

Religion from Scholarly Worlds to Digital Games: The Case of RISEN

Oliver Steffen

The content and structure of entertaining digital games often refer to the imaginary worlds of historical religion. This appears in a particularly striking way in the fantasy role-playing game *Risen*. Methodologically, the case study shows that the ludological concept of “hit points” may be taken as a starting point for the investigation of the religious repertoire. In addition, a comparison with the original German work of the Dutch phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw suggests that *Risen*’s ludological-narrative complex of “hit points” (“life energy”) enacts a 20th-century essentialist and phenomenological conception of religion that has made its way into, and was specifically framed by, the new medium of digital games.

If you can show dedication to the Holy Flame,
then I would see you as more fit for training.

Belschwur, mage (RISEN)

Join the Order and believe your soul will be saved by a flame.

Romanov, pirate (RISEN)

The following case study aims to illustrate a content-analytical approach to the religious content in the computer game *RISEN*.¹ *RISEN* is a commercial entertainment game developed by the German studio Piranha Bytes and published by Deep Silver in 2009. It is the successor² of a series of

- 1 Piranha Bytes/Deep Silver 2009, Standard PC German Edition, version 1.10. For the purpose of this article, I activated the built-in English version.
- 2 For copyright reasons, Piranha Bytes was not allowed to use the protected name *GOTHIC* to explicitly continue its series after the split with Austrian publisher JoWoOD Entertainment in 2007. The rights on *GOTHIC* remained with JoWoOD who published a game of its own in October 2010, *ARCANIA/GOTHIC 4*, developed by Spellbound Productions Software. However, fans of the series view *RISEN*, not *ARCANIA*, as the genuine successor of the Piranha Bytes *GOTHIC* games.

role-playing games named *GOTHIC*, known for its vast, male-dominated open worlds, gloomy graphics, rough language and behavior, and drug use. As a fantasy role-playing game for a single-player it incorporates the typical and widespread elements of the genre: a controllable player character who travels through an animated and realistic three-dimensional virtual environment; a dramatic, yet simple narrative set in a magical medieval world—a world threatened by dark forces and saved by a hero; ludic elements like “hit points” (life energy) which decide over life and death of the player character, “magical power” (“mana”)³ to cast magical spells, and “experience points” which are gained by winning combats and completing quests and which are used in the process of “levelling” in order to develop the player character in strength and talents.

I approached the content and structure of the game through “playing observation,”⁴ a modified form of “participant observation.” The ludological characteristics are examined by applying a terminology based on the religious aesthetical classification system from the author⁵ and the ludological “rapid analysis method” (RAM) from Aki Järvinen.⁶ My thesis is that the religious symbolic system in fantasy role-playing digital games like *RISEN* is first and foremost a narrative frame for life-supporting functions; focusing on the central game component of “hit points,” therefore, is a good starting point for the investigation.

1. The Concept of “Life Energy” in *RISEN*

The virtual life of the hero is expressed by a quantifiable value usually called “hit points” or “health points.” The ludological concept of “hit points” has been developed within the *DUNGEON & DRAGONS* game system of the 1970s as a result of the tendency to control not entire armies but a single character whose death from just one blow had to be prevented.⁷

3 Historically, the term *mana* stems from the Polynesian/Melanesian/Maori culture, where it designates an impersonal power that resides in living beings (and objects). Brought to Europe by anthropologists, the term was borrowed by Western fantasy fiction authors and designers of fantasy (computer) games to describe a limited magical resource used by individuals to perform magical acts.

4 Steffen 2008: “High-speed Meditation”?, 19–24.

5 *Op. cit.* 65–68.

6 Järvinen 2008: *Games without Frontiers*.

7 Rausch 2004: Dave Arneson Interview. Cf. the contribution by Fabian

Figure 1 The hero in the wild—with two thirds of his “hit points” (RISEN, Piranha Bytes/Deep Silver 2009).

Since the status of “hit points” is an essential information for the player, it must be visible at any time. In RISEN, the remaining “hit points” of the nameless hero are displayed by the permanently present red bar at the bottom of the screen (figure 1). Ludologically and aesthetically, this is an extra-diegetic, dynamic and representative piece of information in the window of the game world. At a single glance the player can tell how much of his life remains (shown in red) and how much is already lost (shown in black). The character screen (menu) accurately displays the ratio in numbers (figure 2). In the tooltip (bottom right), the “hit points” are labeled “life energy”⁸ and are iconically represented by a winged anthropomorphic being, whose stretched arm immerses in a sphere of light.

Figure 2 Detail from the character screen: The numerical and iconographic representation of life energy (RISEN, Piranha Bytes/Deep Silver 2009).

The red bar and the figure on the character screen belong to the game element category of information, which correlates with other game elements. Thus, the “hit points” are connected to rule-governed procedures; these rules define the events and values by which the “hit points” increase or decrease. The crucial rule for the player is the following: if the “hit points” value drops to zero, the player character dies and the game ends. The most important goal in RISEN is to keep the red bar always as full as possible. “Hit points” change through game mechanics—the actions of the player and the game system. For example, the player character loses “hit points” when hit by an enemy (NPC: “non-player characters”) during combat, through contact with different types of traps in dungeons, or as a result of falling down from a great height. Lost “hit points” do not regenerate automatically in RISEN. For that reason, “boosters”—environmental components or items that increase “hit points” when activated—have to be found and used. In RISEN’s narrative, the hero regenerates by sleeping in a bed or drinking from a water barrel (environmental components); he

Perlini-Pfister in this section, below [***p.***].

8 The term “hit points” is used in the English version of RISEN together with the term “life energy”; in the original German version, the hero’s hit points are throughout termed “Lebensenergie” (life energy).

heals himself with healing plants, eats healthy meals, drinks alchemical healing potions, casts healing spells etc.

In the following, I will present some items relevant to life energy, differentiated by the amount of “hit points” (HP). “Hit points” determine these items’ value in the game and may transport some of the developers’ implicit ideological bias or agenda that could be relevant to the analysis:

- Plants are usually collected in the wild, e.g., “healing herb” (+10 HP), “healing plant” (+20 HP) and “healing root” (+30 HP).
- Healing plants can be processed to alchemical potions, which intensify the effect of the plant. For example, to mix a strong healing potion the hero requires a level 3 alchemy skill, needs to own an empty vial, some wine and a healing root, and has to find an alchemy table to mix the ingredients. The finished potion restores 300 HP.
- Foods contribute to the hero’s survival, too. Meat is taken from slain animals and must be fried in a pan in order to eat it; meat products provide the highest amount of “hit points” (e.g., fried meat, +15 HP; shark steak, +15 HP; chicken drumstick, +10 HP; sausage, +10 HP). Less potent kinds of food are vegetables and fruit (e.g., apple, carrots and turnip, +5 HP each).
- Potatoes and onions in turn cannot be consumed directly, but serve as ingredients for dishes. With a cauldron, a ladle, a recipe and the ingredients at his disposal, the hero can prepare a dish (figure 3), mostly consisting of potatoes, onions, and meat. For example, the consumption of a “hotpot” with one potato, ten pieces of raw meat and one onion restores 200 HP.

Figure 3 Preparing a healthy meal (RISEN, Piranha Bytes/Deep Silver 2009).

- Magical armor, when worn, increases defensive and offensive values. Magical amulets and rings count as armor as well. The “amulet of life,” for example, increases the hero’s maximum life energy by 20 HP; the “ring of health” provides 10 HP. If the hero has learned the art of smithing, he can manufacture amulets and rings from precious metals and gems (figure 4).
- Runes are magical stone tablets containing particular spells. Wisdom, the understanding of the “magical seals,” and “magical power” (mana) are required to exert rune magic. Of the eighteen runes in RISEN, three restore life energy: “strong magic healing” (+150 HP),

“medium magic healing” (+100 HP) and “small magic healing” (+50 HP). Taking the example of the strong magic healing rune, its casting transforms 40 mana points into 150 HP.

- For each rune spell there are corresponding scrolls. They have the same effects as the runes but consume less mana; after usage, they dissolve. Scrolls are found, purchased, or produced like alchemical potions: If the hero possesses the talent and owns a quill, a parchment roll, the healing runes and the healing plants, he can create the corresponding scrolls at a writing desk.

As the examples of rings and amulets show, life energy in *RISEN* can not only be regenerated but also increased. Besides armors, rare potions and plants also increase the maximum number of “hit points.” The typical process of increasing the “hit points” is referred to as “levelling”: reaching certain amounts of “experience points” enables the hero to move up to the next level which makes him stronger in many respects: The hero starts as “Castaway” on level 1 with 80 HP and, in my run, defeated the final enemy (boss) as “Master of Magic” on level 27 with 496 HP.

2. From Life Energy to a Virtually Enacted Phenomenology of Religion

To start the analysis, it is reasonable to ask whether the game’s implementation of the concept of “hit points” itself draws from traditional religious concepts. There seems to be no evidence for this on an aesthetic-semiotic level, where “hit points” are represented as a red bar or as a numerical value. More revealing is the accompanying image of a winged anthropomorphic being associated with light (figure 2) that can be interpreted as an angel or a soul. But taking the ludological-narrative context of “hit points” into consideration, there is no further indication to pursue the idea of angels or souls. The textual-narrative framing of the “hit points” as “life energy,” in turn, raises animistic, dynamistic, and vitalistic notions of a vital substance or efficient energy. In the course of anthropological mana theories, this notion was constructed by early scholars of religion as the central theme of the research of religion. And indeed, life energy in *RISEN*—and the items and processes it is connected to—are objects that were typically systematized and investigated by 20th-century essentialists and phenomenologists. The following comparison with the original German

work of Gerardus van der Leeuw⁹ suggests that the ludological-narrative complex of life energy in *RISEN* enacts a phenomenological conception of religion.

Van der Leeuw starts by describing the object of “primitive religion,” the impersonal power or mana.¹⁰ Sometimes he uses the term “life force” (*Lebenskraft*) as an equivalent for mana.¹¹ This contrasts with the terminological, visual and ludological separation of energetic resources into “life energy” and “mana” in *RISEN*. Indeed, the example of the transformation of mana into life energy through casting healing spells suggests a direct link between the two. But as the items listed above demonstrated, there are ideas about life energy that do not refer to the Melanesian mana philosophy but rather to alchemic-magical notions of prolonging life, or to health in a modern physiological, pharmaceutical and alimentary sense.

Thus, some items in *RISEN* are loaded with “power” or “energy.” On the one hand, this can be taken as an example of what van der Leeuw calls “nature-ism” (*Naturismus*),¹² in so far as power items are often natural phenomena like plants, gems, and metals. Water barrels meant to refresh life energy suggest notions about water as a cleansing and life-renewing element. By contrast, fire is only indirectly connected to life energy; it is a transforming power in the manufacturing of products restoring life energy, e.g., in cooking, smithing, and alchemical processes; as a destructive power, magically summoned fire burns the enemies. *RISEN* is chthonic in orientation, references to the transcendent importance of the sky, its light and celestial bodies are completely absent.¹³

On the other hand, *RISEN*’s energy-loaded components reveal ideas about the “magic,” or the added value, of human fabrication:¹⁴ Processed products are always more valuable and enriched with life energy (and mana) than raw materials, as is the case with potions, dishes and smithing products (like rings and amulets) in contrast to plants, food items, gems and metals.

Figure 4 Enriching metal with life energy: The hero forges a “ring of health” (*RISEN*, Piranha Bytes/Deep Silver 2009).

9 Van der Leeuw 1925: *Einführung*.

10 *Op. cit.* 13–25.

11 *Op. cit.* 76, 97, 109.

12 *Op. cit.* 29–36.

13 *Op. cit.* 36–39.

14 *Cf. op. cit.* 28.

Throughout the game, RISEN players look out for and collect power-boosting items. However, these items are not preserved, shown and worshipped in terms of fetishism (*Fetischismus*)¹⁵—they are consumed and sold. The same also applies, for example, to the rudimentary worship of relics (*Reliquienkult*):¹⁶ the hero's goal to find the ancient "titan armor," once worn by a mighty titan lord, is not to worship the armor, but to wear it and thus protect his life energy in the final combat.

Just as the energy-containing items, animals¹⁷ in RISEN are rather productive livestock than objects of worship. There are, however, indications of their sacredness (*Heiligkeit*)¹⁸ or power, as can be concluded from the following observations: Products of animals or beasts are manufactured to items that increase or protect life energy, e.g., meat, claws, teeth, shells etc. Furthermore, the hero utilizes the power of some beasts by magically transforming¹⁹ himself into them. With the life-threatening lizardmen—they rise as a result of the "Dark Wave" and strive for the destruction of all mankind—RISEN also simulates another kind of sacred animals, the chimera.

In RISEN, there is some evidence pointing to the sacredness or holiness of human beings.²⁰ The leaders of the three factions, though not kings, exert a paramount (magical) power, which can be interpreted as a type of implicit royal mana (*Königsmana*).²¹ The player character, subject to the life energy in consideration, can be characterized as a "mana god" (*Managott*)²²-to-be: though he does not provide cultural achievements to mankind, he is a man maturing into a champion who restores the order of a world in disaster. Casting magical spells (*magische Handlungen*)²³ whose coercive efficacy is related to mana plays an important role in that process. In many cases, the hero casts spells to regenerate or protect his life energy. Moreover, some spells provide attributes or skills relevant to life

15 *Op. cit.* 25–29.

16 *Op. cit.* 28–29.

17 *Op. cit.* 39–43.

18 According to Van der Leeuw, "sacred" is the object or person that has a lot of mana: *op. cit.* 15, 57.

19 *Op. cit.* 40.

20 *Op. cit.* 61–64, 104–110.

21 *Op. cit.* 62–63. For the power or life energy of kings, cf. Frazer 1963: *The Golden Bough*.

22 Van der Leeuw 1925: 43–45.

23 *Op. cit.* 96–99.

energy that refer to certain types of sacred human beings:²⁴ the “berserker” spell grants the hero a temporary increase of fighting power; “levitation” helps to safely bridge rifts; the spells for healing and for transformation into beasts feature characteristics of a healer and a shaman. In connection with that, rune and scroll magic suggests the existence of sacred signs or words (*heilige Worte*)²⁵ that are sometimes visually displayed as part of the spell-casting animation (figure 5).

Figure 5 Casting the “Berserker” spell that consumes mana and protects life energy. The hero radiates mighty signs for some seconds (RISEN, Piranha Bytes/Deep Silver 2009).

Besides the “dynamistic” impersonal powers (life energy, mana), there are “animistic”²⁶ notions—personal spirits or souls. This is best demonstrated with a brief look at the “bestiarium”: The hero often fights ghostly creatures with mythical backgrounds from different cultures, e.g., animated skeletons, “undeads,” ghouls, and gnomes. Concerning the player character, RISEN lacks an explicit concept of afterlife:²⁷ after having lost all his life energy, the hero dies. The dying sequence is unemotional, the hero falls to the ground and remains motionless. For a few seconds, the scene remains on the screen while the only control left to the player is the camera movement. Then the loading screen appears. Thus, the concept of afterlife implicitly derives from the inherent structure typical to most digital games, namely restoring a former game state after a “game over.” While the hero’s reappearing into the game world implies a shift between the diegetic and non-diegetic levels, the cheat “god mode,”²⁸ which is a feature of the hidden developers’ mode, prevents the losing of life energy and thus allows for in-game immortality.

In RISEN’s prequels GOTHIC 1–3, personal gods²⁹ bestow, among other things, life energy on the player when they are worshipped at their shrines. In contrast, the introduction to RISEN announces: “Man banished the gods

24 *Op. cit.* 104–110.

25 *Op. cit.* 115–121.

26 *Op. cit.* 51–61.

27 *Op. cit.* 90–95.

28 Cf. the contribution “Breaking the Magic Circle” by Julian Kücklich in this volume, below [***p. ***].

29 *Op. cit.* 76–79.

from the world.”³⁰ The absent gods seem to be ancient Greek ones—their disappearance releases the once fettered titans, who now strive to wipe out mankind.

The locality also has an effect on the hero’s life energy. In the safer, more “civilized” regions of Faranga—the bandit camp, the volcano keep or the harbor town—there are plenty of items to regenerate “hit points.” In contrast, experiences in the wilderness often threaten the hero’s life, although they are also relevant to “levelling” and thus eventually strengthening the hero’s life energy. With the “Hall of the Holy Flame” in the volcano keep, *RISEN* has a sacred place (*heilige Stätte*),³¹ where the player character is forbidden to enter at first. But it is not the life-threatening power of the place that makes the hero refrain from going there (*taboo*)³² but rather the heavily-armed guards. The rite of passage that is performed in that hall indicates the idea of sacred times (*heilige Zeiten*)³³ as well: The initiation into the Convocation of the Holy Flame changes the status of the hero from novice to mage and strengthens his mana and life energy.

3. Conclusion

An in-depth study of the content and culture of digital games is still absent from the research of contemporary religion. However, scholars of religion could contribute in many ways to the scientific exploration of this new medium. As an example of a contemporary approach in the study of religion, and accounting for the existing computer game research, I conducted a content analysis of the fantasy role-playing game *RISEN*. The case study shows that the ludological concept of “hit points” may be taken as a starting point for the investigation of the religious repertoire. When religious symbols and meanings are accessed via “hit points,” viz. via their functions within essential game rules and rule-based procedures, they are related to the ludic system known from the start of the game. This approach accounts for the ludological and media characteristics of the game under consideration. Furthermore, it provides a way to delineate the vast corpus

30 In the German version, man does not play an active role in the leaving of the gods. The text just states: “Die Götter haben die Welt verlassen” (“The gods have left the world”).

31 *Op. cit.* 99–102.

32 Cf. 128–132.

33 *Op. cit.* 102–104.

of computer game elements in a reasonable way: confining the elements to the ones which are directly linked to “hit points” will reveal the (religious) content, which is crucial to gameplay—a content that players inevitably deal with. Also, using this genre-specific approach is suitable in order to study the content in any fantasy role-playing computer game—including some of the third- and first-person action games, shooters as well as “jump & run games,” as long as they contain relevant narratives.

However, accessing computer game elements by considering the “hit point” system also implies several limitations: elements not directly linked to the “hit point” complex are not analyzed—e.g., environmental components, or items with mere aesthetical and narrative functions. In addition, the elements linked to the “hit points” mostly belong, for ludic reasons, to the ludological classification of diegetic items which have a boosting, less frequently a transforming effect—leaving aside other types and attributes of items, e.g., extra-diegetic auxiliary items, items of the category statistic/menu, and containers as well as teleporters. This could lead to limited concepts of computer game semiotics. Therefore, in a broader, in-depth analysis, further classification systems and methods should be used to cover these extra-diegetic elements, types and attributes. Also, structural characteristics possibly relevant to the research of religion—such as perspective or navigation through time and space—are ignored by this content-analytical approach. Lastly, it has to be kept in mind that this approach is not suited for the study of digital games that do not represent the player as a mortal character, as is the case in real-time or turn-based strategy games, many adventure games, simulations, sports games, and puzzle games.

“Hit points” do not necessarily have religious connotations in every game. In *RISEN*, the narrative specification of “hit points” as “life energy” opened up the view of a concept of religion that corresponds in some detail to the list and characteristics of religious phenomena given by Gerardus van der Leeuw: in both cases, religious phenomena originate from or refer to life energy, power, and/or mana. This suggests that the 20th-century essentialists’ and phenomenologists’ concept of religion has made its way into, and was specifically framed by, the new medium of digital games. Since *RISEN* incorporates many of the typical ludic and narrative elements of fantasy role-playing games which draw from similar historical originals—mainly nordic and (neo-)pagan mythology—this finding most likely applies to other games of this genre too. As digital games share elements

of (religious) meanings between developers and players, additional social research could qualify the findings so far. On the one hand, revealing the religious notions used by RISEN's developers might shed another light on religious content in RISEN. On the other hand, social research on RISEN's players could answer the question about reciprocal effects (or transfer effects) between the dynamistic concept of life and the players' individual identities, about forms of coping with extraordinary situations and frames of meaning and interpretation.

References

Games

- ARCANIA—GOTHIC 4 (Spellbound Entertainment, Germany 2010).
 GOTHIC 1–3 (Piranha Bytes, Germany 2001/2003/2006).
 RISEN (Piranha Bytes, Germany 2009).

All pictures are screenshots from the computer game RISEN and are used according to the copyright law doctrine of *Zitatrecht*, or *fair dealing/fair use*, respectively.

Literature

- Frazer, James George (1963): *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*. MacMillan & Co.: London.
- Järvinen, Aki (2008): *Games without Frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies and Design*. Available under <http://acta.uta.fi/english/teos.php?id=11046> (17.8.2010).
- Rausch, Allen (2004): Dave Arneson Interview. In: *GameSpy*. Available under <http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/540/540395p1.html> (12.10.2010).
- Steffen, Oliver (2008): "High-speed Meditation"? *Eine religionsästhetische und ritual-theoretische Betrachtung des Computerspiels*. Available under http://www.god-mode.ch/assets/downloads/oliver-steffen_high-speed_meditation--lizentiatsarbeit%20_mai-2008.pdf (2.8.2010).
- Van der Leeuw, Gerardus (1925): *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*. Christentum und Fremdreigionen 1. Ernst Reinhardt: München

