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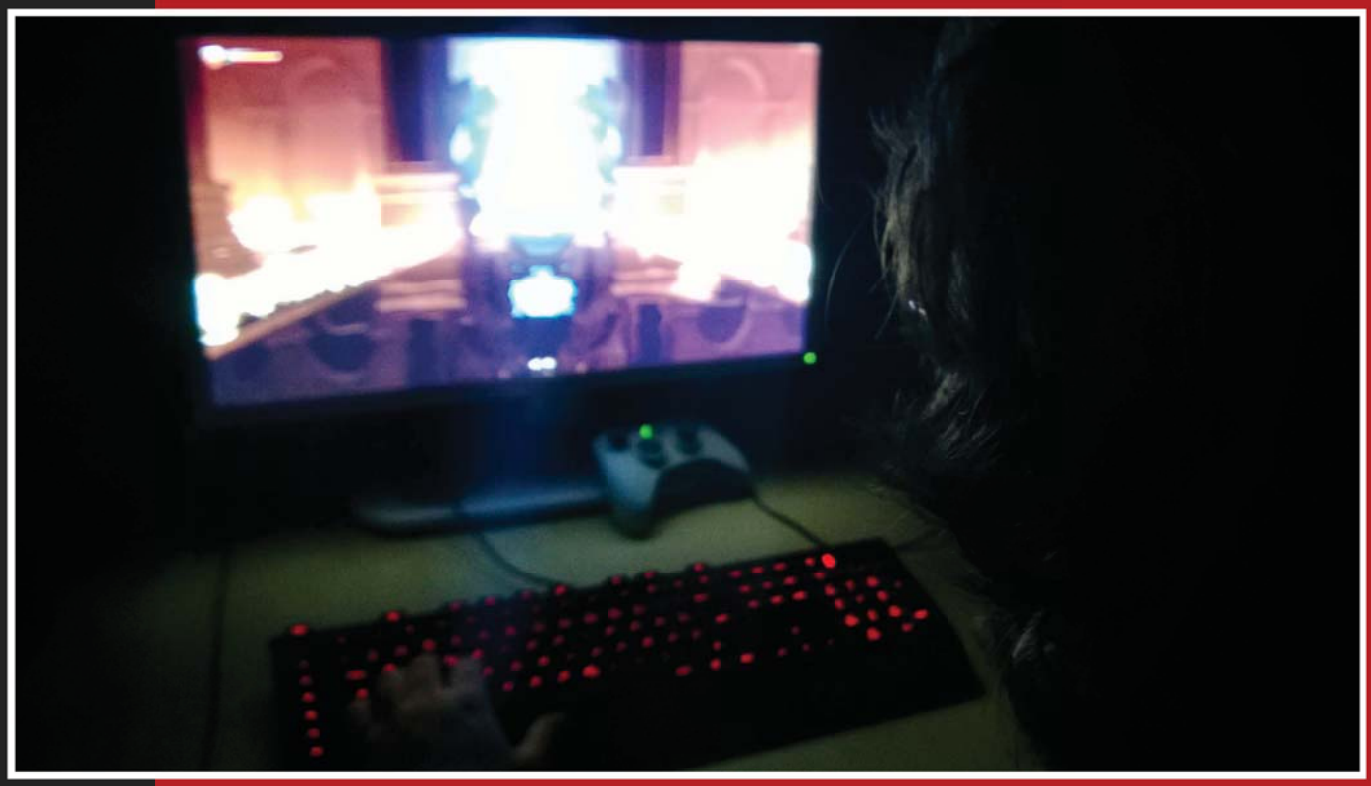

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Religion in Digital Games

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Theorizing Religion in Digital Games

Perspectives and Approaches

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Abstract

The article makes a case for Cultural and Religious Studies to expand the focus of research on digital games which so far have been a mostly neglected field of study. By means of discussing theoretical, methodical and practical approaches by various scholars from different academic disciplines the authors show how religion in games can be analysed, contextualized and interpreted. From a Cultural Studies perspective, they describe the genesis of religious discourses in context of digital games (re)trace the lines of their construction, reception and (re)contextualization as well as the role of the actors within these frameworks. Following a short overview on the history of (computer) game research, practical perspectives and approaches to computer games analysis are taken into focus. The authors refer to the "text" (in the broadest meaning) of the medium, but also include terms like "aesthetic", "gameplay", "gameworlds" and "gaming culture" into their considerations. Furthermore the characteristics and interconnections of a game-immanent as well as an actor-centered approach are being highlighted. The discussion on theories is exemplified by many case studies. Digital games as artifacts of contemporary popular culture are as a matter of fact subject to religious discourses on many different levels and by a multitude of (human) actors. They reside and influence the social realities of people who play. Religion is an important factor in this context and so are digital games. To understand the relation between both is the task of this paper.

Keywords

digital games, theory, methods, Cultural Studies, Religious Studies, material-immanent, actor-centered, discourse analysis, media analysis, history of reception, construction processes

1 Introduction

> "And every year on this day of days, we recommit ourselves to our city and to our prophet. Father Comstock. We recommit through sacrifice and the giving of thanks and by submerging in the sweet waters of baptism." (Preacher Witting, *Bioshock Infinite*)

With a loud clatter, the door of the rocket-capsule slides open and the handcuffs which held me in place during my voyage, are released. I get up and cautiously leave my temporary prison to step into an underground cavern. I enter a vast space only illuminated by a multitude of candles, swimming in the water which covers most of the floors. Directly in front of me I see a stained-glass window depicting a white-bearded man in blue garb pointing his finger towards an obscure object in the sky. It is a city in the clouds or so it seems. At his feet, a flock of people is assembled, watching him in plain admiration. "And the prophet shall lead the people to a new world", it says above the scenery. I hear the hollow sound of many voices chanting gospel-like hymns, echoing off the marble-like walls. After a while I realize that it is a slow version of 'Will the circle be unbroken' – in fact a popular evangelical devotional song.[1] All around me are alcoves adorned with statues labeled by cryptic, religious-sounding aphorisms. Where am I? What am I supposed to do here? At the other end of the room I spot a man, all dressed in white. I call out to him, asking him where I am. "Heaven," he answers, "or as close as we'll see till Judgment Day". What does that mean? Have I fallen into the hands of an obscure religious sect? Lacking an alternative I wander on through the shallow waters.

Soon I realize the sheer size of this labyrinth of caverns, one merging into the next. The place is not of a natural origin however but clearly man-made with its cathedral-like structures of high columns, pointed arches, rows and rows of pews, tapestries and stained-glass windows with "pious" motives mostly featuring the already mentioned white-bearded man. Many statues are provided with "sacrificial" offerings like money or flowers, but also toys and other plunder. No daylight is reaching this place and candles are the only source of light. As I proceed, the echo of the singing is becoming louder. I approach a staircase leading me further downstairs. At the foot of the stairs another white-clad figure awaits me but does not deny me entry. As I reach the floor below, I find myself in a narrow entryway, arched by two angel-like figures. On the left and right I can see even more people in white dresses standing motionless in the knee-deep water, seemingly rapt in prayer. The multitude of candles give the high-arched rooms a festive and ecclesiastical atmosphere.

Above the singing I now can hear the agitated voice of a man preaching. Coming closer, I find a group of about twenty white-clad people facing the front side of the huge cavern with bowed heads and folded hands, listening devoutly to the man's voice rambling on about "the prophet" and "new Eden". I walk on towards the gathering and gently push my way past the congregation. To my surprise, I am immediately welcomed by the owner of this voice, which turns out to be a gaunt old man in a priestly black cassock (by the name of Preacher Witting as I will later learn). Approaching him, I suddenly realize that the man must be blind, his sightless eyes nonetheless fixating me. He is standing knee-deep in water in an alcove decorated by trellis work. He seems to be guarding a passageway of some sort, flanked by two giant angel statues and beneath a huge skylight in the front wall marking the only place down here where daylight is to be seen. At the end of the small water-filled corridor, a nondescript light source behind a perforated window at the far end of the passage seems to endow the preacher with a kind of halo. Above the passage I can spot an

1 For general information concerning the song see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_the_Circle_Be_Unbroken%3F. For a paper speculating on a subliminal "hidden meaning" of the song in the context of the game, see: http://adambogert.com/2013/03/29/bioshock-infinite-will-the-circle-be-unbroken/ (last access 05/02/2014).

inscription saying "This path of forgiveness is the only way to this city". Probably this offers me an escape route away from this place? When the preacher becomes aware of my presence, he asks me if I was from "Sodom below". I learn that entry to the city through this passageway can only be achieved by being "cleansed" and "reborn in the sweet waters of baptism" as the preacher puts it. Since I do not see an alternative, I agree and grasp his outstretched hand. "I baptize you in the name of our prophet, in the name of our founders, and the name of our lord" he says, as the preacher's surprisingly strong arms submerge my head under water. "I don't know, brothers and sisters", he muses, "but this one doesn't look clean to me." Once I manage to surface and catch breath only to be plunged downwards again. I am about to drown and everything around me turns black.

Fortunately the above recounted labyrinthic journey through unknown territory and the "forced baptism" leading to a near-drowning experience was not 'real' in the 'physical' sense of the word. It was an account of a different 'reality' namely a sequence of a computer game called *BioShock Infinite*, an award-winning[2] opus developed by *Irrational Games* and published by *2K Games* in March 2013. The text is a "thick description" of a storyline in the beginning of the game which by reason of the religious references in the narratives and game aesthetics we considered as especially relevant for further reflection. In order to enable the readers to follow the plot even without being in possession of the game, we can provide you with a *YouTube* video clip[3] of the audio-visual account of the scene.

BioShock Infinite is a first-person shooter (sometimes also coined as "thinking-person's"-shooter[4]) and the third installment of the *BioShock* series featuring similar gameplay concepts and themes as its predecessors even though it is not directly part of the storyline. Timed in a turn-of-the-century setting of the early 1920s, the game's protagonist Booker DeWitt is being sent to the floating city of Columbia to find Elizabeth, a girl who had been held hostage there for most of her life. In order to enter the city, the protagonist has to undergo the above described baptism scene. During the rescue operation which follows, DeWitt gets involved with two conflicting factions namely the elitist "Founders" and the underground rebels called "Vox Populi" who both struggle for dominion over the town. On his rescue mission through the city of Columbia and different alternate realities the player adopts the role of Booker DeWitt, eventually accompanied by the non-person character (NPC) Elizabeth.[5] According to *Irrational's* creative director Ken Levine, the general plot and concept of the game is based on the ideas of American Exceptionalism[6]. By also incorporating

2 For a detailed list on *BioShock Infinite's* awards and nominations see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_accolades_received_by_BioShock_Infinite and http://irrationalgames.com/insider/bioshock-infinite-wins-75-e3-editorial-honors/ (last access 05/02/2014).

3 For the first 15 minutes of *BioShock Infinite*, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZietNuVY3V0 (last access 05/02/2014).

4 See e.g. http://www.computerandvideogames.com/384576/interviews/interview-ken-levine-on-religion-and-racism-in-bioshock-infinite/ (last access 05/02/2014).

5 For further information on the plot see http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/BioShock_Infinite (last access 05/02/2014).

6 The term 'American Exceptionalism' signifies the idea of the USA as being "qualitatively different" from other

more recent events such as the German left-wing militant Baader-Meinhof group activities from the 1970s, *Occupy Wall Street* (2011) and the neo-conservative *Tea Party movement* (since 2009), the game represents a mixture of narratives broaching issues of socio-cultural, political and religious extremism, utopia and dystopia, alternate-reality fiction[7] and science, thus bringing up a multitude of controversial topics, many of which are naturally of great interest to scholars of religion.[8] Due to the fact that the discourses concerning the religious topics and elements which are subject to the game have been brought into the public, researchers have the chance to not only analyse the game-immanent narratives, but also the processes of their (re-)construction and reception in an actor-centered perspective.

Those are mainly the reasons we took *BioShock Infinite* as prime example for demonstrating and acting out our theoretical approaches. Thus in the following, after a brief overview over the history of Game Studies and a record of the main debates in this field, we will highlight some possible research scenarios to religion in digital games using the example of the baptism scene from *BioShock Infinite* described above. In fact, the episode in question will not be the only example we discuss, but it will still accompany us throughout the whole article, where different facets of the scene will be exemplarily focused, analysed and interlinked.

> "Make yourself ready pilgrim. The bindings are there as a safeguard" (*BioShock Infinite*)[9].

Welcome to the 'game'. Let's play!

states. The idea can be traced back to the early 20th century. (For further details see: Lipset 1996.) Even though the theory does not necessarily imply cultural or moral superiority, many (neo)conservative politicians and scholars have used it in that sense (see e.g.: http://spectator.org/articles/38032/defense-american-exceptionalism#, last access 05/02/2014). The concept is closely linked with the idea of an American Civil Religion (Bellah 1967 / Emling 2013).

7 For details on the inspirations and resources of *BioShock Infinite* see some interviews with Ken Levine, e.g. http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/the-tea-party-occupy-wall-street-and-bioshock-infinite-how-a-video-game-is-reflecting-life/2011/10/21/gIQAlU8fGM_story.html, http://www.computerandvideogames.com/416306/interviews/ken-levine-and-the-search-for-meaning-in-bioshock-infinite/ and http://www.computerandvideogames.com/384576/interviews/interview-ken-levine-on-religion-and-racism-in-bioshock-infinite/ (last access 05/02/2014).

8 For further details see chapter 3 and 4 of this article.

9 So says the automatic voice of the rocket-capsule elevater in *BioShock Infinite*, just before the main protagonist Booker DeWitt begins his journey to Columbia (immediately before arriving in the subterranean caves where our introductory account sets in) See: *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013).

2 The Research on Games: Prospects and Promises

When we think of academia, research, and Cultural Studies it is not very likely that the first thing to spring to our minds is 'games!' Such things seem to be rather a serious business surveying the "real" foundations of culture. Philippe Bornet proposes a theory for the question why games have been ignored as something worth of studying. He sees the marginalization of the overall interest in the "serious" study of "playful activities" within and through our own European history. Even early Christian theological doctrines, he says, abolished roman *ludi*[10] as being immoral and eventually linking many different sorts of games and play with "pagan" culture (Bornet 2012: 16-17). In the time of the Protestant Reformation also Roman Catholic ritual practices were condemned as being not useful along with gambling and other games of chance. The notion of usefulness and uselessness was also later discussed in utilitaristic discourses in the 18th century as productivity and industriousness became main foci of this time and "idle games" were devalorized (Bornet 2012: 20). With this historical interpretation in mind one can see that a new kind of thinking about games has emerged in the last hundred years and especially in the new millennium.

Studies in which one tries to think about games in general thus were first undertaken at the beginning of the 20th century. Harold J. R. Murray's extensive work on the history of chess and other boardgames (see Murray 1913 [1951]) and the paper of ethnographer Stewart Culin on games of Native North American people (see Culin 1907 [1992]) are well-known examples of this then rising interest in an ignored area of human culture. In 1938 Dutch historian Johan Huizinga elaborated on the origin of culture in play and set in motion different discussions about the definition of play and games. One of his various observations was that when we play we are separated from our "normal" daily lives, a state that is often called being in a "magic circle" (Kücklich 2012: 297). Huizinga considered the phenomena of play and games in a broader philosophical perspective himself stating that he does not have the proper resources to delve into every single historical fact deeply (Huizinga 1949). This of course makes his work quite vulnerable for critique from a contemporary Cultural Studies viewpoint. In 1958 French philosopher Roger Caillois elaborated further on Huizinga's ideas debating over the difficulty in defining "games" and "play". Among other things he suggested four dimensions of play and games that help in this definition: "alea" (chance), "agon" (competition), "mimicry" (role-playing), and "ilinx" (the alteration of perception) (Caillois 1961). Even until now we find different aspects of Huizinga and Calloise influential studies used or adapted for contemporary work on games (e.g. King & Krzywinska 2006).

10 I.e. ritual plays that were performed in the context of Roman religion.

Since this academic groundwork pointed out the importance of games in culture, new possibilities emerged for the study of games. In the 1960s and 70s different institutions formed around the occupation with (war) games and simulations, like the *International Simulation and Gaming Association* (ISAGA)[11] that held annual meetings to offer a platform for academic and non-academic actors. There was not only room for research but also for thought about games in the improvement of education or for design-related issues. The journal *Simulation & Gaming*[12] was also first released in 1970 being the oldest journal to meddle with the vast field of games (see Mäyrä 2008, 7). The more academic-centric *Cultural Anthropology of Play Reprint Society* was founded in 1974 renaming itself *The Association for the Study of Play* (TASP)[13] in 1987. From there a number of journals spun, e.g. *Play and Culture Studies*[14] that is being published to this day.

2.1 The Advent of Game Studies

We now reach a new era in the occupation with games – study-wise and of course in our own culture – with the popularization of the computer.[15] The discipline that studies computer-, video- or other such games that reside in the realm of the digital is a relatively young enterprise as are digital games themselves. One could argue that credit is due to Mary Ann Buckles whose 1985 dissertation about the game *Adventure*[16] was one of the first if not the first academic work to get into a serious analysis of digital games. Even then the focus was on narrativity and literature as games have been explored at first from traditional academic viewpoints. Espen Aarseth partly revived Buckles' (unfortunately ignored and underrated) work in 1997 further elaborating on the notion of hypertext and narrativity in games but insisted that game-like cybertexts should be studied not only as classical texts but simply as games with the help of new methods and approaches concentrating on ludic aspects. As one of the other first "ludologists" Gonzalo Frasca also stated that Game Studies should be occupied with the uniqueness of play and activity in digital games rather than their implied narratives (Frasca 1999).

11 See: http://www.isaga.com/ (last access 05/02/2014).
12 See: http://sag.sagepub.com/ (last access 05/02/2014).
13 See: http://www.tasplay.org/ (last access 05/02/2014).
14 See: http://www.tasplay.org/studies/ (last access 05/02/2014).
15 In terms of the development of the computer games genres (mainly but not exclusively concerning MMORPGs) the most influential source of inspiration has been the so-called "tabletop role playing games", which involve multiple participants interacting in fictional worlds and has gained momentum especially after the publication of the first edition of *Dungeon and Dragons* in 1974. Its influence on digital games varies from the conversion of the rule systems, general topics and fictional world settings and "crosses all known computer game genres from first person shooters to real time strategy games and massively multiplayer online games" (Tychsen 2006: 75). For further details on the history and interdependencies of TTRPGs and computer games, see Tychsen 2006.
16 *Adventure* (or in its full name *Colossal Cave Adventure)* was released in 1976 and is supposed to be the first text-based adventure game and predecessor of important titles like *Zork* or *Labyrinth* creating the genre of Interactive Fiction. It was first played on the PDP-10, a locker-sized mainframe computer.

2001 was the year in which Aarseth proclaimed the "Year One" for the study of digital games in his first article in the newly founded journal *Game Studies* being now in its twelfth volume. As another academic group that serves as an international node for contemporary Digital Games Studies the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA)[17] tries to encourage work on this topic having hosted six international conferences since its foundation in 2003. There exist also similar but smaller associations that coordinate researchers on a more local level, e.g. the Danish *Spilforskning*[18], the Norwegian *JoinGame*[19], or the *Games Research Association of Poland*[20]. Universities begin to establish courses in Game Studies but only few possess facilities dedicated especially for this new discipline, like e.g. the *Game Research Laboratory* in the University of Tampere[21], the *Centre for Computer Games Research* in the IT University of Copenhagen[22] or the recently founded *DMC Gaming Lab* of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro[23]. While surveying different academic programs of U.S. universities it seems that there are plenty of programs for the design or production of games but not so much for the theoretical thinking about games linked with the humanities and social sciences.

2.2 The "Ludology-versus-Narratology Debate"

> "Outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (Eskelinen 2001: Introduction, para. 1).

In July 2001, when the first issue of *Game Studies, the International Journal of Computer Game Research*[24], was published, it wasn't hard to determine the dominating debate occupying the newly formed discipline: Are games primarily a storytelling media? Jesper Juul, one of the contributors to the first issue precisely phrases this question and it's underlying implications:

> "As questions go, this is not a bad one: Do games tell stories? Answering this should tell us both how to study games and who should study them. The affirmative answer suggests that games are easily studied from within existing paradigms. The negative implies that we must start afresh" (Juul 2001: Introduction, para. 1).

17 See: http://www.digra.org/ (last access 05/02/2014).
18 See: http://spilforskning.dk/ (last access 05/02/2014).
19 See: http://joingame.idi.ntnu.no/ (last access 05/02/2014).
20 See: http://ptbg.org.pl/strona.php?id=11 (last access 05/02/2014).
21 See: http://gamelab.uta.fi/ (last access 05/02/2014).
22 See: http://game.itu.dk/index.php/About (last access 05/02/2014).
23 See: https://newsandfeatures.uncg.edu/uncg-gaming-lab/ (last access 05/02/2014).
24 See: http://gamestudies.org/ (last access 05/02/2014).

The question is a defining one, a question of identity. Simply put, it asks: Do we need Game Studies as a distinct and independent academic discipline? Of course Juul, himself a "ludologist", finds an equally defining answer. After examining alleged similarities of games and narrative media and discovering considerable differences in the way stories translate to games (and vice versa), as compared to the way they translate between movies and novels (Juul 2001: The problem of translation), he also describes an "inherent conflict between the *now* of the interaction [in games] and the *past* or '*prior*' of the narrative". According to him, "you can't have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story." (Juul 2001: Conclusion, para. 1) Finally, he emphasizes the difference between the reader/story and the player/game relationship by stating that "the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game *and* undertakes a role inside the game" (Juul 2001: Conclusion, para. 1) he comes to the following conclusion:

> Using other media as starting points, we may learn many things about the construction of fictive worlds, characters (…) but relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games: Such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player's actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player. It is the unique parts that we need to study now (Juul 2001: Conclusion, para. 4).

Of course, Jesper Juul was not the only proponent of a study of games, which separates itself from narrative focused paradigms. But not every "ludologist" took the "diplomatic" approach to "narrotologist" views and methods Juul did by acknowledging similarities between many games and movies, novels and theater productions but at the same time emphasizing their fundamental differences.

Markku Eskelinen, also a contributor to the first issue of *Game Studies* finds very clear words in describing the 'colonization' of computer game research "from the fields of literacy, theatre, drama and film studies":

> "Games are seen as interactive narratives, procedural stories or remediated cinema. On top of everything else, such definitions, despite being successful in terms of influence or funding, are conceptually weak and ill-grounded, as they are usually derived from a very limited knowledge of mere mainstream drama or outdated literary theory, or both" (Eskelinen 2001: Introduction, para. 1).

He then continues by examining the (in his view) most crucial differences between computer games and dramatic and narrative media. Referring to Espen Aarseth's work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Aarseth 1997), he points to the "configurative" nature of games, compared to the "interpretative" nature of literature, film and theater:

> "In literature, theatre and film everything matters or is conventionally supposed to matter equally – if you've seen 90% of the presentation that's not enough, you have to see or read it all (or everything you can). This is characteristic of dominantly interpretative practices in general. In contrast, in computer games you either can't or don't have to encounter every possible combinatory event and existent the game contains, as these differ in their ergodic importance" (Eskelinen 2001: Gaming as configurative practice, para. 5).

After describing additional differences between games and narrative media, like causal, spacial and functional relations, Eskelinen closes with the sharp statement, that "stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy." (Eskelinen 2001: Conclusion, para. 1)

Fortunately, the frontiers between "ludologists" and "narratologists" have somewhat softened up to a point, where key players on both sides, including Henry Jenkins (2004), Espen Aarseth (2009) and Janet Murray (2013/2005) in the last years have agreed, that "the Ludology/Narratology discussion has moved on" (Eskelinen 2001: para. 1) and that "narratology proper is not opposed to ludology in any way"[25]. As Murray frames it:

> "(…) games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories. (…) It is time to recognize the difference between the useful formalist methodology and the distractingly prescriptive ideology of game essentialism. No one group can define what is appropriate for the study of games. Game Studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving" (Murray 2005/2013: para. 10).

Parallel to this discussion and true to Murray's statement, the purely "ludological" as well as the purely "narratological" approaches have not remained (and never really were) the only way of researching digital games.

2.3 Merging Game Studies with Humanities

Starting with the new millennium a broad spectrum of studies concerning digital games have emerged and journals or collections of essays found their way into academic discourses. The ever growing amount of literature is not that easy to grasp in its wholeness but can maybe be sorted into certain categories. As a starting point we see introductory works and handbooks on Game Studies (e.g. Mäyrä 2008; Raessens & Goldstein 2011; Wolf & Perron 2003, 2013) that give an overview

25 See: http://vimeo.com/7097715 (last accessed 12/02/2014), comment section.

over what Game Studies can encompass, or what goals Game Studies can try to achieve. From there on we encounter different approaches to the research of games. Depending on the academic perspectives different questions arise and of course very diverse answers can be given. One can ask about the "text" of the game, the modes of storytelling, or the characters, as a scholar of Literary Studies would do (e.g. Ryan 2001; Majewski 2003; Kocher 2007; Backe 2008). Then again we see sociological and ethnographic actor-centered works that focus on the people playing games, their playing, and the interaction between players and game (e.g. Yee 2006; Corneliussen 2008; Quandt, Wimmer, Wolling 2008; Boellstorff 2008; Sisler 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Taylor 2006).[26] Some scholars explore game mechanics and inner structures of games and how those can be described in an adequate manner (e.g. Aarseth 2003; Juul 2005; Björk & Holopainen 2003; Sicart 2008). We see also works that elaborate on moral implications or even philosophical statements that can be found within games (e.g. Cogburn & Silcox 2009; Sicart 2011). The topic of morality, often combined with the question of children's education is not only discussed within academic but very much so in popular media because of the widely accepted notion that video games can have negative effects on children's learning, upbringing and their socio-moral compass.

In the variety of works paper appear that address one specific game and dissect it to lay open different layers of meaning carried within the object of study. We see e.g. different studies on *World of Warcraft* (Krzywinska 2006; Klastrup 2008) or other games as *Max Payne 2* (Kringiel 2009). But specializing in specific games is something that entails certain problems. In a fast evolving and ever-changing landscape of this medium a game that is studied for several years could very well be outdated at the time the work is published. To concentrate on one game means, that the researcher will maybe loose connection to the latest developments in the game industry. Therefore bigger studies in the form of whole books on one game are rarely undertaken and specific games and certain topics therein are more often discussed in the form of articles in journals or in collection of essays.

Most interesting for scholars of religion is whether studies were conducted which focus on religious topics in digital games or at least the connection between religious discourses and games in general. As one of the few works *Religions in Play*, edited by Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger (2012) tackles the question of how religious narratives and religious actors have been and are linked with games. But until now this certainly huge field of research remains mostly untapped[27] and digital games have only recently been declared an interesting object for scholars of religion.

26 See also Nick Yee's extensive *Daedalus Project* in the context of which he surveyed about 40,000 players of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) at http://nickyee.com/index-daedalus.html (last access 05/02/2014).

27 Another example is the forthcoming volume *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve (Campbell & Grieve 2014 forthc.).

3 Why Study Religion in Games?

Now, after a brief journey through the history and genesis of the discipline of Game Studies, its main issues and its relation to Humanities and Cultural Studies, its time to direct our focus on the topic of religion in computer games as a new field of research. "Why (at all) study religion in digital games?" is a justified question in this context. The easiest and shortest answer to this query is as simple as that: "Because religion is to be found there!"

In the same way as religion is referred to in cartoons, blockbuster movies, bestseller books and other mediated content of postmodernity, it is addressed in computer games.[28] And in the same way as all other reference to religion or religious elements in popular culture are subject to Religious Studies in an actor-centered and/or Cultural Studies approach, so are digital games. This answer, however, might be a bit too straightforward and succinct on one hand, and much too scientifically self-sufficient on the other. In times, when academic research is (according to expectations of the public) supposed to prove its relevance for culture and society, a researcher might have to dig deeper to legitimize researching the appearance of religion that is (presumably) much devoted to matters of transcendence within the (presumably) rather "mundane" and marginal realm of digital games. – However, in our opinion it is not difficult to give reason for the analysis of digital games as a new field of research for Religious Studies!

Nobody will seriously doubt that digital games have become a mass phenomenon of nowadays popular culture. Even though in popular discourse those activities still have the reputation of being played by a marginal group of socially inadequate adolescent boys[29], hard evidence tells otherwise: According to Nick Yee's large-scale sociological analysis[30] of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) the players can be characterized as follows:

> "(…) the average age of MMORPG players is around 26. In fact, only 25% of MMORPG players are teenagers. About 50% of MMORPG players work full-time. About 36% of players are married, and 22% have children. So the MMORPG demographic is fairly diverse, including high-school students, college students, early professionals, middle-aged home-makers, as well as retirees. In other words,

28 There is a multitude of publications broaching these issues, let us just refer to Stewart M. Hoover who in his works highlights the general interdependencies of religion, media and culture in theory and practice, e.g. Hoover 2006.

29 To quote only some random examples, let us mention a newspaper article published in the aftermath of the so-called "Columbine Highschool massacre" in 1999, blaming violent videogames for the shooting (see: "Doom, Quake, and Mass Murder" http://www.salon.com/1999/04/23/gamers/ published 23/04/1999 by *The Salon*, last access 05/02/2014). Identical press releases can be found on the "Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting" in 2012 (see: "Media blames violent video games for Lanza's Sandy Hook killing spree: is there a link between video games and aggression?" http://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2012/12/19/media-blames-violent-video-games-lanza-s-sandy-hook-killing-spree-there-link published 19/12/2012 by *The Drum*, last access 05/02/2014).

30 For an overview see: Yee (1994-2004): The Daedalus Project, http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/.

> MMORPGs do not only appeal to a youth subculture. (…) Another caricature of video gamers is that they are solitary hermits, but the data on MMORPG players show that 80% of MMORPG players play with someone they now in RL (a romantic partner, family member, or friend)on a regular basis. Thus, MMORPGs are in fact highly social environments where new relationships are forged and existing relationships are reinforced."[31]

Also the average time of play per week does not surmount the national average for TV watching.[32] Above all, it is – according to Shaw (Shaw 2010) who takes the perspective of Cultural Studies (and a basic understanding of culture as [discoursive] process[es]) – not possible to define video game culture as a separate sphere, as it is part of the cultural mainstream. Instead, she urges us to look at "video games in culture rather than games as culture" (Shaw 2010). Which is basically the perspective we would like to adopt for the analytical and methodical approaches in the following sub-chapters.

Computer games are part and result of the socio-cultural discourses its designers and its players are embedded in. In the same way they can be treated and analysed as "cultural artifacts" as "they provide a representational trace of both individual and collective activity and how it changes over time, enabling the researcher to unpack the bidirectional influence of self and society" (Steinkuehler 2006). Thus, digital games are being designed by, played by, and reflected on by a multitude of socio-cultural actors. As such they are more than a product of the culture they are embedded in but can serve as significant indicators which (explicitly and / or implicitly) point to discourses which are part of this setting. In cases, computer games might even serve as a kind of "burning glass" which reinforces or singularizes subliminal or subconscious issues. Religion, as being a part of these discourses, is one factor within this framework and can serve as a focal point in research.

Therefore, in the context of computer games, religion and religious elements (like narratives, iconography, symbols, place 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, as we have shown in the introduction. We can identify the different elements which have been derived from historical or recent religious history (in the "baptism" scene from *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013) which we describe in the introduction it could be US-American forms of Christianity) and ask questions on

31 See: Yee (1994-2004): The Daedalus Gateway. The Psychology of MMORPGs: Player Demographics, http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_demographics.html (last access 05/02/2013).

32 See: Yee (11/01/2005): MMOPRG Hours vs. TV Hours. In: The Daedalus Project: The Psychology of MMORPGs, http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000891.php (last access 05/02/2013).

transfer or transformation processes, the aesthetics, the role of those religious elements for the construction of the plot, etc. A research along those lines might allow for evidence on the level of the game designers and producers but leaves the players which "consume" the game unconsidered. Whereas an actor-centered approach on the reception processes by the gaming community, e.g. in computer forums, fan fiction and other media within the context of digital games might result in interesting findings on the level of the players (but does not necessarily allow for conclusions on the designer / producer level). In the case of the "forced baptism" scene we do know that there has been some strong reactions, especially due to the fact that the "baptism" is an obligatory part of the game and cannot be skipped, if a player wants to continue.[33] Those critical statements always point back to the critics themselves and allows for conclusions on their religious disposition(s).

This is also true for the construction of religious stereotypes as Vít Šisler has shown in terms of the representation of "Arabs" in different American and European video games (Šisler 2008a). In his analysis of *Command & Conquer Generals* (EA Pacific / EA Games 2003), a strategy-game where the player is able to chose from three sides of a fictional conflict, he has shown that in contrast to the well-organized and high-tech American troops, the "Global Liberation army" which presents "the Arabs" is depicted as hostile and brutish terrorists using car and truck bombs, suicide bombing and biotoxins as weapons of choice, thus uncovering and reflecting underlying fears and stereotypes of "the Muslim other" within contemporary Western societies along the lines of Edwad Said's concept of "Orientalism" (Šisler 2008a: 86). Reichmuth and Wernings term of "neglected media" (Reichmuth & Werning 2006, quoted in Sisler 2008b) which Šisler applies to the field of computer games might as well be a useful perspective for other research on religious ascriptions and stereotyping in digital games. He argues that "neglected media exhibit strong popular appeal and economic relevance, which contrasts with their lack of culture prestige and scientific coverage. (…) Stereotypical representations tend to be reproduced in neglected media in more explicit forms, partly because these media are considered to be less relevant in cultural discourse and thus less subject to media critique" (Reichmuth and Werning 2006, quoted in Sisler 2008b: 205).

The examples given above clearly show the socio-cultural relevance of researching religion in digital games. Games – as objects and products of popular culture – are means and indicators of religious discourse in many different perspectives we will specify in the next chapters. Now it takes us, the (gamer-)scholar, to entangle the interwoven lines of discourses and shed light to a subject of scientific research.

33 For further details on the matter see chapter 4.1.

4 In Search of Religion(s) in Games: What to Study?

In the previous chapters we have argued that religious elements in digital games serve as an indicator for the negotiation of religious topics in different socio-cultural settings, the construction of fictional religious worlds, religious conflicts or even as instruments for the visualization of subliminal socio-cultural discourses. In the next part of the article, we will try to trace some of those lines of arguments somewhat further by exemplifying theoretical and practical approaches to research and analytical perspective.

4.1 Religion and Game Narratives: 'Questing' for a Religious Storyline

It is a common fact, that many (if not most) digital games tell – in one way or another – a story or are at least based on a storyline.[34] As Marie-Laure Ryan (Ryan 2006) states:

> "(...) in the vast majority of computer games, especially recent ones, players manipulate avatars with human or human like properties situated in a world with features inspired by real geography and architecture, such as hallways, rivers, mountains, castles, and dungeons. Insofar as the actions of the player cause this world to evolve, computer games present all the basic ingredients of narrative: characters, events, setting, and trajectories leading from a beginning state to an end state. One may conclude that the unique achievement of computer games, compared to standard board games and sports, is to have integrated play within a narrative and fictional framework" (Ryan 2006: 182).

Ryan – like many other researchers – takes a middle-ground position, trying to reconsile the formerly opposing position of the ludology vs. narratology controversy we have briefly outlined in chapter 2.2. "A discussion of the narrative potentials of games need not imply a priviledging of storytelling over all the other possible things games can do", as Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2004) suggests. In order to better distinguish the special function and characteristics of narratives in games, he introduces the term of "game architecture": "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (Jenkins 2004: 121). Many scholars argue, that it is precisely this "spatiality" (which is achieved by the visual design, but also by a network of intertwined narratives) which strongly contributes to the players' sense of "worldness"[35], allowing a deep

34 For a brief insight into the history of computer game research including the scholarly debate on the narrativity of games, see Chapter 2.1 and 2.2 of this paper. A historical overview of narratives on cyberspace, including computer games, can also be found in Murray 1997.

35 The term "worldness" as used by Krzywinska mainly refers to the (virtual) environment as being provided with a unifying consistency concerning "geography" / "spaciality" as well as its "history". See: Krzywinska 2006: 386.

"immersion"[36] into the virtual game environment. Henry Jenkins argues for "understanding games as serving some specific functions within a new transmedia storytelling environment" (Jenkins 2004: 120), where narratives are being transmitted by multiple media platforms reverting to topics and elements from "earlier" media like literature or film or broach the content of other popular or traditional discourses (Jenkins 2006: 95). Along these lines we can identfy (among others) the following narratives and narrative structures within a computer game environment (mainly paraphrasing Ryan 2006: 201):

- The narrative script or plot provided by the game design.
- The narrative that players "write" though their actions, choosing a particular sequence of events within the range of possibilities offered by game script.
- The narrative that attracts players to buy and play the game (e.g. cut scenes and background information that introduce the game in several media; text on the box, commercials, …).
- The narrative (e.g. a cut scene) that introduces a quest or game sequence or follows its completion.
- The microstories told by nonplaying characters.
- The narratives that players create themselves by writing or talking about the game and their experiences e.g. in the form of fan fiction, forum discussions, machinima or even the embodiment of game characters at conventions or in Cosplay, etc.

Thus, a complex network of intertextual references and discourses is woven which in many cases also includes religion or religious issues in an explicit or implicit way. Depending on the research perspective and methodical approach both, a game-immanent analysis of the construction mechanisms and reception processes on the side of the game designers, as well as an actor-centered approach on the players' side can provide interesting insights into the discoursive localization, the construction as well as the mechanisms of reception, ascription and personal disposition towards religion on different levels. In order to further explain the different levels and approaches towards narratives in games we will in the following exemplarily review some research project in the field.

One example for an analysis of narratives in computer games is the research of Tanya Krzywinska (Krzywinska 2005, 2006, 2008) on the significant role of myth for the world-creation in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004). The author has identified

36 "*Immersion* is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality (…) that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus," (Murray 1997:98).

narratives and narrative patterns resembling mythological tales of cosmogeny and world creation in a multitude of religious traditions and has analysed their functions for the gameplay. She argues that

> "the mythic plays a primary role in making a consistent fantasy world in terms of game play, morality, culture, time, and environment. It provides a rationale for players' actions, as well as the logic that underpins the stylistic profile of the game, its objects, tasks, and characters. In terms of the "cultural" environments of the game, the presence of a coherent and extensive myth scheme is core to the way differences and conflicts between races are organized. And, as a form of intertextual resonance, its mythology furnishes the game with a "thickness" of meaning that promotes, for players, a sense of mythological being as well as encouraging an in-depth textual engagement" (Krzywinska 2006: 383).

By applying approaches by contemporary media scholars, like Bolter and Grusin's concept of "remediation"[37] (Bolter & Grusin 2000) as well as the theories of "thick text"[38] and "geek aesthetic"[39] by Roz Kaveney (Kaveney 2005), the author identifies different layers of narrativity. Krzywinska follows the different strands of narratives she identifies as "myth" and traces them back to their (assumed) origin in Celtic, Greek, Native North American mythologies. In doing so she uncovers the processes of reception, construction and "remediation" within the contexts of popular literature as well as popular culture. Some storylines can be directly traced back to literary fiction (mainly scifi and fantasy) as Krzywinska points out, quoting the example of the (re-)construction of the Night Elves in accordance with J.R.R. Tolkiens *Lord of the Rings* (Krzywinska 2008: 128 ff.).

In *World of Warcraft*, mythic structures serve as a means to create consistency and coherency, applying "not only to spatial coordinates, style, and physics but also to the past events that constitute the current state of affairs within the world and to which the player-character is subject" (Krzywinska 2006, 386). Krzywinska argues that the structures as well as the forms and contents of those mythological narratives (e.g. the world-order, the landscaping, the socio-cultural structure and the gameplay represented among others by the prophetical style of many quest texts) are a necessary element for invoking the notion of *World of Warcraft* as persistent world by the players. (Krzywinska 2008: 127).

37 The concept of "remediation" means the refashioning of earlier media like visual arts, film, tv, literature etc. by new digital media. In this process, the new media gain their cultural significance not by merely substituting older media, but by including and incorporating them (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Contemporary computer games can – in analogy to Bolter and Grusins theoretical approach – with a focus of intertextual elements be explained as a "remediation" of preexisting media genres such as religious story, fantasy tale, film (Krzywinska 2006: 384).

38 Roz Kaveney's conception of "thick text" refers to the (intertextual) contexts, references, allusions and connotation within and across media genres (Kaveney 2005: 5 and Krzywinska 2006: 383).

39 The term "geek aesthetic" relates to the phenomenon of fandom culture featuring a depth engagement into certain media products or media genres. According to Kaveney (Kaveney 2005: 6) "a feature of the geek aesthetic is that popular culture is consumed in an active way".

> "As a form of narrative used to explain or allegorize a state of affairs, myth is, I would argue, intrinsic to the creation of a particular worldview in all these cases, whether that worldview is to be taken as 'real' or as a form of make-believe" (Krzywinska 2006, 385).

Following Krzywinskas line of argument, an analysis of the religious elements and contents as well as its receptions, remediations and (re-)constructions within the framework of the game leads to interesting insights into the religious dispositions of the designers as well as the recipients who actively contribute to the narratives and storylines by the means of the internet and other (mainly digital) media.

In the context of digital game narratives it may even happen, that the individual storylines which the players create, collide with the prescripted in-game settings, as the study of Heidbrink, Miczek and Radde-Antweiler (Heidbrink, Miczek, Radde-Antweiler 2011) confirms, by means of the example of mourning rituals for a recently deceased player within the virtual gaming environment of *World of Warcraft.* The event was organized by the so-called "guild" of the deceased and was preannounced in several online group forums. The ceremony was held in an in-game territory which is constantly contested by the two rivaling factions of the game. As a result, the mourners were disturbed and (their virtual representations were) killed by members of the opposing party. These events have in the aftermath lead to many off-game discussions on the intrusion of real-life events into the virtual space of a fictional game environment and on the agency of the gamers to haphazardly redefine the prescripted in-game narratives for real-life purposes, claiming their right to temporarily invalidate the narrative of the conflicting parties in a war scenario[40] in order to conduct a ritual.[41] Even though the focus of the research was mainly on ritual and conflict, the clash of the different positions toward the function and validity of in-game narratives in contrast to the gamers' individual ascriptions towards religion and ritual becomes obvious and underlines the interdependencies of in-game and off-game "realities".[42]

A different approach to researching narratives in computer games has been taken by Gregor Ahn (Ahn 2011) in his study on the construction of death and postmortality. By comparing the computer games *Venetica* (Deck 13 Interactive / dtp entertainment 2008) and *The Void* (Ice-Pick

40 For further information on the dominant narrative of war or conflict using the example of World of Warcraft see MacCallum-Stewart 2008.

41 Some of the discussions are quoted in Heidbrink, Mizek, Radde-Antweiler 2011: 176ff.

42 A different approach towards rituals and player agency in computer games (namely first-person shooters) is taken by Rachel Wagner (2012 a & b). She claims that in contrast to films, literature etc. computer games deploy an intense feeling of agency and performance in its players by fulfilling their in-game quests of imposing order in a hostile and chaotic environment (Wagner 2012 b). She raises the question if in this sense digital games can be termed as "ritually cathartic" (Wagner 2012 a: 162). For further discussion on first-person shooters and rituals employing Wagners viewpoints also see Perrault (2013): "The Religious Ritual of *Call of Duty"*: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-perreault/the-religious-ritual-of-c_b_4235383.html (last access 05/02/2014).

Lodge / ND Games 2009) he shows that the transfer and transformation of religious motifs and topics does not necessarily result in the construction of an in-game religion but can be limited to the installation of certain (originally) religious concepts or topics in an overall "secular" setting (Ahn 2011: 123). In accordance to the fact, that most computer games enable the player to "revive" a character after its (virtual) death, the general in-game conception of death, dying and the ability for the avatar to be "revived" can be termed as "multimortality" and "multivitality" (Ahn 2011: 127). Interestingly, this fact is subject to many ascriptions derived from traditionally religious concepts by the players, like the Christian concept of "resurrection" or the Hindu / Buddhist idea of "reincarnation" (Ahn 2011: 126).

Using the example of the conceptions of "death" and "dying" (in in-game speech often referred to as "(re-)spwan") the author shows, how in-game scenarios can mirrow and reproduce real-life religious discourses. Ahn's analysis does not only allow the visualization of reception processes and the localization of its topics in religious history and literature[43], but also shows the mechanisms in the contemporary construction of secular concepts of postmortality in popular culture. Thus, the results of the in-game research can serve as proof for the tendency to disembed the notion of postmortality from the traditional religious settings and reintegrate them into secular and world-immanent contexts (Ahn 2011: 144). That way, the construction and reception of the narratives of "multimortality" / "multivitality" in computer games reflect the cultural discourses on postmortality and by doing so serve as indicators of recent developments in Western religious history. This study shows, that the narrative structures of in-game scenarios heavily depend on real-world actors and can therefore serve as mirror and catalyst of contemporary socio-cultural discourses.

Accordingly, the gameplay of *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013) often refers to contemporary Christianity, mainly to US American Christian fundamentalism. Taking the example of the baptism sequence in the beginning of this paper, the scenic arrangement, the background music as well as the different narratives point to Christian elements, even though partly in an implicit way. Terms like, "new Eden", "Sodom", the "sweet waters of baptism" as well as the concepts of "cleansing" and "being reborn" in this context bear strong cues referring to Western Christian religious history. In analysing these in-game constructions the researcher is able to (at leat to a certain degree) draw conclusions on the religious disposition of the designers who assembled these patterns. In the case of *BioShock Infinite*, it is even possible to retrace some actual conflicts

43 Ahn shows e.g. parallels in the construction of postmortality in *The Void* and Dante Aligheris *Divina Comedia* (Ahn 2011, 132).

within the developers' company *Irrational Games* due to religious differences[44] ending in extensive alterations of at least one game character within the development process[45].

These incidents (as well as a gamer's request for refund because of the "forced baptism" scene[46]) have not only fueled the debate among the designers and the gaming community[47] alike, it also confirms – in accordance with the other examples quoted above – the analytical potentials of in-game narratives for the study of religion in the context of computer games and the importance and interdependency of both the in-game material-based and the actor-centered perspectives.

4.2 Religion and Game Aesthetics: The "Beauty" and the "Beast"

> "Digital games are commonly described as phenomena that combine aesthetic, social and technological elements, yet our understanding of the aesthetic element of games and play is perhaps the least developed of all" (Niedenthal 2009: 1).

Simon Niedenthal's appeal for an approach focussing more on aesthetics mainly addresses the discipline of Games Studies and discourses on game design, where in his opinion aesthics plays only a marginal role (Niedenthal 2009: 2). However, the general negligence of non-textual contents is a well-known dilemma also in the disciplines of Cultural Studies. Recently scholars have gradually become aware of the problem especially in terms of new media research and started to consider it to a greater extent. But this engagement almost always is limited to visual content to the disadvantage of other sensual dimensions like e.g. the soundscape, the impact of colors, the menu navigation as well as the interconnectivity of the different aspects (Heidbrink & Miczek 2010: 1). In accordance with Niedenthals criticism of reducing game aesthetics to questions of "game as art" (Niedenthal 2009: 1) and recent studies on aesthetics and Material Culture[48] we would like to define our notion towards (game) "aesthetics" as follows: (Game) aesthetic means the role of apperception

44 See e.g. http://operationrainfall.com/bioshock-infinite-dev-nearly-quits-over-religious-differences/ (last access: 05/02/2014).

45 See e.g. http://www.pcgamer.com/2013/01/22/bioshock-infinite-character-changed-religion/ (last access: 05/02/2014).

46 For a detailed record of the incident see chapter 4.4 of this paper.

47 See e.g. http://www.ign.com/boards/threads/christians-didnt-like-bioshock-infinites-forced-baptism-scene-demands-a-refund.452963280/ (last access: 05/02/2014).

48 The idea of transfering the theories of Material Culture to the digital contents of video games where materiality does not exist in the literal sense might sound contradictory at first. However, from the perspective of the gamers the online environment is part of their socio-cultural context and thus "real" as well as "material" to them, even though the materiality exists only in a virtual sense. Additionally we must not forget that the interconnections between the sensual dimensions perceived in-game always refer to and rely on the physical body of the gamers and thus provokes and stimulates "real" perceptory reactions (Heidbrink & Micek 2010: 4).

within the process of knowledge production, including all kinds of sensory stimuli as well as the actors' communication and mediation on the topic.[49]

> "Actors within different social, political, cultural or religious fields receive, communicate, negotiate and develop the notion of aesthetics in close connection to their possibilities of perception, certain interpretation patterns and – probably most important – to their sensual and bodily dimensions. (…) With its interest in the mechanisms of production, ways of perception, and discursive negotiations of visual culture the subject exceeds the boundaries of classical studies of arts and aesthetics and allows a critical reflection on the relationships with – for example – narrative modes or cultural topics or bodily and other sensual perceptions" (Heidbrink & Miczek 2010: 2-3).

Along the same line of thought, Niedenthal (Niedenthal 2009: 2) identified and terms three key concepts on aesthetics in digital games he recommends to further analysis, namely

1. Game aesthetics refers to the sensory phenomena that the player encounters in the game (visual, aural, haptic, embodied).
2. Game aesthetics refers to those aspects of digital games that are shared with other art forms (and thus provides a means of generalizing about art).
3. Game aesthetics is an expression of the game experienced as pleasure, emotion, sociability, form giving, etc (with reference to "the aesthetic experience").

For our further considerations we would mainly rely on the first and third concept, which term (game) aesthetic as "the way a game looks, sounds, and presents itself to the player" and games as "artifacts that have the potential to give rise to an aesthetic experience". Aesthetic experience as "the play of imaginative and cognitive faculties" (Niedenthal 2009: 2-3) is closely associated with the concepts of immersion[50] or "incorporation" (Calleja 2007). The two terms bear close relations to (the perception of) materiality and "worldness" (Krzywinska 2006: 386)[51] as they interconnect the player with the game. Both concepts can be characterized as follows (Niedenthal 2009: 4):

1. (It) is one in which attention is firmly fixed upon (…) components of a visual pattern
2. Excludes the awareness of other objects or events.

49 For a detailed outline and historical record of the study of "aesthetic" in Cultural Studies with a focus on religion see Heidbrink & Miczek 2010. For interdisciplinary case studies on aesthetical / sensual dimensions of religion in new digital media see the articles of the special issue "Religion on the Internet – Aesthetics and the Dimensions of the senses" of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4.1. (2010), online available: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ojs/index.php/religions/issue/view/1123 (last access 05/02/2014).

50 For further details on the concept of "immersion" see chapter 4.1 of this paper.

51 For further explanation on the term "worldness" see also chapter 4.1. of this paper.

3. Is dominated by intense feelings or emotions.

4. Hangs together, is coherent.

5. Involves „make-believe“.

One dilemma in connection with “aesthetic” in the context of video games is the fact, that there is neither an overaching theoretical framework nor a fixed analytical “toolbox” for its analysis. However, the absence of a consistent theory or method is weakness and strength at the same time: “As it is currently pursued, then, writing from a game aesthetics perspective is a somewhat fluid practice”, as Niedenthal observes, somewhat laconically (Niedenthal 2009: 3). Nonetheless, this deficiency can be a chance for scholars from different disciplines to sharpen and further develop research prospects on aesthetic by having the chance to bringing in their respective subject-specific expertise.[52]

Especially in terms of world-creation and world design (where aesthetics are closely linked with underlying narratives in order to construct consistent “worlds”) computer games offer a vast field of different styles and approaches, which in most cases can be conceptualized as processes of “remediation” (Bolter & Grusin 2000) and / or “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins 2006) we have already mentioned in chapter 4.1. of this paper. Surprisingly (or maybe necessarily?), familiar elements often derived from (especially Western-Christian) historical and contemporary religious iconography, architecture and landscaping can be found in many digital games such as *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013). In the depiction of the subterranean caverns in the baptism scene, the ecclesiastic architecture with the neo-classical pillars, the winged statues, the stained-glass windows as well as the soundscape, the content and style of the written aphorisms, the voxophone recordings and the cadence of speech of the in-game religious experts all bear strong reminiscence of Christian religious sources and origins and can be subsumed as aesthetical content. Here, questions on the selection, combination, (re-)construction and (re-)contextualisation of religious elements as well as the ascription by the players could be an interesting research scenario which provides inisights into contemporary discourse on Christianity.

Some game designs also draw heavily on fictional fantasy such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) as Krzywinska has exemplarily shown by tracing back the construction and characterization of the night elves and their “homeland” along Tolkienean lines (Krzywinska 2008: 130). Fictional world-building (in the literal sense) can be coined as common phenomena in genres such as fantasy and science fiction where the “world” is usually constituted by imaginary landscapes connected by spactial terms which can be built, explored and “mapped”.

52 For examples of approaches from Cultural Studies and Geography, see e.g. Niedenthal 2009: 3.

> "J. R. R. Tolkien was the first to create a full realized secondary universe, an entire world with its own geography and histories and legends, wholly unconnected to our own, yet somehow just as real" (George R.R. Martin, quoted by Krzywinska 2008, 132).

This literary form of world-building often becomes subject to computer games and thus also to game aesthetics. In this context, the construction of the religions as well as the religious objects assigned to the different "species" which inhabit the fictional worlds as well as the soundscape in religious spaces, religiously motivated quest texts etc. could lead to interesting conclusions concerning intertextual processes of reception. Of special interest could e.g. be the question, inhowfar the decidedly Christian worldview of a fantasy author like J.R.R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*, 1954/55) which is inherently present in different aspects of his books (Purtill 1984) also has found entry into the gameworld settings.

Other digital games combine the aesthetics of a certain historical or cultural setting with a specifically attuned gameplay, like the example of *Ôkami* (Clover Studios / Capcom 2006) for Sony Playstation and Nintendo Wii shows. It transfers contents and pattern from Japanese mythology[53] into a gameplay that consists (among other) of the mastery of Chinese character calligraphy (conducted by help of the motion controller). Thereby aesthetic and aesthetic experience is acted out on different levels.

> A game such as *Okami* demonstrates the way in which these pleasures can coexist in a game: we experience sensory pleasure from the visual, auditory and tactile elements of the play experience, joy from seeing our efforts to bring light to Nippon bear fruit, and aesthetic pleasure from the way in which player agency, expressed through the affordances of brushwork, ties all these together (Niedenthal 2009: 6).

Questions concerning the transfer and transformation processes of contents and iconography from Japanese mythology into the storyline, the audio-visual shaping of the landscape and the game characters and in this case especially the gameplay could be interesting research designs. Do the actors (designers and gamers alike) perceive this aesthetical programme derived from Japanese

53 The title of the game *Ôkami* is a play of words, since two different notations with Chinese characters are possible. One version (狼) means "wolf" whereas a different Character combination (大神) literary means "great god". However, the meaning of the term "kami" exceeds the concept of "god" by far since in the Shintô context where it is derived from it can includes elements in nature, animals and (human) spirits, and energies of some kind which are believed to have a form of "spiritual power". In the context of the game *Ôkami*, the main character is a white wolf embodiing the Shintô mythological sun goddess Amaterasu Ômikami so both Character versions would be valid. The Japanese website on the game however uses the version of "great god" (大神). See: http://www.capcom.co.jp/o-kami/ (last access 05/02/2014).

religious history as religious? If so, how are the contents (re)mediated and contextualised (maybe even in a comparative perspective, e.g. in the US and in Japan)?

A completely different aspect exhibit games which focus on conflicts and war. In many cases, the aesthetical regime (as well as the accompanying narratives, as we have shown in the previous sub-chapter) focusses on "othering" certain groups, as Vít Šisler (Šisler 2008b) has shown for stereotyping Muslims using the example of different video games with a Middle Eastern setting. The author states that the representation of Arab and Muslim cultures in Western media exploits stereotypcal generalization and clichés, mostly realized by an iteration of a limited number of textures and schemes. along the lines of Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" (Said 1978).

> "On the screen, the Muslim Arab continues to surface as the threatening cultural Other (…) He / She lacks a human face and lives in a mythical kingdom of endless desert dottet with oil wells, tents, run-down mosques, palaces, goats, and camels" (Jack Shaheen quoted in (Šisler 2008b).

Since "in-game representations of Arabs and Muslims do not circulate in a 'ludological vacuum' and have to be contextualized in a broader (narrative) structure that covers Islam in news and popular media" (Šisler 2008a: 2), the topic of the Middle East as war zone and virtual battleground has become even more significant in the post 9/11 era. Not only have the numbers of games with an objective of fighting terrorism increased significantly, the stereotyping, the "othering" of the (virtual) Muslim counterpart have become even more racist as well (Šisler 2008a: 5).

> "The militarization of the video game trope, having reinforced the polarized frame of the good Self and the evil Other, obviates any further explanation of the reason for conflict" (Šisler 2008b: 210).

In this context, the role of religion as source or legitimization of (virtual) conflict as well as the iconographical and auditive patterns and topics on Islam that (re-)emerge in the context could be an interesting approach to research. Especially in terms of bestseller games, the research design of an actor-centered approach could comprise questions on agency, embodiment and self-reflection in Muslim and non-Muslim players.

In more general terms, the topic of "othering" and the depiction of "civilized" and "savage" respectively "familiarity" and "otherness" is also examined by Jessica Langer (Langer 2008) by the example of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) in a postcolonial perspective. She identifies the (visual and conceptual) construction of in-game „races" according to fictional as well as real-world ethnocultural stereotypes of e.g. black Caribbean and Native North Americans (Langer 2008: 89). This is visible in the modelling of the visual characteristics of the different species, the landscapes, and the construction of their culture and their religion. Langer concludes that

> "To an extent unique among current MMORPGs, World of Warcraft takes its cues equally from real-world cultures and from a Tolkienic construction of orcs, trolls, dwarves, elves, and humans. World of Warcraft depictions of these races are therefore doubly familiar: they have both the Tolkienic underpinnings of Western fantasy discourse and stereotyped features of real-world cultures. The result is that they become hybrid stereotypes, with attributes from both sources" (Langer 2008, 92).

Again, questions concerning the depiction of religious contents within the framework of intertextual references and ascription could lead to interesting insights, especially if connected with Bourdieu's concept of "habitus"[54] and / or Foucault's theories on discourse and power[55].

The importance of the individual perspective (including our own as researchers) especially within the regime of perception and the senses cannot be underestimated. Even though the perception of aesthetic is an individual sensation, the cognitive processing of the apperception is – as we have shown – a discoursive process and therefore in part socio-culturally determined (Heidbrink & Miczek 2010: 3). Therefore, aesthetic must always be culturally contextualised! Using the example of the fantasy action role-playing game *Dragon's Crown* (Vanillaware / Atlus 2013) which is a product of Japanese designers, a rather explicit and exaggerated depiction of gender attributes immediately comes to attention. This fact has lead to considerable debates.[56] However, with regard to the Japanese tradition of *ukiyoe* (woodblock prints) where the depiction of sexual intercourse and men with exaggerated genitalia was a common phenomenon, the display and overstatement of gender characteristics seems (or at least seemed) to have been part of the socio-cultural discourse. The so-called "shunga" (literally "spring drawings", a Japanese term for erotic art) were an established art form in 17th to 19th century and exhibit direct lines of reception to contemporary manga art (Ito 2008). Including this line of discourse into the debate on the visual design of *Dragon's Crown* might generate a different perspective and leads to different assumptions.

Our approach towards aesthetic in computer games naturally deals with religious topics and is mostly derived from the theoretical and methodical approaches in the area of Cultural Studies. Our field of interest is focused on the processes of reception and (re-)construction in landscaping, architecture, soundscapes, symbols and other audiovisual contents to which human actors (may) ascribe religious meaning. We are aware that we sometimes must fall short on some aspects of the

54 See: Bourdieu 1984.
55 See e.g. Foucault 1970.
56 There are a multitude of voices agreeing and critizising the design, leading to an official statement by the designers. See e.g. http://www.destructoid.com/blogs/TitusGroan/sexism-dragon-s-crown-and-the-gaming-community-yes-we-re-going-there—252316.phtml, http://www.tyrantandogre.com/the-dragons-crown-controversy-is-stupid-heres-why/, http://gamasutra.com/blogs/JoshBycer/20130711/196096/Dragons_Crown_and_the_Sexism_Debate.php, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/123560-Dragons-Crown-Designer-Apologizes-for-Exaggerated-Characters (last access 05/02/2014).

analysis of non-textual aesthetic contents, e.g. when looking at a game's soundscape or visual design, not being a trained musicologist or art historian.[57]

Returning to our initial case study of the baptism scene in *BioShock Infinite* it surely would be very interesting to deeper analysis the soundscape, namely the choice of music in the sequence. Apart from church bells and a reverberant ecclesiastic echoing we identified the devotional song "Will the circle be unbroken"[58]. We can trace the song back to its origins in 1907 and can identify the author of the lyrics and the composer of the tune.[59] By analysing the lines of receptions throughout the century, we can reconstruct its popularity, the different versions and the general occasions when the song was sung.[60] We also know, that the copyright of the song has expired and that it is now public domain. About the exact reasons why the tune appears in *BioShock Infinite* we can only speculate. However, we can record our own impressions the song triggers in us, as we as researchers are also actors in the field. Moreover, we can summarize and analyse other actors' ascriptions towards the song, its meaning and its function within the context of the game. Interestingly, there are speculations worthy of further research which point towards the song as secret hint towards the cyclic setting of the plot[61], to name only one of many potential actor-centered research scenarios. Surely a musicologist could dig deeper and we would like to encourage that!

However, we do make exciting and relevant scientific findings by means of analysis and discoursive localization of the media elements, the reception processes and the actors' positions beyond the realm of text and communication! And for deeper analysis in subareas of game aesthetics we are not afraid to seek interdisciplinary assistence by experts from the respective fields, if necessary. After all, the analysis of digital games calls for interdisciplinary approaches in order to be able to digging deep into the material at hand and analysing it thoroughly, adequately and from the bottom up.

> "When you're forced deep underground, well – you see things from the bottom up" (Daisy Fitzroy, *Bioshock Infinite*).

57 For an approach in musicology, see e,g, Laack 2008.
58 Information on the song and a short description on the context has been given in the introduction of this paper.
59 See: http://hymntime.com/tch/bio/h/a/b/habershon_ar.htm (last access 05/02/2014).
60 General information can be found in the Wikipedia entry on the song on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_the_Circle_Be_Unbroken%3F (last access 05/02/2014).
61 See: http://adambogert.com/2013/03/29/bioshock-infinite-will-the-circle-be-unbroken/ (last access 05/02/2014).

4.3 Religion and Gameworlds: Where World and Story Meet

Espen Aarseth defines "game-world" as "fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc." (Aarseth 2003: 2) and thereby focuses on the spatial dimensions of a game, its levels, its interiors and the space that it gives for the objects and characters the player can manipulate or interact with. This lays the groundwork for a category that we would like to open up further. What constitutes the gameworld is not only its topography. The topography often tells the player in some way or another a certain story or some basic narrative and is filled with meaning. Therefore we would like to expand the term "gameworld".

A gameworld represents the result of a game's aesthetics, its narrative and its possibilities in the communication between the player and the game.[62] It is this combined effort of the underlying mechanics and elements that constitute a gameworld that can be experienced by the player. We can think about game environments that open up before us that present e.g. modern-day cities through which we stroll, fantasy forests through which we must traverse or many other landscapes and places. They can be the "home" of our avatar or the objects we manipulate in a game and are the space in which they exist. This aesthetical space can be filled with recognizable structures or architecture, representations of nature, like mountains and trees, and with other objects that tell us something about the environment in which the game takes place. Thereby aesthetics are complemented with narratives and thus form the groundwork of the gameworld. The unique "worldness"[63], according to Lisbeth Klastrup (talking especially about online game worlds), emerges from the

> "(...) complex interplay between a) the aesthetics of the gameworld as both an actualised explorable and mentally imagined universe; b) the experiences and means of expression the world as a game system and tool allows and affords; c) the social interaction in and about the world" (Klastrup 2008:1).

So the gameworld can be seen as a nexus in which all the strands of aesthetics and narratives merge together and are interwoven with the option of the player to interact with those elements. "Gameworld" points at the larger experience of the game consisting of its mechanics, stories, objects, characters, spaces etc. Thus a fictional or "invented universe" (Klastrup 2008: 2) comes to life. We find ourselves now at a point of higher complexity. Instead of looking at certain aesthetically perceivable symbols, narratives or other smaller elements of a game, we are confronted with greater phenomena. Instead of looking at one character, one symbol etc., we analyse whole communities of NPCs, the spaces they inhabit, the rules of this world that we can

62 For a detailed reflection on game narratives and game aesthetics, see chapter 4.1 and 4.2.
63 For a different perspective on "worldness" also see Krzywinska's approach mentioned in chapter 4.1.

explore etc. The notion of imagining and pretending also plays a big role for gameworlds. A player will perceive the fictional universe of a game as a world when he plays along with it. The solemn strings of things said and things shown to the player culminate in the "becoming" of the world. The question arises how a player perceives this world. Is he making a cut between "his" world and the world behind the screen? Is he shifting seamlessly between these two? (Klastrup 2008: 5)

Such gameworlds can be filled with lore, stories about it, either told in the game or through additional out-game material like books, comics, films etc.[64] Whole societies of characters can be elements of it: royal courts, fantasy tribes, space congresses, church congregations, godly pantheons, etc, of course highly depending on the setting and the story. Sometimes religion functions as one of the elements that take place in a gameworld being interwoven with other bits and pieces of telling objects. Bigger open-world RPGs can be good examples for this. The Elder Scrolls' series, e.g. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), offers the player not only an abundance of topography, landscape and architecture but also puts towns and cities in its environment full of NPCs to speak to that give the player information about this fictional universe. The player can read books in the game that further expand on it and experience the world's story through quests etc. One is presented with a classical medieval fantasy world with monsters, magic and religion that is expressed through the worship of a pantheon of gods.

Being "drawn into a world", experiencing "immersion"[65] in it, is one of the goals that games try to achieve (Klastrup 2008: 4). And a coherent gameworld, or at least one that gives the player the sensation of coherence, can contribute to this experience. Also player action is a significant element in the simulation-like character of certain gameworlds. Doing something in a world, participating in its ruleset, to get involved in its world through exploration and/or through the repertoire of action of the player's avatar lets the player become part of the gameworld.

Religion can be a part of this universe and does play sometimes a significant role in it. *Skyrim* shows a complex mythology and religious specialists in temples and shrines that give the player information on their meanings. In the *Gothic* series (Piranha Bytes 2001-2006) and its successor *Risen* (Piranha Bytes 2009) one had the choice to join religious orders. Those orders were constructed with special aesthetical elements (temples, altars, monasteries, monks in robes, NPCs performing rituals) and narratives (mentioning of gods, mythologies, articles of faith) and were deeply linked with the surrounding story and had their firm place in this fictional universe.

The more complex religion is woven into the narrative and aesthetics of a gameworld and the more a player can communicate and interact with this element the more likely it is that a response will be generated by the player. One of many possible questions a researcher can work with is e.g.

64 Further details on the processes of "remediation" and "transmedia storytelling", see chapter 4.1 and 4.2.
65 For different aspects concerning the concept of "immersion", please refer to chapter 4.1 and 4.2.

how players react to religion in gameworlds. Do the take it for granted as a part of the world and engage in the religious discourse in it? Do they feel threatened in their own religious feelings? Or do they ignore it altogether? What does it mean when a player takes on a role of a religiously charged character in the game (e.g. a monk, a battle-cleric, a participant of a ritual)? What meaning have those elements for the one who is interacting with them?

Taking the example of *BioShock Infinite*, we see a gameworld richly saturated by religious elements which add to the players' immersion into the gameplay to a considerable amount. By enhancing the atmosphere and creating an aesthetical and narrative consistency and coherency. In this context, the baptism scene serves as a leitmotif for the plot, since in the very end of the game the main character (or his alter ego?) indeed is drowned in the process of the baptism. Therefore, the baptism scene is central for the whole game setting, since it constitutes the gameworld as cyclic construction with "wormholes" to a multitude of alternate realities.[66]

4.4 Religion and Gameplay: Immersion into a Field of Study

When it comes to asking the question what digital games *are* all about, what distinguishes them from other media, a multitude of answers can be found. But the most defining and controversial ones revolve around "choice", "interaction" and "agency"[67].

"Games are about player agency to a very large extent", artist David Hellman tells the gaming website *Polygon* in criticizing the lack thereof in recent installments of *Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda*. According to him, limiting the possibility for choice and adopting a more linear approach means abandoning the need for exploration and disrupting the "sense of wonder and discovery" of earlier *Zelda* games. Ignoring player agency to him means acting against the very "nature of video games and against what they do best"[68] (Lien 2012).

Hellman is not the only one trying to define gaming experience based on player agency and choice. Game Studies scholar Thomas Apperley, in tackling the question of "game genres", identifies "interactivity" as the binding element of games as a medium (Apperley 2006: 7). Based on Aarseth's criticism of the term as "purely ideological […] lacking any analytical substance" (Aarseth 1997: 51), Apperley adopts the term "ergodic", describing the very active role of a human actor in the reading and creation of a "cybertext" or – in our case – the playing of a game.

66 For further information concerning the cyclical world construction also see the reference to the song "Will the Circle be Unbroken" in chapter 1 and chapter 4.2 in this paper.

67 See e.g. Thue, Bulitko, Spetch and Romanuik (2010), who state that "Agency, being the ability to change the course of one's experience (…) is a central aspect of video games."

68 Of course, while acknowledging the significance of player agency and choice in distinguishing games from other media, linking the amount of provided player agency with overall enjoyment of a game should be viewed with caution. See e.g. Johnson 2013.

In both cases, "agency", "choice" and "interaction" (or "ergodic action") are playing a vital role in defining either the quality or the very nature of video games as a medium. So, when talking about the means to find and study religion in digital games it is essential to look at possible approaches towards gameplay – as a main tool of achieving and describing "agency", "choice" and "interaction" in games (Thue, Bulitko, Spetch, Romanuik 2010: 210) – and religion.

Instances of religious symbolism in gameplay and even specific game mechanics are easy to find throughout a variety of games and game genres. Just recently, in a development diary concerning the latest expansion *Sons of Abraham*, *Crusader Kings II* developer *Paradox Interactive* talked about the implementation of game mechanics specifically designed to make the gameplay of Jewish and Muslim factions[69], characters and rulers more compelling to play compared to their Christian counterparts. *Civilization IV* by *Firaxis* lets the player chose between seven pre-set religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Taoism) for his or her own civilization, each with the same effects, but differing in technological requirements to found them. The expansion pack *Gods & Kings* for *Civilization V* implemented the possibility for the player to create his or her very own religion, based on a set of various "beliefs", representing the ideas and goals of the religions and granting different bonuses throughout the game.

Of course, religious themes are not only prevalent in games of the 'strategy' genre. Action focused games like the "Multiplayer Online Battle Arena" (MOBA) *SMITE: Battleground of the Gods* feature a large variety of character abilities and items inspired by various mythologies. From the official game website:

> "SMITE is the online battleground of the gods. Players choose from a diverse cast of deities and use their unique powers to triumph over the opposition in 5v5 team matches."[70]

Playable gods range from *Agni, Hindu God of Fire* to *Zeus, Greek God of the Sky*, each with their own sets of abilities and roles on the battlefield.

The list doesn't end here. "Ethical decision making systems" (most common in role playing games) like the "moral scale" in *Bioware's Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Thames 2014), the "karma scale" in *Bethesda's Fallout 3* (Schulzke 2009) and the "Paragon-Renegade" system of the *Mass Effect* series (also by *Bioware*) can – depending on game narrative and player reception – have strong implicit or explicit religious connotations while at the same time changing and influencing the game experience based on the player's choices.

69 Such as the possibility to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem or to restore the high priesthood for Jewish rulers and the possibility for Muslim rulers to chose between two different schools of theology: the Mu'tazila or the Ash'ari school. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=hCVDNJlVavo (last access 07/02/2014).

70 See: http://www.hirezstudios.com/smitegame/home/sidebar/game-info/about-smite (last access 07/02/2014).

What makes the relationship between gameplay and religious association so interesting and meaningful to study is that gameplay can have a direct influence on the "ludic experience" of the game, i.e. player agency and perceived challenge/balancing. As *Gamasutra* author Soren Johnson phrases it:

> "Ultimately, game design is a series of tradeoffs, and designers should recognize that choice itself is just one more factor that must be balanced with everything else. Even though player control is core to the power of games, it does not necessarily trump all the other factors, such as brevity, elegance, and variety" (Johnson 2013, Too repetitive, para. 7).

On the one hand, these "tradeoffs" can have a significant impact on the way religion is integrated into and presented through gameplay and game mechanics. The prerequisites for founding a religion in *Civilization IV* may be based on designer reception of said religion (e.g. the technology *Meditation* is needed to found *Buddhism*), but as well on actual balancing and gameplay considerations (e.g. where in the "tech tree" the technology is placed). On the other hand, reception of religious narratives can strongly influence design decisions throughout the development process. In *SMITE*, the gods *Hercules, Champion of Rome*[71] and *Odin, the Allfather*[72] are not only represented as brawny warriors, but they are also meant to be played as "melee bruisers" and feature corresponding abilities like *Hercules*' "Excavate", which allows him to rip a huge boulder from the ground and hurl it at an enemy[73]. While both of these examples aren't especially interesting in terms of player choice and agency, they already point to a variety of possible approaches towards religion and gameplay.

1. Just like game narratives, game aesthetics and gameworlds, specific elements of gameplay are parts of reception processes of religious beliefs, symbols and narratives, both by game designers and players.
2. Through said reception processes religion in relation to gameplay can play a significant role in influencing and shaping the actual mechanics and gameplay experience of a game.
3. Due to the complex decision making process and the "tradeoffs" involved in the course of creating an enjoyable, challenging (and commercially successful) gameplay experience, the construction of game mechanics and game rules can also have a significant role in

71 See: http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1848 (last access 07/02/2014).
72 See: http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1669 (last access 07/02/2014).
73 *Poseidon, Greek God of the Oceans* even possesses the ability to summon a creature from the depths of the ocean to attack his enemies. An ability, arguably designed for the sole purpose of implementing the iconic phrase "Release The Kraken!" - coined by 1981 fantasy film *The Clash of the Titans* - into the game. See http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1881 (last access 07/02/2014).

> influencing and shaping the presentation and therefore reception of the religious beliefs, symbols and narratives inside the game.

Of course, this balancing act of design and gameplay decisions by the game developers is in most cases invisible to the player, who only sees (and receives) the end product.

This leads us back to the beginning of this section and back to player agency and choice, or more precisely the lack of choice in the gameplay sequence at the beginning of *BioShock Infinite*, described at the start of this article. The so called "forced baptism"[74] presents us with an excellent example of how gameplay and narrative decisions can come into conflict with player agency and personal views. The scene is neither avoidable (if one wants to continue the game), nor is it a cut scene where the player becomes a passive spectator of the events without having to consent. Actually the player has to willingly accept the participation in the ritual by clicking a button and therefore is provided with the illusion of choice and real agency. He or she either has to accept the baptism or quit the game completely. This fact has lead to irritation especially among religious gamers one of whom has even successfully fought for a refund of the sales price[75] because of "extreme blasphemy" of the baptism sequence. The gaming website *Kotaku* quotes the reaction of the above mentioned gamer:

> "As baptism of the Holy spirit is at the center of Christianity – of which I am a devout believer – I am basically being forced to make a choice between committing extreme blasphemy by my actions in choosing to accept this 'choice' or forced to quit playing the game before it even really starts."

He goes on in complaining about how there is no way to somehow bypass or skip the sequence, implying that such an option would have allowed him to play the rest of the game. Therefore one might argue that the problem – at least for the author of said letter – doesn't lie in the game's overall narrative (of which the baptism is an integral part), but in the feeling of denied agency, of being forced into *acting* against one's own beliefs. The question remains as to whether the sequence would have received a more positive reaction had it been stripped of all gameplay elements, however minimal, and hat been transformed into a cutscene.

Whatever implications one might draw from this example, it at least points to the importance of taking a closer look at player agency, player choice and thus gameplay when dealing with the issue of religion and games.

74 See: http://kotaku.com/some-dont-like-bioshocks-forced-baptism-enough-to-as-473178476 (last access 07/02/2014).

75 See: http://www.polygon.com/2013/4/16/4231064/valve-refunds-baptism-bioshock-infinite (last access 07/02/2014).

4.5 Religion and 'Gaming Culture': "World" and "Play" Intertwined

When first considering writing this section on religion and "gaming culture" our thoughts immediately went to a wallpaper decorating a PC desktop in our office for quite some time now. It depicts a row of iconic video game characters including – among others – *Assassins Creed III*'s main character Connor, *Mass Effect*'s Commander Shepard and the "Psycho" from *Borderlands I&II*. Written above and below those images is a single sentence: "I am a gamer not because I don't have a life … but because I choose to have many"[76]. Often, when looking at it, one can't help but feel a small hint of pride in the things accomplished in all of those games. Seeing ourselfs as "gamers", we went searching the internet for other like minded people in hopes of finding some opinions on being a gaming enthusiast, of being part of "gaming culture".

We quickly found a rather lengthy discussion on the forums of the popular gaming website *Neoseeker*. User *Zazomy* takes the title of the popular wallpaper[77] as an opportunity to ask the other users of the forum the question: "How many of you people are proud to be gamers? How many of you spit in the face of naysayers who would chastise you for your enthusiasm of gaming? What is your attitude towards gaming?"[78]

Only 3 minutes later, user Paper Fox provides the first reaction: "Female gamer and proud. Everyone I work with knows I'm a gamer, so much so that I've had people I've never met before come up to me with gaming related questions."

But not every response seems to be quite so enthusiastic. User *Paradox* states: "I'm not really 'proud' to be a gamer. I will mention that I play video games If someone asks me, but for the most part I keep it and other interests like that to myself." And *MrGrimm* adds:

> "It's only natural I guess, people who play games tend to be different, so now we've got a whole new sub-sub-subclass of human beings. Now we have 'gamers'. I just don't like it. In some cases, it feels normal. Like 'metalhead' for someone who likes metal.
>
> A gamer is pretty much what I am, but I hate being part of a classification, except for human. It feels like gamers are trying to say they are part of something, and everyone else is not, and it feels like everyone else is going to start to resen[t] and not understand it. There already are some, like the people who can say that gamers have no life for example.

76 See: http://www.wallpaperhere.com/I_am_a_Gamer_104691 (last access 07/02/2014).
77 A slight derivation of the phrase can also be found on a so called "meme", depicting a figure cut together from various video game characters (although it is hard to determine which of both is the older one). See http://weknowmemes.com/2012/06/im-a-gamer-because-i-dont-have-a-life/ (last access 07/02/2014).
78 See: http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/18/t1754371-am-gamer-not-because-don-have-life-but-because-choose-to-have-many/ (last access 07/02/2014).

> As video games start taking a large place in many people's live, it is no doubt going to be another thing for people to argue and debate about."[79]

The discussion goes on for several more pages, but the underlying tone seems to be, that there is no agreement to what it means to be a gamer, to be part of "gaming culture" (or not) or what the term even means. Regardless, especially gaming related public media seems to have adopted the term on a broad basis. Popular sites like *Gameinformer* have created their own sub sections dedicated to "gamer culture" related news[80], an online article on *Gamasutra*, written by Christopher Totten (2010), emphasizes "the importance of gaming culture" in forming bridges between "gamers" and "non-gamers" and online encyclopedias like *Wikipedia*[81] and *Tvtropes*[82] are crediting 'video game culture' with various phenomena like it's own slang and terminology, it's influence on music or social implications like "MMORPG identity tourism" or the influence of the real-time strategy game *Starcraft* in South Korea.

So what exactly is this "gaming, gamer or video game culture" everyone is talking about? And what do we have to look at in regards to religion and digital games? The first question has already been addressed by Adrienne Shaw in her article "What is Video Game Culture?: Cultural Studies and Game Studies" (Shaw 2010) where she did some extensive research on press as well as academic discourses on "video game culture". Summarizing her findings and looking at the problem from a Cultural Studies perspective, she advises scholars against a definition and therefore "othering" of video game culture, which would only serve in setting it apart from "regular" culture. Instead, academics should not only draw on the terminology, but also the concepts as well as the internal conflicts of Cultural Studies when dealing with the culture of gaming:

> "We must be reflexive and critical of both our object of study and our methodologies. Defining gaming culture as something distinct and separate from a constructed mainstream culture encourages us to only study those who identify as gamers, rather than more dispersed gaming. That is, we should look at video games in culture rather than games as culture" (Shaw 2010: 416).

Drawing on Stuart Hall's work on "black culture" (Hall 1993: 111ff.), she suggests to "look at video game culture as inclusively and diversely as possible." ((Shaw 2010: 416) According to her, the study of games should not only focus on a singular and allegedly homogeneous gaming community, but should try to address the diversity and heterogeneity of players and playing practices as "video

79 See: http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/18/t1754371-am-gamer-not-because-don-have-life-but-because-choose-to-have-many/
80 See: http://www.gameinformer.com/p/culture.aspx
81 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_culture
82 See: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/VideoGameCulture

games permeate education, mobile technologies, museum displays, social functions, family interactions, and workplaces" and "(...) are played by many if not all ages, genders, sexualities, races, religions, and nationalities." ((Shaw 2010: 416)

So what does this mean for the study of religion and digital games? Based on Shaw's observations and suggestions, this question may be addressed from two different – sometimes overlapping – angles: religion and 'culture in games' and religion and 'games in culture'.

Religion and 'Culture in Games'

This approach refers to the way religious symbols, narratives and practices are drawn upon, received, transformed and represented 'inside' video games to create an immersive, coherent and therefore enjoyable – or at least 'believable' - experience for the players. Thoughts on this topic, including examples and sections on game narratives, game aesthetics, game worlds and gameplay have already been addressed in chapter 4.1 through 4.4 of this article.

Sticking to Shaw's critical approach on the definition of culture, one possible way of looking at religion and 'culture in games' may be to ask the question how religious beliefs and symbols are used inside games to 'identify' specific cultural groups and factions. As Raymond Williams phrases it: "[i]n contemporary parlance, culture consists of four sorts of elements: norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols" (Shaw 2010: 405). Looking for such elements in video game narratives, aesthetics, worlds and gameplay mechanics in both "imagined" (e.g. fantasy worlds like *World of Warcraft*) and "real world based"[83] scenarios (e.g. the *Call of Duty* and *Age of Empires* series or *Command and Conquer: Generals*) may give us important information on the game designer's understanding of cultural and religious identity as well as provide us with the opportunity of disclosing processes of social construction and "othering".[84]

Of course Williams definition of culture is only one of many possible definitions which – like Shaw phrases it: "[..] has been a persistent debate in Cultural Studies as it should be in the analysis of video game culture." (Shaw 2010: 405) What this means is, that there are as many approaches to religion and 'culture in games' as there are possible definitions for the term "culture" (or "religion", while we're at it). Which should not prevent game focused academia from discussing the accompanying questions and issues.

83 For the purpose of this article, the differentiation between "imagined" and "real world based" game scenarios has solely been made to avoid the exclusion of the former when dealing with the construction of cultural identities in games. In fact, the term "real world" should be handled with extreme caution with regards to digital games and virtual worlds as a whole.

84 One such work is Vit Šisler 2008a, where he specifically discusses the "othering" of these groups by mainstream European and American games and the process of "digital emancipation" of Middle Eastern developers. For more information see also chapter 4.1 and 4.2 in this paper.

Religion and "Games in Culture"

The same goes of course for dealing with religion and 'games in culture'. But while the previous section dealt primarily with 'game-immanent' representations of religion, this one refers to religious beliefs and practices that go beyond the boundaries of games, oftentimes either leaving them behind and entering the "real world" or using them to create something completely new, something not envisioned by the games' designers.

There are numerous examples of how video games are influencing and shaping contemporary pop culture, many of which have in the past been discussed – both by academics and by popular media, as described by Shaw – under the terms "gaming culture", "video game culture" or "gamer culture". While keeping clear from such attributions, the actual phenomena usually associated with these categories still remain. The (sometimes major, sometimes minor) influence of games on popular culture can be found in musical performances, television shows and channels, movie adaptions, "e-sport" events and "cosplay" conventions and iconic video game characters like *Mario*, *Pacman* or *Sonic the Hedgehog* are known by "gamers" and "non-gamers" alike. In the same vein, public discourse on religion and video games has become more and more prevalent throughout the "gaming community". Examples being the debate on *BioShock Infinite's* "baptism scene"[85], already mentioned in chapter 4.1 and 4.4 of this article, general discussions on web forums like *The Escapist*[86] and even the "proposition" of founding a "Church of the Latter Day Player" presented by Andy Robertson at the Greenbelt Festival 2012[87] including its controversial discussion, e.g on *Youtube*[88] and *Kotaku*[89].

But reducing the interactions between games and culture to a "one-way street" of pop cultural influences would mean disregarding the creative influence of players on their games and the way they are bringing their own norms, values, practices and belief systems into the games, often than not transforming and reshaping them in the process. Games like *Minecraft*, which provides the player with almost limitless creative possibilities in shaping the game to their own liking without confining them by setting specific goals and rules, may function as a great example for how players sometimes draw on their own cultural, social and religious influences to shape the world around them, sometimes alone and sometimes in groups. But at the same time *Minecraft* remains the exception to the (quite literal) rule and more often than not, players have to adapt to a game's very strict rules and design boundaries when trying to express themselves.

85 Please refer to chapter 4.4 in this article for more information on the matter.
86 See: http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/9.405993-Religion-in-Video-Games (last access 07/02/2014).
87 See: http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/media/video/19784-andy-robertson/ (last access 07/02/2014).
88 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX8J5ORkcUo&feature=youtu.be (last access 07/02/2014).
89 See: http://kotaku.com/video-games-are-the-next-big-religion-991525452 (last access 07/02/2014).

On September 11th, 2012 insurgents attacked the US consulate in Lybia and killed several people in the process. Among those killed was Sean Smith, known as "Vile Rat" in the space MMORPG *EVE Online*. Under this name, Smith had worked himself to a position of great renown, influence and power inside the game. Last acting as 'chief diplomat' for *Goonswarm Federation*, one of *EVE*'s largest player alliances of the time, he had played a major part in shaping the game's political landscape. In reaction to his passing, many fellow alliance members, friends and *EVE* players decided to remember Vile Rat inside the game and did so in various creative ways: Numerous player controlled outposts throughout the *EVE* universe where renamed to "Vile Rat Memorial Park", "Vile Rat Memorial Station" or "RIP Vile Rat". Additionally, another in-game tribute was created by writing the name "Vile Rat" into space through the use of so called "bubbles"[90] inside of which individual players used the in-game item 'cynosural field' to 'light candles', thereby paying their respects.[91] In this case, players used the game's own mechanics to express their sympathy, mourning and respect inside the game in a creative manner. At the same time, they where transporting practices from the 'outside' (e.g. the lighting of candles) world into the game, adapting them to its boundaries and therefore transforming them.

There are more cases of these kinds of transportation, adaption and transformation processes, shown for instance by Heidbrink, Miczek and Radde-Antweiler in their work on mourning rituals in virtual worlds and games like – especially relevant in our case – the *World of Warcraft* (Heidbrink, Miczek, Radde-Antweiler 2011: 172ff) as described in chapter 4.1 of this article. Using the example of *BioShock Infinite*, we already mentioned the debates which arose from the conflicting religious concepts of the in-game setting in contrast to the socio-cultural realities of the players (e.g. the discourse on the "forced baptism"). Additionally, we find many sources for players' deep involvement into the gameworld by their discussing, recording and reconceptualizing of in-game content in their daily "physical" life.[92] These instances clearly show how religion can be an integral element of discourse in "culture in games" as well as "games in culture".

While these are mere examples for a much wider possible area of studies, it can be stated that dealing with religion and 'games in culture' means dealing with complex processes of interaction, exchange, adaption and transformation of cultural and religious practices and beliefs. It is left to researchers of religion and digital games to identify these processes and place them into the broader context of contemporary reception, negotiation and expression of individual religious identity.

90 "Warp Disruption Fields" (or "Bubbles", named after the large blue sphere, they form after being deployed) are stationary devices, used by players in *EVE Online* to prevent other ships from "warping" away, thereby stopping them from fleeing and forcing them to engage possible attackers. See https://wiki.eveonline.com/en/wiki/Warp_Disruption_Fields (last access 07/02/2014).

91 See: http://kotaku.com/5943483/here-is-eves-in+world-tribute-to-its-slain-diplomat (last access 07/02/2014).

92 See e.g. the extensive contributions of gamers to e.g. the *BioShock Wiki* on http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/BioShock_Wiki or *BioShock* cosplay on http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/bioshock-cosplay (last access 07/02/2014).

5 Conclusio: Towards a "Religious Games Studies Manifest"

Throughout the course of this paper, we have presented various perspectives and examples on how religion is being adopted, represented, modified, received and communicated by players and designers alike. Examining the role of religious elements in "game narratives", "game aesthetics", "game worlds", "gameplay" and "gaming culture", we have argued that these elements in video games can serve as an indicator for the negotiation of religious topics in different socio-cultural settings, the construction of fictional religious worlds, religious conflicts or even as instruments for the visualization of subliminal socio-cultural discourses, thereby enforcing the importance of further academic study in the field of games and religion.

In this last chapter we would like to share some final thoughts on general perspectives as well as considerations on approaches when dealing with the issue of religion and digital games. Regardless which perspective one takes when looking at religion and digital games, be it narrative, aesthetics, game worlds, gameplay or "gaming culture" (or a mixture of these approaches), the question of 'what' exactly one should study remains an important one. Throughout this article we tried to encourage a 'two sided' view and approach to this issue: a "game-immanent" approach on the one side and an "actor-centered" approach on the other side.

Both perspectives possess the ability to give important insights into the way religion and games (and the players) interact, each raising and inspiring their own respective research questions. "Game-immanent" approaches can be used to ask for and analyse the way "mythic structures" are used in games like *World of Warcraft* to create a feeling of consistency and coherency within the game world, while in other games the representation of certain characters and religious practices in narratives and gameplay mechanics may serve as a form of cultural "othering". On the other hand "actor-centered" approaches can sharpen the view on the way players and designers of video games receive, adopt and negotiate religious content or are introducing their own religious beliefs and practices into the "game sphere".

However, as the examples given in this article indicate, a strict separation of "game-immanent" and "actor-centered" approaches rarely help in highlighting the bigger picture of interactions between religion and games. Asking for the constitution of coherency and consistency or the process of "othering" by means of religiously charged narratives, aesthetics or gameplay mechanics is of little use if we don't involve the game designer, who decided to implement these elements into the game and the player, who is confronted with them, thereby starting his or her own process of reception and occasionally public discourse. Likewise, following the various discourses in the context of religion and digital games is of little use, if we don't have a solid comprehension of the games in question. Generally speaking, "game-immanent" and "actor-centered" approaches

remain a question of perspective, influencing mainly the focus of study rather than its practical methods. Whether a researcher of religion and games might decide for one or the other, his or her methods should always consider the whole picture by integrating qualitative analysis of game "text" and structure, gamer and designer reception and related discourses as well as – in any case – actual play.

Let us finally and as a general summary of this article list some key points we consider as essential for the research of digital games within a Cultural Studies perspective:

1. **Know your material!** In order to adequately research (religious contents in) digital games you need to be familiar with the game you are analysing. That means, you need to play it, since it is your "field" of study and research. In the same way as ethnographers do field work (mostly) in a geographical sense, you have to "immerse" into your virtual game environment. Thoroughly. Looking other players over the shoulders does not count and will never suffice! You. Have. To. Play!
2. While doing your research, always mind your own position, opinions, socio-cultural and religious localization and context(s). **You are – as a gamer-scholar – also an actor in the field** you are researching. No more and no less. Reflect it! And forget about neutral viewpoints, those are scientific myths that do not exist!
3. Always be aware that the game you are researching is a cultural artifact, a composition of and by the socio-cultural discourses it is embedded in. **Reflect on the specific cultural context** it derives from, especially if it is not your own (but even then)! It may open your eyes and change your perspective. Above all, **digital games always are a product of contemporary popular culture**. They are a part and output of this culture, a synthesis in a way. Think of culture as a complex formation of interwoven and fluid fields of discourses which are constantly being shifted and negotiated. Whoever talks about "gaming culture" as "subculture" is welcome to validate his/her point. We doubt it is possible. Besides, empirical data (e.g. Yee 2006) proves otherwise.
4. If doing your research, **focus but contextualize**! In the course of your study, you need to phrase a research question and focus on certain topics or elements. This is a necessary and pragmatic decision. However, always keep in mind, that games consist of a multitude of interdependent contents and elements and perspectives, such as the material-immanent and the actor-centered dimensions are always interlinked and necessarily so! You won't be able to consider and incorporate all possible dimensions of research, but you have to reflect upon the possible limitations of your study!
5. **As a gamer-scholar, you might be a nerd**. Get used to it and look on the bright side! You might be able to combine work and play. Have fun!

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Biography

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JAN WYSOCKI is enrolled in the Master's program of the Religious Studies department at the at the University of Heidelberg. Having written his Bachelor thesis on the topic of mourning rituals in contemporary Japanese Soto Zen he now specializes in the history of evangelical religion in North America. His interest for all things digital and playful led him to the occupation with Game Studies which will result in his Master thesis about the representation of American religion in *BioShock Infinite*. He is also interested in the theory, method and epistemology of the Study of Religion.

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