

Introduction: Approaches to Digital Games in the Study of Religions

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In a broad sense of the term, we understand virtual worlds as coherent alternate realities that are actualized through various media. In a more strict sense, the term refers to computer-generated, persistent spatial environments that allow people, represented as “avatars,” to engage in (social) interaction.¹ The relationship between virtual worlds and games is multifarious—ranging from games being a part of virtual worlds to virtual worlds being a part of games.

The articles of this section engage in investigating the relationships of games, virtual worlds and religion. They are focused on instances of recent media, the most prominent of which are multimedia digital games. Since all of the contributions refer, more or less explicitly, to digital games and since digital games are a relatively new academic research subject, I will use this introduction to reflect on existing and potential areas of study and approaches for scholars of religion who investigate digital games. These approaches are exemplified, in varying measures, by the contributions, as the list of references at the end of this section indicates.

1. A Preliminary Definition of Digital Games

First, what are digital games?² The term designates a combination of computer software and games. As specific entertainment software, digital games run on a computer which processes the data of the game’s program code digitally and algorithmically. Games are at the same time systems of rules and systems of control—the interface enables rule-based data input and thus interactive, cybernetic or ergodic³ control of the game system. This

- 1 Calleja 2008: *Virtual Worlds Today*, 7–15; Bell 2008: *Toward a Definition of “Virtual Worlds.”*
- 2 I use the term “digital game” as a collective term for any computer game or video game. These latter terms are often used interchangeably, but can also imply a distinction according to the platform (PC or console). Cf. Steffen 2008: *“High-speed Meditation?”* 25–26.
- 3 “Ergodic,” derived from Greek *ergon* (“work”) and *hodos* (“path”), is used by

implies a form of feedback which consists of an aesthetic multimedia presentation on the output devices, resulting in images, video clips, sounds, music, speech and texts. On that level, digital games are sign-producing machines and have the ability to tell stories. The diegetic events, whether narrative in nature or not, are developed in distinctive spatial and temporal structures—often, but not always, designed as “virtual worlds”—which are not known to earlier media and non-digital games.

As games, digital games can be understood as goal-oriented systems of rules. The rules are enacted in the computer-controlled procedures and in the mechanics of the game, and in contrast to traditional games, they are gradually discovered by the players when playing the game. Different genres of digital games challenge the players in different ways: players need skills of organization and tactical planning in strategy games; skills of observation, memory and reasoning in adventure games; high levels of motor skills and reaction capacities in action and sports games; abilities of spatial orientation and identification with the avatar in epic role-playing games—to give a simplified overview.

2. Huizinga, Caillois, and Digital Game Studies

In 2001, the literary scholar Espen Aarseth proclaimed the “Year One of Computer Game Studies as an emerging, viable, international, academic field.”⁴ The discipline aims to reflect on the socially and economically relevant phenomenon of digital games by applying scientific methods. The pioneers of modern digital game research have been struggling to give an identity to the discipline and distinctive features to their research object. Many of them resorted on existing works on games. The most prominent is the work of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who defined “play” as

a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding; having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.”⁵

Espen Aarseth to describe a distinctive feature of cybertexts (including digital games): the nontrivial, extranoematic “work” a reader has to perform in order to traverse the text. Aarseth 1997: *Cybertext*, 1.

4 Aarseth 2001: *Computer Game Studies, Year One*.

5 Huizinga 2nd ed. 1955: *Homo Ludens*, 28.

Few digital game researchers are building directly on Huizinga's definition. However, the notion of play as being "different" from ordinary life, or as a separate or marked-off play-ground⁶ respectively, had a major impact on game studies: this notion is expressed by the slogan "magic circle," a term used by Huizinga to describe ritual space as a specific instance of play-ground.⁷ After the term was adopted by Katie Salen/Eric Zimmerman (2004, 93) and Jesper Juul (2005, 164–167), game studies scholars have been debating about how open or closed this "magic circle" in the case of digital games really is, and whether or not the application of the term is accurate. As a consequence, the metaphor was rejected or reformulated—for example, Julian Kücklich's contribution in this book suggests that deludic practices are "breaking the magic circle."⁸

Most game studies scholars follow Roger Caillois in the demand for a systematic description and classification of play, as well as for the distinction of play (social action) and game (rules, system).⁹ In *Man, Play, and Games*, Caillois distinguished two forms of games that became relevant to game studies: *ludus*, the game that is strongly regulated and standardized in time and space, and *paidia*, the free, spontaneous and improvised game. These two forms are ideal types to which games—classified according to the four categories *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo)—correspond more or less.¹⁰ Some game studies scholars directly apply Caillois's classification to digital games,¹¹ others explicitly or implicitly criticize Caillois by stressing the dialectic relationship between game rules and game play.¹² The four categories are seen as integral aspects of digital games and are therefore combined up to the point where "forbidden" or "contingent" relations¹³ seem to be possible—going thus much further than Caillois with his examples of traditional games. Game studies literature shows that action-oriented role-playing games likely integrate all types of games—competition in conflicts, chance in the algorithmic throwing of the die, simulation in role play and vertigo in absorbing and

6 *Op. cit.* 25.

7 *Op. cit.* 10.

8 [***See below p.357.***].

9 Caillois 2nd ed. 2001: *Man, Play and Games*, 58–59.

10 *Op. cit.* 11–26.

11 E.g. Frasca 2003: *Simulation versus Narrative*.

12 E.g. Grimes/Feenberg 2009: *Rationalizing Play*.

13 Caillois 2001, 71–79.

flow-generating action.¹⁴ Some researchers miss the spatial and temporal structures, which are distinctive features of digital games: McGregor (2007), for example, argues that Caillois's typology are "patterns of play rather than patterns that consider the spaces in which games are played in."¹⁵ Lauwaert et al. (2007) complete the typology by introducing the categories of *repens*, the confrontation with unexpected events and new challenges, and *repositio*, the cyclic-repetitive structure of retrying, replaying etc.; both take into account the temporal organization of digital games.¹⁶

3. Approaches to Digital Games in the Study of Religions

Although Huizinga and Caillois reflected on the relationship of game and religion, the issue of religion has hardly been addressed by modern game scholars so far. The same applies to the study of religion that has ignored digital games as a research topic until now. Reasons for this might be, in the case of the former, the perpetuation of a popular view of religion as a *fascinosum* beyond scientific consideration, and, in the case of the latter, methodological uncertainties and missing affinities between scholars and the new medium. Scholars of contemporary religion, though, would be particularly well equipped to study the abundant religious symbolism¹⁷ in games as well as the possible religious dimensions of gaming. In the following, I will present some initial thoughts about possible fields of study and research topics regarding the relationship of digital games and religion.

Fields of Study

Digital games as a part of scholars of religions' investigation of games and sports

Scholars in cultural studies have pointed to the connections between games and religion in different times and cultures.¹⁸ These observations could be a starting point to reflect on digital games and religions. In particular, structural and functional similarities have been observed, e.g., the similarity

14 E.g. Ljungström 2008: Remarks on Digital Play Spaces, 204.

15 McGregor 2007: Situations of Play, 539.

16 Lauwaert et al. 2007: Frustrating Desire.

17 Steffen 2008, 92.

18 Cf. Bado-Fralick/Sachs Norris 2010: *Toying with God*; Huizinga 1955: *Homo Ludens*.

or even identity of game and ritual.¹⁹ With regard to theory, the religious functions associated with Caillois's game categories—*agon* (cosmological, eschatological, or moral contests), *alea* (divination), *mimicry* (imitative magic and ceremonial), *ilinx* (altered states of consciousness)—could be used to describe game contents or genres. Understanding digital games as contests opens up the question of how “E-Sport” (a professional digital game tournament) fits into the area of religion and sports.

Digital games in the context of (new) media, popular culture and religion

Digital games can be studied within the context of considerations on media developed in the study of religion. Recent approaches in this field are characterized by the ambition to understand religion by its expressions in popular culture.²⁰ Furthermore, the active role of users in the process of negotiation and adaptation of new media technology to their own religious community is increasingly emphasized.²¹ These approaches do justice to the “new” medium²² or popular culture medium²³ of digital games. Like other media, games can help to communicate and situate beliefs and values. In addition, they provide possibilities for interaction and modification that might shape the gamers' understanding of participation. The sensual aspect of gaming is relevant too, for it has an impact on the perception of contents. Religious content in digital games can be experienced in different ways and has other consequences for the daily life compared to contents in more traditional media. This participatory culture challenges traditional religious authority in respects of content, media, and communication.²⁴

Digital games and the religious aspects of virtual environments

For several years, scholars of contemporary religion have been investigating the Internet in order to find out how religious groups present themselves online (“religion online”), and what possibilities they provide for religious activities or practices on the Internet (“online religion”).²⁵ If the Internet

19 Huizinga 1955, 18–19; Campbell 1960: *The Masks of God*; Oerter 1999: *Psychologie des Spiels*.

20 Horsfield 2008: Media, 111–113.

21 Campbell 2010: *When Religion Meets New Media*, 6, 17, 41–63.

22 *Op. cit.* 9–10.

23 Rountree 2006: Materializing Magical Power.

24 Horsfield 2008, 116; Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007: Electronic Game Research Methodologies.

25 Cf. Højsgaard/Warburg 2005: *Religion and Cyberspace*; Dawson/Cowan 2004:

is described as a “virtual environment” which allows for socio-religious exchange, online digital games may be taken as a special case of this field of study. Initial articles and monographs addressing the religious aspects of online games like *World of Warcraft* have been published.²⁶ The findings of the research of online religion could even be relevant to the investigation of single-player (offline) games, e.g., results relating to contents, or to methodological approaches for the analysis of online forums and fan sites dedicated to a particular game.

Suggestions of Research Topics for Study of Religions' Investigation of Digital Games

Content analysis

Digital games often carry religious content²⁷ that is communicated more or less explicitly on different ludic levels. On the diegetic-narrative level, religious (or religiously inspired) symbols, characters, actions and stories can be experienced aesthetically.²⁸ Symbols from religious traditions²⁹ are often de- and re-contextualized,³⁰ either in a critical, satirical, or—in the case of “religious digital games”—in an apologetic manner. Analysis of religious semantics is part of most of the contributions in this section: Oliver Steffen discusses the diegetic signs (items) in the digital role-playing game *Risen* in terms of Gerardus van der Leeuw’s phenomenology of religion; Fabian Perlini-Pfister gives an overview of the religious contents in the main components of the pen and paper role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*—origin of many of today’s digital fantasy-role playing games; Daria Pezzoli-Olgianti traces the religious connotations in movies about games and virtual worlds, distinguishing the levels of semantics and genre.

According to the ludologist Gonzalo Frasca, digital games are goal-defining systems of rules that are able to convey ideology just as the narrative

Religion Online; and the contributions in *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*: <http://online.uni-hd.de> (7.9.09).

26 Cf. Bainbridge 2010: *The Warcraft Civilization*; Stam/Scialdone 2008: *Where Dreams and Dragon Meet*; Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007.

27 Cf. Steffen 2008; Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007, 37–39.

28 Cf. Aupers 2007: *Better than the real world*; Steffen 2006: *Daedra*, 21–24; 29–32.

29 Steffen 2006, 32–34.

30 Steffen 2008, 68–82; Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007, 36.

representation does.³¹ Procedures of point distribution, enforcements or restrictions of game mechanics and the like often imply a moral agenda.³² Such information is frequently communicated through extra-diegetic signs, viz. signs not belonging to the game world showing up in visual interfaces or menus. Even the level of the program code can be relevant to the analysis in that “mods,”³³ hidden program functions, bugs,³⁴ cheats or trainers³⁵ change the rules of play; this change may, of course, alter implicit moral ideas of the developers. In “Breaking the Magic Circle,” Julian Kücklich focuses on breaking the game rules (cheating) in an extramoral sense, as a method to deepen the understanding of digital games. In order to highlight possible relationships between games and religion, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati reflects on the narrative structures of selected science fiction movies, conceived of as a parallel to the religious dimensions of structural aspects of digital games.

Reflections on religious functions of digital games

Some scholars considered the role of digital games in the context of spiritual experiences.³⁶ According to Bainbridge, it is “possible that certain categories of games satisfy some of the same psychological needs satisfied by religion: providing compensatory status, a sense of community, and transcendence of the material world.”³⁷ For example, digital games can be considered as modern myths in so far as their narratives often refer to classical mythological themes.³⁸ Another possibility is the reflection on the ritual dimensions of (online) games, e.g., comparing action and context of gaming to the techno-ritual use of the Internet,³⁹ or applying concepts of ritually induced consciousness transformation (flow, liminality).⁴⁰ Even

31 Frasca 2003.

32 Steffen 2006, 35–37.

33 Programs often developed by fans that modify aesthetics and game play of an existing computer game.

34 Errors in computer programs that produce unexpected results.

35 Programs developed by fans that modify the values of the player character (hit points, experience points, gold etc.) in order to adapt the game play to the player’s skills.

36 Highland/Yu 2008; Communicating Inner Experience; Steffen 2008; Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007.

37 Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007, 35–36.

38 Aupers 2007; Steffen 2008.

39 Highland/Yu 2008; Martínková 2008; Computer Mediated Religious Life; Radde-Antweiler 2006; Rituals Online; Krüger 2005; Discovering the Invisible Internet.

40 Steffen 2008, 83–99; Pinchbeck/Stevens 2006: *Ritual Co-Location*.

deludic practices—in the sense used by Julian Kücklich in his contribution in this section—can be understood in terms of religious acts. For example, cheats which alter game rules bear structural similarities to the performance of magic which “intervene[s] in natural determinism to complete or modify its course.”⁴¹ Other cheats lay bare hidden, sometimes surreal aesthetic qualities of game space and thus rather remind of the shamans’ and mystics’ visions which are believed to reveal extraordinary dimensions of and insights about reality.

Reflecting on the religious functions of digital games is legitimate within a study of contemporary religion whose notion of religion is not confined to a Western Christian understanding. Concepts like “invisible religion”⁴² or “implicit religion”⁴³ can be applied as theoretical framework. Considering this, the issues of the empirical verification of these concepts—gamers usually do not conceive their hobby as religious activity—and the demarcation between religion and non-religion have to be addressed.

Social research and discourse analysis

The impact of games on the religious notions of gamers. Are digital games influencing the ethical and religious orientation of their users, and if so, how and to what extent? On the one hand, this question addresses the religious content of games. For example, Bainbridge and Bainbridge observe that “many electronic games mock conventional religion, and may thereby erode the player’s respect for the churches in his or her real community.”⁴⁴ Conversely, one can ask whether a neutral or positive representation of religion—for instance, the neopagan contents in fantasy role-playing games⁴⁵—reinforces or even generates agnostic or religious attitudes. On the other hand, some of the structural elements of digital games may have an impact on the users’ notions that traditionally stem from the area of religion. Examples are the constant occurrences of dying and *respawning*,⁴⁶ the “isometric” perspective (also known as *god view*) as well as the interactivity and modifiability of (PC) games. It is possible that such elements could alter beliefs—e.g., about life after death, about God’s

41 Lévi-Strauss 1966: *The Savage Mind*, 221.

42 Luckmann 1970: *The Invisible Religion*.

43 Thomas 2001: *Implizite Religion*.

44 Bainbridge/Bainbrige 2007, 36.

45 Rountree 2006, 190; Steffen 2006.

46 Cf. Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007, 37.

locality, perspective and (omni)potency—as well as the believer’s role and potency in relation to soteriology.

Analysis of the relationship of religious groups to digital games. What do religious groups think of digital games and how do they respond to them? As with other modern mass media,⁴⁷ the answer is ambiguous:⁴⁸ Various religious groups and individuals criticize contents and usage of games, whereas other communities try to regulate the usage. Evangelical web services in the US check digital games on violence, sex, and “occult” content and rate them as more or less “Christian.”⁴⁹ Moreover, certain games are appropriated to spread religious messages.⁵⁰ The “Christian Post” discloses to its readers “how to share your faith using the first-person shooter Halo 3” suggesting “to introduce some God-talk” via the in-game chat function.⁵¹ Christian gaming clans like the “Soldiers of Christ” aim to “bring the truth and love of Jesus Christ to [...] the world of gaming.”⁵² Game developers like the Christian N’Lightning Software or the Muslim Afkar Media create games based on the history and ideology of their respective religion. But how do less game-oriented religious groups conceive of digital games in general, and religious digital games in particular? How are religious games received by religious adolescent players? What are the processes of negotiation over how to deal with games that take place within religious communities? Fabian Perlini-Pfister addresses some of these questions when exploring the Christian criticism and the community formation in the case of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

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47 Cf. Campbell 2010.

48 Cf. Steffen 2008, 38.

49 Cf. Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007, 39–42.

50 Bainbridge/Bainbridge 2007; Steffen 2008, 40–41.

51 Dratz 2007: How to Share Your Faith Using Halo 3.

52 <http://www.teamsoc.net/index.php?page=26749> (10.11.2010).

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