‘God Modes’ and ‘God Moods’: What Does a Digital Game Need to Be Spiritually Effective?

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Introduction

“I’m not sure how much religion you’ll find in The Path,” writes Michaël Samyn, director of the Belgian independent studio Tale of Tales on inquiry. After all, The Path “is a short horror game inspired by older versions of Little Red Ridinghood, set in modern day.” Six sisters aged nine to nineteen are sent on an errand to their sick and bedridden grandmother. Mother tells them to stay on the path that leads through a thick and dangerous forest. The latter, however, promises adventures that can hardly be resisted by the girls. In the forest they find strange areas and objects related to their character and life situation. Above all, they find their personal wolf—a traumatic encounter after which grandmother’s house becomes a place of surreal nightmares that end with the death of each girl.

Fig. 1: Rose off the path: The Path (2009).

The Path, award-winning for innovative game design, shows little overt religious symbolism, apart from some Christian crosses at the graveyard, or the girls’ reflections about death.

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1 This inquiry, as well as the present chapter, are related to the research project “Between ‘God Mode’ and ‘God Mood’. Religion in Computer Games and the Meaning of Religion for Gamers,” a project of the Institute of Science of Religion, University of Berne, Switzerland, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), cf. http://www.god-mode.ch.

However, a glance at the developer’s forum reveals that players relatively often tie their play experiences to religious themes. Therefore, the game might be an example, on the one hand for the suggestion of sociologist William Sims Bainbridge that it is “possible that certain categories of games satisfy some of the same psychological needs satisfied by religion;” and on the other hand for game researcher and designer Ian Bogost’s approach that games may have a spiritually relevant persuasive effect rather through their procedural representation and interaction than through their contents. In this chapter, I suggest a ludologically influenced religious studies approach to digital games. I am interested in basic structural elements of games that generate religiously or spiritually relevant experiences in players. As a start, I consult a number of scientific and journalistic publications that, in their discussion of digital games’ effects, not only refer to religious terms, metaphors and themes, but also provide details about the characteristics of the accordant ludological structure. From this review, a list of criteria is composed, which serves to compare the spiritual efficacy of digital games—an essential aspect of the implicit religious potential of games. It will be shown that this efficacy may be understood and compared in terms of flow, meditation, empowerment, disempowerment and morality. This catalogue becomes the basis for the analysis of The Path, followed by a discussion from a religious studies perspective. So even if Michaël Samyn is not sure how much religion is in The Path, I’ll gladly follow his friendly invitation: “But have a look … And do please let us know what you find!”

**Theories and Concepts**


6 In this chapter, I use the term “religious studies” in the sense of “science of religion”, i.e. the study of religion is conducted according to approaches and methods of secular disciplines like sociology, anthropology etc. rather than theology or phenomenology. Scholars of secular religious studies have largely ignored digital as well as non-digital games as a research topic until now. A rare and recent publication is Maya Burger / Philipp Bornet, Religions in Play. Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2012).
Implicit Religion and Spiritual Efficacy

In this chapter, “religion” is defined according to the sociological theory of “implicit religion.” This theory covers cultural phenomena that are not attributed to traditional religions, but have the same or similar structures and functions for individuals. Here, I focus on a single theme of implicit religion, spiritual efficacy, as expressed by the German sociologist of religion Günter Thomas. First, through rituals and other strategies, the religious communication process induces and interprets experiences of altered states of consciousness. These experiences show two typical poles: an operation of consciousness which is to the greatest possible extent hetero-referential, i.e. the individual consciousness is absorbed by external stimuli as is the case in practices of ecstasy; and an operation of consciousness which is to the greatest possible extent self-referential, e.g. phenomena of silence, meditation and mystical experiences. Second, religious communication provides cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation. Third, it suggests specific ways of behaving and acting. Thus, the individual consciousness of the participants, or their self-perception and social perception respectively, is meant to be shaped permanently. As will be shown, parallels can be found for these three interdependent factors in digital game literature.

“God Mode” and “God Mood”

In digital gaming, “god mode” is a common term for the practice to permanently maximize the avatar’s attributes, i.e. achieving a state of immortality, by altering the game rules. This process has several aspects that are relevant to this study. It emphasizes the ludological structure of digital games by dealing with the rule system. It conveys a particular religious

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7 Günter Thomas, *Implizite Religion. Theoriegeschichtliche und theoretische Untersuchungen zum Problem ihrer Identifikation* (Würzburg: ERGON Verlag, 2001), 441-446.
notion, namely that of an omnipotent and immortal deity. Finally, it induces an altered game experience in the players, including feelings of absolute power and of “playing God.” Based on these aspects, I use the term “god mode” to identify ludological structures that are spiritually effective according to the literature reviewed. This means that these structures do not merely convey religiously or spiritually relevant notions, but also bring about ‘god moods’, the corresponding changes in the players’ consciousness. To determine the ludological structures, I focus on three of Aki Järvinen’s “compound elements”—the procedurally actualized rule set; the game mechanics, the diegetic possibilities of player action; and the theme, the integration of the game elements into system transcending contexts of meaning. These compound elements can be expressed and accessed only by means of other compound and systemic elements: components, the game elements that can be manipulated and owned; environment which is the spatial organization of the game; information about events, roles and states of the system; and the human-computer interface. To take these perceptually accessible elements into account, I summarize them into a fourth category aesthetics.

Approaches to Spiritual Efficacy in Digital Games

Religious Experience—Flow and Meditation

Flow

Flow and the problem of its measurement in digital games is a known topic in game studies. Though flow cannot be directly identified with “ecstasy”, it fits the description of an operation

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of consciousness which is to the greatest possible extent hetero-referential: in flow state, the consciousness and reaction are fed and operated by external stimuli. Flow is a psychological concept, but it may have religious significance if it is experienced accordingly in religious or non-religious contexts.\(^{10}\)

Such significance is given to flow in a series of transpersonal psychology studies by Jayne Gackenbach et al. The authors investigate if and how digital games can be described as cultural amplifier for the process of consciousness development. Results of their extensive surveys show that flow, together with lucid dreaming, are the most experienced altered states of consciousness in digital gaming that can be associated with “higher state of consciousness”.\(^{11}\) Unfortunately, Gackenbach et al. pay little attention to the genre or elements of digital games. Therefore, we turn to game designer Xinghan (Jenova) Chen, co-founder of game development studio Thatgamecompany. In his MFA thesis he investigates game design requirements in order to create games appealing to a broad audience. He takes the concept of flow as a source of inspiration and starting point. Based on the flow elements most important to game design—rewarding the player; balance between the game’s challenges and the player’s abilities; and player’s control over the game activity—he suggests a flow system including the following criteria:

<EXT> 1) a wide spectrum of gameplay covering different difficulties for all types of players; 2) a player-oriented active Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment (DDA) system to give the players control over their gameplay, allowing them to play at their own paces; 3) embedment of DDA.


choices into the core mechanics of gameplay to adjust flow experiences directly through
diegetic behavior. 

Thatgamecompany implemented these principles in their widely recognized and successful
game *flOw* (2006). Programmer Eddy Boxerman from Hemisphere Games who worked on
*Osmos*, a game similar to *flOw*, adopts Chen’s approach and mentions further elements of
flow games, above all: intuitive gameplay and controls, appealing visuals, sounds and music,
as well as the absence of time pressure.  

For their flow based games, Thatgamecompany introduced the genre “Zen.” Sony
Computer Entertainment which published Thatgamecompany’s more recent games for the
PlayStation 3, adopted the term to promote the release of *flower* (2008). Eddy Boxerman
commented and suggests that “flow” would be more appropriate, but “‘Zen Gaming’ sounds
better, and perhaps it paints a broader picture for the genre.”

**Meditation**

Digital game Zen also points to the other type of religious experience: the operation of
consciousness which is to the greatest possible extent self-referential. According to Thomas,
an example of that operation would be meditation. This comes close to what Bogost calls
“zen-gaming.” Here, Zen is not equated with flow, but is thought to imply notions of Zen
meditative practices: Zen games, Bogost demands, must be “lean back” or relaxing games;

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15 Boxerman, “Zen Gaming, part 2.”
they are not about control, engagement and time pressure, but embrace simplicity, austerity and calmness in visuals, themes and controls. Thus, good examples of Zen games are casual puzzle games: they provide abstract aesthetics and demand repetitive gestures, while achieving the goal becomes secondary. Other types of Zen games, according to Bogost, are gardening games and wandering games: The first include tilling, planting and weeding as core mechanics and are said to induce the meditative effect of karesansui (Japanese dry gardens). The latter provide spatial exploration of open virtual worlds and may be connected to historical and mythological accounts of meditative wandering.

Sus Lundgren et al. approach the issue without referring to the history of religion. They use the term meditation to describe one of several aesthetic ideals of gameplay design; more specifically, meditation is the result of a specific set of variable gameplay properties. It seems promising to amend the authors’ approach by clarifying the relationship of these properties to historical accounts of meditation. For the most part, Lundgren et al. support Bogost’s idea of Zen, in which Meditation games should be simple (simplicity) and avoid non-goal-related work, therefore minimizing the possibility for reflection (minimal excise); their rules are consistent and cohesive; they lack complex themes, accurate simulations, varying strategies, different meaningful choices, and emergent gameplay, i.e. complex situations that arise from simple rules and mechanics. All of these requirements point to small and simple games, e.g. puzzle and skill games like Tetris. In contrast, by attributing a great deal of micro management—small tasks requiring immediate attention—and, contradicting Bogost, limited

play time to the meditation aesthetic ideal, play moves and rounds are clearly repetitive. This resembles the meditative repetition of prayers (ruminatio18) rather than the silent non-discursive observation. And some use of chance, as well as a tempting challenge based on pattern recognition and analytical skills suggests an understanding of meditation that emphasizes the investigation of contingent phenomena or the revealing of hidden truths—similar to how the term was used in European medieval academic theology.19

<C>Cognitive, affective, evaluative orientation—empowerment and disempowerment</C>

<D>Empowerment</D>

In the participants, the religious communication process seeks to bring about cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation. Digital games, too, aim to channel the players’ thinking, feeling and evaluating through challenge, selective multi-media communication, rules and reward systems. In the reviewed literature, authors sometimes identify game structures that refer to the subject of empowerment. More precisely, they refer to the “empowerment of the mind, will, and imagination”20, i.e. the realization of special powers that may result from cognitively, affectively and evaluative adopting a particular religion’s rules and ideals. Aaron Oldenburg’s art game After provides an example for extra-psychic or supernatural acquisition of information21. An alternative temporary perspective presented in a separate window conveys counterintuitive information relevant for progress in the game. The source of that information seems to be a deceased person close to the player character. Depending on the interpretation of how this information is transmitted to the player character, this

18 Karl Baier, Meditation und Moderne (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 32-37.
19 Ibid., 37-42.
21 Ibid., 156-167.
perspective may be considered as simulation of channeling, clairvoyance or out-of-body.

Based on this example, I suggest to generally consider the transmission and representation of relevant information in first- and third-person games: Besides alternative perspectives in separate windows, also directional arrows, marks and other hint signs may be interpreted—dependent on the thematic context—as psychic or intuitive attention directing processes, or as extraordinary knowledge or “omniscience” of the avatar.

<FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE>

*Fig. 2: Integrating the deceased’s perspective: After (2010).*

Structures of empowerment can also be identified when studying “god games”—construction and management simulations, as well as strategy games, in which the player takes on the role of a deity, e.g. *Black&White* (Lionhead Studios, 2001), or an all-powerful mundane decision-maker, e.g. *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989). In the reviewed literature, several god game properties are mentioned that may induce feelings of superhuman powers in the players: extensive control over individuals, cities, or civilizations, manifesting in game mechanics of terraforming, building, exploring, expanding, conquering and even non-diegetic level design; a narrated time often exceeding a human lifespan; and a kind of top-down or isometric perspective (“god view”). Combined with a typical feature of digital games—to achieve a huge effect with a small effort—god games may be interpreted as simulation of an aspect of

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spiritual empowerment, namely that “willing and thinking become transfigured in such a way that whatever one thinks or wills immediately comes to pass.”24

While in god games, great power is often given from the start, action and role-playing rather emphasize the path to power. In the course of the game narrative, the action or role-playing hero has to level up in order to become a match for superhuman challenges. There is reason to consider this empowerment process as implicitly religious: Dan Pinchbeck and Brett Stevens refer to Victor Turner’s ritual theory to understand digital game narratives as highly structured liminal phases: Avatars undergo a conflict-laden transformation of world and self, in the process of which the conflict is resolved and a stable end-state is brought about.25

Ludologically, the liminality becomes evident in the progress through increasingly challenging levels (FPS, action games), or in the mechanic of leveling up (RPGs).

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Disempowerment

I generally use the term “disempowerment” to describe all sorts of processes that relativize and confine human possibilities of being and acting. At least two forms of disempowerment may be religiously relevant: on the one hand, the fundamental contingency of life, i.e. human being’s helplessness vis-à-vis bodily and psychic dependencies; on the other hand, overwhelming experiences of any sort that induce feelings and psychophysical reactions like wonder, shiver or awe, and may likely be perceived as superhuman or sacred. Both examples may contribute to an awareness of the individual’s limitations; in both cases, religions provide a frame of interpretation; and both situations may bring about the individual’s submission and devotion to the assumed source of life or power experienced. I suggest that religiously

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24 Hollenback, Mysticism, 150.
relevant disempowerment is actualized in games that consciously confine the player’s control and thus make a counterpoint to the usual control in digital games; for such processes are easily associated with religiously relevant themes like metaphysical uncertainty, fear of death, and self-abandonment, as the following examples illustrate.

Adventure game *Cosmology of Kyoto* (Softedge, 1995) provides an example of confining cognitive control: Each of the protagonist’s acts in medieval Kyoto influences his karma and determines his rebirth. However, since this important process remains nontransparent, we find reports containing phrases like “I don’t know if this [giving money to the beggars] affects your karma” or “I developed a sort of faith that performing these rituals [praying in a Buddhist monastery] would affect my karma points.” Based on that example, I suggest that principally every act in a game whose effects are not, or not immediately, evident to the player opens up the possibility for the question of meaning and faith. To players who are accustomed to “meaningful play”—a developer’s design ideal implying that every interaction must be relevant to local and global goals—this question is urgent.

Confining the control of affective tendencies is another type of control confinement. For example, this is vividly experienced in action game situations of persistent and imminent threat which cannot be properly dealt with due to the player character’s low skills and equipment; low health, lack of ammunition, or the capture or demotion of the protagonist implying the loss of skills and equipment may be narrative equivalents of the player’s confined agency. This is carried to the extremes by survival horror games like *Amnesia: The protagonist, hunted by obscure, but powerful creatures, lacks the means to defend himself—running away and hiding are the only options; the protagonist’s fear and terror is simulated as

blurred views and the player’s loss of direct control over the character. Situations like these may induce feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and fear in the players. Referring to “predation games”, Elena Bertozzi describes states like these as “simulated near-death experience[s].” 29 She cites the Hegelian motif of the struggle to the death for recognition, amongst others, to also consider the empowering effects of these experiences. Thus, shooters and horror games simulate the trial to reach higher states of freedom and consciousness through self-sacrifice and overcoming the fear of death. 30

Finally, some games urge the players to abandon agency in order to progress. Meditation games like *Guru Meditation* (Ian Bogost, 2007), *Wii Fit Zazen* (Nintendo, 2007) or *Journey to Wild Divine* (Wild Divine, 2001) not only refer thematically to the abandonment of agency, but, using input devices like balance boards and biofeedback finger sensors, even realize it on a vestibular and psychophysiological level. Furthermore, abandonment of agency has a somewhat different quality if it unexpectedly defies genre conventions. For example, in *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Mysteries of the Sith* (Lucas Arts, 1998), the player has to realize that, in order to win the final battle, his player character needs to stop fighting. Such simulations of abandonment of self or control are to be found most likely at the intersection of art and digital games. In *The Night Journey*, an experimental video game by Bill Viola and others, the “mechanic of enlightenment” 31 requires the player to give up control of moving and looking in order to gain new perspectives and to progress in the game. According to Oldenburg, these strategies are religiously relevant: On the one hand, the confinement of control and agency parallels the requirement of many religions to give up control over worldly affairs and to surrender one’s own life to the assumed transcendent reality. Defiance of genre conventions,

on the other hand, often induces disorientation which may culminate in a “transcendent religious experience.”

Disposition to act—morality

The religious communication process seeks to bring about dispositions to act in the participants, here considered as moral behavior. Generally, religions function as breeding ground and basis of legitimacy for cultural “codes of conduct, procedures for reasoning morally, and standards of virtue. To support commitment to the moral life, they help configure the world as a moral order. Finally, they are prepared to qualify or refine this order so as to permit anyone to attain the highest level of moral excellence.”

Like fairy tales or myths, some digital games narratives establish a moral order, to which the protagonists are subjected. However, only a small number of games make their moral system an object of interactive decision. This is rare even—or perhaps especially so—in faith-based games. Technically, the simulation of morality is based on simple arithmetic systems that distribute different points for the player character’s different actions, giving a corresponding feedback sooner or later. A closer look at the concrete implementation of such systems highlights different dimensions of historical religious morality. The avatar’s moral attributes in some games, for example, function as strategic resource. In the Christian RTS game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (Left Behind Games, 2006), the believers’ “spirit” level increases through praying and decreases when in bad company. Increasing spirit is essential for the player to keep control of the believers and to convert enemies into believers.

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Another example is the role-playing game series *Ultima* (Origin, 1981-2009), providing open virtual worlds with far-reaching possibilities to act. Misconduct in *Ultima IX* (1999) is clearly defined and reduces the “karma” value of the avatar. Low karma is punished by the system by weakening other attributes of the avatar. By contrast, *Black & White* or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Bioware, 2003) do not overtly punish or reward the player’s deeds, but clearly qualify them as “good” and “evil” through textual and aesthetic feedbacks. The central ludological element in all of these games is some kind of moral meter, a closer examination of which will reveal some historical and philosophical characteristics. Moral meter games have a moralizing effect, for they objectify presuppositions implicit to moral, like “right” and “wrong”, as well as the idea of retribution. At the same time, they allow the players to consider their own acts from a position of objectivity and impartiality—a requirement for ethical reasoning. Moral meter games usually exclude eschatology: retribution has its effect in the game’s here and now, no later than the final sequence. Regarding the source of morality, the systematic rational character of moral meters suggest less a personal deity than an impersonal body of rules, similar to the Indian notion of karma. Finally, moral meter systems do not usually provide redemption or qualification of moral rules: Unless such is foreseen in the game’s narrative, digital game protagonists are not justified by remorse or by some god’s grace, they do not overcome the “samsaric” good-evil-scheme.

By contrast, the consequences of moral decisions in action and FPS games *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000) and *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007) are not expressed by moral meters or any other form of numeric or aesthetic evaluation of the players’ acts; it is expressed by the narrative itself—a process closely corresponding to the moral interpretation of life events and situations. Usually, these games provide a set of different options to act in a given, ethically delicate situation; the player chooses her protagonist’s next move by her ludic preferences and ethical sense alone, for the game provides little or no information about the effects. Later in
the game, the player is confronted with how the game world or the protagonist has been affected by her former choice. Promoting the players’ imaginative empathy and the notion that one’s own conduct influences the other’s welfare, *Deus Ex* and *Bioshock* contribute likewise to the requirements of ethical reasoning.

Except for a few cases (e.g. *Left Behind*), moral systems of digital games are not embedded in explicit theological, metaphysical or ritual dimensions of historical religions. They are based on fictional religious or religion-like systems (e.g. *Star Wars* or *Ultima*), or on the implicit developers’ ideas. In any case, digital game morality may be understood as a set of highly simplified and individualized behavioral principles to meet current needs for action. These principles follow the Golden Rule known from many cultures, e.g. the prohibitions to kill, injure and lie, or the support of the socially disadvantaged and people in need—violent games usually qualify the prohibition to kill according to a morality close to Abrahamic religions: killing human beings to protect oneself and one’s own people is justified; killing animals and other non-human creatures does not have any moral implications.

<B>A Question Set to determine the spiritual efficacy of *The Path*</B>

Based on the above-mentioned elaboration, I propose a question set to consider digital games focusing on flow, meditation, empowerment, disempowerment and morality. I use these five terms to describe particular psychic states (god moods) that are induced by particular sets of ludological elements (god modes). In other words, flow etc. are at the same time god moods and god modes, depending on the corresponding view. Having described the god mood as well as god mode aspects of flow etc. above, the game elements may now be assigned to the main categories rule set, game mechanics, theme and aesthetics (fig. 3):
In the following, this question set is applied to *The Path*; the score of each god mode’s affirmatively answered questions are scaled to a ten-points system. Against the background of my knowledge, my impression and interpretation, the analysis of *The Path* reveals the following picture (fig. 4):

*The Path* has quite some potential for flow. It is true that the game does not provide different degrees of difficulty, goals or scenarios. For example, the narrative, as well as some areas and objects are adapted according to the personality traits of the girl chosen at the beginning (act 1), but the gameplay remains the same (+0). In the second act, however, the player has some control about pace and progress in the game. He may choose to stay on the path and directly head to the grandmother’s house, confront the wolf in the forest, or go back to act 1 and start over with another girl (+1). Most of these options are realized through the core mechanics of walking and, therefore, are more or less consciously chosen by the player (+1). There is no time limit for exploring, discovering, experimenting; *The Path* presents itself as a “slow game” (+1). Though the game’s mechanics walk, run and interact are simple and easy to perform, the meaning of interaction with objects and protagonists is not easy to understand and therefore subject to interpretation (+0). The controls are a combination of conventional inputs—e.g. moving by pressing the left mouse button or the keyboard keys W, A, S, and D—
and unconventional elements like interaction through letting go of the controls. Also, the initially confusing hint system in the form of scribbles and overlays on the screen does not contribute to an intuitive understanding of how the game works (+0). Aesthetically, *The Path* is a beautiful game with lovely animations, colors and sounds, sensibly embedded into the virtual world’s narrative (+1).

By contrast, *The Path* does little to bring about meditative states: Regarding rules, the art game’s cunning instruction to stay on the path causes, for starters, confusion especially for players who are used to trusting the game’s information. Even later in the game, the generally consistent, but not cohesive rules become evident to the player only gradually (+0). The possibilities for interacting with objects are rather low, but the game definitely provides opportunities for different strategies and meaningful choices, e.g. the free exploration of the forest as opposed to the aim of unlocking all of the hint system by collecting flowers (+0). *The Path* has no predetermined goal (+1). To face the challenge, emotional skills and the urge to discover are more promising than sensorimotor and analytic skills (+0). There is also some chance: Every time one plays, the layout of the forest is different, and the objects and attractions are distributed randomly (+1). The game mechanics are not repetitive in terms of Lundgren *et al.*’s micro management (+0); some interactions like looking into a well or playing with the Girl in White seem to be ludologically redundant, but invite to pause and reflect (+0). Though a “horror game”, *The Path*’s main theme is wandering and exploring the forest, i.e. is neither aggressive (+0) nor constructive (+0). For the aesthetical question about the interface, see above (+0). The visuals and sounds are, in the main part of the game, rather sensual and realistic than abstract or simple—albeit continually superimposed by abstract and associative images; only in act 3, surrealism completely breaks through (+0).
Like meditation, empowerment is not much of The Path’s business. There is no built-in or external editor to adapt the game world (+0). Even though there are aspects of the “hero’s journey” like exploring, discovering and transformation embedded into the core mechanics (+1), there is no classic improvement of the avatar’s abilities (leveling up) (+0) or control and increase of game world resources (+0)—The Path is not a control simulation (+0). There is no top-down or isometric perspective (+0) and no narrated time exceeding a human lifespan (+0). There is, however, an alternative perspective: depending on the direction and movement of the player character, the screen is overlaid with flashing sketch-like figures such as faces, wolf paws, lips or eyes, as well as abstract forms like color stains and scribbles, arguably representing the girl’s intuitive or even supernatural anticipations and perceptions (+1).

The Path disempowers the players in a variety of ways: Starting interaction with objects by letting go of the controls limits the player’s power over the protagonist; in act 3 which runs like a film with minimal interaction, even the girl’s moving direction is preset (+1). Running is, next to walking, an option to move through space, but the “slow game” palpably restricts it: In some special areas, the girl just won’t run. And the player is generally best advised to refrain from running since running lets the collectible flowers disappear and zooms out the camera from an over-the-shoulder perspective to a bird’s eye view, literally letting the player lose sight of his virtual aims (+1). The Path, as a horror game, deals with death and near-death: The girls who occasionally hang out in the cemetery and philosophize about death die in grandmother’s house after they encountered their personal wolf. But there’s no apparent threat or necessity to experience these traumatic encounters—the girls, or the player respectively, freely choose it (+0). This is why the sacrifice of the girls’ innocent and childish selves, and surrender to the adolescent or adult world, seem to be the main themes of the game (+1). On the aesthetic level, the game defies conventions, as well (+1): though feedback is given for player’s actions, it often appears cryptic because of missing information (+1) or
surrealistic aesthetics. The meaning of the girl’s thoughts, the hint system or the events in grandmother’s house become only gradually clear to the player—until then, feelings of disorientation and confusion are likely to arise. The input devices mouse and keyboard are conventional (+0).

*The Path* does not convey *morality* in the sense outlined above. There is no moral system (+0) or resource associated with morality (+0) as foundation for player actions; accordingly, there are neither numerical (+0) nor aesthetical (+0) moral feedbacks. Player decisions are not guided—the final score screen, schoolishly evaluating the accomplishments (“Success”, “Failure”, ranks A to D) informs about possible goals, but appears to be too ironic to seriously guide player actions (+0). Also, there is no indication for any dualism of good and evil (+0).

**Conclusion—Some remarks from a religious studies perspective**

To answer Michaël Samyn’s invitation, *The Path* is neither a faith-based or religious digital game, nor does it contain a striking quantity of symbols that are known from historical religious traditions. According to the analysis, *The Path* has some potential to keep the players in the flow by providing interesting characters and a fair deal of control regarding the gameplay. On the other hand, it disempowers the players with unconventional information and controls. The analysis suggests that the feelings associated with flow and disempowerment might be religiously relevant to some of the users. But to what extent is this finding representative? And is flow etc. necessarily related to religion? I will conclude by considering these questions focusing on three contingencies of the method outlined and applied above:
1) God mode: the compilation of ludological elements and their identification in games

I used the term “god mode” to describe religious ideas which are actualized in digital games in the form of ludological elements, arranged to specific themes. Since the god modes are compiled according to only a small number of articles, I understand this question set as an instrument that suggests a method to investigate implicit religion in digital games, open for amelioration and change. Moreover, it is evident that assigning these ludological elements to structures existing in a particular game is also a question of interpretation and taste. To minimize this effect, the question set could be operationalized into an (online) survey which will be completed by the fans of a particular game.

2) God mood: feelings induced

The reviewed literature implies that god modes induce religiously relevant feelings, god moods. However, the relationship between god modes and god moods is contingent: Just like religious communication may draw individuals’ attention, but cannot enforce perceptions and states of consciousness, god modes may induce in the players the corresponding god moods, although not necessarily. *The Path*, for example, provides the structural preconditions to induce a state of flow; but of course, it also depends on the players themselves whether or not they really experience flow. This is true also for the question whether the experience of flow etc. is relevant to the players beyond the gaming context—apparently a precondition for any cultural phenomenon to be qualified as religious. To Oldenburg, for example, “[m]echanics alone are not generally enough to turn a feeling of faith in a game system into a belief in the supernatural, but must rely on the meta-aspects of play: how the player

cognitively intersects the game with his or her life outside the game’s imaginary structure.”

The god moods, therefore, are potential and contingent rather than deterministic.

3) ‘God’ mode, ‘god’ mood? Determining the reference to religion

To limit the scope of this chapter, the ludological structures and the feelings they supposedly induce have been required to refer to religion, i.e. they have been required to be ‘god’ modes and ‘god’ moods. This reference is a construction to which several authors contributed, including the author of this chapter, a white male, raised in a Christian environment, trained in secular religious studies, and interested in altered states of consciousness. A critical review of the main points of how the god modes/god moods are related to religion will reveal the constructional nature of this approach.

As a start, flow and meditation refer to religion through their association with altered states of consciousness. While altering consciousness is central to some religions’ ritual practices, it is not exclusively religious. This is suggested by the psychological concept of flow. The term meditation, on the other hand, has stronger ties to religious or spiritual traditions, but even more than flow, it is used inaccurately in the reviewed literature. Here, neither flow nor meditation refers to a particular religion, even if they are associated with Zen. For the authors’ usage of “Zen” does not consider traditional Japanese Zen Buddhist schools and practices; it is rather a product of Western adoption starting with 19th and early 20th century orientalist discourse. Today, Zen often means “a sense of liberation, spontaneity, and oneness with the world that can be sought not only in highly technical forms of meditative practice but also in

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archery, gardening, tea ceremonies, and even the most mundane matters, such as motorcycle maintenance—37—or gaming, according to some authors.

All of this suggests that the reference of flow and meditation to religion is based on concepts that are characteristic of a popular notion of “spirituality” which is focused, among other variables, on “mystical experiences”38. These concepts are used by some individuals with interests in research, development or marketing to give special importance to different genres, alternative gaming, and to the phenomenon of players’ distance to everyday life while playing—formerly described by Johan Huizinga as the “magic circle”39. Of course, this does not touch upon the question of authenticity: Whether a player is having a religiously or spiritually genuine experience—regardless of its contents and characteristics—or whether he simply enjoys himself by being ‘in the zone’ can only be answered by the experiencing individual or by a particular religious community.

Likewise, empowerment and disempowerment are used as meta-concepts not referring to a particular religious tradition. The terms have been introduced by the author to subsume ludological elements to the theme of granted or restricted player control, as well as to describe the subjective feelings associated with it. Reference to religions is established by the notion of a particular contrast between human powerlessness and superhuman or godly power. Rather than essentializing “power” as a religious object, we observe that powers tending towards omnipotence and omniscience are part of many religious reflections and myths; still, they are also communicated outside of particular religious traditions—especially in popular media.

Similarly, disempowering contingency may, but does not have to, be experienced or dealt with in a religious context.

Finally, even if morality may be a classic theme of many religions, most authors writing about digital games morality or ethics are interested in aspects other than religion. This is not surprising since digital game moral systems rarely explicitly refer to a religious tradition. Thus, god mode morality stands for the ludological evaluation of players’ decisions in terms of dualistic judgmental concepts like “good” and “evil”, “light” and “dark”, “spiritual” and “mundane” etc. In this chapter, similarities to general or particular religious morality have been established in a somewhat superficial way. Also, further investigation would have to include the developers’ perspective.

It must not be forgotten that these contingencies fit the logic of implicit religion: The god modes and god moods outlined here are a part of a broader polythetic definition of religion. They answer the question of how the religious communication process affects the consciousness of the participants. In order to call a phenomenon like digital gaming “religious”, other factors have to be considered, like the symbol system, the question of imagined personal beings, rituals or the development of communal structures. All of these factors, efficacy included, are not specific or exclusive to the religious communication process. But when it comes to religion, they often show typical characteristics. To identify the characteristics of the factors collectively called “efficacy”, I applied the same polythetic model: efficacy of digital games—spiritual or not—consists of a number of ludological elements, which themselves are obviously not religious or spiritual. In this sense, the question set developed here supports a modern and critical understanding of religion, acknowledging the contingent interplay between material base, human interaction and subjective interpretation. In the case of implicit religion, this contingency usually is assumed by those
interacting with the phenomenon in question: For many, it is an incredibly long way from, say, graphical simplicity and abstraction, to consciousness change, to meditation and to the explicit religiously or spiritually relevant effect. For others, however—and the results presented in this chapter indicate that, too—it’s just a Super Mario jump.

References

Figures 1 and 2 are screenshots taken from the corresponding game. They are used according to the copyright law doctrine of fair dealing / fair use. Figures 3 and 4 are drawn by the author.


Fullerton, Tracy. “Reflections on The Night Journey: an Experimental Video Game.”


http://www.thechineseroom.co.uk/PinchbeckStevens.pdf


