/AR replicas make processes of understanding and acceptance easier as have Sierra / de Prado / Soler / Codina shown (2017), in this case even by using the *Unreal-game engine* to let users visit a medieval town and to (virtually) walk its streets.

School / preschool: preschool children suffering from autism were prepared for school with VR technology. Ip, Wong, Chan et al. developed six VR scenarios that were tested with over 100 subjects in a fully immersive CAVE facility. Initial results showed that the children developed significant improvements, for example, in the recognition of their own and foreign emotions and social reciprocity (Ip / Wong / Chan / Byrne / Li / Yuan / Lau / Wong 2016).

Anxiety and Panic Attacks: established game technologies have been used to successfully treat fear of heights (vertigo or acrophobia) (Rothbaum / Hodges / Kooper / Opdyke / Williford / North 1995), fear of flying (aviophobia) or fear of animals (arachnophobia: spiders etc.) (Fogg 2003, 74). Therapeutic approaches using VR/AR in order to treat patients suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms were also effective (Botella / Quero / Banos / Perpina / Garcia Palacios / Riva 2004).

Social phobias and schizophrenia: The possibilities of treating social phobias with images or real confrontations are limited. The tone of voice and the thereby expressed information as an audio file are only weak indications for people who are afraid of direct confrontation. VR environments or AR techniques can project animated faces on 3D objects /dummies ("virtual agents") and put audio

to this animation or video, allowing the patient to encounter fearful situations in a safe space and with psychotherapeutic support. After Russell (1994) presented his outcomes at the beginning of the VR lifecycle, Gutierréz-Maldonado / Rus-Calafell and González-Conde (2014), among others, developed new approaches to the field and benefited from previous research endeavours. Still, whether schizophrenia can be treated with computer games is unclear. A literature research of various disciplines dealing with learning and cognitive as well as cerebral processes of change has provided indicators for a possible usability of computer games as a treatment option, but further investigation is required, according to the researchers (Suenderhauf / Walter / Lenz / Lang / Bordwardt 2016, 33).

Emotions/non-verbal communication: Today the recognition and utilization of emotions is possible with off-the-shelf game hardware like Microsoft's Kinect camera. Different states can be detected through posture and facial expression which can then have an alternating effect on the storyline of the game. Peñas and Peinado (2017) studied different postures and emotional states (lacking religiosity).

Their intention was to have the system analyze the player's mood by decoding their posture. These can then feedback into game interactions, dialogues and game situations. Interestingly, given the limitations of the experimental set-up (only a few postures and facial expressions are available, very basic dialogue structures) the test subjects felt that the system could read their minds. Obviously, they clearly overestimated the true capabilities of the system— a discovery that shows that humans still seem to over-estimate technologies eagerly or suspect "hidden functions" (see below). Recent research setups could include and harness data such as heartbeat or pulse.

Motor skills: Abuhashish et al. (2015) researched the influence of emotions on motor skills (although they narrowed it down to "happy" and "sad"). Their goal was to depict realistic emotional states of video game characters. Based on the realization that sad people walk differently than happy ones, they noticed that in most video games the characters' movements do not change no matter how the storyline develops. Their experiment aimed at identifying the player's emotional states and bringing these into movements within the VR space. Basori / Daman / Sunar and Bade (2007) have already pursued this approach. Their arrangement also contained the seven emotions used by Peñas and Peinado (2017) later: Anger, Fear, Disgust, Sadness, Joy, Interest and Surprise (ibid., 28). Future research could also integrate the moods of confidence or faith, which would be of interest for theology and religious education. However, it is necessary to feed hierarchies and architectures of intentions into data processing systems, as Tomasello / Carpenter / Call / Behne and Moll (2005) point out that emotional states result from the balance between intention and purpose (ibid., 677). However, at the same time they are part of culture/interculture— emotions and actions are observed, registered and evaluated against the background of everybody's individual experience of enculturation (ibid., 680). For VR systems and collaborative problem-solving scenarios (whether

in games or educational environments), understanding and accepting the intentions of "the other" are just as important as they are in "real" reality. In this light social awareness can be received and developed in different cultural settings and portrayals.

3.2　Thoughts on findings in practical and theoretical discussions

It is obvious that practical acting in a virtual space can treat fears (and phobias) effectively:

> "VR allows structuring therapy like a special and protected environment. The virtual environment is, in fact, a "safe" environment. This aspect of "as if" from VR is of great importance, as it can be considered to be an intermediate key step between the consulting room (completely protected) and the real environment (totally threatening). Multiple situations, difficulties, unforeseen events, errors, dramatic consequences can be practiced; although, "in fact", nothing happens. In short, the patient feels safe in the virtual situation and, supported by the therapist, can face the feared context at his own pace and without risks" (Botella / Quero / Banos / Perpina / Garcia Palacios / Riva 2004, p. 39).

Rehearsing actions in role-playing games (ibid., P. 40) and repeatable actions can also reduce anxiety and allow the patient to develop new self-confidence through self-efficacy (ibid., 40). This self-efficacy has been regarded as a notably more powerful predictor for acting successfully than merely reflecting on past processes and their assumed continuation into the future (Bandura 1977, 211).

VR could be used not only for treating phobias, but also as a training tool to nudge attitudes and develop behavioral change. It has been used to train doctors who showed lack of empathy when dealing with bad news for cancer patients. Doctors should learn to understand the world from a different perspective. For this they were confronted with everyday situations of cancer patients and had to go through these typical frustrating situations (Fogg 2003, p. 78).

This list is not intended to be complete and can not make any statements on the validity of the procedures and results given by other authors and researchers. However, it points out the steadily increasing importance of VR for more and more fields of human social economics.

The chosen examples of i.e. the psychotherapeutic practice are of great interest in another aspect in the context of the above presented statements. For one, the great confidence in the light of virtual treatment possibilities becomes apparent in the research reports. Botella et al. even go so far as to state that:

> "A few years ago, we already highlighted VR potential in the field of psychological therapies and the facts occurred until now show that said potential was real. All works, carried out in the field of

psychological therapies, prove that in less than a decade this new tool has shown a remarkable utility for the treatment of many psychological disorders (...). Indeed, nowadays VR is of remarkable use (...). (...) VR has a series of advantages when we compare it with the traditional therapies" (Botella et al. 2004, p. 39).

The results from this as well as other studies seem to confirm this positive expectation, but they are also reminiscent of Joseph Weizenbaum's observations. His very limited Artificial Intelligence program "Eliza" from 1964 attracted the attention of American psychiatrists like Kenneth Colby who were fascinated by the possibilities of using computer sciences and artificial intelligence in psychiatry. Although the program did not actually explain anything but simply replied with more or less seemingly intelligent but pre-formulated queries based on the users' input, quite some psychiatrists believed that a computer-generated counseling would be the future of psychotherapy:

"Colby believed that there could be a healthy therapeutic relationship between people and a computer program because, although a human therapist is not actually present, the program was obviously written by one" (Turkle 1995, 106).

Weizenbaum rejected these ideas firmly. Fogg later also warned of idealizing technology:

"(...), the simulation is just another gee-whiz technology experience, not a vehicle for changing attitudes or behavior" (Fogg 2003, 74).

This VR-environments being just at the beginning of its "hype cycle" let us hope for and expect much more effective approaches in the near future.

In terms of religion, the benefit of VR or AR would be, above all, a social one: people could perform rituals together, attend church services or the Friday prayer in selected places, deliver sermons, and come together at freely selectable locations and watch atmospheric or celestial phenomena.

The already tested experiments of connecting motor skills and emotionality also allow further reaching considerations. A VR system can translate mood and brain activities into appropriate landscapes, colors, lights, and symbolic settings of transcendency that may be completely different for each individual participant creating a technically assisted form of mass hallucination that is analyzed and can be controlled with any positive or negative consequences to some extent. Mass panic like in Mecca in September 2015 or suicide, as observed in the past especially in cults (see about the Heaven's Gate, Jonestown or Branch Davidian mass suicides: Lee 2017) would be both preventable as well as transportable.

In turn, theology and religious education could contribute by defining typical behaviors of believers or spiritually touched people, and making them viable for game developers as well as pointing out opportunities and risks from their point of view.

Boundaries can also be clarified and can be crossed deliberately, or borderlines can be made tolerable. Ancient ritualized scenarios of human sacrifices or mutilations like circumcisions can be observed and evaluated regarding their impressions on the spectator in simulation, although measuring and supervising the real reactions of an audience could be interesting too.

4   Observations on immersion and virtuality, feelings and emotions

The credibility and relevance of technical environments are of great importance. Users approach technologies often with either a certain skepticism or expectation. Both can, caused by flaws in the design, quickly disappoint high flying hopes (Fogg 2003, 130). Users are willing to open up to technology if they know that the system observes and evaluates individual actions, but is treating all participants equally (ibid., 197). With this being granted, other people do not even have to be portrayed realistically, as long as they are represented as avatars in the VR (ibid., 198).

To go beyond the limitations of the *physical* and *visual* world was also the attempt of religious meditation. Spencer-Hall calls medieval meditation manuals "visionary scripts" which should help the believer to immersely "feel" the life of Christ directly through his/her own imagination.

> "For the skilled, 'visualising becomes seeing'. The ultimate aim of seeing was to become fully present at the moment in which the event occurs" (Spencer-Hall 2018, 193).

Still it should be noted that to date even the most advanced VR systems merely illustrate and do not overcome human biological and cognitive limitations, as Hornbeck / Barrett (2008) criticized on the example of Second Life (SL):

> "SL residents are situated in SL by way of an avatar, which serves as a resident's 'zero point' of perception and social contact. One can go a little outside, but cannot move entirely beyond one's avatar. For example, one cannot be viewing books in a SL library while one's avatar is soaking up rays on the beach. Resident and avatar are inextricable, and so the latter is an important part of one's online identity. Consequently, great amounts of time, effort and money go into avatar construction" (ibid., 5).

As mentioned above— important in terms of religious education and theology— in addition to the three "I" of Immersion, Intensity and Interaction which were mentioned earlier, Botella et al. define a fourth "I"— "imagination". This refers to contexts of meaning beyond the technical conditions and thus includes what users see in the VR or what they contemplate. The fourth "I" guides a variety of intentions into virtual space (Botella et al., 2004, 39 f.). At the same time, this non-technical "I" enfolds the scope of religion which, being invisible, is more difficult to judge.

At this point, technical solutions and neurological interpretations can be combined with VR — studies on the effect of religious symbolism on individuals (Newberg et al. (2014) and the effect of perceived optical symbols with religious content on the cognitive processes of the brain (ibid. 83) could be replicated and measured under VR conditions. Newberg found significant effects of religious symbolism in both the visual and emotional brain areas (ibid., 91). It is highly imaginable that an immersively experienced VR environment could emphasize this effect or even change it drastically.

The evaluation of brainwaves, of emotional impulses and the cerebral blood flow of the different brain areas of meditating and non-meditating individuals measured by Newberg et al. (2010) promises fresh impetuses on virtuality's impact on religious awareness and sentiment per se for further research. The researchers measured changes in the frontal lobe of long-term meditating individuals, possibly rooting in meditation practice (ibid., 902). The frontal lobe of the brain is connected with the limbic areas and is involved in the processing of attention, emotions and memories (ibid., 903). From a religious, educational and game study perspective, it could now be significant to what extent not only meditation, but also VR has an impact on emotions and memories and how religious states of consciousness relate to these.

Sayadmansour observes that in addition to quantitative mounds of data, the human brain also collects and processes qualitative data, transforming them into "holistic" concepts which help to understand the world. Such "neurotheological" (Sayadmansour 2014, 52) mechanisms possibly connect secular with transcendental perceptions in the processing moment:

"One of the major issues that neurotheology faces, is the problem of the ability to determine the subjective state of the subject. This is also a more universal issue in the context of cognitive neuroscience. After all, one can never know precisely what a research subject is thinking at the precise moment of imaging. If you have a subject solving a mathematical task, one does not know if the person's mind wandered during the task. You might be able to determine if they did the test correctly or incorrectly, but that in and of itself cannot determine why they were right or wrong. The issue of the subjective state of the individual is particularly problematic in neurotheology. When considering spiritual states, the ability to measure such states empirically while not disturbing such states is almost impossible" (ibid., 54).

These kinds of effects, states of consciousness or disorders, could be much better targeted in VR (in the sense of controlling or avoiding certain situations, emotions, visions and so on). Positive or negative religious expectations and beliefs can affect well-being and consequently mental stability as well as specific diseases.

In turn, religious crises can lead to or intensify mental health issues, such as depression or anxieties. According to a research by Leurent et al. (2013, 4), this applies to spiritual as well as religious individuals compared to secular individuals. The authors suppose that individuals who are prone to depression might possibly be increasingly searching for spiritual or religious explanatory models than secular individuals. They suggest that people with depression may be more interested in spiritual or religious explanations than secular ones, and may fear mutually reinforcing effects. It is to be feared that these effects might be reinforcing each other (ibid., 10).

Crises like that often cause difficulties for secular psychotherapy or drive concerned persons back into the setting of their denomination (e.g. a sect) which possibly may have evoked or caused the crisis in the first place.

The results of King et al. also suggest that a strong faith frequently leads to a deteriorated performance in clinical therapy settings (King / Speck / Thomas 1999, 1292 & 1297 - in opposition: Tabei / Zarei / Joulaei 2016, 3).

VR/AR technologies could support emotional states in various simulated secular as well as religious situations and reveal them for analysis. The adequate classification of emotional states in such scenarios would be necessary for this, as suggested by use of the emotiv-apparatus, which can then be applied to 3D animated models. That way users communicating with avatars in a VR environment get to sense the avatars' emotions and reactions more realistically. Abuhashish et al. have submitted a pilot project as mentioned before and assure that their model can be used in both computer games and medical contexts (ibid., 160). It should be mentioned, however, that a system like that also enables manipulations. As false prophets and sects deceive and scam trusting people in reality, engineered or misread emotions, religious expressions or impulses may lead believers to fall for the religious empathy of a technical system or to be faked by human avatar leaders: the real user behind the virtual avatar does not have to be empathic himself, but by help of the technology, the user/ believer might interpret it this way and adapt all actions accordingly.

Banos / Botella and Perpina (1999) also warn of negative effects, precisely because "VR is a medium defined in terms of its effects on both basic and major psychological processes" (ibid., 288) and fear that the lines between the different realities may blur (ibid., 289):

> "(...) as virtual environments become a part of our natural environments, the distinction between the computer´s reality and the conventional reality will fade away, and humans will need to become more

sophisticated in our reality judgements. In the case of VR, even its name suggests a possible psychological effect that sometimes is not welcome: the growing confusion between virtual reality and physical reality" (ibid., 289)

This means that people have learned to base their decisions on realities, but now they are increasingly basing their decision making on irrealities, which on the other hand become new but distorted realities. Even the creator of the VR term Jaron Lanier himself voiced concerns (Biocca / Lanier 1992):

> "There have been a lot of media technologies recently that are just slightly interactive, like the Nintendo machines at home. And in my view, just a slight bit of interactivity might be worse than no interactivity at all. For one thing, it forces the user into the psychology of a rat being trained to operate a maze. Also, there's a problem that it's sort of an enforced form of compulsive behavior. There's no doubt that all of us - and let's say adolescent boys in particular - go through a period where they are interested in killing things and aggression. But I think the point is if they do it in a playground, it's part of a fluid process which continues to grow and change. But if they get caught up in a little interactive loop, in some sort of a simulation entertainment product, then they get stuck in it and relive the same loop again and again and again. (...) You need to get a good grounding in the physical world" (ibid., p. 163).

From a point of view of religious education Lanier's idea of a VR initiation rite or "initiation ceremony" for children of a certain age is interesting and similar to a confirmation in catholic and protestant church:

> "That's probably gonna be a controversial idea, but I think that's a good idea. And it could be framed positively. There could be a nice sort of ritual for kids when they get old enough to use simulators. They could be introduced to the mysteries of the simulation world, and that could be a lot of fun. So it doesn't have to be framed as a prohibition at all. It could be actually a very nice thing, but I think something like that should be done in the future" (ibid., 164).

He is proposing a ritualized transformation into an expanded world. According to Wagner, players who introduce their avatar into a new world grow with their tasks and experiences and also undergo a ritualized process of transformation which leads to a goal represented by "levels" or stages, similar to rites of passage (Wagner 2012, pp. 159).

5   VR, learning and religious education

Social and cultural principles serve to structure society and its inherent constellations of power, and draw on conventions which have evolved and have been established among members of a society or of a milieu as social (and religious) beliefs for generations.

However, the real and also the world of narration and imagination are part of a "biological reality". They have limits by which VR is not limited in the first place. Birth and death are among these boundaries. Traditions, narratives and memories are interwoven within these boundaries and have a truly life-sustaining character: they protect against life-threatening mistakes or make life easier (Heim 1991, p. 32).

However, it has to be noted that these kinds of limits barely exist in VR, at least not in the conventional and expected form. The VR's non-physicality or non-embodiment not only grants freedom, but also reveals another significant limitation:

"An avatar can enact a 'kneeling' animation while praying, but can´t engage in the traditional sacraments" (Kaburuan 2012, 65).

Furthermore, there can be no physical damage, destruction or punishment in case of illegal or dishonest or heretic behavior. However, it is possible to reduce the rank of a user or to exclude him from certain functions and areas of the VR before, finally, a virtual user resp. the avatar could be deleted. Virtual exclusion may entail further deviance phenomena in a "shared", "liked" and mobile virtual reality. Otherwise any application could simply be restarted just as an avatar could be recreated.

Wagner points out that there are more crucial boundaries of VR for religious practice and representation: religions provide answers and require the observance of rituals and the faith in firm principles. VR, however, is the exact opposite - VR promises freedom and almost unlimited optionality (Wagner 2012, pp. 221). Sacred texts, whose contents and even words or spellings have been codified for centuries and which should not or must not be changed, get a different meaning in multi-optional contexts.

Joint experiences or learning in VR may offer new options in education. Slater et al. (2000) wanted to find out if people could solve puzzles together that were written on the walls of virtual rooms. The researchers were less interested in the correct solution of the task but rather in observing the social interaction. While the avatars lacked important visual characteristics and comprehensible behaviors, there was social interaction nevertheless. Interestingly, participants were most likely to be credited with leadership skills by the group if their technical equipment was superior to the

others, so their (technically endorsed) performance possibly expressed "power". The leadership characteristics assigned in virtual settings were not confirmed in real/physical settings afterwards (ibid., 41 and 44). Also technical imperfections were an important subject in the group discussions. These obviously cast an influence on the contentual tasks (ibid., 46). On the other hand, less well-equipped participants reported social experience as well as respectfulness towards other gamer avatars.

In the first decades of home-computers human imagination was needed to interpret the text output of adventure games. Today the need for imagination is being lowered within computerized environments. This is particularly true for the educational sector and it is not surprising that religious communities such as Christians, Jews and Muslims have already used the virtuality of Second Life to establish their own representations there (see: Kaburuan 2012, 3). Kaburuan has recreated the Via Dolorosa and the hill of Golgatha in Second Life for his dissertation project, giving users the opportunity to follow the path to crucifixion (ibid., p. 34). He measured the rate of use (ibid., pp. 51) and also interviewed them based on a questionnaire (answers and reaction: 51-55) at the end of the tour. The reactions were extremely positive and the using rates proved to be particularly high at Easter.

The advantage of VR for the field of education and especially for religious education is that this way otherwise imagined content or content which would normally be presented two-dimensionally can be visualized in a targeted and focused manner. The visualization can happen in terms of shape, dimension/size, haptic as well as in terms of lighting and aura. Experiencing ancient sanctuaries the same way as believers of the past millennia did is an exclusive possibility in VR. Above all, this experience is completely risk-free. Neither encroaching rituals of violence nor outbreaking animals or natural disasters like draught which also had great influence on religions' substances and rites, need to be feared. In addition, as already mentioned, groups of people can expose themselves to the same influences and describe their experiences within a narrow time frame and from different cultural, religious or other perspectives. Diverse groups like that could also be studied regarding their willingness and ability of solving problems when confronted with a shared challenge.

VR will supersede neither teachers nor textbooks. However, it goes above and beyond illustrations or animated graphics of processes and can complement most elaborate technical descriptions with visual understanding. Learning individuals can focus on the truly vital information and will not be distracted by information irrelevant to the process of learning (weather, teacher's clothing, their own mental state, group quarrels, being attracted physically, etc.).

6   Individual experiences enhanced by VR

In VR's first hype in the early 1990s Rheingold wrote:

> "One way to see VR is as a magical window onto other worlds (...). Another way to see VR is to recognize that in the closing decades of the twentieth century, reality is disappearing behind a screen" (Rheingold 1991, 19. Cited by: Stanovsky 2004, 168. German version: Rheingold 1992, 22).

Today, the screen is no longer a barrier, and both areas overlap, which is especially true for AR. Wagner argues in a similar way when she says that online and offline spheres are flowing in and out of each other in modern life designs and become "persistent liminality" (2012, p. 159).

Despite the variety of international research and publications on VR/AR, the knowledge acquisition is still heavily dependent on the respective state of the art or the technical limits and approaches (as well as the researchers' expertise) at the time of a research. In addition, many related disciplines are just discovering the field and are developing it for themselves. This gives reason to expect focused approaches and hits theology and religious education largely unprepared:

> "In VR worlds such as SL, on the other hand, where we can retain control over phenomenal inputs, we may proceed by examining what has been put into the user. Which conditions suffice for a religious or spiritual experience, and which do not? Perhaps by using VR and borrowing from media theorists specializing in religious content, we can approach these questions with greater precision. For media researchers, examining this gap in affective content and how this gap narrows or widens with new technologies could help to explain how VR, and media generally, contributes to the 'mediatization' of religion and to the 'enchantment' of popular culture" (Hornbeck / Barrett 2008, 19).

How can theology and religious education explain, comment on or even benefit from this development?

The quest for meaning especially in western countries is still enormous, but it has changed— a process that is labeled "spiritual turn" by Houtman / Aupers (2007). Established state churches benefit less from this quest for meaning than independent and active denominations such as esoteric movements, free churches and sects (ibid., 305). This has less to do with religion itself rather than with progressive individualization in a globalized and multi-optional consumerized world. Today, at least in western cultures people can choose their church and form of worship of religion; there are no standards or only little social expectations. This leads to a "relocation of the sacred. Gradually losing its transcendent character, the sacred becoming more and more conceived of being imminent and residing in the deeper layers of the self" (ibid., 315).

Consumer societies alienated from religion produce individuals who no longer find any contact partner for their "last questions". Frissen et al. (2012, 83) discuss Max Weber:

"The "disenchantment of the world", Weber argued, generates a nonreligious and disillusioned worldview. Under the influence of science and technology, he commented, an otherworldly orientation will be gradually replaced by a worldview that is more objective, but undermines – at the same time – the meaning of life. Modern astronomy, biology, physics or chemistry can describe the world as it is, but can (and should!) not teach anything about the ultimate meaning of the world".

They also note that the majority of interviewed World of Warcraft players would agree with this result:

"Interestingly enough the majority of players of World of Warcraft who were interviewed also subscribe to this existential situation. They are basically nonreligious in a traditional sense and are disillusioned. First of all, they pride themselves on being atheists incapable of believing in "supernatural" or "transcendent" realms and especially traditional forms of religion. One gamer typically argued that "[r]eligions like Christianity and Islam are from the past and no longer relevant for me. They are based on a society from two thousand years ago [...]". Others state that "there's nothing holy about the Bible", that religions are just "fairytales" and that "only fools believe in God". They essentially perceive themselves as too rational and sober to believe and often literally claim that scientific knowledge essentially can solve and demystify all mysteries. As self-proclaimed, "true atheists" they accept many secularizing scientific propositions derived from evolution theory, physics, and computer sciences" (ibid.).

Piasecki received almost identical statements in his study on ideological views of game developers (Piasecki 2016a, summary in English: Piasecki 2016b).

Many people no longer accept premade answers today, but seek their very own meaning by themselves. Sometimes they try to find this in substitutes: drugs, fashion, music, nutrition and, of course, games as a plot and as a medium. Therefore, considering this would be vital in order to know where people experience a "spiritual turn" and when they are in risk of undergoing tendencies of social isolation due to a "spiritual drift" away from society into spiritual sub-cultures. This also helps to find out how to prevent alienation and to establish educational strategies. One thing is certain: anyone who is searching and falls into wrong hands is at risk of manipulation. Technical systems alone cannot be trusted as the modulation of player´s behavioral repertoire is now part of the computer and video games market and a field where big money can be made (Piasecki 2018).

7   Discussion: Religion and VR

Faith and religion are individually experienced, but above all, they are community experiences:

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20).

"The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers." (Qur'an, 49:10)

How can traditional religious experiences be transferred to VR in the light of the research results, observations and thoughts that have been presented so far? Did "digital heaven", as Spencer-Hall puts it, become reality, something that medieval saints tried to reach through meditation (Spencer-Hall 2018, 195)?

Religious activity in VR can occur among several individuals, represented by avatars collectively reading texts or performing and/or watching rituals and visiting sacred virtual places. This way rites and meanings can be experienced and those interested can participate at any time. Other means of access can range up to psychedelic experiences that are easily generated visually by graphic effects and possibly can be increased by real toxic or spiritual drugs, herbs etc. In VR the term "metaphysics" gets an enhanced and updated meaning.

Whether such joint experiences would be more than a leisure activity and truly create shared religious emotions or mental states would need to be tested. The Emotiv-Headsets and cerebral studies of for example Newberg and Sayadmansour, present various technical and theoretical starting points which are worth pursuing.

Kaburuan points out that, on the one hand, religion can be inclusive in VR. Non-Muslims can also go on a "Virtual Hajj" and visit the holy places in Mecca. The operator IslamOnline.net even emphasizes that this "is not just a tool for Muslims, but also for non-muslims to learn about Islam" (Kaburuan 2012, p. 64) - in reality infidels would not be able to access the sanctuary. According to this, VR could be inter-religiously enlightening, instructive and mediating, but also causes follow-up questions:

Is it conceivable and tolerable for someone to take part in a religious rite he does or does not believe in? Or join practises under a fake or real idenity whose content may be mutually exclusive? A Shia Muslim in a Jewish Kabbalah rite for example? Finally it is to be reminded that the offline user (body) and online avatar (spirit) can never be fully separated (Spencer-Hall 2018, 195). And apart from this, would that be desirable or tolerable after all? Does religion not remain bound to firm beliefs as well as to loyalty and fellowship? Can such ties be maintained in the VR?

Religion and VR are not mutually contradictory. Then again especially immersive games often refer to or rely on religions or at least spiritual symbolism:

"Being "the most mystical" and "the most magical land of all," so it seems, is an important asset in rivalry in the game as well as in the competition between online game worlds competing on today's market" (Aupers 2014, 8).

But can played religion compare with practiced or believed religion at all? Although faith is always a vision and, therefore, virtual in a way, experienced faith is mentally virtual while VR's virtuality is a technically generated one; no one has to believe in it - it can be bought in shops, can be installed and experienced. Its results are untouchable but producible - over and over again. Then again, this also applies to meditation to some degree. This, however, originates in the biological individual. The indivual dives into this VR and it no longer is part of and bound to its own mentally created visions but simply uses a technical product. Other questions concern the identity of a "person". How many identities does someone have, how many is one allowed to have?

"When people can play at having different genders and different lives, it isn't surprising that for some this play has become as real as what we conventionally think of as their lives, although for them this is no longer a valid distinction. (...) In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language" (Turkle 1995, p. 14).

VR could cause fragmentations of identities plus implications and challenges for psychotherapy. Even the question of "presence" raises questions of comprehension— Slater et al. lists the "orthogonal" definitions of "presence" which are not identical in content:

"The term presence in the virtual environment literature has come to be used to denote the sense of "being there" in a place (for example, Held & Durlach, 1992). An orthogonal attribute of presence in a place is the sense of being present with other people. This attribute is logically orthogonal, because, for example, talking on a telephone with someone might give a strong sense of "being with them" but not of being in the same place as them. It is useful nevertheless to examine the extent to which these two different types of presence, place presence, and copresence are empirically related" (Slater et al. 2000, 41; also Zeiher 1983).

Postmodern and hedonistic individualism no longer accepts an individual to subjugate under any dogma without criticism. However, the post-modern being, who opens up new virtual worlds, is not limited to any specific spirituality and has, in this light, almost infinite possibilities. Self-efficacy

and self-realization are not only social ideals, but are also flanked by technical possibilities for realizing them in virtuality. VR glasses, data gloves or data suits translate human actions into transformable data. Actions and forms of communication from the real world are being currently transferred, too. In the future, online experiences may transform personal behavior and shape identity in a similar way as rock music has not only changed the western taste in music, but also the culture as a whole:

> "Print and radio tell; stage and film show; cyberspace embodies" (Randal Walser, "Elements of a Cyberspace Playhouse" (1990), cited in: Rheingold 1991, 192; German: Rheingold 1992, 290).

Time and dimension become relative as well. One can take part in a VR activity and a conference at the same time, or even both can take place in the VR. Visions, fantasies, descriptions previously reserved for the personal imagination can be experienced identically by multiple personalities.

8   Conclusion and a futuristic outlook

Today, VR technologies make the extensive manipulation of artificial environments and virtual objects possible. Virtual physical laws and parameters can be changed in VR as cyberspace allows or requires at any time. Only real time and real biological processes are excluded, then again physical and biological impairments can be overcome:

> "What is happening inside the computer´s processors, or on its screen, may be 'virtual', but the reaction it provokes is material" (Spencer-Hall 2018, 221).

Patients suffering from Parkinson desease can act in VR without any limitations (ibid.), *the crippled can rise* (Luke 5:24).

Heim hoped:

> Should synthetic worlds then contain no death, no pain, no fretful concerns? (...) Yet to incorporate constraints fully, as some fiction does, is to produce an empty mirror over and above the real world, a mere reflection of the world in which we are anchored. (...) Actual cyberspace should do more; cyberspace should evoke imagination, not repeat the world. Virtual reality could be a place for reflection, but the reflection should make philosophy, not redundancy" (Heim 1991, 33).

What faith and religion actually are remains an urgent question, because even in VR faith can not be forced, but as part of a technical framework could be explained by rules and narratives or probably be used in a game's context. It would then be instrumentalized for the purpose of the game - this would still not be true faith. For Durkheim, on the other hand, it was crucial that religion was not just an *imagination* but also concrete *acts* that tie the individual back to society. Wagner discusses that:

> "Our experiences interacting bodily within that world further engage us in the illusion that we truly inhabit the digital space. (...) The relationships developed in the virtual worlds have the ability to become deep enough and important enough to their members that they can be seen in religious terms" (Wagner 2012, 157).

That faith and religion are experiences shared by members of a community, as the Bible and Qur'an emphasize on, was prominently stated by Emile Durkheim at the turn of the 19th century:

> "Religious beliefs, says Durkheim, are "always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practises the rites that go with them". The beliefs, he argues, are in fact the thing that unites the group. A "church" is "a society whose members are united because they share a common conception of the sacred world and its relation to the profane world, and who translate this common conception into identical practises". If we generalize this idea of a "church" to any group that is bonded together by common beliefs and practises, then it is possible to argue that play communities may be doing some of the same work as explicitly religious ones" (ibid.).

The assumption that religion, transcendance, divinity and mortality may simply stretch out into VR or that games actually already are, could be or may one day become spiritual experiences with a deeper meaning must be spoiled to a certain degree or at least requires deeper theological reflection, due to the nature of its technological "core" (or 'heart' and 'soul' in religious terms). Games share elements from religous narration like biblical apocalypses. Both games and religion share, according to Wagner, certain similarities: otherworldly mediators appear to help the player understand the experiences and succeed the mission. Game settings and religious scripts both offer visions of transcendence, suggesting that there is more to life than our mundane experiences. Both present the approach of the "end of the time" or "end of the world" in a "dramatic sense" (see: Wagner 2012, 204).

Nevertheless, Wagner notes, the "element of secularism inherent in today´s apocalypses marks the most distinctive feature of video game apocalypses". She cites Collins saying "the transcendent nature of apocalyptic eschatology looks beyond this world to another" (ibid.). Games, according to Wagner, "make no such promises. (...) Death in video games is temporary, not

permanent - thus salvation is also temporary. Worlds visited are transient. Enemies defeated are not real. When one turns off the game and returns to one´s daily life, the same hardships, the same problems, the same doubts remain" (ibid.).

Also cultural and intellectual reception environments must be considered and then even more important questions come up in the context of religion and VR: for example, what about ritual clothing? Kaburuan writes about "Virtual Hajj":

> "Sacredness here is in one part determined by the designs of the authors of this space, and in another by the experiences of users moving through and interacting with it in accord with how the Hajj is meant to be experienced (for example, by wearing the appropriate ihram clothing)" (2012, 65).

The sanctity or the ensuing feeling of religiosity depends on the designers and the users. Certainly a religious person can develop sublime feelings when visiting the virtual Vatican or virtual Mecca, but what about other people who they may meet in the form of avatars? How important is religious tolerance or intolerance? Can or may one enter a virtual place of worship dressed indecently? The avatar in a bikini? Or a ritually and correctly dressed avatar in the VR, but controlled by a naked and drunk person in *physical* reality? Can virtual sacred places be violated? It is uncertain whether this would be a problem at all, because any damage or change to any place or structure could be undone but then it is to question who has the authority to do so. Or could any such changes and its influence on social or religious groups be considered and accepted as evolutionary developments in VR? Would the meaning of holy places fundamentally change?

According to which legal laws would sexual assaults or forced acts, incitements to suicide or mass murder or outrages within the VR, which are not exactly rare in the religious sector, be prosecuted? In a virtual environment, with players being located in different countries and cultures, on whose basis would they be charged, judged and convicted? What would be their sentence? Is there a need for religious laws or judgement?

Is virtually indexed but actually perceived fear and intimidation justiciable? To what extent can mental suffering be traced back to artificially generated stimuli and intentions, or can a real trauma be avenged by a virtual attack?

Certainly, however, despite all the multiple and overlapping realities, the biological human will die and the question of what happens with the soul remains. Today, technical systems can already perform authentic non-player characters that depict and recreate reactions and intentions. However, people are moved and motivated by their secret dreams and fears, those that they would not even read aloud to themselves, not even when they are alone. So even if a highly realistic copy of a human being was created and even if it is equipped with AI, it is still a *different* entity, certainly not human.

Man, the biologically thinking individual, ultimately remains alone with her/his inner thoughts for the most of his or her life and everything amounts to the last moment of maximum isolation, death. To reconcile and deal with this, to accept this individually so far remains a realm mainly reserved for religion.

Transferring this last question into the VR, addressing it with AR in everyday life, and looking for new intellectual approaches outside the non-visible world can be a new and valuable task for theology and religious education.

This obviously is how VR can be seen from a religious, confessional, theological standpoint. VR is simply a tool that can be used to visualize religious aspects, facets of religiosity, maybe for education or excitement even, but surely not a representation of the religious in itself.

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Abuhashish, Faris A. / Zraqou, Jamal / Alkhodour, Wesam / Sunar, Mohd S. / Kolivand, Hoshang (2015): Emotion Interaction with Virtual Reality using Hybrid Emotion Classification Technique toward Brain Signals. International Journal of Computer Science & Information Technology (IJCSIT), Vol. 7, No. 2, April 2015, 159-182

Aupers, Stef (2014): Create your personal Saga - Spiritualization on Games in Advertising, Sociologica - Italian Journal of Sociology online, 3/2014, 1-23

Backlund, Per / Engström, Henrik / Gustavsson, Martin / Johanneson, Mikael / Lebram, Mikael / Sjörs, Emmy (2009): SIDH: A Game-Based Architecture for a Training Simulator, International Journal of Computer Games Technology Online: https://www.hindawi.com/journals/ijcgt / 2009/472672 /, 19.06.2018

Bandura, Albert (1977): Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. Psychological Review 1977, Vol. 84, No. 2, 191-215

Banos, R. M. / Botella, C. / Perpina, C. (1999): Virtual Reality and Psychopathology. Cyberpsychology & Behavior. Vol. 2, No. 4 1999, 283-292

Basori, Ahmad Hoirul / Daman, Daut / Sunar, Mohd Shahrizal / Bade, Abdullah (2007): The Potential of Human Haptic Emotions as a Technique for Virtual Human Characters Movement to Augment Interactivity in Virtual Reality Game, The International Journal of Virtual Reality, 2007, 7 (2), 27-32

Biocca, Frank / Lanier, Jaron (1992): Insider's View of the Future of Virtual Reality, Journal of Communication 42 (4), 150-172

Böger , Astrid (2010): The American Photography, in: Decker, Christof (Ed.): Visual Cultures of the United States on the History of Painting, Photography, Film, Television and New Media in America Bielefeld: transcript, 99-160

Botella, Cristina / Quero, Soledad / Banos, Rosa M. / Perpina, Conxa / Garcia Palacios, Azucena / Riva, Guiseppe (2004): Virtual Reality and Psychotherapy. Studies in health technology and informatics, 99 February 2004, 37-54

Brookwell, Holly (April 03, 2016): Forgotten genius: the man who made a working VR machine in 1957, online: https://www.techradar.com/news/wearables/forgotten-genius-the-man -who-made-a-working-vr-machine-in-1957-1318253, 20.06.2018

Burrill, Derek A. (2008): The Tryin 'Video Games, Masculinity, Culture, New York: Peter Lang Publishing

Cassidy, Brendan / Robinson, David (11.12.2017): How virtual reality is opening http://theconversation.com/how-virtual-reality-is-opening-up-some-of-the-worlds-most-inaccessible-archaeological-sites- 88286, 21.06.2018

Chittaro, Luca (2012): Passengers' Safety in Aircraft Evacuations: Employing Serious Games to Educate and Persuade, in: Bang, Magnus / Ragnemalm, Eva L. (Eds.): Persuasive Technology. Design for Health and Safety. 7th International Conference, PERSUASIVE 2012. Linköping, Sweden, June 6-8, 2012. Proceedings, Berlin-Heidelberg: Springer, 215-226

Cosson, Chuck (2018): Tool Without a Handle: Online Confessions, online: https: // cyberlaw. stanford.edu/blog/2018/03/tool-without-handle-online-confessions, 18.06.2018

Dath, Cathrin (2017): Crime scenes in Virtual Reality. A user centered study, Stockholm: KTH Royal Institute of Technology, online: https://kth.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1115566/FULLTEXT01.pdf, 10.6.2018

Frissen, Valerie / Lammens, Sybille / de Lange, Michiel / de Mul, Jon / Raessens, Joost (2012): Playful Identities. The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press

Fogg, B. J. (2003): Persuasive Technology. Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do, San Francisco / CA: Morgan Kaufman Publishers

Gartner (2017): Top Trends in the Gartner Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies, 2017. Online: https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/top-trends-in-the-gartner-hype-cycle-for -emerging-technologies-2017 /, 19.06.2018

Gelder, Jean-Loius van / Otte, Marc / Luciano, Eva C. (2014): Using virtual reality in criminological research, Crime Science 2014, 3:10, online: http://www.crimesciencejournal.com/content/3/1/10, 17.06.2018

Guidi, Gabriele / Micoli, Laura / Casagrande, Cesare / Ghezzi, Luciano (2010): Virtual reality for retail. 2010 16th International Conference on Virtual Systems and Multimedia, VSMM 2010. 10.1109/VSMM.2010.5665949, 285-288

Gutiérrez-Maldonado, José / Rus-Calafell, Mar / González-Conde, Joan (2013): Creation of a Virtual Virtual Reality Facility for the Assessment and Training of Emotional Recognition Ability Virtual Reality 18 (1) March 2014, DOI: 10.1007 / s10055-013-0236-7

Guthke, Karl S. (1999): The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hardwawar, Devindra (13.02.2018): 'Assassin's Creed Origins' virtual tours can actually teach history, online: https://www.engadget.com/2018/02/13/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour/, 07.06.2018

Heim, Michael (1991): The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality, in: Helsel, Sandra K / Roth, Judith Paris (Eds.): Virtual Reality: Theory, Practice and Promise, Westport / CT: Meckler Publishing, 27 -34

Heim, Michael (1993): The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality, New York: Oxford University Press

Heim, Michael (1998): Virtual Realism, Oxford University Press

Heim, Michael (2017): Bridging Real and Virtual: A Spiritual Challenge, Journal Religion Film Media Vol. 3, No 1-2017, 159-181

Hornbeck, Ryan G., & Barrett, Justin L. (2008): Virtual reality as a 'spiritual experience': a perspective from the cognitive science of religion. Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook, 6(1), 75–90

Houtman, Dick / Aupers, Stef (2007): The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: The Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000 Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, (2007) 46 (3), 305-320

Ip, Horace H. S. / Wong, Simpson W. L. / Chan, Dorothy F. Y. / Byrne, Julia / Li, Chen / Yuan, Vanessa S. N. / Lau, Kate S. Y. / Wong, Joe, Y. W. (2016): Virtual Reality Enabled Training for Social Adaptation in Inclusive Education Settings for School-Aged Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), in: Cheung, Simon K. S. / Kwok, Lam-for / Shang, Junjie / Wang, Aihua / Kwan, Reggie (Eds.): Blended Learning. Aligning Theory with Practices. 9th International Conference, ICBL 2016. Beijing, China, July 19-21, 2016. Proceedings. Cham: Springer Switzerland, 94-102

Kaburuan, Emil Robert (2012): Spiritual Enlightenment in Virtual Worlds. Designing a Religion Site in Second Life, Dissertation, National Cheng Kung University, Cheng Kung, online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236179655_Spiritual_Enlightenment_in_Virtual_Worlds_Designing_a_Religion_Site_in_Second_Life_xunishijiezhongdejingshenqidiSecond_Life_youxilidezongjiaowangzhansheji, 10.5.2018

King, Michael / Speck, Peter / Thomas, Angela (1999): The effect of spiritual beliefs on outcome from illness. Social Science & Medicine. 48 (1999), 1291-1299

Konow, David (2013): Before THX: The Cinema Shaking Technology of Sensurround, online: http://www.tested.com/tech/455667-thx-cinema-shaking-technology-sensurround/, 20.06.2018

Lee, Demi (07.04.2017): Whatever Happened To Mass Cult Suicides?, online: https://theestablishment.co/what-ever-happened-to-mass-cult-suicides-f8c0edd66a0c, 22.06.2018

Leurent, B. / Nazareth, Irwin / Bellón-Saameno, J. / Geerlings, Mirjam I. / Maaroos, Heidi Ingrid / Saldivia, Sandra / Svab, Igor / Torres-González, Francisco / Xavier, M. / King, Michael B. (2013): Spiritual and religious beliefs as risk factors for the onset of major depression: An international cohort study. Psychological Medicine, 43(10), 1-12, January 2013

Levy, Steven (18.7.2017): Google Glass 2.0 is a Startling Second Act, online: https://www.wired.com/story/google-glass-2-is-here/, 5.6.2018

Mihov, Dimitar (2017): Pokémon Go is soon getting monster trading and real-time player battles, online: https://thenextweb.com/gaming/2017/02/14/pokemon-go-monster-trading-battles/, 18.6.2018

Newberg, ANdrew B. / Wintering, Nacy / Waldman, Mark R. / Amen, Daniel / Khalsa, Dharma S. / Alavi, Abbas (2010): Cerebral blood flow differences between long-term meditators and non-meditators. Consciousness and Cognition 19 (2010), 899-905

Newberg, Andrew B. / Johnson, Kyle D. / Rao, Hengyi / Wintering, Nancy / Dhillon, Namisha / Hu, Siyuan / Zhu, Senhua / Korczykowski, Marc / Johnson, Katrina (2014): Pilot Study of the Effect of Religious Symbols on Brain Function: Association With Measures of Religiosity, Spirituality in Clinical Practice 2014, Vol. 1, No. 2, 82-98

Peñas, G., & Peinado, F. (2017). Towards basic emotion recognition using players body and hands pose in virtual reality narrative experiences. CoSECivi.

Piasecki, Stefan (2018): Winners or victims? Discussing identity tracking and behavior analysis in next-gen video games from a digital civil rights perspective. Connectist: Istanbul University Journal of Communication Sciences, 54, 141-162. https://doi.org/10.26650/CONNECTIST406162

Piasecki, Stefan (2018): Credere et Ludere. Computer und Videospiele aus religionspädagogischer Perspektive, Baden-Baden: Tectum

Piasecki, Stefan (2016): Erlösung durch Vernichtung?! Religion und Weltanschauung im Videospiel. Eine explorative Studie zu religiösen und weltanschaulichen Ansichten junger Spieleentwickler, Kassel: kassel university press

Piasecki, Stefan (2016): Redemption through Annihilation?! – Game designer´s views on religion, culture and society and its influences on digital games. Heidelberg Journal on Religion on the Internet. Heidbrink, Simone / Knoll, Tobias (Eds.): Religion in Digital Games Respawned. Special Issue, Vol. 10 (2016) (peer reviewed), 45-73, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17885/heiup.rel.23548

Rae, Juno / Edwards, Lizzie (2016): Virtual reality at the British Museum: What is the value of virtual reality environments for learning by children and young people, schools, and families? MW2016: Museums and the Web 2016. Published January 28, 2016. Online:

https://mw2016.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/virtual-reality-at-the-british-museum-what-is-the-value-of-virtual-reality-environments-for-learning-by-children-and-young-people-schools-and-families/, 20.06.2018

Rapp, A. (2017). From Games to Gamification: A Classification of Rewards in World of Warcraft for the Design of Gamified Systems. Simulation & Gaming. 2017, Vol. 48(3), 381-401

Rheingold, Howard (1991): Virtual Reality, New York: Simon & Schuster

Rheingold, Howard (1992): Virtuelle Welten. Reisen im Cyberspace, Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt

Rothbaum, Barbara Olasov / Hodges, Larry F. / Cooper, Rob / Opdyke, Dan / Williford, James S. / North, Max (1995): Virtual Reality Graded Exposure in the Treatment of Acrophobia: A Case Report, Behavior Therapy, 26, 1995, 547-554

Russell, James A. (1994): Is There Universal Recognition of Emotion From Facial Expression? A Review of the Cross-Cultural Studies. Vol. 115, No. 1. 1994, 102-141

Sayadmansour, Alireza (2014): Neurotheology: The Relationship Between Brain and Religion, Iranian Journal of Neurology, 2014, 13 (1), 52-55

Sherman, William R. , Craig, Alan B.: Understanding Virtual Reality, Amsterdam: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003, p.17

Sierra, Albert / de Prado, Gabriel / Soler, Isis Ruiz / Codina, Ferran (2017): Virtual Reality And Archaeological Reconstruction: The There, Back Then, online: https://mw17.mwconf.org/paper/virtual-reality-and-archaeological-reconstruction-be-there-be-back-then-ullastret3d-and-vr-experience-in-htc-vive-and-immersive-room/, 21.06.2018

Slater, M. / Howell, J. / Steed, A. / Pertaub, D.-P. / Gaurau, M. (2000): Acting in Virtual Reality. CVE '00 - Proceedings of the third international conference on Collaborative virtual environments, San Francisco. New York: ACM, 103-110

Slater, Mel / Sadagic, Amela / Usoh, Martin / Schroeder, Raplh (2000): Small-Group Behavior in a Virtual and Real Environment: A Comparative Study. Presence, Vol. 9, No. 1, February 2000, 37-51

Soares, Marcelo M. / Rebelo, Francisco (2017): Ergonomics in Design. Methods & Techniques, Boca Raton / FL: CRC Press

Spencer-Hall, Alicia (2018): Medieval Saints and Modern Screens, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press

Stanovsky, Derek (2004): Virtual Reality, in: Floridi, Luciano (Ed.): The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Computing and Information, Malden / MA: Blackwell Publishing

Steuer, J., "Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence", Journal of Communication, 42(4), 1992, p. 73-93

Straaten, Peter van der: Interaction Affecting the Sense of Presence in Virtual Reality, Research Task Final Report, Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Information Technology and Systems, 2000, online: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.33.8755&rep=rep1&type=pdf, 02.07.2018

Suenderhauf, Claudia / Walter, Anna / Lenz, Claudia / Lang, Undine E. / Borgwardt, Stefan (2016): Counter striking psychosis: Commercial video games as potential treatment in schizophrenia? A systematic review of neuroimaging studies. Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews 68 (2016), 20-36

Tabei, Seyed Ziaeddin / Zarei, Nooshin / Joulaei, Hassan (2016): The Impact of Spirituality on Health. Shiraz E-Medical Journal, June 01, 2016, 17 (6), online: http://emedicalj.com/en/articles/20465.html, 22.06.2018

Théophane, Nicolas / Gaugne, Ronan / Tavenrnier, Cédric / Petit, Quentin / Arnaldi, Bruna / Gouranton, Valérie (2015): Touching and Interacting with Inaccessible Cultural Heritage, Presence, Vol. 24, No. 3, Summer 2015, 265-277

Tomasello, Michael / Carpenter, Malinda / Call, Josep / Behne, Tanya / Moll, Henrike (2005): Understanding and sharing intentions: The origins of cultural cognition. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, (2005) 28, 675–735

Traxler, John (2010): Education and the Impact of Mobility and Mobility, An Introduction to Mobiles in our Societies, in: Bachmair, Ben (ed.): Media education in new cultural areas The German-speaking and British discussion, Wiesbaden: VS publishing house for social sciences, pp. 101-112

Turkle, Sherry (1995): Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet, New York: Touchstone

Wagner, Rachel (2012): Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality, New York: Routledge

Weinbaum, Stanley G. (1935): Pygmalion´s Spectacles, Éditions de l'Age d'Or. Online: http://age.d.or.free.fr/fichiers/pdf/Pygmalion's%20Spectacles.pdf, 20.5.2018

Zeiher, Helga (1983): Die vielen Räume der Kinder. Zum Wandel räumlicher Lebensbedin- gungen seit 1945, in: Preuss-Lausitz, Ulf u.a. (Ed.): Kriegskinder, Konsumkinder, Krisenkinder. Zur Sozialisationsgeschichte seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, Weinheim und Basel: Beltz, 176-195

Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion

Heidi Rautalahti

Abstract

Religion has often been a theme involving contradictory positions in popular culture. Whether we comprehend religion as explicit implications within products of popular culture, such as recognizable characters from known religions or through formations of implicit meanings regarding Christ- figure analogies, religion is commented on and discussed widely in popular culture (Forbes, p. 21, 2005; Love, p. 192, 2010). Video games can be seen as prominent platforms for today's varying and influential cultural discussions. As John Storey has said, cultural products should be researched for the "ideological work that they do, not only for the work that they reflect", which recognizes the significance and impact of the various cultural products around us (Storey, p. 3, 1996), including video games.

This study addresses video games as facilitating and commenting on the state of religion by examining three mainstream video games: BioShock, BioShock 2 (Irrational Games 2007, 2011,) and Dishonored (Arkane Studios 2012). The primary research question concerns how religion is placed in these games, and what criticism and conclusions the games can provoke on matters relating to religion. Using qualitative game content analysis, this article focuses on how religion is commented on in the three aforementioned games by examining the player's position and negotiation of possibilities in the game worlds. This study views video games as cultural critique regarding the question of what is good and bad religion.

Keywords

1   Introduction

Religion has often been a theme involving contradictory positions in popular culture. Whether we comprehend religion as explicit implications within products of popular culture, such as recognizable characters from known religions or through formations of implicit meanings regarding Christ- figure analogies, religion is commented on and discussed widely in popular culture (Forbes,

p. 21, 2005; Love, p. 192, 2010). Video games can be seen as prominent platforms for today's varying and influential cultural discussions. As John Storey has said, cultural products should be researched for the "ideological work that they do, not only for the work that they reflect", which recognizes the significance and impact of the various cultural products around us (Storey, p. 3, 1996), including video games.

This study addresses video games as facilitating and commenting on the state of religion by examining three mainstream video games: BioShock, BioShock 2 (Irrational Games 2007, 2011) and Dishonored (Arkane Studios 2012). The primary research question concerns how religion is framed in these games, and what criticism and conclusions the games can provoke on matters relating to religion.

Using qualitative game content analysis, this article focuses on how religion is commented on in the three aforementioned games by examining the player's position and negotiation of possibilities in the game worlds. By the player's position, I mean the scope of possibilities and placement of the player in the game world and story. In these game stories, religion is represented as tension between the protagonist and antagonist through the theme of opposing religious organizations. Polarities of good and bad religion become evident, reflecting the player's position in terms of story and gameplay actions. The world of the antagonists displays the negative side of religion, while in gameplay the player as protagonist supports positive connotations of religion. The studied games display religion as an elemental theme in building the game story's worlds, societies and characters, being especially rooted in the construction of the antagonist. This aspect led to the choice of these particular games for possible research material.

The research material consists of the studied games and their according wiki guides (BioShock wiki page, BioShock 2 IGN wiki guide, Dishonored wiki page) as background information. As a premise for this article, religion representations in popular culture are identified as commenting, discussing and residing in dialogue with the surrounding society (Forbes, pp. 11–27, 2005). Traditionally the genre of science fiction, where the studied games can be positioned, has had the tendency to act as a societal commentator through stories of alternative or speculative existences (Milner, pp. 22– 23, 2012).

As religion in these games is linked to antagonist characters, it gives the first impression of religion as something evil. This narrative framing the games mediate provides an opportunity to place societal comments and criticism of religion in the games. Whether intended by the game makers or not, the antagonists can be described as representing all that is faulty in religion. The games' milieu or "gamescape", a concept that has been used to define the aesthetics, information and experienced surroundings inside a game world (Heidbrink, Knoll &Wysoki 2016), may in these three games give an unflattering impression of representations of religion in recent video games.

However, by analysing the player's actions against those of the antagonist characters and the final resolution of the game stories, interpretations of good religion representations come forth. Hanna-Riikka Roine describes the relation between fiction and reader (or here, more accurately, the player) as communicative and emergent. Especially in the case of speculative fiction, in stories of imagined possibilities and ideas, world-building is a co-creation between receiver and the story, which may be conceptualized as reciprocal communication (Roine 2015, pp. 7–8, 132; 2016). In light of video games, the imagined possibilities are tied to gameplay actions and reflection of story. The co-creation is facilitated in video games on two levels, in the player's reflections of the games' milieu (or in other words, the gamescape) and in gameplay.

Cultural studies views (popular) culture as an arena for "continual struggles" of various meanings of power relations (Storey, pp. xvi–xvii, 2009). Applying this approach, it seems that recent video games are no exception. The studied games, story-wise, set goals for the player to fight against antagonists that may be described as organized but fanatic religious authorities. However, by assigning a specific religious antagonist, the games leave a door open for opposite interpretations: what is assigned as good religion. In addition to game narrative, the same games might address in a positive manner the player's individual meaning-making and reasoning through procedural choices or strategies which players have to actively make in gameplay, a process which can be considered as relating to peripheries of religion (Love, p. 193, 2010). These contradicting variations, the games' goals versus the player reflections the games elicit, may create varying impressions of religion. This study views video games as cultural critique regarding the question of what is good and bad religion.

1.1   The Games

Although the studied games can be viewed as intersecting many genres or narrative traditions, the game stories are similar in structure: the player embodies the hero's journey and carries out the monomythic linear path, a premise for many other popular culture stories. The player is the protagonist who saves the world and possible bystanders, thus renewing her identity (Campbell, 1988; Forbes, pp. 20–21, 2005). In all of the games here, the hero (player character) is a father-type who rescues a daughter-type of some sort, unravels the mysteries and hidden agendas of the world, and exposes the antagonist's plans.

The background stories of the games are aligned in terms of their similar structures and player goals. The player characters, the protagonists, find themselves in a situation where they are wrongfully accused and persecuted by governing forces. In BioShock, the playable character Jack is stranded in the underwater city of Rapture and proceeds to find his way out. Through his journey, the horrors of the city unravel and Jack becomes the saviour, ending the monstrous reign of the

antagonist Andrew Ryan. BioShock 2 continues the story with new antagonist and protagonist characters. The player character is Subject Delta, whose goal is to save the world from Doctor Sofia Lamb. Delta proceeds to save citizens from Lamb's manipulative reign and ensures the city's future. The game Dishonored's player character Corvo Attano is a bodyguard for the Royal Empress of Dunwall. However, Corvo is framed for the assassination of the Empress, and throughout the game he must restore his integrity. Corvo's goal is to escape, find out who is behind the coup, and ultimately save the Empress's daughter Emily.

All of the games' stories are set in a fictional past with historical familiarities. BioShock and BioShock 2, situated in the years 1940–1960, can be described as biopunk in aesthetic and story, a sub-genre of science fiction and fantasy, which uses themes of biotechnological and genetic engineering, as well as posthuman themes, in a steampunk setting (Schmeink, p. 14, 2016). Steampunk as an aesthetic genre references the industrial age, mixing retro-futuristic interpretations of steam-based technology, machinery and Victorian fashion (Roland 2014). BioShock games are additionally referenced as products of the retro-future genre, as they depict a more technically developed historical environment than their supposed historical era (Bosman 2014). This applies also to Dishonored: while the story is situated at the end of the 1800s, the game's weaponry is seemingly more advanced. Dishonored has been described by the game's Art Director Sébastien Mitton as "neo-Victorian" in its visual style (Hanson 2016) due to the mechanical and architectural world-building of the game.

The studied games not only present interesting intersections of religious themes in video games, as previously mentioned, but have also received commercial success. While the first BioShock game celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2017, the series was remastered and re-released in 2016. Dishonored was continued with a sequel in 2016. All of the studied games were acclaimed by audiences and critics alike, receiving multiple awards and nominations (e.g. the games received or were nominated for BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) awards). BioShock won best game in 2007, BioShock 2 was nominated for best action game and best story, and Dishonored claimed best game in 2014. The games have made an impact on audiences due to their mature narrative ways of explicating power, unjust societal positions, and especially the use of a choice system in gameplay. The third and final BioShock game, BioShock Infinite (2013), was left deliberately out of this study, as it does not emphasize a "choice matters" system in gameplay. Nor is Dishonored 2 (2016) taken into this study, as the game was not released at the time when gameplay material for research purposes was gathered.

1.2   Gameplay strategies – Dealing with choice-systems in game content analysis

In BioShock, BioShock 2 and Dishonored, gameplay is saturated with a feeling of apparent control when choosing the narrative's direction – namely, the way in which the game story or player character proceeds towards the end of the game. Gameplay is a concept that is used to define the intended method of play, as well as possible player strategies in a specific game (Salen & Zimmerman, p. 125, 303, 2004). Choice-making in gameplay, even though limited to predetermined game mechanics, gives the player a sense of autonomy and space for self-reflection in narrative contexts. In general, the player proceeds through the game and interacts through game mechanics and binding rule sets that frame the game's formal possibilities. Choice-systems, sometimes categorized as a "choice matters" game genre, have by now accumulated a solid tradition of featuring moral dilemmas in narratives and gameplay, but in recent mainstream games the trend has become a way to individualize gameplay, contributing to their popularity (Boyan, Grizzard & Bowman 2015).

Gameplay choices regarding game stories can mean, in the case of Dishonored, that optional hostile actions in the world will result in unfortunate consequences towards the end of the game. Choice-systems or different gameplay choices can have different purposes in game mechanics, whether they are seen as a measurement system gathering player statistics (implemented in Dishonored) or simultaneously developing player character features (as in the BioShock games and Dishonored), or as a way of delivering story. In the studied games, the player's choices generally steer the outcome of the storylines and game endings. In this light, it is not trivial to explicate the process of gameplay, as it is an elemental part of the game, carrying the game narrative forward and framing the play experience.

In this study, gameplay was conducted with a specific strategy in mind. While the game stories and endings were heavily influenced by player choice, it is vital to acknowledge the specific type of gameplay, as it affected the whole gameplay experience and understanding of the game narratives. In the studied games, choices regarding narrative outcomes were framed with moral reasoning, which offered the player the option to do good or bad. The gaming style or goal I assumed in gameplay was altruistic when possible, which led especially to a focus on the games' feedback and changes in narrative: what kinds of themes were endorsed or encouraged in the game through altruistic gameplay, and what good ideals the games were promoting. Altruistic gameplay meant that I looked for non-violent, game-enabled ways of completing tasks, quests or chapters, and I made merciful choices when the stories demanded choosing between killing or a more peaceful action. This usually consisted of sparing antagonist characters' lives, thereby taking a more compassionate approach to conflict resolution. The studied games can also be viewed as exploring player emotions by challenging empathy skills through moral choices. The idea of using empathy in

the delivery of ideas is a growing game genre of its own, as seen in the game depicting a child's cancer, "That Dragon, Cancer" (Numinous Games 2016), or the game on mental illness, "Depression Quest" (Zoe Quinn 2013) (Campbell 2013).

For analysis purposes, the chosen strategy of playing in an altruistic way had also an agenda: to reach the positive end of the game. The games' ending scenes acted as key moments highlighting the final verdict of the player's position, as well as the commentary the games were making. In Bioshock, there are three possible endings (Bioshock wiki), varying from positive to sad. In BioShock 2, the six possible endings vary slightly from very positive to dark (Secret Endings, 2012). Dishonored has three possible endings, also ranging from positive to sad (Dishonored wiki). The endings promote a straightforward moral compass: bad choices result in a sad or dark ending and the altruistic path delivers a comforting one.

I would argue that the moral ideals of good or bad that the games may be advocating in gameplay choices' can be seen as reflecting not only the game makers' views, but simultaneously the player's interpretations and reflections on the gameplay experience. In addition, it is to be noted that the studied games guaranteed the game ending to definitively be a good and happy one when playing altruistic options. The games' predictable ethical outcomes were simplistic and, in a way, naïve. A player could easily follow and predict the outcome by managing moral gameplay actions. For example, in BioShock 2 these were when the player saves an antagonist minion and the character becomes friendly, reflects in game dialogue what wrong they have done, and grants rewards to the protagonist. In other recent games such as The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt Red 2015), where the range of gameplay and narrative variations are enormous, choices and predictable moral narrative outcomes cannot fully be controlled by the player; an apparent morally good choice does not necessarily lead to a good outcome.

2   Play as a method for video game content analysis

Researching and analysing a video game begins by gathering research material through play (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2015; Bosman 2016). The grounds of conducting game content analysis, building on a researcher's own gameplay data, begins by viewing game-immanent and actor-centred perspectives in a chosen game. Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki (2014; 2015), use the "game-immanent" and "actor-centred" concepts as a basis to divide research perspectives in a digital game analysis. A game-immanent perspective focuses on chosen themes in game content: story and gameplay. The actor-centred approach takes into account the player's reception and experience. The two perspectives are recognized as entwining and usually

overlapping in a game analysis (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki, p. 164, 2015), which is indeed the case in my work. The viewpoint of treating play experience as source material for analysis is similar to readings of other material within cultural or popular culture research. Close reading in literary theory traditions, being one example of building on the researcher-subject's experiences, is a valid method for qualitative gathering of game data and evaluating the different ways in which meaning is created in the texts (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011).

In this study, the gameplay experience is understood to consist of multiple modes of information, emotions and relations. In a multimodal perspective, multiple levels of communication are regarded as emitting meaning (Stöckl 2013, p. 9-11). The multimodal approach to game analysis (Carillo Masso 2014; 2016) takes into account the interactiveness of a game at various levels of information, from visuals to atmosphere. While Daniel Dunne (2014) argues for the benefits of the multimodal approach for analysing video games, Espen Aarseth speaks of games as "ludo-narratological constructs", both writers describing similarly the distinctive nature of gameplay (Aarseth, p. 130, 2012). They argue that games should not be comprehended only as story or actions, but interpreted as a combination of experienced information. Gameplay could be then regarded as negotiations with modes of meaning, and videogames as facilitating discussions with multiple modes of information.

I combine Aarseth and Dunne's perspectives with those of Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki (2015) in my approach to how a thorough game content analysis can be conducted. I began my gameplay documentation in the summer of 2016. For recoding I used a game capture device connected to PlayStation 3 and 4 consoles, and I took log notes of significant scenes, which I explicate more in the analysis. I uploaded the videos on a video-sharing website for safekeeping and future examination. After this, I returned to the videos, taking notes on the significant scenes according to research questions on the player's position.

2.1   De-constructing the player's experience

Storytelling and gameplay are major game elements when constructing the play experience. Video game stories may be identified as multiform stories, where the player sees the alternative and even clashing futures in different story directions (Murray, pp. 36–38, 1997). These story structures form the foundation of the player's experience. In terms of gameplay, the studied games are first-person shooters (FPS) with story-driven narratives. In a visual sense this means that gameplay is mostly constructed through acting with a first-person point of view. In terms of story, the game narratives portray a typical set of branching storytelling, meaning that the games implement multiple endings with alternating gameplay paths leading towards the game endings (Lebowitz & Klug, pp. 203–204,

2011). These branching narratives are represented to the player in the studied games through choice-making and morally framed choices, as previously discussed.

The Dishonored game utilizes branching stories consisting of side objectives and other discoveries the player might encounter in the environment. Side objectives may include following an optional short story, such as when Corvo follows little Emily for a game of hide-and-seek in the beginning of the game. Discoveries may include Corvo finding number codes, which can be used to open safes. Part of the excitement of exploring the game environment is that side objectives or surprises are usually hidden.

BioShock can be argued to represent multiple-ending storytelling rather than branching stories. In a multiple-ending story, the player has minimal influence on the different endings. BioShock is only built with three possible endings, as Josiah Lebowitz and Chris Klug have pointed out (Lebowitz & Klug, pp.176–177, 2011). Although BioShock and BioShock 2 are not as freely branching with side objectives as Dishonored, the BioShock games' stories change in a progressive way according to continuing player choices in important events. The player may also find other stories when searching the environment, such as by finding game lore in notes or audiographs. Lore is commonly referred to as a body of knowledge which in this case is used to define the game world's larger origin story.

While the player's experience is constructed by story, game milieu and gameplay, player agency is used to describe the player's position of possibilities in the game world. While the selected games place importance through gameplay choices and narrative on the player's feeling of self-control, I stress player agency as a key factor in the interpretation of the game analysis. Agency as a concept has been used in qualitative game analyses to describe the player's position, referring to the player's feel of autonomy when acting in a game world, and to comprehend the player's position as creating the game narrative (Knoll 2015). By agency, I also mean the perception in gameplay of "empowerment" of an individual's experiences of one's selves, as Eichner describes it. Eichner also argues that the experience of agency comprises the essential enjoyment in playing video games, which profoundly divides digital games from other media (Eichner, pp. 11–12, 2014). Playing video games is also linked to experiencing emotional pleasure and satisfaction (Grodal, 2000, p. 197). The pleasure of the play experience is entangled with different individual emotional responses to game stimulations responding to actions in the game world (Grodal, p. 201, 2000). According to Torben Grodal, experiencing control of gameplay skills and control of one's emotions during play is an especially central part of the enjoyment of playing video games (Grodal, pp. 203, 211–212, 2000). Although it is debated in digital game studies to what degree a game designer's perceptions of intended gameplay affects, agency and immersion in the game world are overly emphasized qualities for composing a meaningful play experience (Frasca, p. 167, 2001), it cannot be denied that the play experience is meaningful to the player individual.

The play experience consists of emotional and individual responses to various play moments. The implicit feel of agency in playing first-person games creates the illusion that events are happening to the player herself. The sense of being the author of the game story is misleading, however, as the original authorship belongs to the game designers (Murray, pp. 152–153, 1997). Still, the memories of a gameplay event can be remembered and articulated through such lines as: "When I was…" or "When I did…", as Tobias Knoll argues (Knoll 2015). Not only does the act of gameplay engage the player and promote a feeling of agency, but the experienced active position of existing in the game world facilitates a space for self-negotiation towards given game topics – in this case, issues concerning religion.

It is to be noted that the feel of agency and the amount of choices available for the player are not necessarily analogical. The mainstream survival game The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013) utilizes an interactive traditional story. While it does not enable the player to choose narrative directions or change the ending, through other convincing actions and design solutions the feeling of agency can be evoked. In the case of The Last of Us, the lack of choices can, storytelling-wise, send a more powerful message in a survival game than agency gained through the feeling of unlimited options. In comparison, the Bioshock games and Dishonored place an imperative on the player's feeling of self-control vis-à-vis choices regarding the story, which positions the player to self-reflect options and form opinions on the game events and story encounters.

3   Facilitating Discussions of Religion

As many other works have also stated, digital games represent and comment on current societal issues. Conrad Ostwalt argues that popular culture is an informative arena through which beliefs, myths and values are understood (Ostwalt, p. 154, 2003). If we understand video games as tools used for understanding the world around us, the information, narratives and interactions that games communicate can be seen as reflecting, discussing and commenting on our world. As works of art, games, film and other popular culture products represent the viewpoints and values of their makers, but they also present a chance for viewer self-reflection on the represented values. As Mark Cameron Love comments: "[playing video games] leads players to reflect" (Love, p. 208, 2010). Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, among others argue that religion and popular culture exists in a dialogic relationship (Forbes & Mahan, pp. 240–241, 2005). In the example of video games, the player becomes an active conversational counterpart where video games facilitate the space for the discussion. In the studied games, the themes of what is good and bad religion become central questions.

Even though the depictions of religion and violence can be seen as combined themes in mainstream video games, it should be noted that violence overall is a common theme or gameplay function in video games. Shooting, violent acts and grotesque scenes are commonly portrayed through visuals or actions. However, it is not in the focus of this research to discuss the research paradigm of violence in digital games or the assumed consequences this might have on players. Here I view violent acts as the game's narrative procedures, or how the story is conveyed to the player. George Perreault found that recent RPGs (role-playing games) show representations of institutionalized religion mainly linked to depictions of violence (2012). The claim can be verified examining this article's research material. The studied video games all include strong religiously themed antagonist characters who set the atmosphere for the main story.

3.1   The Milieu of Bad Religion

In the studied games, religion is placed in the game worlds as an origin story to explain how people are organized or why they are mistreated, and thus it is given as a reason for the existing hierarchical order. Religion in a game's story is used as a manipulative tool for the antagonist characters to represent credible social order (Love, p. 195, 2010). The bad religion milieu is constructed through leader authority and follower depictions, and these depictions and ideals are those which the player is supposed to fight against in gameplay.

A fanatic can be defined as "a person who has very extreme beliefs that may lead them to behave in unreasonable or violent ways" (Cambridge Dictionary). This understanding of the concept fits the antagonists of the studied games. Love argues that the fanatic representation and behaviour of religious "devotees" in video games is an accepted role, while the general public discourse of unconditional religious followers suggests that deeds done in the name of religion are understandable (Love, p. 195, 2010). The studied games support this position.

In BioShock's story, the main antagonist and creator of the BioShock worlds, Andrew Ryan, sets out to build the underwater city of Rapture, where entertainment, glamour, and hedonism can thrive outside government control and restraining religions. Ryan's self-proclaimed dictatorship centres around a personality cult, even though he denies all known faiths. Rapture is Ryan's vision of a truly liberated society, where he condemns organized religions. However, in the beginning, the player finds out that Ryan's control is not absolute. Most of Rapture's citizens have gone mad through misuse and addiction of a drug called "ADAM", which functions as a fuel for self-enhancement potions called "plasmids". One of the player's goals is to save characters called Little Sisters while discovering Rapture. The Little Sisters are children who were abducted to Rapture, enslaved and genetically enhanced to gather and reclaim ADAM for re-use from corpses around the city. The girls were given a bodyguard, a "Big Daddy", and whenever a Little Sister is met the

player must also defeat the bodyguard. However, each time the player encounters a Little Sister, he has the choice and morally framed option of either "exorcising" the child, thus freeing her from her slavery, or taking her ADAM and killing her in the process. By saving the children, players get less of the drug (but they will receive gifts of ADAM in later scenes). By taking ADAM, players can modify their character faster and improve their weaponry, but at the same time they also move towards the sad finale. The Little Sisters act as an embodiment of Ryan's plan to control his followers and keep them obedient. The player also witnesses the city surroundings, destroyed by civil war and conflict between Ryan and local gangs. The references to religion in the game milieu are situated to frame the ambiguous environment and events. Bibles are seen smuggled into the city, and eerie Christian hymns are sung by antagonist characters. Even though Ryan has banned religions, the citizens continue practicing in secret. Religion in BioShock is present in the negative sides of personality cults and religious persecution. It is worth noting that the designers of BioShock were critical of the author Ayn Rand's neo-liberalistic views, and this is hinted at implicitly and deliberately in the game (Bosman 2014).

In BioShock 2, the main antagonist scientist Doctor Sofia Lamb represents a rebellious new sovereign of Rapture. Lamb aims to build a world where community comes first and individuals come second, opposing Andrew Ryan's original vision. The player finds out during the game that Lamb aims to join all of Rapture in one hegemonic mind, "The Rapture Family", by using ADAM for gene modification and sacrificing her daughter, Eleanor Lamb, as a sacred vessel in the process. The player is sometimes accompanied by Eleanor, who slowly comes to realize her mother's horrid plan. The ADAM-addicted people of Rapture are shown throughout the game as lunatics, mindlessly worshipping in candlelight and chanting in unison in front of pictures of Lamb and her scientific publication: the book on "Unity & Metamorphosis". Additionally, the city is filled with creepy graffiti citing biblical words such as "Salvation", referring to Lamb's agenda. The Little Sisters are taken back to Rapture, while Lamb needs ADAM to fulfil her scientific and sacred quest. Rapture's milieu in BioShock 2 is very similar to the first game's feel and imagery, with the exception of a few gameplay changes. Again the objective is to save the Little Sisters, but the player may also exploit their ADAM-gathering skills without turning the narrative entirely to a sad ending. In this case, the player accompanies the child in a corpse-gathering trip and defends the Little Sister from citizen attacks while she gathers ADAM. The player also encounters other hostile characters who may be forgiven or killed. In comparison to the first BiosShock, the options and moral choices in BioShock 2 are not as straightforward, but to ensure a happy game ending all hostiles have to be let free. Here the antagonist Lamb shows religion as fanaticism, caused by mental instability and twisted moral agendas. Lamb's Rapture presents religions as harmful through the depiction of a personality cult, fanaticism and references to ritual human sacrifice.

In the Dishonored game, the religious militant leader Lord Regent represents the governing forces of the rat plague-infested city of Dunwall. As a corrupt dictator, Lord Regent has seized power after the coup following Corvo and Emily's imprisonment. In Dunwall, a religious order called the Abbey of the Everyman is used to uphold the city's laws and religious tradition. The remaining ordinary citizens are shown as poor and miserable, praying in secret to a mythical and magical deity called the Outsider. However, the order has banned folk beliefs, and the order's foot soldiers, the Overseers, actively hunt heretics or citizens for their use of forbidden magic. In Dunwall, a division between the city elite and common citizens is clearly present. Class distinctions are noticeable, while during the game Corvo explores environs ranging from upper-class homes filled with food and artwork to beggars' squats. The player can, if she so chooses, actively change the sad future and witness kindness through gameplay actions assisted by magical abilities granted by the Outsider. These abilities help Corvo use certain powers, like the ability to possess rats and crawl inside walls without notice. The player's objective is to save Emily and bring the coup leaders to justice, but the way in which this is achieved – by killing or imprisoning them – are left to the player, resulting in a positive or negative game ending. The misery shown in Dunwall tempts the player to "take revenge" in an aggressive way, while the game's tagline "Revenge solves everything" hints in this direction. However, the challenge of completing the game in an altruistic way is to proceed in a stealthy and unnoticeable manner. The game story presents religion through societal power, religious persecution and oppressed diversity.

3.2   Criticizing Religious Institutions

The framing of organized religions and their leaders as evil, which is the image of religion that the studied games promote, is not an unfamiliar theme in video games. The well-established video game series Final Fantasy (Squaresoft 1987, first volume) can be described as criticizing organized and institutionalized religions as well (The Game Theorist 2013). It is still debatable whether this theme has affected the representations of religion in later video games. In the studied games, however, noticeable parallels are found with authoritarian organizations and stock images from Western Christianity.

Crosses or the placement of a crucified smuggler in the first BioShock game refers explicitly to Christianity. The second BioShock game relies in a graphic sense even more on biblically derivative language and portrayals of Christian art, such as crucifixion themes, due to incorporating a subsidiary story of a new Rapture church existing alongside Lamb's reign. Dishonored is the only game that relies on indirect references in the construction of religion; however, it also presents general representations of institutionalized religions through the societal placement of the religious order. In Dishonored, the Abbey of the Everyman resembles a conservative and historical

interpretation of Christianity, while following a dogmatic scripture which is even named "The Seven Strictures". Thus, the order builds a dichotomy between folk beliefs and its position vis-à-vis orthodox religion. Whether these parallels are intentional or represent general Western understandings of religion in popular culture, the familiarity nevertheless sets a certain tone for the player. Intertextuality leads the player to further remark on the game's similarities regarding religion and reflect on what the games might be suggesting (Love, p. 196, 2010).

Religion is a topic in popular culture which is expressed in various ways, through allegories or implicit and explicit means (Forbes, p. 21, 2005). The protagonist in all of the games considered here challenges authority, the status quo of the present order, and distances himself from the villain's world. Many of today's games follow similar narrative tropes, where prior to deception and misfortune the leading character faces strong enemies (King & Krzywinska, pp. 172–173, 2014). These narrative conventions often embody ideologies concerning individual freedom in a Western cultural context (King & Krzywinska, pp. 172–173, 2014). In the studied game narratives, the depictions of religion may echo larger cultural discussions of the presence and placement of institutional religions in society. The studied games' story theme of opposition to or retreat from dominant or existing religious relations or institutions is a process that can be said to depict the current shift in the Western religious or cultural atmosphere (Heelas & Woodhead, p. 3, 2005). The discussions that the studied games facilitate relate to Western understandings of the secularization conversation. The individualization or subjectivization of life experiences on a Western scale (Heelas & Woodhead, 3–4, 2005) reflects a similar detachment that the protagonist endures in the games. The player's position is to fight against everything that the antagonists and their worlds stand for. Even though video games are a part of popular culture entertainment, the video game player can be seen as connecting to critical discussions and commentaries on what religion is or should be in today's society.

In a retrospective sense, the game worlds were on the brink of destruction if the protagonist had not stepped in. The explicit criticism of religion that Frank Bosman (2014) convincingly argues as the "janus-face" of recent video games applies to this articles studied games. Bosman viewed the game narratives of BioShock, Bioshock Infinite, Dishonored and Brink (Splash Damage 2011) to connect themes of religion closely to dystopic representations and societal criticism (Bosman 2014). These connections are explicit and well suited, while religion, according to Bosman, is a tool for criticism and simultaneously a constructive part of video game dystopian narratives (Bosman, p. 179, 2014). Agreeing with Bosman, Booker (p. 7, 2013) suggests that dystopic presentations are well fitted for sharing criticism on institutionalized constructions of religion and other societal topics. However, dystopic stories often present warnings, guidelines or solutions as an opposite mirror to the explicit criticism (Booker, p. 7, 2013). The gameplay actions and negotiations position

the fighting player as executing the opposite; these are the ideals worth fighting for, as the altruistic gameplay approach in this research shows.

The research approach to video games and religion usually aims to analyse religion in games or review the cultural commentary the games might make on religion (Love, p. 195, 2010). The commentary the studied games state the loudest is that religion becomes bad in the hands of dictating and oppressing authorities. However, the player in her gameplay actions makes way for something good: the individual, freedom of choice, and forgiveness.

3.3   The Ending Scenes

Despite the overall negative milieu of religion, highlighting gameplay strategy and acts tells a story of individualism and forgiveness. As described in the introduction, I entered the games with a pre-position of altruistic gameplay strategy in order to reflect how the games endorse supposed good choices in their progress and what this could mean. I played and made choices, seeing how the game worlds reacted to altruistic play, when this was enabled, and what effect it had on the games' ending scenes and resolution.

In BioShock, altruistic play mainly consists of how many Little Sister characters the player chooses to save. The killing of antagonist characters does not have an effect on the ending narrative. BioShock 2 follows a more complex system: if certain key enemy characters are left alive and "forgiven", the game world becomes friendlier. For example, when the hostile character Grace Holloway is spared, she removes some villain characters for the player and gives useful supplies. Holloway is embedded in the story as an individual who came to Rapture in hope of a better life, but over time saw the deterioration of the city. In Dishonored, altruism is calculated by the number of hostiles, civilians and key characters killed. Here also the strategy of forgiving enemy characters allows the player to proceed with stealth actions and a less hostile environment which lead to a peaceful ending.

The altruistic strategy ensured good feedback in the games. In all of the studied games, key characters literally gave feedback in specific scenes in video and dialogue on the player's previous actions and choices. In altruistic gameplay, the feedback was usually thankful, as characters reflected on their newfound realization of the world's poor condition and that goodness would be the answer to all problems. This was especially reflected in the characters' ending speeches, which I observe here more closely. The speeches in the ending videos assessed the player's gameplay actions, framing the player's gameplay path to that point. The positive endings thus acted as a retrospective response, affirming and thanking the player.

In the most positive ending scene of BioShock, a guiding supporting character, Dr Tenenbaum, narrates during the ending video:

> "They offered you the city… and you refused it. And what did you do instead? What I have come to expect of you. You saved them. You gave them the one thing that was stolen from them, a chance. A chance to learn, to find love, to live. And in the end, what was your reward? You never said, but I think I know... a family."

The "them" that Dr Tenenbaum refers to means the Little Sisters. Even though these characters acted as a moral meter, by saving them the player also symbolically destroyed the antagonist's plans and introduced goodness into the surrounding game world, as the speech underlines. Through merciful actions, the player demonstrates the error in Ryan's vision. The player strengthens the game's claim that diversity, in religion and individual freedom, is desirable. The scene ends with pictures depicting the Little Sisters growing up, receiving high school diplomas, getting married and having children of their own. In the last scene, the sisters gather around Jack's hospital bed to say goodbye.

In BioShock 2, the six possible endings vary slightly from very positive to dark (Secret Endings, 2012). The accompanying supporting character Eleanor changes her attitude towards the protagonist in relation to how many Little Sisters were saved throughout the game. Eleanor summarizes at the end:

> "And then, father, the Rapture dream was over. You taught me that evil is just a word: under the skin, it's simple pain. For you, mercy was victory… you sacrificed, you endured, and when given the chance… you forgave. Always. Mother believed this world was irredeemable… But she was wrong. Father, we are Utopia, you and I. And forgiving. We left the door open for her… If Utopia is not a place… but a people, we must choose carefully. For the world is about to change… And in our story, Rapture was just the beginning."

The mother that Eleanor is referring to points to the main antagonist, Dr Sofia Lamb. Her plans consisted of Rapture becoming one through a metaphysical and supernatural connection, to which end she manipulatively recruited followers. By showing the possibility of atonement, the player teaches Eleanor forgiveness and compassion. By doing so, the player verifies the importance of individual freedom and diversity, the opposite of the antagonist's plans.

In Dishonored, the deity Outsider narrates and reflects on the player's actions and previous choices in cut scene videos throughout the game. The Outsider is a neutral character but becomes slightly more reassuring after positive actions. The Outsider's final ending speech after consistent altruistic gameplay is comforting:

"So ends the interregnum, and now Emily Kaldwin the First will take her mother's throne, after a season of turmoil. You will stand at her side, Corvo, guiding her young mind, and protecting her from those who seek to exploit her, or cause her harm. You watched and listened when other men would have shouted in rage. You held back instead of striking. So it is, with the passing of the plague and Emily's ascension, comes a golden age, brought about by your hand. And decades hence, when your hair turns white and you pass from this world, Empress Emily – Emily the Wise, at the height of her power – will lay your body down within her mother's great tomb, because you were more to her than Royal Protector. Farewell, Corvo."

The happy ending is measured by how the protagonist, Corvo, has reacted to the world: that is, with hostility or with a non-lethal approach. Through altruistic play, the player makes the antagonist's plan obsolete. By assuring that Emily is saved, the power of the Lord Regent is displaced, and a new, compassionate sovereign emerges. The player confirms through altruistic gameplay that even when suffering persecution, the forgiving approach to dealing with hostility pays off in the end.

3.4　Good Religion – The Individual Prevails

While no specific theme explicitly relating to religion is visible in the ending speeches, they summarize the protagonist's path as representing freedom from fanaticism and oppression. Religion in the game stories plays a significant part as an instrument legitimizing the antagonist's power and simultaneously mirroring the opposite, namely, what the denial of religious diversity might lead to.

The good that came out of an altruistic game path can be seen as a reflection of a desirable world, where authorizing restraints are minimal and the individual is free to make her own choices. The prevailing individualism is highlighted through first-person player agency but also through the game protagonist, who alone fights the antagonist forces. The altruistic gameplay and the fight against the antagonist represent forgiveness and a chance for atonement. Reflecting gameplay and narrative, individual freedom (of religion) and the choice to make individual decisions is a main, and even compassionate, form of commentary in the games. The player becomes the bearer of hope in the dystopic and conflicted game worlds, arguing for the societal freedom of individual beliefs – whether they are explicitly religious or not.

The games' commentary on the rise of individual beliefs does correlate with secularization discussions, suggesting that secularization can affect religious authority rather than beliefs themselves. In this light, secularization concerns the institutional make-up of religions rather than dissembling individual beliefs (Ostwalt, p. 5, 2003). Video games can be seen as playing a part in this cultural shift by mediating these conversations. Paul Heelas argues that today's Western non-conservative Christians might feel the need to leave church-driven communities, as they sense a

loss of self-autonomy concerning traditional values that may now be perceived as discriminating (Heelas, p. 46, 2011). He continues by stating that due to this subjectivization, the feeling of (religious) authority becomes internal (Heelas, p. 46, 2011). This phenomenon of leaving displeasing authorities and taking self-control comes through in the studied games, albeit in a dramatized form. The dynamics between the antagonist and protagonist might also represent a common narrative position borrowed from fantasy literature. The portrayal of traditional religions being less in the face of magical individuals is a known narrative theme within fantasy fiction (Feldt 2016), which the studied games also confirm. The games place traditional religions in the same category as the antagonist characters, while the protagonists' characters are situated more or less with supernatural or magical connotations.

The studied games' criticism relates to Stuart Hall's "incorporation" and "resistance", describing positions and aims of cultural materials in popular culture. Cultural content represents the opposition to or compliance with the existing and surrounding cultural context (Hall, p. 509, 2009) or, as Storey describes it, an empowering process when resisting societal structures (Storey, p xix, 2009). Here the studied games can be seen as mediating resistance, especially through player agency, placing the player in a reflective position. Gameplay and narratives provide a space for real world reflections and discussions, such as those concerning religion and beliefs. In video games, the epic fights are no longer against aliens and/or spike-shelled turtles, but against discourses that represent societal ideals and criticism, including issues of religion. As Bogost says: "Video games represent processes in the material world—war, urban planning, sports, and so forth—and create new possibility spaces for exploring those topics" (Bogost, p. 121, 2008).

Religion themes become representative of societal hopes and wishes, and thus should not only be seen as a subsidiary narrative motivation for violence, as Perreault claims (2012). For games that rely on player narrative construction through procedural choice strategies, the emerging understandings of the play experience become individual, and interpretations vary.

However, Perreault is correct in linking violence with religion concerning the overall game world milieus in the studied games. The violent atmosphere and disappointment with authority can be seen as representing attitudes of cultural pessimism in popular culture (Stroup & Suck 2007). Stories of cultural pessimism can go hand-in-hand with coping with real-world misfortune (Stroup & Suck 2007).

Whether we comprehend religion as a narrative building block for the villain or the villains themselves as setting the tone for religion interpretations, the scenes and gameplay are explicitly critical towards issues of organized religion and representations of authority, especially in a Western Christian context. Simultaneously, the contradictory good image of religion – the message of individualism, choice and forgiveness – is highlighted through gameplay.

4   Conclusion

Whether in the game milieu or gameplay, religion is an element that outlines the studied games' enemy characters, but it also allows the player to participate in discussions defending ideals of individual autonomy and forgiveness. The studied games reflect on authority by negotiating the position of the individual, and the games act as commentaries situating religion in relation to this power struggle. I argue that the discussions the games facilitate reflect ongoing cultural changes of how individual beliefs are understood, and they invite the player to self-reflect on these undertones in the play experience. Referring back to Storey (Storey, p. xix, 2009), the games can be said to deliver empowering agencies when mediating commentaries on good and bad religion. The gameplay choices and options become ways of partaking in the conversation.

The studied games use emotional gameplay experiences in communicating their commentary on religion and beliefs, as well as the games' understanding of good and bad religion. In particular, the moral choices the games use to forward the narrative frame the connotations of good and bad religion to position the individual and religion in opposing corners.

Game worlds and antagonist characters have become platforms for communicating criticism on institutionalized and organized religions, which the game analysis confirms. The player becomes the liberator, who advances ideas of individualism, diversity and forgiveness, and the positive endings act as validation. The player brings change to worlds that have fallen under destructive ideologies and misplaced order. Controversial subjects that are represented through emotional video game play may change our views on which ways difficult themes can be discussed in society, including issues of religion. Interestingly the studied games' criticism of religion only touches on the construction of religion, and the structure and representation of authority, and not necessarily doctrinal content or concepts of gods, rituals or deities. These present interesting possibilities for future research.

The study of cultural values in popular culture as represented by video games is relevant now and in the future, not only due to representations of sociocultural reflections in games, but given the major impact of game consumerism today, which is steered both by designers and audiences (Flanagan & Nissenbaum 2014). Teemu Taira states that new media platforms have become vital environments for today's religions and, as such, are a natural arena for research (Taira 2015). In addition, "choice matters" games challenge the perception of how game content analysis is to be understood. The games' stories are not fully written until the player decides how the game should proceed, and thus the researcher becomes the co-creator of his or her research material in situ. The game world does not exist beyond the player's or the researcher's participation.

Discussions of religion in video games take place in the world-making, resonating with the player's mobile position from the beginning to the end. Although conflict is a common starting point in most video game stories, the studied games place religion especially within conflicts, resulting in good and bad connotations of religion. It can be argued that this placement reflects today's ongoing world events. This would situate the comments the games make, and the fights against fanatics they depict, among very real and current issues.

Bibliography

BioShock, 2007. [video game] (Windows, Mac OS, PS3, Xbox 360, BlackBerry) Irrational Games, 2K Games.

BioShock 2, 2010. [video game] (Windows, Mac OS, PS3, Xbox 360) 2K Marin, 2K Games. Additional work by f.ex Arkane Studios.

BioShock Infinite, 2013. [video game] (Windows, Mac OS, PS3, Xbox 360), Irrational Games, 2K Games.

Dishonored, 2012. [video game] (Windows, Mac OS, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Arkane Studios, Bethesda Softworks.

The Last of Us, 2013. [video game] (PS3, PS4), Naughty Dog, Sony Computer Entertainment.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015 [video game] (Windows, PS4, Xbox One) CD Projekt Red, CD Projekt.

BioShock wiki page, accessed 30.1.20117 <http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/Fontaine_%28Level%29>

BioShock 2 Ign wiki guide, 2012, 'Secret Endings' accessed 30.1.2017 < http://www.ign.com/wikis/bioshock-2/Secret_Endings>

Dishonored wiki page accessed 30.1.2017 <http://dishonored.wikia.com/wiki/Outsider_Shrines/Speeches>

Game award information, imdb.com, accessed 13.12.2016.

The Game Theorist, 2013, 'Game Theory: Why Final Fantasy is Anti-Religion' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLhiWw3pzQk> (Accessed 3.5.2017).

*

Aarseth, E 2012, 'A Narrative Theory of Games', *Foundations of Digital Games Conference Proceedings.* p. 129-133.

Bizzocchi, J & Tanenbaum, J 2011, 'Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences', in D Dawidson, *Well Played 3.0 Video Games, Value and Meaning*, Drew Davidson et al. & ETC Press, digital edition.

Bogost, I 2008, 'The Rhetoric of Video Games', in K Salen (ed.), The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning, *The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning,* The MIT Press, Cambridge, viewed 3 November 2016, digital edition.

Bosman, F G 2014, 'The Lamb of Comstock. Dystopia and Religion in Video Games', *Online – Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet*, vol 5, pp. 162–182, viewed 3 November 2016, < http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/12163>.

Boyan, A, Grizzard, M & Bowman, N D 2015 'A massively moral game? Mass Effect as a case study to understand the influence of players' moral intuitions on adherence to hero or antihero play styles', *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds,* vol 7, nro 1, pp. 41–57.

Booker, M K 2013, *Dystopia*, Critical Insights, Salem Press, Ipswich, Mass, digital edition.

Cambell, J 1988, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Paladin, London.

Campbell, C 2013, 'Gaming's new frontier: Cancer, depression, suicide' *Polygon,* 9.5.2013, accessed 10.01.2017, <http://www.polygon.com/2013/5/9/4313246/gamings-new-frontier-cancer-depression-suicide>

Carillo Masso, I & Abrams, N 2014, 'Locatin the Pixelated Jew A Multimodal Method for Exploring Judaism in the Shivah', in H A, Campbell & G P, Grieve (eds), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Indiana University Press, Indiana.

Carillo Masso, I 2016, 'The G-d in the Machine: Studying the Representation and Performance of Judaism in Video Games using Multimodal Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis', in Cheruvallil-Contractor & S Shakkour (eds), *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion*, Bloomsbury, London.

Dunne, D 2014, Multimodality or Ludo-Narrative Dissonance: Duality of Presentation in Fringe Media, *Proceedings of the 2014 Conference on Interactive Entertainment*, IE2014.

Eichner, S 2014, *Agency and Media Reception. Experiencing Video Games, Film, and Television*, Springer VS, Postdam.

Feldt, L 2016, 'Contemporary fantasy fiction and representations of religion: playing with reality, myth and magic in His Dark materials and Harry Potter' *Religion*, vol 46, nro 4, pp. 550–574.

Flanagan, M & Nissenbaum, H 2014, *Values at Play in Digital Games*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts.

Forbes B D, & Mahan J H, (eds.) 2005, *Religion and Popular Culture in America: Revised Edition* University of California Press.

Frasca, G 2001,' Rethinking agency and immersion: video games as a means of consciousness-raising', *Digital Creativity*, vol 12 No 3, p. 167-174.

King, G & Krzywinska, T, 2014, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts*, I.B.Tauris.

Grodal, T, 2000, 'Video games and the pleasures of control', D. Zillmann & P. Vorderer (eds.), *LEA's communication series. Media entertainment: The psychology of its appeal* (pp. 197–213). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hall, S 2009, 'Notes on Deconstructing "The Popular"', in Storey, J (ed.) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture A Reader*, Pearson Education Limited, England.

Hanson, B 2016, Inside Dishonored 2's Exaggerated Art Direction, viewed 3 May 2017, <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2016/05/23/oppression-opulence-and-decay-inside-dishonored-2s-bold-art-direction.aspx>

Heelas, P, (ed.) 2011, Spirituality in the Modern World, Within Religious Tradition and Beyond, Routledge, Oxon.

Heelas, P & Woodhead, L 2005, *The spiritual revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality,* Malden MA: Blackwell.

Heidbrink, S, Knoll T & Wysocki, J 2014,'Theorizing Religion in Digital Games Perspectives and Approaches', *Online – Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet*, vol 5, pp. 5–51, viewed 3 November 2016, <http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/12156>.

------- 2016, Researching Religion, Digital Games and Gamers: (E-)Merging Methodologies. Cheruvallil-Contractor & S Shakkour (eds), *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion*, Bloomsbury, London.

Knoll, T 2015, '"Are Those tho Only Two Solutions"? Dealing with Choice, Agency and Religion in Digital Games', *Online – Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet,* vol 7, pp. 207–226, viewed 8.5.2017, <http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/18515>.

Lebowitz, J, & Klug, C 2011, *Interactive Storytelling for Video Games A Player-Centred Approach to Creating Memorable Characters and Stories*, Elsevier.

Love, Mark C 2010, 'Not-So-Sacred Quests: Religion Intertextuality and Ethics in Video Games', *Religious Studies and Theology* 29: 191–213.

Milner, A, 2012, *Locating Science Fiction*, Liverpool University Press.

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

Salen, K & Zimmerman, E 2004, *Rules of Play Game Design Fundamentals*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts.

Oswalt, C 2003, *Secular Steeples. Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg.

Perreault, G 2012, 'Holy Sins: Depictions of Violent Religion in Contemporary Console Games', Paper presented at 2012 *Conference on Digital Religion Center for Religion, Media and Culture*, Boulder, CO, USA, January 12–15.

Roine, H-R 2016, *Imaginative, Immersive and Interactive Engagements The rhetoric of worldbuilding in contemporary speculative fiction*, Tampere University Press, Tampere.

-------- 2015, 'How You Emerge from This Game Is up to you. Agency, Positioning, and Narrativity in The Mass Effect Trilogy', in M Hatavara, M Hyvärinen, M Mäkelä & F Mäyrä (eds), Narrative Theory, Literature , and New Media: Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*, Routledge Interdisciplinatory Perspective on literature*, Taylor and Francis, digital edition.

Roland, Paul 2014, *Steampunk: back to the future with the new Victorians*, Herts, Oldcastle Books.

Schmeink L, 2016, *Biopunk Dystopias Genetic Engineering, Society and Science Fiction,* Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.

Stöckl, H 2004 'In between modes Language and image in printed media', *Perspectives on Multimodality*, (eds.) Ventola E, et al., John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004.

Storey, J, 2009, (ed.) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture A Reader*, Pearson Education Limited, England.

------------1996, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, digital edition.

Stroup, J M & Shuck, 2007, *Escape into the Future. Cultural Pessimism and its Religious Dimensions in Contemporary American Popular Culture*, Baylor University Press, Waco.

Taira, T 2006, *Notkea uskonto*, Eetos, Turku.

Biography

HEIDI RAUTALAHTI is preparing her PhD-research in the field of study of religions in the Doctoral Programme in Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research focuses on how religion and video games facilitate meaningful encounters in todays (popular) culture. More information on publications and activities: https://tuhat.helsinki.fi/portal/fi/person/rautalah

Heidi.rautalahti@helsinki.fi

"Black-eyed Bastard"

The Outsider Character in the *Dishonored* Series

Michaela Šimonová

Abstract

Dishonored is not only one of the most popular and original game series on the market, but from a religious point of view it has one of the most complex and original fictional belief systems. A character that particularly stands out is the Outsider, a mysterious divine-like entity that interacts with all main playable characters, giving them supernatural abilities and commenting on their choices. He inhabits a mysterious otherworld called Void, containing everything supernatural, chaotic, magical and irrational. The Outsider also indirectly affects the 'human world' by figuring in underground cults and their opponents, creating an interesting mosaic of religious teachings and struggles. In this article, we would like to examine the Outsider both in the context of the game lore and comparative religion studies, with emphasis on the analysis of his character and its parallels in world mythologies.

Keywords

1   Introduction

The fictional world of the *Dishonored* series, similar to the 19th century Victorian era and industrial revolution, comes with its own history, political system, geography and customs inspired by their real-life counterparts. The core of its gameplay is a combination of playable character's abilities, both in combat and magic, and a freedom of choice whether the player will use a non-lethal or lethal approach, determining the end of the main story. The social, political and religious system is highly developed and included in the narrative, with additional context that is possible to explore

outside the main storyline. This information can be obtained via numerous notes, dialogues, artefacts, surrounding decoration or posters. Considering the fact that the Outsider is an integral part of a wider game narrative, we cannot ignore a religious world created within the game. As Henry Jenkins (2005) pointed out, the game designers should be seen more as narrative architects rather than storytellers, which fits with the complexity and 'real-feel' of world and characters in *Dishonored.* An overview and impact of religious institutions and their beliefs will be discussed in the second part of this article, with focus on their perception of the Outsider and parallels in 'real-life' examples. In the third chapter we will attempt to approach this figure as a complex fictional character, keeping in mind that the creation process was different than with 'real-life' divinities. In their highly informative and extended study, Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki provide us an overview of various approaches on studying games in an academic context, with an emphasis on religion:

> (…) In the context of computer games, religion and religious elements (like narratives, iconography symbols, places and character names etc.) can be researched and analysed on different levels and from a multitude of perspectives and foci, depending on the research question(s) and the scientific interests. One possible approach could be a game-immanent analysis of religious topics, the reception, transformation and/or (re-)construction of religious elements as symbols, rituals, architectural styles, quotes and other materials. (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014)

Following this approach, we will try to partially isolate the Outsider from a wider game narrative in the last part of this article, in order to study him as a character with 'mythological' qualities, compared to the deities Tezcatlipoca and Odin.

If not stated otherwise, listed quotes without a reference are directly from the games *Dishonored*, *Dishonored 2* or *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*. This article works with texts and materials used in actual games, not including features such as interviews or developers' commentaries, in order to present an objective description of a specific figure in its own game context. Our goal is not to find a 'hidden' critique of religious and social systems, but rather focus on the fact that they were an inspiration and serve as an excellent example of how some themes are deeply integrated in human's perception of faith, whether 'real' or 'fictional'.

2   Shadows of the Void

> *Each of us carries the Void inside our bodies. It churns just beneath the surface of our consciousness. It yearns for our contact. Our fears. Our desires.*

In the game's lore, there are two known worlds: the first one is inhabited by humans and similar to the one we live in, while the other one is a mysterious supernatural dimension known as the 'Void'. The existence of the Void seems to be widely accepted both by common people, Abbey of Everyman (a religious institution discussed later in this article) and occultists. On the other hand, the belief in the Outsider's existence is not so clear, and as stated in one of the notes, "*for most, the Outsider is nothing but a child's tale meant to instil fear of that beyond the family, the community*". According to the Abbey's teachings, the Void was a primordial world of creation and it will swallow the human world in the end. It is also the world to which some souls pass[1] after their physical body dies, however their consciousness appears to be short-lived and in time they will dissolve into the Void. Animals strongly linked to this world are huge whales, sometimes referred to as leviathans, with a strong connection to the magic and simultaneous appearance in the Void. Another animal, rather connected to the Outsider and magic, is the rat. Apart from a connection with the 'Lonely Rat Boy', discussed later in this article, there is a brief mention of a sickness one woman got from feeding a rat with her own blood, during which she met the Outsider and walked with him in the Void. Furthermore, in the last instalment *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider,* players can find a note about a large hound of the Void certain magic practitioners used for a ritual, nicknaming it 'Sugarboy'. Investigators called it a 'malevolent spirit of the Void', but unfortunately we don't know more about these supposedly supernatural creatures inhabiting the place together with the Outsider. A visual representation of the Void is in dark colours, with bright white light, strong wind and many floating stone islands. Sometimes, a reflection of a scene from the human world can be mirrored into it, but in most cases they appear to be static and no interaction is possible. This realm can also partially pass through to the human world, creating strange and unexplained disturbances, such as disembodied voices, hallucinations and strange lights. The Void seems to be an opposite of the human world, including everything chaotic, mysterious, magical and incomprehensible by physical laws and rationalism. This is confirmed by the ability to access this realm through dreams or specific magical means, such as altars or paintings and spells. The link between two worlds is a figure of the Outsider, who inhabits the Void and can channel its powers to the human world. He is the only known long-term inhabitant of the Void at the time all three *Dishonored* games take place and interacts with both protagonists and antagonists. Special objects connected with supernatural powers can be found throughout the game in the form of incised bones and constructed charms, known as runes and bone charms. Although their primal mean is to enhance character's supernatural abilities, they are known to be used by people with no magical skills or connection to the Outsider, making them similar to 'real-life' amulets and talismans. An Interesting touch is an existence of so-

---

1   They appear to be people who died by a violent death, people with strong connection to the Void, restless souls etc. Additionally, it is extended in The Death of the Outsider that everyone who experienced a near-death state, visited the place.

called corrupted charms that can negatively affect other abilities or vital function. This type of charm is mentioned in the lore, as well, as being created on purpose or by mistake. Runes are much stronger and rarer items, carved with the Outsider's mark, and the player can usually find them in home-made shrines. As it is pointed out in the first instalment, if a person "*wasn't chosen and doesn't wear my (Outsider's) mark, he can't unlock their (runes) secrets*." The mentioned secret is an obtainment of new skills or an enhancement of already possessed magical abilities. Although most of them are mentioned to be made of whale bones, which have a certain connection to the Outsider and the Void, the explanation is far less mysterious. According to one of the notes, whale bones became popular after the whale trade had begun. These charms were described to "*sing in the night and grant some small boon to a man's vigor or defense against pregnancy*". This 'singing' meant that they possessed the power of the Void, as it is pointed out that when one of the characters, an old witch nicknamed Granny Rags, created the charms, she "opened" them to the Void until they "*moan like the fever-sick on a cold night*". Rune design is very similar to a writing system of the same name, which was believed to possess certain magical attributes among Germanic people, who used them for centuries as a decoration of various objects (MacLeod and Mess 2006).

Despite a close connection of the Void and the Outsider, he appears to be in a position of a 'parasite', an artificially created being that is not supposed to be in that realm. This is implied in the fact that a young boy had to be sacrificed in order to be 'reborn' into the Void and an interesting mention about 'Ancient music', a set of tones that can disturb magic channelled from the Void. Furthermore, certain musical notes have "*the ability to calm the turbulence originating in the Void, which we attribute to the Outsider*". Therefore, he was not a keeper of a balance between two worlds, but its disturber. The Void itself seems to be a world in a constant motion following its own rules, with some parts being described as 'old', while others offering a twisted mirror of the current state of the 'human' world. Players learn about an interesting ritual, by which the main antagonist and bearer of the Outsider's mark in *Dishonored 2* had found a place of the Outsider's 'birth' and hid a piece of herself there, making her human self immortal by becoming "part" of the Outsider. Thus it seems that the Void has its own laws and the chaos is only a seeming illusion, attributed to it because its forces cannot be understood by the human mind and can be partially controlled by or through the Outsider. That was the main reason cultists sacrificed a young boy at its edges, so they could channel its infinite creative and destructive energy to the threshold of their world. Interestingly, it is revealed in the last instalment that some of these members mutated into monstrous beings called 'envisioned', an effect of a long-term occupation of the place where a border between the worlds is broken.

3   Abbey vs. Cult

Can two enemies occupy the same body? No, for the first will direct it one way, and the second another, until they stumble into a ditch and its neck is broken.

Although we do not find much information about religious life of common people, at the time the game takes place the only 'acceptable' faith seems to be the path of the Abbey of Everyman. Information found throughout the game tells us that before the Abbey took over, there was a wider variety of faiths and cults, all eliminated in a conflict known as the Rectification War. Surviving remains of other religions and beliefs can still be found throughout the game, ranging from an individual worship, guided séances, witch convents to a highly organized cult centred in Shindaery Peak. Usually, the Abbey deals with the first mentioned case, trying to uncover the worshippers and illegal shrines dedicated to the Outsider. The Abbey itself is a hierarchized group with two main factions, the Oracular Order and the Overseers. Interestingly, the exclusively female Oracular Order reportedly used visions to interpret prophecies[2]. The same contradiction can be found in Medieval Europe, with the most famous example of Hildegard of Bingen. She was a great 12th century mystic, but If we look objectively at her visions and means of work (Singer 2006), in a different context she could have been easily accused of witchcraft and heresy. Thus, we can observe the same paradox in which 'supernatural' powers used under a supervision of the dominant religious group are acceptable and even desired. This religious institution oversees also political and civil matters, thus covering all important aspects of daily life. Despite their seemingly atheistic and civil nature, they do not deny the existence of supernatural forces inhabiting the world, however they see most of them as something negative that has to be avoided and fought against. It should be also noted that their fight against witchcraft is perceived in a positive light, unless it is corrupted by power hunger or torture and false accusations. To quote the Outsider, "*(Vice Overseer) believes in the Abbey's mission, protection the good people of the empire against the likes of us*". Even one of his human 'agents' mentioned in one of the additional notes that "*the Overseers are right to fear us, to warn the common folk to stay near their homes at night and keep their families close*". It is true that we can see many negative aspects of magic especially in *Dishonored 2*, and there are strong reasons for people to be afraid of it. These fears and sense of duty were concentrated in one of their main goals, which was an elimination of the Outsider as the main source of magic and discord. However, this anti-campaign seems to be directed towards his followers, rather than the entity itself, for the simple reason that the Outsider could not be confronted directly. In one of their invocations, we can clearly

---

2   It should be noted that the developers referred to these powers as a cover up for an intellectual analyses they carry out in order to establish a prophecy. However, for the goal of this work the fact is important that the Abbey and people count their visions and prophetics as 'unnatural', whatever the truth is behind them.

recognize this goal: "*And to those who choose to wander, beyond the walls of our homes, in far places, we will strike at them swiftly before they whisper to their neighbours, filling their hearts with strangeness and doubt*". Their actual practices and approach towards the fight against 'magic' strongly resemble the Spanish Inquisition. Firstly, they exercised both secular and a religious functions, with an approval from the ruler with supreme authority to root out heresy. Similar to the Abbey, the inquisition had its own leader, ministry, courts, prisons, commissioners and local agents (Rawlings 2006); indeed, a very similar structure to the Abbey of Everyman with its High Overseer, civil institutions, prisons and Overseers. The same can be observed in the relationship with the crown, or in the case of *Dishonored*, an emperor or empress. There is a certain influence and cooperation, but the ruler is not the one selecting the next High Overseer[3], just like it was the case with a Spanish king and Grand Inquisitor. Manifestations of its public influence can be found within the game, for example in *Dishonored 2* a player can hear out a public speech about a girl, who confessed to an Overseer that she had found the Outsider's shrine. After an interrogation, the girl was executed as a heretic. This example reminds us of a public reading of an edict by a local inquisitor, comprising of a long list of heresies against the Catholic faiths, which was followed by an invitation to acknowledge own sins and denouncement of others for engaging in such offence (Rawlling 2006). If the Abbey can be compared to the Inquisition, then we can compare the cult of the Outsider to heresy and the devil[4]. The strategy of both Catholic Church and the Abbey of Everyman is similar in identifying and explaining an enemy of their teaching as a source of evil and discord. We also need to keep in mind a difference between official church view and folklore surrounding these beings. Both devil and the Outsider are sometimes presented as monstrous magical animals[5], considered outcasts at the edge of society, sources of magic and discord, with a connection to an unknown and feared world of chaos and magic that lays beyond human understanding. Of course, this scheme doesn't have to fit the game lore, but when we look at the presentations of the devil in history and human mind, we may be surprised to find interesting parallels, proving the point that the religious system of *Dishonored* is 'built' with a great craftsmanship and understanding of religion.

In the case of the Abbey's perception of the Outsider, we shall rather talk about propaganda than a real 'understanding' of his figure, especially considering the fact that the player is able to directly interact with him in all three games and thus make his or her own opinion. On the other

---

3   The next High Overseer is chosen by a council made of elder Overseers, during the Feast of Painted Kettles. Although not much is known about the process and the feast, it seems to be a process similar to Catholic Pope election.

4   It is worth pointing out that in one description, he is described as a 'horned thing warped by heresy'.

5   In one note from the Death of the Outsider, a confrontation between the Outsider and High Overseer is mentioned, in which the Outsider took the form of a large serpent and attacked him. However, author of this note pointed out that this story is made up and that the Outsider's physical form "exists bodily in the Void, and does not, as we know, shapeshift like a trickster from some fanciful tale".

hand, we know that the worship includes carving of bones[6], human sacrifices, blood infusions, and other undefined "disgusting rituals". Interestingly, it has little to do with the requirements the Outsider has for people he talks to. It was clearly and well formulated by the Outsider already in the first *Dishonored* game: "*Sokolov believes there are specific words and acts that can compel me to appear before him.(…) He performs disgusting rituals beneath the old Abbey. But if he really wants to meet me, he could start by being a bit more interesting.*" Additionally, in one of the journals excerpts, we can find a more detailed description of these rituals: "*I've known four people in my time who carried the Mark of the Outsider, but I've known dozens more who wanted it, who stood at night in stagnant ponds or begged in the dust blowing through graveyards. People who gutted farm animals or burned the flesh of men, thinking it would call forth the Void.*" In the novel Corroded Man (Christopher 2016), an official addition to the game series, the main antagonist carved the Outsider's mark on his hand with a blade that created the Outsider, but we know only about vague mentions of dreams in which this entity visited him. The mark gave him certain supernatural abilities because of the dagger's magical properties, but they were imperfect and 'corrupted', negatively affecting his body and mind. Also, in the second game instalment, the main antagonist is able to 'block' the powers of the Outsider's mark. It is worth noting that this antagonist partially merged with the Outsider and that she was among those few chosen to bear the mark. Their relationship is interesting: on one side it seems that the Outsider is impressed by her cunningness and resourcefulness, on the other he helped to destroy her after realizing she was draining powers from him against his will. But again, there is no moral judgement of her deeds nor traceable hatred or disgust in the dialogues. It would be interesting to hear their direct conversations, but unfortunately they are not included in the game. Otherwise, a player can find brief mentions about other people to whom the Outsider appeared in dreams or gave his mark, but they are very brief with no new information.

When it comes to the worship of the Outsider, there appears to be two main types: unorganized worship at custom-made shrines and organized cult. Witches and wizards are a specific category, not necessarily connected to the Outsider, but drawing some of their powers from the Void, which is an ultimate source of magic. Performance of magic includes creation and use of various items, such as potions and amulets, but also more complicated mechanical devices, as seen in *Dishonored 2.* Two antagonists from the series are able to borrow some of their supernatural powers to their followers, but it should be noted that neither of these groups, witches and assassins, were considered to be the worshippers of the Outsider. An organized cult was revealed in the last instalment, *The Death of the Outsider*, but already hinted at in the second instalment. This cult is

---

6   Bones are an important part of magic in general, and some are considered 'stronger' and more suitable for occult rituals, as confirmed both in the game and novel Corroded Man. Apart from whale bones, bones of witches and Oracular Sisters seemed to possess special magical properties. Several accounts also mention use of children bones.

alive at least on Serkonos, an island on which their main base is located at the physical entrance to the Void. It comprises of carefully selected followers guarding the entrance to the Void, accessing it with the help of an artefact called 'Eye of the Dead god'. They have strict rules about taking in new members to live in their main base, carefully observing potential candidates. Once in Shindaery peak's base, they have access to a huge library concerning the Void and the Outsider, as well as a chance to use the power of the Eye of the Dead god to reach the occult secrets[7]. Their other duty is to guard the Outsider, so that no one will destroy his human body, trapped in a border area between worlds. Although they are forced to work with the outside world, once they are invited to join the close circle of core members, they stay at the base. This type of organized cult follows strict rules and its members wear uniforms, both features identical to devoted Overseers from the Abbey of Everyman. It seems that the individual goal of some cult members is to become an 'envisioned' and physically merge with the Void, while still staying in the human world. Reach for this form of immortality, study of the Void's secrets and guard of the Outsider's body appear to be core elements of the cult. Search for a 'secret' and 'hidden' knowledge, as well as immortality, is a characteristic trait for many occult and spiritual groups appearing through centuries in nearly all cultures, and we can safely consider it to be an integral part of human desire to raise above its own limitations.

An individual worship seems to be still active at the time the game takes place, despite the Abbey's prosecutions. As expected, it takes place in secret and shrines are built in abandoned apartments or areas that are hard to reach. A shrine is usually in the form of a wooden altar-like structure with a purple cloth and burning candles, on which a player can find a rune, presumably an offering to the Outsider in hope that he will enhance it with magical energy of the Void. The most notable individual worshipper in the first instalment is 'Granny Rags', a blind old woman with an interesting and well-documented backstory. She used to be a beautiful and desired young noble, but after she had married and travelled to the mysterious continent Pandyssia, the Outsider marked her. Later in life, she killed her husband and made charms from his bones. Additionally, she 'adopted' a mute boy that became an executioner in order to bring her more bones for runes and charms. Even as an old woman suffering from dementia, she was a dangerous and ruthless witch, qualities noted by the Outsider himself. She is indirectly mentioned in *Dishonored 2,* when one of the secondary characters kept her hand as a charm, still 'charged' with magic. The Outsider's comment on the situation is very interesting, revealing another part of his 'worshippers': "*In case you're wondering, Paolo's not one of those unhinged cultists who believe I'll grant them favors if they leave a big enough offering or play just the right musical notes*." Thus, it is revealed that magical abilities are directly connected to a physical representation of the mark, burned on the head of a chosen one.

---

7   The power of this artefact is summarized in a memoir note found in the game: "It seemed to hum with power, beckoning me. And when I touched the Eye understanding exploded within me. The invisible layers of the universe were laid bare to me."

Paolo, an idealistic and ruthless gang leader, used its power to gain a partial immortality, and although he didn't worship the Outsider, a shrine was built in his office to keep the magical properties of Granny Rag's hand.

A middle ground between the Cultists and individual worshippers are small occult groups. In the second instalment, a group of nobles centred around the main antagonist, a powerful witch bearing the Outsider's mark, are after immortality. Their 'worship' seems to consist of guided séances and gathering of powerful artefacts, allowing them to come closer to their ultimate goal. Although no other similar groups are found within the game, a group of people centred around a charismatic and powerful leader is always at the beginning of an organized cult.

4   Born in the Month of Darkness

> *In these sleepless nights of despair, you appear to me not as the mighty leviathan, but as a young man, with eyes as black as the Void.*

The origin and personality of the Outsider slightly changes in process, depending on the needs of the main storyline. While in the first game he seemed to be a fully-divine, impersonal and almost eternal entity with no particular backstory, in the second and third instalment his human aspect is revealed and notably extended. The behaviour pattern and communication seems to be more personal and emotional already in *The Knife of Dunwall* and *Brighmore Witches* DLCs, however it might have been fuelled by a hostile approach of the main protagonist, assassin Daud, towards the Outsider. The nature of dialogue in all games and DLCs slightly varies, depending on individual choices. If a player decides to spare an assassination target, the Outsider is intrigued by an unexpected behaviour, and the exact opposite can be said about the choice to kill the enemy. It shall be noted that the Outsider is not judging the choices in a traditional pattern good vs. bad or right vs. wrong, and his interest is not based on morality. Rather, he sees murder as a predictable and 'boring' solution to a problem, with expected consequences reflected in one of the possible futures he can see. The Outsider is a being observing the world without judging it or taking sides, granting his mark to people with a potential for great things that might be good or evil, depending purely on their choice.

As noted above, one of his abilities is to foresee the future. However, according to his own words, this ability is limited and he seems to see several possibilities of how the future can look like. Sometimes, even the Outsider admits that the outcome is obscured to him, ("*what will that mean in the days to come, I wonder*.") but he seems to be rather interested in them, or to quote him.

"*these are the moments I wait for*". A good example is the death of the 'Lonely Rat Boy', a figure introduced in The Tales from Dunwall[8], who received the mark from the Outsider just to die shortly after because of carelessness and lust for personal vendetta. It is most likely that this outcome was not the one the Outsider expected, but it was made clear that the boy was grateful for that short moment he could live without fear. A Similar situation was in the first game, when he stated that he "*can see all her tomorrows and I know that either she dies tonight at your hand or she'll live out her days, month after month, year after year, far away, even as her fine clothes wear into tatters and her silken hair gets dull and gray*". A similar ability is implied in *Dishonored*: *Death of the Outsider,* when the Outsider gave abilities and weapons to kill him to the main protagonist Billy Lurk, whose initial intention is to destroy him. He seems to know possible outcomes of his own future, which would be either death or liberation by Billy's hand, and instead of threating, he reveals to her more information about himself so she (the player) can make a decision on her own. We don't know much about how the Outsider perceives the past, but in the last instalment of the game, it is suggested that he cannot see behind his own "birth"[9]. As for the present, his sight reaches far and wide, most likely able to perceive everything in a particular moment. It is not specified whether it is the Outsider reflecting parts of the human world into the Void, but the fact that they are observed by the ones he 'chose' and are directly linked to their situation, speaks in favour of the fact that the Outsider could partially manipulate the space he inhabited.

A physical representation of this divine entity is one of a young man with dark-brown hair and all-black eyes. As it is revealed in *The Death of the Outsider*, that body is a reflection of the real one 'frozen' in a place called Ritual Hold, sacrificed five thousand years before the main events happened. Interestingly, in the first *Dishonored* game, the Outsider told the main character that he is "*older than the rocks this place is built on*" when referring to Dunwall, a city in which the game takes place. As stated earlier, we shall consider similar narratives to be a part of a different, more 'divine', version of the Outsider in its 'original' concept of an impersonal supernatural entity. However, he could be also talking about the 'age' of the being he became, since we know there was at least one inhabitant of the Void before him. Coming back to his appearance, the all-black eyes are his main characteristic feature, visually distinguishing him from other characters. Although it was never directly explained in the game what was the reason for this colouring, it was hinted at the end of *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*. When the Outsider's body is liberated from the Void by revealing his true name, his eyes change back to those of a human, most likely corresponding with how they looked before the ritual took place. Some scientists suggest that the eyes can provide

---

8   The Tales of Dunwall is a set of three short animated stories. Their protagonists are connected with the world of Dishonored, briefly mentioned in the original game.
9   It was mentioned in a context of an artefact called "Eye of the Dead God", when the Outsider said that the object is relict of "*whatever god that was before me*".

information about another person's emotional state and personality[10] and if that would be an idea here, too, it would mean that the boy's emotions and personality were trapped outside the Void, unable to perish or return into its physical body. The blackness of the eyes could represent the supernatural energy of the Void channelled through the current Outsider, especially if we compare it to a huge black Eye of the Dead God, an entity that inhabited the mysterious world before him. Little is known about the Outsider's life as a human, and most information comes from a song included in the game[11], revealing that he was an orphan and mongrel begging on streets before an occult group took him in and sacrificed him in the Void. This choice was not random, as it is indirectly suggested that they were looking for a "chosen one" that would be accepted by the Void.

It can appear as a paradox that an object with strong connection to the Outsider is a human heart, both abstract and in flesh. He analyses human thoughts and emotions, however it is implied that he couldn't 'read' them with certainty. Assassin Daud, one of the main characters in the game in direct contact with the Outsider, noted that "*no doubt that the black-eyed bastard takes delight in watching me twist into knots. He knows I can't abide a mystery*". Similar can be said about his knowledge of the future, discussed earlier in this article. In the first *Dishonored* game, the main character is given a device constructed from a human heart. Although the Outsider claimed it was done by his hands, the 'real-life' artefact was constructed by Piero Joplin, a brilliant inventor bearing his mark, to whom he had given the instructions. Thus, this mechanical heart is of his construction and given his magical ability to expose an individual's secrets. In the second *Dishonored*, it is revealed that the heart contains remains of a spirit or soul of the empress, murdered in a previous instalment, whose lover and daughter are the main characters in the game. Thus, this trapped spirit of the empress seemed to possess some supernatural abilities drawn from the Void, but the moment this essence left the vessel, it perished into oblivion. The ability to read secrets of a human mind and soul was undoubtedly connected to the Void, since the spirit of the empress was, similarly to the Outsider, on the border of both worlds.

In the last part of this article, we would like to have a closer look at some gods from world religions that share common features with the Outsider. However, we have to be careful and keep in mind the different nature of the figures we are going to compare. On one side we have divinities developed for centuries by cultures that believed them to be real beings participating in their lives. On the other side is a fictional world serving as a base for an action game, with the goal to create a believable and working system within an entertainment environment. Once we are aware of this basic difference, we can see that even the unintentional parallels have their place and logic,

---

10 For further information see: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-apes/201512/your-eyes-really-are-the-window-your-soul (23.05.2018); Larsson, Pedersen and Stattin (2007).

11 This song is called The Month of Darkness and appears in Dishonored 2, naming the boy as a son of a monster. However, the cultists didn't treat him with respect but with an abuse. Interestingly, a concept of a "chosen child" is present also in the Abbey of Everyman, in a ritual initiation of their members, the Overseers.

considering they follow the same goal: to make a supernatural figure fit into its own world. We have already mentioned some parallels to the Christian devil, especially in connection of their perception in the eyes of a dominant religious group. Therefore, in this part we would like to turn our focus to two other deities from different cultures. The first god, with whom the Outsider shares several notable similarities, is an Aztec deity called Tezcatlipoca. He was one of the most important gods of the pre-Columbian pantheon with an important place in cult and mythology, thus we have rich historic sources from which we can draw important information. Firstly, we are talking about a god with many names and functions, sometimes in seeming opposition. For example, he was the patron of rulers and young elite, but at the same time slaves were under his protection. His body and mind were imperfect, with one leg absent and mind filled with strife, but a youth representing him at the great feast Toxcatl had to be perfect in every possible way. In a 16th century account, written by Friar Bernardo de Sahagun, we can find interesting passages describing Tezcatlipoca:

> When he walked upon the earth he quickened war; he quickened vice, filth; he brought anguish, affliction to men; he brought discord among men, wherefore he was called 'the enemy on both sides'. He mocked men, he ridiculed men. He was called wind, shadow. This wicked Tezcatlipoca, we know, is Lucifer, the great devil who there in the midst of Heaven, even in the beginning, began war, vice, filth. From there he was cast out, from there he fell. But he walketh here upon the earth deceiving men, tricking men. (…) He (Tezcatlipoca) only maketh sport of one. Of no one can he be a friend, to no one true. They said Tezcatlipoca enriched one, and thereby visited him with pain and affliction. (Sahagun 2012)

Of course, this summary is heavily affected by a Christian worldview, but we can still gather interesting information that could have corresponded with how the Aztecs perceived this god. Interestingly, this description strongly resembles how the Abbey of Everyman perceived the Outsider, especially as a source of strife and discord among people. A more general aspect is a connection with wind and shadow, attributes of the Void as a world the Outsider inhabits. Both elements are connected with something hidden, invisible and unpredictable. Although we cannot say that the Outsider directly mocks people, at some points his attitude can be considered provocative and teasing. It is also interesting to observe the note about both enrichment and pain that the favour of Tezcatlipoca can bring, just like we can see in the case of the Outsider, whose mark can be both blessing and curse. They also share an attitude towards their 'favourites' by not taking sides and leaving them to take responsibility for their own choices. An interesting example is an episode in which Tezcatlipoca, in a disguise of a drunk man, met men of Moctezuma, the last ruler of the Aztec empire, and prophesised the fall of his empire (Todorov 1995). Thus, even If Moctezuma was a ruler that gave rich tributes to him, it didn't guarantee the favour of the god who seemed to rather enjoy interesting moments to come, revealing only part of a bigger picture. A

similar episode can be found in the *Knife of Dunwall* DLC, in which the Outsider appears to assassin Daud just after he murdered an empress. There is no moral judgement present, however he states that the "*empress was different*" and "*you can't just disappear in the shadows*", notifying him about the consequences of his action, but not telling him whether his action was right or wrong. Additionally, he provides him with a mysterious name and indirectly led him to a point when he would save the young empress. Despite this, Daud has a hostile approach towards the Outsider, blaming him for not stopping the murder of the empress he committed, and later in *The Death of the Outsider*, seeing him as a source of the world's discord and his personal misery. This refusal to take responsibility for own actions is an interesting motif, especially if we consider the fact that the Outsider always left a freedom of choice for the ones he marked. Another similarity between these deities is a specific connection to a human heart. In general, Aztecs considered a human heart to be the supreme offering fit for gods (Miller and Taube 1993), and Tezcatlipoca had a special connection with this organ. One of the postcolonial tales tells us about this god appearing with an opened chest, and if a person who met him was brave enough to tear out his heart, he would get a rich reward. However, if he would run away, a punishment or death would meet him soon (Olivier 2008). It reminds us of the way the Outsider appeared in a dream or vision to a potential bearer of his mark, especially if we consider the fact that in the second instalment there is a possibility to refuse his powers. We need to keep in mind the fact that this was done primarily for a gameplay purpose and not as an extension of the lore. Still, in *Death of the Outsider,* we can find an interesting note that he appeared in a dream of an Oracular sister and offered her the mark, but she rejected it. Despite that, she was cast out of the convent. However, the main character of the same instalment clearly refused the mark, but the Outsider ignored it and on top of supernatural abilities, she 'received' an artificial hand and eye with clear connection to the Void. The last important aspect of Tezcatlipoca that can be compared with our main topic, is the feast in the month of Toxcatl. A perfect young man, chosen from captives one year before the celebration took place, represented the god for the whole period. The selection process was crucial and there were dozens of very specific attributes the slave had to possess. This selection of a suitable victim is similar to the one we can find in the game when cultists searched for a child to become the Outsider, suggested in various clues and additions to the main storyline. Unfortunately, we don't have more information about these requirements, but what is important is the fact that an 'apotheosis' of a sacrificed victim is a desirable outcome in both cases.

The other god that shared some notable similarity is the Old Norse deity Odin, worshipped by Germanic people for centuries before the Viking Age. However, most of the information we have about him comes from sagas and poems written down in medieval Iceland. Despite this 'handicap', there are strong arguments speaking in favour of the antiquity and importance of his figure. During the Viking Age, he was the chief of gods with several areas of patronage and influence. His

personality, like with other gods from the same pantheon, is highly anthropomorphised, with both positive and negative traits. There were many spheres over which this god ruled, including poetry, death, war, magic and wisdom. He is the father of gods, co-creator and ruler of the world and humans. With the help of his throne he can look over all worlds, making him an omniscient deity that possesses knowledge about what's going on around him. Although he is unable to see the future himself, in poems and myths he is a frequent visitor of dead seers in the Underworld, forcing them to reveal to him the future or interpret concerning dreams of his son. He can be easily recognized because he is the only god with one eye, the other sacrificed in a sacred well as an exchange for wisdom. This eye 'deformation' can be paralleled to the Outsider, whose divine status and knowledge are visually demonstrated through the black eyes. Odin's relationship with heroes is a double-edged sword: on one side, he is the god of victory granting achievements to his favourites; on the other side he can bring their doom once they lose his interest. Creating discord and warfare is in his nature, as it is stated in numerous heroic poems (Simek 1993). An image of Odin awaiting fallen warriors in his hall Valhalla is similar to the Outsider living with restless spirits of the dead in the Void, as it was demonstrated in the last instalment in which Daud's soul sat next to the Outsider's physical body. A strong connection to magic is undeniable and crucial for both characters, as they seem to grant certain qualities to their 'chosen ones'. Odin, although in poetic tradition an important deity, was not intensively worshiped by a wide public (Simek 1993). Similarly as Tezcatlipoca, Odin was connected to a human sacrifice. And just like at the Toxcatl feast a young man embodied Tezcatlipoca, according to the poem *Havamal* (*138-141)* Odin sacrificed 'himself to himself' by hanging from the world tree, to gain a mystic knowledge of runes. According to an episode from the medieval chronicle *Gesta Danorum*, king Vikarr's death, which was requested by Odin himself, was a direct reference of this sacrifice but with no 'mystical' outcome (Saxo Grammaticus VI). This practise resembles a sacrifice of the Outsider, who was reborn with an access to a greater knowledge and power, while at the same time preserving an integrity of his old memory and human body. On the top of this, we have already mentioned earlier in an article that runes and bone charms inscribed with a mysterious script resembling the Scandinavian runic alphabet are items through which the Outsider channels the magic into human world, which can be seen as another interesting parallel to Scandinavian religion.

5   Conclusions

This article attempted to present an overview of one of the most interesting non-playable characters in modern games. The Outsider is a passive observer that comments on player's choices and fills or extends blank spaces in the storyline. The complexity of his personality and function is remarkable,

especially when compared to 'real-life' counterparts and the way he interacts in a world built for the *Dishonored* franchise. First, we had a closer look at the world he inhabited in the game and summarized information available about this place. The Void appeared to be a world of infinite creative and destructive forces, impossible for humans to control without the intervention of an intermediary, born into both worlds but not fully belonging to any of them. The Outsider was in a position of an intruder, able to break the barrier and keep his independence from humans, but not from the Void. His human body is held 'hostage' in the place where it was sacrificed, and the same can be said about his spirit or soul relieved of all emotions, visually represented in black eyes. If a player decided to liberate him from this captivity by revealing his true name, both essences merged and the first thing the Outsider noticed is that he can 'feel'. In the second part, we analysed major religious groups of the game and compared some of their aspects with real-life counterparts. These institutions perceived the Outsider in a different light depending on their goals. The Abbey of Everyman is dedicated to destroy him and his followers, strongly demonizing his image and labelling him as the source of all evil and discord in the world, a propaganda strongly resembling a Christian view of the devil. On the other hand, cultists and individual worshippers seem to overestimate their influence over him, thinking that performance of certain rituals and sacrifices would turn him into an obedient servant to their cause. In rarer cases we can find romanticization and idealization of his figure and Paolo's example shows us a rather 'practical' relationship. A specific case is Daud, a character with hostile approach towards him, and Billy Lurk, the main character in the last instalment with similar attitude. Lastly, we attempted to look at the Outsider as a complex character with fully-developed personality within game measures. Additionally to this 'humanization', we looked at two other deities from 'real-life' and compared certain individual aspects specific for them. Tezcatlipoca, Odin and Outsider are entities both admired and feared, living at the edges of the known world and granting both blessing and curse to their followers. Their connection with magic, discord and knowledge point them towards a dangerous, yet fascinating part of the human mind and supernatural world that is out of our reach to understand. All three figures 'distribute' supernatural powers to the human world, create strife and test the limits of human dedication and moral codex. It can be said that they are 'bridges' between consciousness and unconsciousness, available only to people ready to take a 'trip' into an unknown part of their minds, usually through dreams. But first, they had to be chosen by the divine entity, usually due to their potential strength or inner conflict. Following partial analysis of these characters, we came to the conclusion that they are a specific 'type' of supernatural being, not directly corresponding to one of the established archetypes, although sharing several features with them. With final remarks, we would like to conclude this study in hope that an ever-growing field of religion studies will acknowledge an importance of fictional characters (not only) in games as cultural reflections of

existing faiths and 'mechanics' of human mind, which is an ultimate source of both religion and game lore.

Bibliography

Poems of Elder Edda 1990, Philadelphia: Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Grammaticus, S 2013, *Gesta Danorum,* available: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1150/1150-h/1150-h.htm (24.5.2018)

Christopher, A 2016, *Dishonored: The Corroded Man*, London: Titan Books

Heidbrink, S; Tobias, K and Wysocki, J 2014 'Theorizing Religion in Digital Games: Perspectives and Approaches', in *Heidelberg Journal of religions on the internet,* vol. 05, pp. 5-55

Jenkins, H 2005, *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*. Available on: http://homes.lmc.gatech.edu/~bogost/courses/spring07/lcc3710/readings/jenkins_game-design.pdf (24.05.2018)

Larsson, M; Pedersen, N and Stattin, H 2007, 'Associations between iris characteristics and personality in adulthood'*,* in *Biological Psychology*, Vol 75: Issue 2, pp. 165-175

MacLeod, M and Mees, B 2006, *Runic Amulets and magic objects,* Wooddbridge: The Boydell Press

Marshall, D (ed.) 2014, *Dishonored: The Dunwall Archives*, Dark Horse Books

Miller, M and Taube, K 1993, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, London: Thames and Hudson

Olivier, G 2008, *Mockeries and Metamorphoses of an Aztec God: Tezcatlipoca, "Lord of the Smoking Mirror*, Colorado: University Press of Colorado

Rawlings, H 2006, *The Spanish Inquisition,* Blackwell Publishing

Todorov, T 1995, *Morals of History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Sahagun, B 2012, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, Book 1: The Gods*; University of Utah Press

Simek, R 2008, *A dictionary of Northern Mythology*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer

Springer, Ch 2005 'The Visions of Hildegard of Bingen', in *Yale Journal of biology and medicine,* vol. 78, issue 2*,* pp. 57-82

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-apes/201512/your-eyes-really-are-the-window-your-soul (23.05.2018)

How to Download the Divine

Religion Meets the Internet in the *qigong* Healer Dr. Zhi Gang Sha and His "Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment™"

Franz Winter

Abstract

The Chinese born spiritual teacher "Dr. Zhi Gang Sha" makes up part of a growing global healers market and provides various techniques of purported ancient Chinese origin in his centres in Canada and in Europe. Most of his teachings belong to the vast and heterogeneous array of practices, methods, and beliefs which developed within the modern *qigong* scene that emerged in China in the second half of the twentieth century and spread into the West in close connection with the so-called "Traditional Chinese Medicine". This article takes a look at a rather recent religious offspring with a particular focus on his innovative take on the internet. This approach has its roots in a specific history of the internet in the Chinese context which is commonly referred to as "cyber-sectarianism". The movement founded and led by Zhi Gang Sha may be interpreted as a continuation of major techniques and strategies applied by cyber-sectarian movements which emerged during the 1990s and the 2000s.

1   Introduction

Religious topics have played a major role in the internet since the start of the new technology and its manifold possibilities. The World Wide Web and all the other arenas of "the net" seem to be an ideal ground for the presentation and propagation of religious material. Consequently, religions and their use of the internet have been an object of scholarly attention since the inception of the IT-era. This contribution deals with a rather recent religious offspring of Asian origin who became active in North America and in Europe, substantially in the last decade. The spiritual teacher and healer "Dr. Zhi Gang Sha" is a new supplier on the spiritual market and presents healing techniques of purported ancient Chinese origin.

As will be shown, most of them belong to the vast and heterogeneous array of practices, methods, and beliefs popular within the *qigong* scene and the so-called "Traditional Chinese Medicine" that developed in China in the second half of the twentieth century and spread into the West. In addition, Sha's healing abilities are combined with a specific religious message that evolved in the course of his recent development, namely the propagation of the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind as initialised by and connected with his activity. The most conspicuous aspect of his approach, however, is the rather innovative use of the internet which became an integral part not only of the propagation but also of his teachings and methods. As this article will show this approach has its roots in a specific history of the internet and its use in the Chinese context which is commonly referred to as "cyber-sectarianism". The movement founded and led by Zhi Gang Sha may be interpreted as a continuation of major techniques and strategies applied by cyber-sectarian movements which mainly evolved due to the restrictive attitude of the Chinese government towards religious movements and the plethora of *qigong* teachers and healers in the 1990s and the 2000s. In the course of the recent development of Sha's movement, however, there seems to be a shift in the approach towards the use of the internet, insofar as the blatant and too obviously commercial attitude that dominated the 2000s was removed and replaced by other, interestingly more traditional media. This article is meant as a micro-study of one specific example in the big spiritual global market and his approach to the internet with all its changes and corrections. In addition to examining the innovative implementation of the internet as a means of propagation and presentation this article also covers a new figure on the spiritual market for the first time and therefore is also conceptualised to locate and place this new religious offer in the framework of currently relevant spiritual and religious interests. Thereby the transnational aspect also plays a major role. Sha is of Chinese origin and evidently connects to specific Chinese traditions, but he actually started his career outside of China, namely in North America and from there in Europe as well.

2   Preliminary remarks: Religion and the Internet

Research on the relation between religion and the internet emerged already in the late 1990s when academic studies focused on the various ways in which religious consumers or movements were taking notice of the possibilities of the new medium and how this approach might influence religious belief and practice (see, for example, Ess 1999; O'Leary and Brasher 1996; on this early phase of research see Campbell 2011, pp. 233-234). Soon a diversification took place in the study of religions and their approach to the internet, initially mainly within journalistic publications, focusing, for example, on how religions were being imported and treated online (Zaleski 1997), the

ethical and moral challenges arising with the new digital technology (Houston 1998), or the ways in which the Internet could reconnect people with spirituality in a purportedly "postmodern" society (Cobb 1998; Wertheim 1999), and the rise of new cyber-religion (Davis 1998).

With the growth of the internet, however, a basic distinction became necessary due to the simple fact that several religious movements began to use the new medium as the major and sole way to propagate their material. Rather than simply making use of the web as a means of providing information the internet became an integral part of religious practice. The web developed into an interactive venue for religious practice, *inter alia* for carrying out rituals, or gathering people in a virtual "cyber"-space (Cowan 2007, pp. 291-292). Methodologically, this led to an important and basic distinction first suggested by Christopher Helland between *religion online* and *online religion* (Helland 2000). The first approach means use of the internet as a medium for providing information about or from religious movements or traditions (for a summary, see Cowan 2007; Helland 2005). In this regard the Internet is an additional medium complementing those media traditionally used, such as books, magazines, lectures, or the like. *Online religion* as the second type refers to the use of the Internet as an active and involving medium that invites internet users to participate in religious practices. The practices that are offered "online" range from "online prayer", "online meditation", the opportunity to observe a Christian Mass or a Hindu *pūjā* virtually, to spiritual counselling in chatrooms, "teleclasses" etc. (Cowan and Dawson 2004, p. 7; see also Campbell 2011, pp. 234-235).

As was soon stated by its propagators this distinction is only basic and should not be understood as exclusive alternatives. With the further development and sophistication of the internet it became clear that there was a growing opportunity to develop a broader internet offer that, to a certain extent, mixes the two approaches. This was already noted by Glenn Young who pointed out that the model proposed by Helland primarily refers to two major distinctions, namely "(1) the provision of information about religion versus the opportunity for participation in religious activity, and (2) primary reference to offline, pre-existing religious traditions versus primary reference to religious activities taking place online" (Young 2004, p. 93). Based on this assumption an absolute distinction between "online religion" and "religion online" is not possible.[1] These cautious remarks become more and more relevant when considering the further development of the internet (Campbell 2011, pp. 239-240).

To a certain extent this amplification is also mirrored by the academic question, how and whether *new religious movements* in particular refer to the web and use it in a way different from traditional religions. Already in 1999 Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Hennebry explored this

---

1   For a summary of Young's criticism see Helland 2005; see also Cowan 2005, where the internet use of modern neopagan (Wicca) communities is researched with the fundamental conclusion that most of the websites use both modes.

phenomenon and came to the conclusion that most of the (then) websites composed by recently emerged religions simply posted reproductions of their print materials and wanted its visitors to go to the nearest temple or centre. Consequently they concluded that "it is unlikely that it [sc. the web] has intrinsically changed the capacity of NRMs to recruit new members" (Dawson and Hennebry 2004, p. 164). This was followed by cautious remarks from Jean-François Mayer, who focused on the question, "whether the Internet has proved to be a viable instrument for recruiting new members" and came to the conclusion that the answer simply cannot be given due to the lack of supporting evidence (Mayer 2000, p. 250 and 272). This was in accordance with a general approach at this time, that the Internet was far from being a totally accepted new ground, some of the movements even showing signs of scepticism and disapproval, since access to the confusing mass of websites could cause puzzlement and could not be controlled (Cowan 2004, referring to the Church of Scientology as a typical example).

Further developments, however, proved that this was a rather hasty observation. It became evident that the endless realms of the internet offer an ideal place for all kinds of presentation. In an article on the emergence of a movement *within* the internet Marilyn C. Krogh and Brooke Ashley Pillifant showed already in 2004 that there is a layer within the religious use of the web that provides the opportunity for movements to emerge, grow, and develop (Krogh and Pillifant 2004, p. 206).

Most of these developments, however, have not been studied so far, since it is often about rather small and not publicly known spiritual suppliers and movements. As this article will show, the detailed study of a movement's approach towards the internet provides an opportunity for dealing with substantial questions regarding the presentation of religious material and the use of media. All of that is intimately connected to various traditions and the religio-historical background. In addition, attitudes towards the internet may also change over the course of time. Zhi Gang Sha made extensive use of all the possibilities of the internet particularly in the 2000s but began to make a major shift only recently when he introduced more traditional methods of propagation once again.

3   "Dr. Zhi Gang Sha"

3.1   Introduction: a new healer comes to town

The person mostly referred to with the full title "Dr. Zhi Gang Sha" is a rather recently emerged Chinese teacher and healer who became active in North America and Europe in the last two decades. In an early short Chinese description Zhi Gang Sha is introduced as *quanqiu zhuming de*

ling xue daoshi—Sha Zhi Gang dashi 全球著名的靈學導師－沙志剛大師 (literally, "world-renowned spiritual teacher, Master Sha Zhi Gang") thereby already claiming his utmost importance and place on the global scale.[2] Other common epithets used in the various publications and presentations are "soul leader", "world-renowned master healer", and "divine servant".[3] As far as can be seen from the available sources Zhi Gang Sha (born 1956; in Chinese: Sha Zhi Gang 沙志鋼) interprets himself in specific Chinese traditions of healing techniques and claims to be in a lineage of various teachers of methods including (at least in the common descriptions) areas such as *Taiji*, *qigong*, *fengshui*, or the use of the ancient *Yijing*. He connects mainly to various *qigong* teachers without any deeper information on the actual contacts[4] with the exception of one person Sha is intimately obliged to, namely the *qigong* healer and teacher Zhi Chen Guo.[5] He seems to be the most important source of much of Sha's teachings and shares with him an encounter with a power called "the Divine" that is constitutive for his own development, as will be shown in the detailed exposition of his biography.

A more or less official description of his life and spiritual development is given in a book by William Gladstone, an admirer of Sha, which was published in 2014. William Gladstone is a Harvard trained anthropologist who worked as author and film producer with an obvious and keen interest in alternative spirituality. His best known book is *The Twelve* (published 2009), a thriller, that deals with the 2012 Maya calendar topic. William Gladstone has also worked with authors and spiritual teachers such as Deepak Chopra, Neale Donald Walsh, or Michael Beckwith, all of them well known figures in the current US-American alternative spirituality scene. The book with the title "Dr. and Master Sha. Miracle Soul Healer. Exploring a Mystery" basically consists of a description of Sha's life from the beginnings until around 2003 in the first part, and a collection of

---

2   See http://newnews888.blogspot.co.at/2009/10/blog-post.html (accessed July 27, 2017). It is worth noting that "teacher" is here daoshi, a word which has (in contrast to the more common laoshi 老师) a more formal, academic flavour.

3   Quoted from the information on the book cover of Sha and Xiu 2014.

4   One example would be the author and *qigong* teacher Liu Dehua 刘德华 (born 1938) who teaches in Paris and connects with the legendary long-lived figure and popular Daoist saint Pengzu 彭祖, both considered as important sources for Sha (Sha 2009a, p. 160-161). Liu Dehua published on Pengzu and draws on his teachings as the main source for his own version of *qigong* which he received in a "secret transmission" (*michuan* 秘传) as presented in the book Dehua Liu 刘德华, *Michuan jianming Pengzu wu bugong. Chatu Liu Dawei* 秘传简明彭祖五部功. 插图 刘大卫 [Secretly Transmitted Concise Five-steps Gong of Pengzu. Illustrations by Liu David]. Ha'erbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1987 [non vidi]; a French translation is Liu 1992. Pengzu (literally, "Ancestor Peng") is a very popular figure in China and commonly dated to the Yin 殷 dynasty (1900 to 1066 BC), where he allegedly lived for 800 years. His purported longevity owes to his practice of gymnastics (*daoyin*), circulation of breath (*xingqi*), and sexual techniques (*fangzhong shu*). See Sakade 2011; a traditional, canonical description of his life may be found in Kaltenmark 1953, pp. 82-84.

5   Further information on Zhi Chen Guo will be given in the detailed portrait of Sha's development below.

devoted adorer's stories and reflections on diverse aspects of his teachings and the purported effects of his healing power in the second.[6]

3.2   The early years in China and abroad: Healing many sick people

According to Gladstone's rather hagiographical account Sha was born 1956 in a small town in Northwest China, his parents moving with him to Xi'an when he was six years old. His father was the "top executive of a coal mine with ten thousand employees" and his mother was a "technician who worked at the mine" (Gladstone 2014, p. 21). Sha was a "sickly child" but was able to help himself by learning Taiji from an old man he accidentally encountered at age six. Following a rather well established narrative it is stated that Sha, although he was rejected by the master at first (because Sha was too young at this time), soon happened to become his pupil due to a dogged and stubborn tenacity that would become a major characteristic of his whole life (Gladstone 2014, p. 23).

His wish to help people led him to study medicine at a medical college beginning in 1977. Studying medicine meant at this time primarily the study of Western medicine (referred to as *xiyi* 西医 in Chinese) which became heavily promoted by the then Communist government. In addition to this conventional training Sha was also interested in various Chinese healing traditions. After he had once been healed by a student of classical Chinese medicine he "made a commitment to master traditional Chinese medicine including Chinese herbs, acupuncture, and Chinese massage" (Gladstone 2014, pp. 24-26). The three areas mentioned, namely Chinese herbs (*zhongyao* 中药, literally, "Chinese pharmaceuticals"), acupuncture (*zhenbian* 針砭, or, when as usually combined with moxibustion, *zhenjiu* 針灸) and massage (*tuina* 推拿), are together with *qigong* 气功 (as the basis for the *Taiji*) traditional elements of "Chinese medicine" (*zhongyi* 中医)[7] as practiced in manifold ways.[8] In this context it is worth noting that the idea of "combining" the two medical approaches, namely *xiyi* and *zhongyi,* was a major aspect of the Chinese state attitude towards the

---

6   This book was written after major shifts towards the use of the internet had already taken place and does not mirror the original take on it, as will be shown en détail in course of this contribution.

7   *Zhongyi* is the most common umbrella term denoting the various areas of the so-called "Traditional Chinese Medicine". Other expressions would be *zhong yixue* 中医学, literally "Chinese medical learning", or the more full and formal expression, used for example in legal texts or state's announcements *zhongguo* viz. *woguo chuantong yiyao* (中国 viz. 我国)传统医药, literally „China's/Our Nation's traditional medicine." For more details on terminology see Hsu 1999, pp. 6-8.

8   For an overview see the contributions of Xu 2011 (on Chinese herbal medicine), Wang 2011 (on acupuncture), Xutian, Sun and Tai 2011 (on Taiji), Manek and Lin 2011 (on *qigong*), Engen 2011 (on massage). An additional area in *zhongyi* not mentioned in the listing above would be diet and nutrition (see Jones 2011). For the theoretical framework see Xuan 2011. A useful overview of TCM is also provided by the US-American National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) at https://nccih.nih.gov/health/whatiscam/chinesemed.htm (accessed July 27, 2017).

revitalisation of its own medical traditions which should be interpreted as "scientific" by Western medicine. "Combining Chinese and Western medicine" (*zhongxi yi jiehe* 中西医结合) is a phrase which originally referred to People's Republic of China chairman Mao Zedong's 1956 policy of pushing doctors of Western medicine to study Chinese medicine, with the explicit goal of creating a new medicine that would combine the Chinese and Western medical culture (and, therefore, be a future great contribution to the whole world). It was a reversal of the older policy of requiring doctors of Chinese medicine to study Western medicine in order to promote the "scientification" (*kexuehua* 科学化) of their practice (Bridie 2014, p. 5). With his education and his studies Sha is a clear outflow of this attitude which became particularly prominent in the late 1970s and the 1980s as a matter of national policy.[9]

After graduating from the medical college in 1984 Sha received a kind of initiation as a healer with very special skills when he was able to cure a severely injured physician whom nobody could help after an accident. According to Gladstone's biographical account this was the reason why he became introduced to the head of the "Ministry of Traditional Chinese Medicine" (Gladstone 2014, p. 28) which presumably is the "State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine" *(Guojiā zhong yiyao guanliju* 国家中医药管理局).[10] In Gladstone's account the young doctor with a specialisation in the traditional medicine offered *Taiji* and *qigong* training and soon rose to a top position since his reputation as a "miracle healer" became "known in one of Beijing's top institutes of acupuncture in China, as well as in the Ministry of Traditional Chinese Medicine" (Gladstone 2014, p. 28). The above mentioned contact with and promotion by the "State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine" is a little bit odd since this institution was not established earlier than 1987 (which does not correspond to the chronology proposed in Gladstone's account). It was part of the program of propagating Traditional Chinese Medicine by the Communist state to promote the study and interest in "genuine" Chinese medical treatments.

From 1986 to 1990 Sha went to the Philippines, initially to study at the University of the Philippines and to gain a master's degree in hospital administration. But soon his alleged healing abilities made him famous and he became once again famed as "miracle healer" during that time.[11] The most decisive event when taking into account his further biography, however, was an invitation from a friend to come to Canada in 1989. Once again his preeminent knowledge on Chinese healing

---

9   Article 21 of the 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China stated that the state "promotes modern medicine (*xiandai yiyao* 现代医药) and Chinese traditional medicine (*woguo chuantong yiyao* 我国传统医药)" which form the pillar of the public health system "to protect the people's health (*baohu renmin jiankang* 保护人民健康)."

10   See also the timeline in Gladstone 2014, pp. 321-322: "1984: healed a senior physician and this miracle was reported to the Ministry of Traditional Chinese Medicine."

11   See Gladstone 2014, p. 31: "He was a miracle healer in the Philippines from 1986 to 1990. He was so popular that even today many people, rich and poor, hold Dr. Sha in the highest regard and gratitude for the healings they received."

techniques helped him on his way (even when he applied for a passport)[12] and already at the beginning of his stay in Canada he was allegedly interviewed by leading broadcasting companies. In 1992 he met Sylvia Chen, who is introduced as "a multimillionaire business entrepreneur" (Gladstone 2014, p. 34). She was actually searching for a doctor – and thankfully found "the best doctor […] in Toronto", namely Sha (ibid.). After their encounter Sylvia Chen became obviously very helpful in establishing Sha in Toronto by providing him space for his practice, which was mostly "acupuncture" at this time. In the biographical account she is introduced as a "key person in helping to support Dr. Sha especially in the early years beginning in 1992" (Gladstone 2014, p. 35). She also plays a major role in the formation of the upcoming business contexts which would become relevant in the second half of the 1990s, all of them allegedly very successful.[13] According to the material provided by the movement Sha earned "more than one million dollars a year" between 1990 and 2003 (see the timeline in Gladstone 2014, p. 323).

3.3   Zhi Guo Chen, "the source"

Another major change happened in 1993 when Sha started to make regular trips to a doctor and *qigong* healer in Mainland China named Zhi Guo Chen. Already at the end of the 1980s his father allegedly sent him a book entitled *Dong Yi Gong*[14] which moved him so much that he wanted to become a student of Guo.[15] He was able to realise this goal years later and this happened due to the mediatory help of Sylvia Chen, who allegedly financed an important portion of Guo's medical centre (Gladstone 2014, p. 43).

Zhi Chen Guo (born 1943; Guo Zhi Chen 郭志辰) is the founder of a healing center in Shijiazhuang, which is the capital of the province of Hebei in North Eastern China. He is one of many *qigong* teachers who upgrade and magnify traditional Chinese techniques with a certain flavour of cosmic validity and transcendence, a focus which increased in the 1990s. The whole process transformed the *qigong* scene and eventually led to major state action against *qigong* teachers in the 2000s when some of them started to develop their own religious movements (with Falun Gong 法輪功 viz. Falun Dafa 法輪大法 being the most prominent but not the only

---

12 Gladstone 2014, p. 32, with the episode of how he was able to enter Canada.
13 Gladstone 2014, pp. 2011, p. 35-38, devotes a whole chapter to Chen and emphasises her "loyalty" over the years of intense cooperation with Sha. He also describes his own experiences when encountering Sha and Chen in Canada.
14 It is probably the book Guo Zhi Chen 郭志辰. *Dong yi gong jing hua* 動意功精華 [Essence of Dongyi Gong]. Taibei: Taiwentang chubanshe，1993.
15 See also the timeline in Gladstone 2014, pp. 321-322: "1988: Master Guo's influence; read his book Dong Yi Gong; became Master Guo's disciple."

example).[16] In Guo's case the program is called "space medicine" (*kongjian yixue* 空间医学) or "human body space medicine" (*renti kongjian yixue* 人体空间医学), which includes several traditional features of Chinese medicine, such as "examining the tongue" (*she zhen* 舌診) as "the main method for diagnosis" (*zhuyao zhenduan fangfa* 主要診斷方法),[17] or the use of various pharmaceuticals (referred to as *bencao* 本草 [18]) [19], but interestingly not including "acupuncture" which is so important for Sha. In addition he claims insight into major mechanisms of the universe that form the alleged basis for his teachings. To summarize, Guo makes up part of the bewildering plethora of *qigong* and medical teachers with their slightly variant interpretations of traditional Chinese techniques combined with a constant reference to Western (pseudo-)scientific concepts and terminology.[20]

In addition to the purported insight into the underlying cosmic mechanisms of various healing methods another important aspect of Sha's teachings obviously goes back to Guo, namely the use of chanting formulas (referred to as *mantra* in the English texts) to secure and support the healing process. In Gladstone's biographical account the scenery, where Sha is confronted with this aspect for the first time, is described *en détail* and it is important to keep in mind that this is also the

---

16 More details on this development will be presented below. A sketchy insight into the variety of comparable offers may be found in the list of teachers labelled "China Qigong talents" (*Zhongguo qigong rencai* 中国气功人才) at http://www.chinaqigong.net/english/qgsk.htm (accessed December 18, 2015). They all share a certain sympathy for various additional increments to their *qigong* offer. A comparable approach would be Shen Chang (b. 1956) who is introduced as the "Chinese Originator of Human Science and technology". On the "Shen Chang Centre Human Body Applied Science and Technology" see also Porter 2003, p. 81, focusing on juridical problems and altercations with the Chinese government in 1996. Chang's movement was initially classified as an "evil religion" or "cult" (*xiejiao* 邪教) and finally prosecuted for tax evasion and illegal business practices according to newspaper sources (see http://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4be1e20.html [accessed July 27, 2017]; Lipton 2002, p. 85).

17 A short manual of Guo's approach to *she zhen* can be downloaded at http://www.dandelion-hk.net/page221.php (accessed July 27, 2017). On the history of this important aspect of Chinese medicine see Maciocia 1995, pp. 1-12 and particularly 7-12, for the approach to tongue diagnosis in the People's Republic of China, showing that in that time a lot of effort was made to combine and reconcile Western and Chinese approaches to this topic. See also Xuan 108-109; Jiuzhang and Lei 2009, pp. 41-42; Hertzer 2010.

18 The expression *bencao* 本草 (literally, "roots and grasses") is a traditional term referring to the Chinese *Materia Medica* regarding pharmaceuticals used traditionally; see Yang 1998, pp. ii-iii; Wu 2005, pp. 3-8, on the history of this term.

19 See the brief information (in Chinese) at http://www.dandelion-hk.net/page123.php (accessed July 27, 2017).

20 Brief information and a description can be found in English at http://www.chinaqigong.net/english/qgsk/gzc.htm (accessed December 18, 2015), emphasising his unifying approach, much of which is comparable to Sha's later approach: "… he presented the scientific theory on the combination of the traditional Chinese medicine, western medicine, Qigong and the extraordinary functions." Information on his approach is also given on the website http://www.3396815.cn (which is in Chinese, but has a highly condensed English version as well; accessed July 27, 2017). Just to give an impression of the scientifically sounding language a short quote from the general description of Guo's approach should serve as an introduction (quoted from www.3396815.cn/en/): "Body Space Medicine revolutionizes medicine with its emphasis on how energy density and pressure in the spaces of the body affect our health. Its prime focus is to make energy flow freely in Gong Zhuan the main energy circle of the body. Adjusting the movement of energy is to provide proper and optimal inner environment for cellular vibration, and recovering cell digestion and absorption as well."

first time that a crucial aspect of the further development of Sha is presented, namely the reference to a transcendent power called "the Divine". It actually serves as a guiding and initiative force for those who are chosen by it (Gladstone 2014, pp. 43-44). "The Divine" contacted Guo already in 1978 and gave him the number 3396815 that, in the Chinese pronunciation *san san jiu liu ba yao wu* 三三九六八幺五,[21] serves as a powerful *mantra*. This "body number" is referred to as "the divine sacred code to bring out Soul Language" (Gladstone 2014, p. 44).[22] As will be shown in the further course of Sha's development these concepts seem to be a major basis for all the endeavours to come. This is also expressed by the admiring words Sha has for his teacher who is labelled as "the source" because of his unique wisdom and teachings thereby quoting the popular Chinese phrase *yin shui si yuan* 飲水思源 (literally, "when drinking water think of the source") which should remind one of the necessity of thankfulness.[23] According to the official biographical account there were at least three further visits to Guo until 2005, the last with "daily teachings to Dr. Sha on the secrets of the soul and the power of the soul for healing" (see the timeline in Gladstone 2014, pp. 321-322).

The close relation between Guo and Sha is also at the centre of a documentary film entitled "Soul Masters. Dr Guo & Dr. Sha" which was made by the US-American filmmaker Sande Zeig and released in 2009. After her father was allegedly healed by Sha she follows him to Guo's healing centre in China and relates her impressions of the situation there. The film mainly portrays the close relationship between the two healers and their cordial bond.[24]

3.4   Encountering "the Divine" and its penchant for IT-language)

After Sha becomes acquainted with the concept of "the Divine" through Guo in the 1990s (at least according to the information in his biography) there is a temporal leap in Gladstone's account which

---

21 On http://www.3396815.cn/en/Body%20Number.html (accessed July 27, 2017) the correct pronunciation is indicated as *sahn sahn joe lew bah yow woo.*

22 On the English website the "purpose of chanting the mantra" is explained as follows (quoted from http://www.3396815.cn/en/Body%20Number.html [accessed July 27, 2017]): "The sound wave of each number in 3396815 produces energy vibration for cells in a specific part of the body. The number sequence provides an inner energy and massage to the body's organs and cells. It guides energy to flow in a specific circuit through the body."

23 See Gladstone 2014, p. 46: "The source is from Master Guo and all of my great teachers, the Divine, and the Source, are all the source of the wisdom and the power of my service." Also referred to in Sha 2014, pp. 53-54. Similar references to Guo full of reverence may be found in Sha 2008a, p. 10; Sha 2008b, p. 15. In Sha 2014, p. 13, Sha is introduced as the "worldwide representative of his well-known teacher, Dr. Zhi Chen Guo, who was one of the greatest *qigong* masters and healers of the world" ("weltweiter Repräsentant seines bekannten Lehrers, Dr. Zhi Chen Guo, der einer der weltweit größten Qi-Gong-Meister und Heiler war").

24 The film is enthusiastically welcomed by Michael Beckwith who speaks of an "inspiring documentary" that "has masterfully captured the vital healing work and global mission of Dr. Guo and Dr. Sha. Watching Soul Masters is a healing experience in itself and opens one's heart in gratitude that such profound teachings are being generously disseminated in the West by Dr. Sha" (blurb given on the cover of the DVD-edition).

introduces the confrontation of Sha himself with this undefined force in 2003 and the significant changes introduced thereafter (Gladstone 2014, pp. 47-51).

The crucial confrontation with "the Divine" is described in many publications and it is definitely one of the decisive points in Sha's own self-representation pointing to a superordinate religious framework.[25] According to the various descriptions the spiritual entity called "the Divine" introduced itself in April 2003 to Zhi Gang Sha during a "Power Healing Workshop for about one hundred people" held at a retreat centre in Soquel, California (Sha 2009a, p. xviii; Sha 2009b, p. xvii; Gladstone 2014, p. 47).[26] The spiritual entity, which "looked like a human being" and was "floating in the air"[27] approached with a rather concrete message for the surprised and reverent Sha, namely introducing "a spiritual law" called "the Universal Law of Universal Service" which is "the highest spiritual law in the universe" and "applies to the spiritual world and the physical world" (Gladstone 2014, p. 48). In the following conversation "the Divine" exhorts Sha (and consequently all human beings) to fulfil his duty as "a universal servant" (Gladstone 2014, pp. 47-49). After this first encounter a second *tête-à-tête* followed a couple of months later. At this time the definite plans of "the Divine" for Sha himself were revealed and he became elected as the "direct servant" (Gladstone 2014, p. 50) viz. "vehicle, and channel" (Sha 2009a, p. xx; Sha 2009b, p. xix), or "chosen direct servant and channel" (Sha 2009a, p. xxi). The main feature now introduced by contact with the transcendent force is Sha's healing abilities, which become enhanced and from this moment on directly derive from "the Divine".[28]

The event described is interpreted by referring to a system of cosmic periods and eras. In the book *The Power of Soul* Sha speaks of the beginning of a new "era for humanity, Mother Earth, and all universes" that is called "Soul Light Era" and dates exactly to August 8, 2003, i.e. the day of his encounter with "the Divine".[29] This period is a time of "transition", whose rather sketchy description includes typical apocalyptic features, such as natural disasters, drought, extreme temperatures, famine, political, religious, and ethnic wars, terrorism etc. All this is purportedly a necessary ingredient of a major transformation process, as expressed in the following quote: "The consciousness of humanity needs to be transformed. The suffering of humanity needs to be removed" (Sha 2009a, p. XVII). Evidently Sha interprets his own work and abilities in a greater

---

25 More or less parallel accounts of this decisive event can be found in Sha 2009a, pp. xviii-xxiii, Sha 2009b, pp. xvi-xxii; Sha 2010c, pp. xxxiv-xlii.

26 The centre in Soquel with the name "Land of Medicine Buddha" is a rather small but popular place which offers the opportunity for groups to hold sessions and retreats (see http://dharma.landofmedicinebuddha.org/ [accessed July 27, 2017]). It is used by all kinds of spiritual groups, including Yoga practitioners or Buddhists (see Zopa, for a description of a Buddhist retreat there; Loundon 2002, p. 77, for another example).

27 Gladstone 2014, p. 47; see ibid.: "… he was a light being in the air. It was a human being form that was standing in the air."

28 See Gladstone 2014, p. 50: "The Divine said, 'This service is unique. From today you offer the healing. I will do the job.'"

29 Sha 2009a, p. XVI; see also Sha 2009b, p. xxii; Sha 2010d 12, for a summary of this topic.

horizon of major cosmic developments and upheavals. Although this content is not of major concern for his further development and Sha does not develop a major interest in apocalyptic sceneries, the purported timeline is elaborated a little bit more in the aftermath and in a couple of further publications. There is a basic distinction between various "eras" in history, namely *xia gu* 下古 (translated as "near ancient" by Sha), *zhong gu* 中古 (translated as "middle ancient"), and *shang gu* 上古 (translated as "far ancient") that return cyclically and shape the history of the earth. On August 2003 *xia gu* allegedly ended and a new *shang gu* began, but there is no further explanation of how this cosmological model is understood (Sha 2014, p. 55, and a more extended version on 239-241; Sha 2012, pp. xliv-xlv).[30]

3.5   Downloading "soul software"

The most conspicuous feature of the encounter with the transcendent power called "the Divine" is the introduction of a specific terminology that becomes more and more important in the course of his further development. The healing process as purported by "the Divine" *via* Sha is described by using rather explicit IT language, as will be evident with the detailed description of the encounter and the healing process initiated in 2003: In the course of the above described crucial encounter "the Divine" transmits his healing force to a person named Walter with liver cancer. The phenomenon, i.e. the healing power itself is defined as a "golden light ball, that instantly started spinning." To make Sha understand what just had happened "the Divine" compares the healing force to "software":

> "Software is program. Because you asked me to, I transmitted and downloaded my Soul Software for Liver to Walter. It is one of my permanent healing and blessing treasures. You asked me. I did the job. This is what it means for you to be my chosen direct servant and channel" (Sha 2009a, p. xxi).

For the person who receives this kind of "soul software" it is important to know that he has to continue doing practice with this material: "Walter must spend time to practice with my Soul Software […] Tell him that simply to receive my Soul Software does not mean he will recover. He must practice with this treasure every day to restore his health, step by step". Basically this "practice" consists in a chant where the formula "Divine Liver Soul Software heals me" is repeated

---

30   There is, however, a tendency to emphasise the contacts Sha has with the powers beyond. In 2008, for instance, Sha claims to have established contacts with another cosmic force, namely "the Source" that is introduced as the creator of heaven, the mother of earth and of all the planets, stars, and galaxies (Sha 2014, pp. 240-241). As will be shown below, it is allegedly "the Source" which opens up new modes of expressions according to the narrative provided by Sha.

"at least two hours a day". At the end this will restore the sick man's health: "If Walter does this, he could recover in three to six months" (Sha 2009a, p. xxii).

This description is the nucleus and explanation of the way Sha began to act as a healer starting in 2003. In his self-perception he is the one who functions as the intermediary authority between "the Divine", which is the source of his healing abilities, and all the people with various illnesses. The events described are also the marker for a decisive change in Sha's own healing techniques. Since that time, he has not practiced acupuncture, his former core discipline, but continued by relying "solely upon the Divine to heal" (Gladstone 2014, p. 323). The contact with "the Divine" legitimises his new attitude which makes him different from all the "normal" suppliers of various "Traditional Chinese Medicine" concepts.

The "downloading" mode developed into a rather flashy feature of his work, as Sha expanded his main website www.drsha.com. The new website was launched in the second half of the year 2003, replacing the older version that was online before that, i.e. in the years 2001 and 2002. The older versions were restricted to basic information on Sha's activities and products (including books and CDs for sale) and mainly visualised the image of "Sha's golden healing ball" (recalling the healing force coming from "the Divine" as described in the detailed account of his encounter above), additionally surrounded by the above mentioned "divine sacred code to bring out Soul Language" or simply "body number" 3396815 that goes back to his teacher Guo. This website would represent the *religion online* typology according to Helland.[31] A totally new version of the website was launched in the second half of 2003 which initially still continued to use the "golden ball"-image (which was later disbanded), but added a separate and new aspect called "zhi gang sha soul software". It had all kinds of "healing offers" in store, which could be downloaded after having paid the necessary fee by credit card, and literally provided a "shopping cart" where anyone interested might be able to put his desired healing item. This included the various parts and organs of the body, the soul, but also all kinds of abstract items, such as success and luck in life, expanding even to separate healing offers for pets and other beloved animals. The rather blatant approach was enhanced by the fact that the healing powers and healing software were available for various regions and parts of the body. For instance a "Tao Highest Source Committee Soul Mind Body Healing and Transmission System" that was applicable "For ONE Organ, System, Body Part or Condition (Physical, Mental or Emotional)" was offered at a price of 500€ "for EACH condition". After having paid by credit card the person received the above mentioned "service" and had to "activate the permanent healing treasures and practice with them daily" with a "minimum of 1 hour of daily practice." An enormous number of different offers with a constantly changing range covering all kinds of "Divine Downloads, Soul Operations & Soul Transplants" had been at the

31   See the information in the "preliminary remarks" of this contribution.

centre of the website[32] since then, and a kind of "shopping cart" attitude has become characteristic. In this context the specific medical teachings of the Chinese tradition that are relevant for Sha become important since it fosters the idea of separate regions and parts of the body which all need separate treatment (see Zhang 1990, pp. 120-212, for examples), or "software transplants". Sha was very innovative in this regard and the structure of his website was obviously based on classical shopping websites (such as amazon.com), including reduced rates for bigger packages or the like. A separate "Divine Blessing Membership Program", for instance, provided different healing modes which were offered at a reduced price. This system was enhanced over the years, mainly by clustering the offers into bigger packages. "The Divine" helped again in this case, since "on September 2, 2008" it "created the *Divine Soul Mind Body* Soul Healing and Download System" that might remove all kind of "soul or karmic blockages", "mind or energy blockages".[33]

In addition to the downloading mode there were a couple of further possibilities to get in contact with Sha by using the internet. A popular feature were (and are to date) the so-called "teleclasses", where interested people might follow Sha in healing or teaching seminars online. It is basically meetings with Sha on various occasions where he exerts his healing powers on sick people,[34] which anyone who wanted to participate virtually (and paid for it) could stream live online. This approach had much in common with the forms of internet participation as introduced by many movements and it would clearly correspond to the *online religion*-type as proposed by Christopher Helland.[35] All of these developments emerged with the foundation of the umbrella organisation that covers all the efforts of Sha and his followers, namely the "Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment™", which has its main seat in San Francisco.[36]

3.6   Recent shifts: from IT-technology to traditional calligraphy

Interestingly the above described attitude towards the internet and the overall implementation of it in self-presentation has obviously been an object of major modifications in the last couple of years. It is basically a shift in the general attitude towards the internet which is not used in this blatant and extremely commercialised way anymore. The different accounts of the crucial encounter with "the

---

32 See the information at http://soulmindbody-medicine.blogspot.co.at/ (accessed July 27, 2017), a website which keeps the above mentioned attitude to date.

33 See http://drsha.com/index.php?id=352 (accessed July 21, 2008).

34 Examples of these sessions are available on the platform www.youtube.com combined with reports of and interviews with people who were allegedly healed by Sha. The official channel of Sha is at https://www.youtube.com/user/zhigangsha (accessed July 27, 2017).

35 Just recently there is also the possibility to follow "online courses" on various subjects, which are offered for a fee. At http://spi.drsha.com/online-courses/ (accessed November 11, 2015) there is a chance to watch one of those videos for free.

36 See the information at http://storefront.drsha.com/about-drsha-store (accessed July 27, 2017).

Divine" in 2003, as given in many of his publications, provide the opportunity to get a detailed impression of this development.[37] As described above, the "download" mode was a constant feature in most of the descriptions cited. In the most recent biography of Sha in 2014, however, this conspicuous analogy to IT-language is missing. Instead of the usual "soul software" the healing force is simply referred to as "golden new soul" and even the crucial *mantra* for the healing process which originally was "Divine Liver Soul Software heals me" is now changed to a simple "Divine Liver" (Gladstone 2014, p. 50).[38] The change is also evident on the main website where the "download" mode is not present anymore and the former "shopping cart" attitude seems to be abolished. A decisive date in the religious development of Sha's biography would be June 2013. The decisive force is now referred to as the "Source" (not "the Divine" anymore), which "creates" the "Source Calligraphy for healing, blessing, and life transformation" as presented in the book *Soul Healing Miracles*, which was published in 2013. Therein Sha speaks of the former book series on "soul power" that is now enhanced by the new series, namely on "soul healing miracles" (Gladstone 2014, p. 15). The latter expression refers to phenomena of spontaneous self-healing which can be improved by several techniques (see Sha 2014, p. 335, for details). This seems to be combined with a shift towards more traditional Chinese modes of media expressions, namely the use of "calligraphy" (*shufa* 書法). It is basically items drawn by Sha himself which just recently have begun to play a major role in the public appearances of Sha.[39] In addition he even offers courses in calligraphy for people interested in learning how to draw the Chinese characters.[40]

These courses are naturally connected with a kind of transformation or healing process which becomes initiated by the procedure itself. The calligraphies represent common Chinese expressions, most of them interestingly associated with Buddhism.[41] An important term represented in these calligraphies would be *ling guang* 靈光, one of the traditional expressions for the divine light around the Buddha, the "halo" surrounding him (and in a more general context simply a "miraculous column of light"). The "Ling Guang Calligraphy" is a kind of umbrella term used by Sha to label all of his calligraphies and it allegedly derives directly from the "Source". In defining its function, we encounter once again a mix of traditional expressions of Chinese origin and various

---

37 See the detailed analysis and information above in this contribution.

38 Interestingly there is no separate entry for "(soul) software" or "download" in the index of Gladstone 2014. The term "Soul Software" is only used in one account of a devoted follower who describes his encounter with Sha in 2003 (Gladstone 2014, p. 202). The "download" metaphor is used only once by quoting from a kind of prayer: "Master Sha has downloaded more than ten permanent divine treasures to all humanity and all souls, including countless planets, stars, galaxies, and universes" (Gladstone 2014, p. 117).

39 Examples are provided in Sha 2014, where colour plates of Sha's calligraphic efforts are inserted in the book.

40 A "Tao Calligraphy Special Training with Dr. and Master Sha" is offered on https://www.drsha.com/tao-calligraphy-special-training-master-sha/ (accessed November 24, 2015). These training courses are offered "to chosen ones only", viz. "only to two hundred people" and there seems to be a very exclusive stance on that as "Master Sha will personally approve all participants via Source Guidance."

41 On Buddhism and *qigong* see the remarks by Penny 2005, pp. 42-44, on the references to Buddhism in Falun Gong.

other contexts. For instance, Sha defines the "Ling Guang Calligraphy" as the *jing qi shen* 精氣神 of the "Source" (Sha 2014, p. 241). *Jing qi shen* (literally, "essence, vital energy, spirit") is a very common Chinese expression referred to as the "three treasures" (*sanbao* 三寶), which mainly goes back to Daoist sources and plays an essential role in the foundations of Chinese medicine.[42] Another of these calligraphies would represent *da cibei* 大慈悲 (literally, "great compassion"), or *da guang ming* 大光明 (literally, "great light"), both associated with Buddhism, or *san jiao chang tong* 三焦 暢通 (literally, "free flowing of the three visceral cavities), an expression of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

A very conspicuous element of the further development in the late 2000s is the growing importance of all kinds of formulae which are used as *mantra*. Many publications contain specimens of these various short phrases or "prayers" as they are sometimes called. One example would be the "Sacred Text of the Tao of Healing, Rejuvenation, Longevity, and Immortality" (*Zhi liao fan lao huan tong chang shou yong sheng zhi dao* 治疗返老还童长寿永生之道) which basically consists of 220 phrases with wide ranging meanings.[43]

In addition Sha has also expanded into other areas of media implementation. In this regard an important aspect is his interest in music which has its roots in the use of all kinds of *mantra* and prayer formulae. Consequently, and with obvious confidence in his vocal abilities, Sha has composed several songs and even a "symphony". They are all naturally connected with his healing powers and may enhance its benefits. On the cover of the *Soul Symphony of Yin Yang* (released in 2009) it is therefore stated: "This divine symphony can offer blessings of healing and rejuvenation. It can benefit your health on all levels: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. It also can offer blessings to all that exists, including Mother Earth, all planets and all universes. It is a most precious treasure." The same applies for the collection entitled *The Voice of the Universe: Power Healing Music. Universal Light/yuzhou zhi guang* 宇宙之光 ("Light of the Universe") that promises great success when chanting "universal light" "to bless whatever you wish to be blessed: your health, business, relationships, and any other issues".[44] Sha has also introduced "audiobook"-versions of his major publications, usually "read by the author" himself.[45]

---

42 For the Daoist background of the trias *jing qi shen* see Despeux 2011.

43 The full text with Chinese characters, Pinyin transliteration, pronunciation guide, and English translation is provided in Sha 2012c, pp. 94-116.

44 Quoted from the cover text of the CD.

45 This information is given on the cover of two audiobooks of recent publications, namely of *Tao I. The Way of All Life*, released in 2010, and *Divine Healing Hands. Experience Divine Power to Heal You, Animals, and Nature, and to Transform All Life,* released in 2012.

4   Locating Sha's approach

When trying to evaluate the program of Sha and particularly his approach to the internet by locating it in a wider religio-historical framework there are basically two aspects that are important to consider. Firstly, it is the *qigong-,* Chinese medicine-, and Daoist (and sometimes Buddhist) background which forms the argumentative pool of most of the material Sha is putting forward. Secondly, there is the importance of the internet as a means for propagating his message, which has slowly become the central tool of his self-promotion, as was shown in the detailed portrait above. Both areas, though, are closely interconnected when taking into consideration specific developments in Mainland China during the last decades in regard to the *qigong*-scene. In addition the transnational aspect of Sha's endeavours is also worth examining.

4.1   Sha as qigong-teacher

Regarding the first topic a conspicuous feature of Sha's teachings and offers is a hodge-podge of various formulae, prayers, mantra and a confusing abundance of terminology which gives the program a specific Chinese flavour and standing. In this regard Sha might be compared to the plethora of *qigong* teachers and healers in China who only slightly differ from each other and draw on a mix of several traditions. As David Palmer has shown in his fundamental study of the *qigong* movement in Mainland China this marks already the very last stage of a development which began decades before and reached its peak in the so-called "*qigong* fever" (*qigong re* 气功热) in the 1980s and the 1990s (Palmer 2007, pp. 136-157; Chen 2003, pp. 36-60; Chen 1995). *Qigong* developed into a mass movement that provoked two major features which sooner or later caused a crash with the governing body, namely commercialisation and spiritualisation. For the first topic the movement called *Zhong Gong* 中功 is the best known example. It was founded by Zhang Hongbao 张宏堡 (1954-2006) in 1987 under the full name *Zhonghua yangsheng yi zhi gong* 中华养生益智功 (literally, "China Health and Wisdom Enhancement Practice") and had a strong emphasis on commercialisation from its beginning on. At its peak in 2003 the founder claimed to have around 38 million followers, but his organisation was forbidden by the government (Ownby 2008, pp. 69-76; Leung 2002, pp. 777-778). The second important aspect of the development of *qigong* in China particularly from the 1990s onwards has been its overall spiritualisation and the development of distinct religious communities within the *qigong* scene. This is in contrast to the initial idea of the Chinese state to foster a kind of "scientific" approach to the ancient Chinese health traditions (Palmer 2003, pp. 83-94; Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 92-93 and 120-122). Falun Gong is beyond doubt the most prominent example of a movement which became classified as an "evil cult" (*xiejiao* 邪教), but there are a couple of other examples that developed similarly (Marsh 2011, pp.

225-228, for details of the chronology of the Chinese state's actions; Thornton 2003, pp. 227-228; Perry 2001, pp. 170-171).[46]

To a certain extent Sha can be placed in this scheme with his development and approach as described above. He began as a typical healer integrating aspects of the traditional Chinese medical tradition, initially acupuncture and some advanced techniques, but later developed a specific religious interpretation of his healing powers at the beginning of the 2000s by referring to his encounters with "the Divine" and by introducing a kind of cosmological model where his own activity marks a crucial transitory period. These aspects clearly were enhanced over the course of time. It is important to highlight that Sha does not play a role in China and did not become the object of state action, but his program can clearly be interpreted as a result of the above described development.

4.2   The use of the Internet

As a second point the function and importance of the internet within the *qigong* context is a separate chapter. As Patricia Thornton has pointed out, the use of the internet became an integral part of the *qigong* and alternative religion scene in China right after the inception of growing state suppression (Thornton 2003 and 2008; for a summary see Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 292). She introduced the term "cyber-sectarianism" to denote this phenomenon, thereby including movements like the Suma Ching Hai movement[47], along with Zhong Gong and Falun Gong. Those movements were banned in Mainland China, moved into cyberspace and "evolved into multinational conglomerates that blend media enterprises, public relations firms and commercial operations beneath a single quasi-corporate umbrella" (Thornton 2003, p. 217). Whereas Suma Ching Hai's virtual offer focused on promoting vegetarianism (and recently veganism) and the sale of merchandise such as pictorial books with poetry depicting the master in lovely surroundings, Zhong Gong and Falun Gong used cyberspace as a base for campaigns against the Chinese Communist Party (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 292 and 389-392).

---

46 See also the information on the *qigong* teacher Shen Chang (b. 1956) and his "Shen Chang Centre Human Body Applied Science and Technology" in Fn. 17 above.

47 Suma (= Supreme Master) Ching Hai viz. *Qinghai wushang shi* 清海無上師 (literally, "clear ocean, immeasurable teacher") was born Trịnh Đăng Huệ in 1948 or 1950 as a Vietnamese of Chinese origin. She started her movement in the late 1980s in Taiwan. Her "Quan Yin method" viz. *Guānyīn fǎmén* 觀音法門 (literally, "method of Guanyin" = Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara) is close to and obviously based on the "meditation on the inner light and sound" (*surat shabd yoga* viz. *śuratśabad yoga*) of the Radhasoami teacher Sant Thakar Singh Ji Maharaj (1929-2005), whose disciple she became when staying in India for a certain time (see Irons 2004, Thornton 2008, pp. 188-189, Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 291-292; a journalistic and rather critical overview is also given by Young 2010).

Sha, although acting outside of Mainland China, clearly adopts their strategies and adapts them to his specific interests. Therefore it seems appropriate to put his movement next to the above mentioned movements and alternatively classify it as a "new cyberreligious movement" (NCRM), a term introduced by Anastasia Karaflogka (285).

4.3   The transnational aspect

In addition Sha is also a typical representative of the "transnational" aspect of the *qigong* movement which became extremely important in the later 1990s and the 2000s (Chen 2003, pp. 159-184; see also Palmer 2014). The "Asian" *qigong* is an integral part of Western alternative religious and spiritual culture with various modes of adaptation (Madsen and Siegler 2011, pp. 237-239). A figure comparable to Sha in many aspects would be the Thai-born Chinese Mantak Chia (born 1944) who moved to New York City in 1979 and opened the "Taoist Esoteric Yoga Center", later to be renamed "Healing Tao Center."[48] Chia teaches a popularised, streamlined system of Chinese "internal alchemy" which he freely interprets and adjusts for his Western audience (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 292; see also Ryan 2008, p. 538). The same would apply for Sha, who is very active in becoming a part of the North American spirituality scene. As pointed out, his biographer William Gladstone makes up part of a heterogeneous group of authors, writers, and teachers including figures such as Michael Beckwith or Neale Donald Walsh, who, for instance, co-worked on the globally successful production of "The Secret" (released 2006) and its successor "The Moses Code" (2008). The key doctrine of this major film and merchandising projects is the so-called "law of attraction" which could be summarised in the idea that everything is attainable if one sincerely and absolutely believes in his goals. Alternative medicine is a key topic within this scene and the idea of "self-healing" through inner powers is in line with the doctrine. Interestingly Sha also shows obvious affinities to this all-pervading general *mantra* and stresses self-healing particularly in recent publications.[49]

---

48   As of today Chia offers his healing techniques in his "Tao Garden" in Thailand, whilst the "Healing Tao USA" is headed by one of his former students, Michael Winn (born 1951), and based in Asheville, North Carolina.

49   See, for instance, Sha 2009b, pp. 12-28, on the "soul mind body medicine" as a "complete soul mind body self-healing system"; or Sha 2010b, when describing the principle *wan wu geng xin* 万物更新 ("all things are renewed") as the new way of healing in the "Soul Light Era" where "self-healing" will be the only method to apply for every cure; see also Sha 2010a, pp. 29-45, about "self-healing the physical body".

5   Concluding remarks: From IT technology back to Calligraphy?

The thorough description of Sha's development given above is of course just a glimpse. As is evident with every supplier on the spiritual market and particularly in the ever changing field of new religious movements an important aspect is the constant changes, the reshaping, and the adaptation processes. Many concepts have a highly transitory nature and the organizations or movements can be perceived as 'experimental faiths' (Cowan and Bromley 2015: 197-198). Although in most cases religious founders have a background in a specific religious tradition, a new offspring has to undergo a very intense phase of formation by adapting new concepts and ideas to cope with the changing surroundings.

Interestingly it is exactly the use of IT language which is so prominent in the publications and with the appearance of the web in the 2000s that seems to have undergone changes just recently. One can only speculate about the possible reasons for this shift, but the all-too-obvious money-grabbing attitude of his internet approach might be one of the reasons. The attitude was criticised in various newspaper articles on Sha[50] and this is probably one of the reasons that he became discussed on "anti-cult" websites as well (although the criticism never reached very high levels and seems to have vanished only recently).[51]

The future will show whether "Dr. Zhi Gang Sha" will be able to thrive with his innovative take on Chinese traditions. He is beyond doubt just one example amongst many others who benefit from the positive image Asia and its legacy still have in the West.

---

50 Sha has received some controversial coverage in the media, where exactly this aspect is of major importance. See for example the article entitled "Dr. Sha, a Healer With a Modern Spin: He Downloads New Organs", by Lisa Katayama which appeared in the magazine *Wired* in 2007.

51 Sha's movement is classified as a "cult" on some websites and discussion forums that are associated with the US-American controversial "deprogrammer" and "exit counsellor" Rick Alan Ross, mainly his own *Cult Education Institute*, e.g. at http://www.cultnews.com/2015/04/who-is-dr-master-zhi-gang-sha/ (accessed July 27, 2017), where there is apparently only very little information on Sha himself. Notwithstanding the lack of substantial material he is compared to the usual suspects of the "cult" scene. On the discussion forum of the "Cult Education Institute" there is a separate thread regarding Sha (http://forum.culteducation.com/read.php?12,57321,page=1 [accessed July 27, 2017]), where Sha is associated with the "cult" term: His movement "is a very dangerous cult and is very seductive. Dr Sha makes incredible promises and claims." A major point of criticism is also the sometimes extremely high costs for his services. The thread, however, ended in 2009, and the initial fear that a new "cult" would sweep the earth seems to have vanished. Another website totally devoted to criticising Sha is http://mastersha.weebly.com/, which claims that the "purpose of this site is to gather and archive peoples [sic] thoughts and comments on 'Dr'/'Master' Zhi Gang Sha in regards to him being a huckster, scam artist, and cult leader" (accessed July 27, 2017). The last entry on this site also dates to 2009.

Bibliography

Books

Bridie, A 2014, *The Making of Modern Chinese Medicine, 1850-1960*, Vancouver and Toronto, University of British Columbia Press, 2014.

Campbell, HA 2011, 'Internet and Religion', in Consalvo, M, Ess, Ch (ed.), *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, Malden and Oxford, John Wiley & Sons, pp. 232-250.

Chen, NN 2003, *Breathing Spaces: Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Chen, NN 1995, 'Urban Spaces and Experiences of *Qigong*', in Davis, D (ed.), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 347-362.

Cobb, J 1998, *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World,* New York, Crown Publishers.

Cowan, D 2004, 'Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 255-272.

Cowan, D 2005, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge.

Cowan, D 2007, 'Teaching New Religious Movements on the World Wide Web', in Bromley, DG (ed.), *Teaching New Religious Movements*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 291-308.

Cowan, D, Bromley, DG 2015, *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History,* Chichester, John Wiley & Sons.

Cowan, D, Dawson, LL 2004, 'Introduction', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 1-16.

Davis, E 1998, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, New York, Three Rivers Press.

Dawson, LL, Hennebry, J 2004, 'New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 151-173 (= a slightly edited version of an article that first appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, 1999, pp. 17–39).

Despeux, C 2011, 'Jing, qi, shen', in Pregadio, F (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, Volume 1, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 562-565.

Engen, DJ 2011, 'Massage', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 193-200.

Ess, Ch 1999, 'Prophetic communities online? Threat and promise for the church in cyberspace', *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 34, 2, pp. 87–100.

Gladstone, W 2014, *Dr. and Master Sha: Miracle Soul Healer: Exploring a Mystery*, Dallas, BenBella Books.

Goossaert, V, Palmer, DA 2011, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Helland, Ch 2000, 'Religion Online/Online Religion and Virtual Communities', in Hadden, JK, Cowan D (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, London, JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000, pp. 205-224.

Helland, C 2005, 'Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet', *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet: Volume 01.1. Special Issue on Theory and Methodology*. Online: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/5823/ (accessed December 18, 2015)

Hertzer, D 2010, 'Foreword', in Kirschbaum, B (ed.), *Atlas of Chinese Tongue Diagnosis. Volume 1.* Seattle, Eastland Press, 2010, pp. xi-xvi (English translation of *Atlas und Lehrbuch der Chinesischen Zungendiagnostik*, Verlag für Ganzheitliche Medizin Dr. Erich Wuhr, 1998).

Houston, G 1998, *Virtual Morality: Christian Ethics in the Computer Age*, Leicester, Apollos.

Hsu, E 1999, *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Irons, E 2004, 'Suma Ching Hai', in Partridge, P (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religions: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities*, Oxford, Lion Publishing, 2004, pp. 263-264.

Jones, ME 2011, 'Diet and nutrition in Traditional Chinese Medicine', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 179-192.

Jiuzhang, Men, Lei, Guo 2009, *A General Introduction to Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press.

Kaltenmark, M 1953, *Le Lie-sien tchouan (Biographies légendaires des Immortels taoïstes de l'antiquité)*, Pékin, Université de Paris, Publications du Centre d'Études Sinologiques de Pékin.

Katayama, L 2007, 'Dr. Sha, a Healer With a Modern Spin: He Downloads New Organs', *Wired,* May 4, 2007; now available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20080514174540/http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2007/04/drsha_0405 (accessed July 27, 2017)

Krogh, MC, Pillifant, BA 2004, 'The House of Netjer: A New Religious Community Online', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 205-219.

Leung, B 2002, 'China and Falun Gong: Party and society relations in the modern era', *Journal of Contemporary China* 11, 33, pp. 761–84.

Lipton, EP 2002, *Religious Freedom in Asia*, New York, Nova Publishers, 2002.

Liu, Dehua 1992, *Qi gong. Aux sources de la tradition antique de Pengzu. Traduit du chinois par Wang Chia-Yu. Préface du Lü Bingkui*, Mennecy, Édiru, 1992.

Loundon, S 2001, *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists*, Boston, Wisdom Publications.

Maciocia, G 1995, *Tongue Diagnosis in Chinese Medicine*, Revised Edition, Seattle, Eastland Press.

Madsen, R, Siegler, E 2011, 'The Globalization of Chinese Religions and Traditions', in Palmer, DA, Shive, G, Wickeri, PhL, *Chinese Religious Life*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 227-240.

Manek, NJ, Lin, Chunyi 2011, 'Qigong', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 167-178.

Marsh, Ch 2011, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival*, New York and London, Continuum.

Mayer, J-F 2000, 'Religious Movements and the Internet: The New Frontier of Cult Controversies', in Hadden, JK, Cowan D (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, London, JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000, pp. 249-276.

O'Leary, S, Brasher B 1996, 'The Unknown God of the Internet', in Ess, Ch (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication*, Albany, State University of New York Press, pp. 233–269.

Ownby, D 2008, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press.

Palmer, DA 2007, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Palmer, DA 2003, 'Modernity and Millenialism in China: Qigong and the Birth of Falun Gong', *Asian Anthropology* 2, 1, pp. 79–109.

Palmer, DA 2014, 'Transnational Sacralizations: When Daoist Monks meet Global Spiritual Tourists', *Ethnos*, 79, 2, pp. 169-192.

Perry, EJ 2001, 'Challenging The Mandate Of Heaven: Popular Protest in Modern China', *Critical Asian Studies* 33, 2, pp. 163–180.

Penny, B 2005, 'The Falun Gong, Buddhism and 'Buddhist qigong'', *Asian Studies Review* 29, 1, pp. 35–46.

Porter, N 2003, *Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Study*, Boca Raton, Universal-Publishers.

Ryan, A 2008, 'Globalisation and the 'Internal Alchemy' in Chinese Martial Arts: The Transmission of Taijiquan to Britain', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 2, 4, pp. 525-543.

Sakade, Yoshinobu 2011, 'Pengzu', in Pregadio, F (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*. Volume 2, London and New York, Routledge, p. 790-791.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2009a, *The Power of Soul*. *The Way to Heal, Rejuvenate, Transform, and Enlighten all Life*, New York, Atria.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2009b, *Divine Soul Mind Body Healing and Transmission System: The Divine Way to Heal You, Humanity, Mother Earth*, New York, Atria.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2010a, *Divine Transformation*: *The Divine Way to Self-clear Karma to Transform Your Health, Relationships, Finances, and More,* New York, Atria.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2010b, *Tao I: The Way of All Life*, New York, Atria.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2010c, *Tao II: The Way of Healing, Rejuvenation, Longevity, and Immortality*, New York, Atria.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2010d, *Seelensprache: Erkenne deine innere Wahrheit*, München, Knaur MensSana (German Translation of: *Soul Communication,* New York, Atria, 2009).

Sha, Zhi Gang 2012, *Divine Healing Hands: Experience Divine Power to Heal You, Animals, and Nature, and to Transform All Life*, New York, Atria.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2008a, *Seele-Geist-Körper-Medizin. Eine Anleitung zur Selbstheilung durch Seelenkraft*, Third Edition, Burgrain, KOHA.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2008b, *Seelenweisheit. Kostbarkeiten zur Transformation deines Lebens*, Burgrain, KOHA.

Sha, Zhi Gang 2014, *Wunder der Seelenheilung. Altehrwürdige und neue heilige Weisheiten, Erkenntnisse und praktische Techniken für die Selbstheilung des spirituellen, mentalen, emotionalen und physischen Körpers*, München, MVG Verlag.

Sha, Zhi Gang, Xiu, Rulin 2014, *Soul Mind Body Science System. Grand Unification Theory and Practice for Healing, Rejuvenation, Longevity, and Immortality*, Dallas, BenBella Books.

Thornton, PM 2003, 'The New Cybersects: Resistance and Repression in the Reform era', in Perry, E, Selden, M (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance,* 3rd Edition, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 215–238.

Thornton, PM 2008, 'Manufacturing Dissent in Transnational China', O'Brien, KJ (ed.), *Popular Protest in China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, pp. 179-205.

Wang, Yong Gao 2011, 'Acupuncture', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 125-144.

Wertheim, M 1999, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, London, Virago.

Wu, Jing-Nuan 2005, *An Illustrated Chinese Materia Medica*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press.

Xu, Bob 2011, 'Chinese herbal medicine and formulations', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 113-124.

Xuan, Wen 2011, 'Traditional Chinese Medicine: an overview', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 97-112.

Xutian, Stevenson, Sun, Feng, Tai, Shusheng 2011, 'Tai Chi', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 145-166.

Yang, Shouzhong 1998, *The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica: A Translation of the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing*, Boulder, Blue Poppy Enterprises.

Young, A 2010, 'Supreme Mystery', *VegNews*, October 2010, pp. 44-49.

Young, G 2004, 'Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 93-106.

Zaleski, J 1997, *The Soul of Cyberspace,* San Francisco, HarperCollins.

Zhang, Enquin 张恩勤 ed., 1990, *Chinese Qigong/ Zhongguo Qigong* 中国气功. *A Practical English-Chinese Library of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Shanghai, Shanghai Zhongyi xueyuan chubanshe 上海中医学院出版社.

DVD

Soul Masters. Dr Guo & Dr. Sha 2009, DVD, Ontario Limited. Directed by Sande Zeig.

Audio Material

The Voice of the Universe: Power Healing Music. Universal Light (*yuzhou zhi guang* 宇宙之光 [Light of the Universe]) 2002, CD, Qi Records, Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment.

Soul Symphony of Yin Yang 2009, CD, Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment. Produced by Master Zhi Gang Sha and Mr. Chun Yen Chiang.

Tao I. The Way of All Life. Read by the Author 2010, CD, Heaven's Library Publication Corp. Produced by Dr. & Master Zhi Gang Sha.

Divine Healing Hands. Experience Divine Power to Heal You, Animals, and Nature, and to Transform All Life. Read by the Author 2012, CD, Heaven's Library Publication Corp. Produced by Dr. & Master Zhi Gang Sha.

Biography

Franz Winter has received PhDs in Classical Studies (1999) and Religious Studies (2005) from the University of Vienna, and a Habilitation in Religious Studies (2010) from the same university, after having studied and done research at the Universities of Graz, Salzburg, Vienna, in Rome, at Boston University (Fulbright), and in Tokyo and Kyoto. He currently teaches at the University of Graz. Among his major areas of interest are the history of contact between Europe and Asia from antiquity to modern times, new religious movements in East and West, history of Buddhism, Western Esotericism, religion and the media. For further information see http://homepage.univie.ac.at/franz.winter/

Franz Winter, PD Mmag.Ddr
Institut für Religionswissenschaft
Universität Graz
Heinrichstraße 78
A-8010 Graz
Austria
franz.winter@uni-graz.at