

Religion and Digital Games: Past, Present, and Future Studies An Overview

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Abstract – This article is a survey of over one hundred academic studies on religion in video games. Ranging from the early 2000s to 2022, it highlights the main themes and methodologies of these works as well as their relationship with the multi and interdisciplinary academic literature relevant for the study of this object: post-secularism, internet, the language of games, digital technology, anthropology and more. This overview is divided into two sections, each highlighting how specific methodologies from the social sciences and humanities have been used to address particular aspects of the representation, interpretation, and experience of religion in digital games. The aim of this paper is therefore not to report all the works that have been published on the topic of religion in digital games but to use most of the published and better-known works in this field to highlight some of its key epistemological characteristics and themes. Finally, in the conclusion, we focus on the limits of these past research and we indicate some future paths to follow. Most notably, we highlight 1) how such field has undeniably proven the relevance of a religious dimension in digital games, 2) the epistemological limits of a rather rigid distinction between the analysis of gamers and the one of games, 3) a lack of diversity in the specific objects studied and especially in relation to the new social reality of gaming, 4) the long-lasting fertile dialogue of this field with the interdisciplinary context of studies on many different topics for which it is reasonable to foresee a significant impact of A.I. and intermediality on the future of these studies.

Keywords: religion – video games – game studies – religious studies – digital culture

1. Introduction

As de Wildt and Aupers rightly pointed out a few years ago¹, the study of religion in digital games is a relevant and extremely fertile field of multidisciplinary research. It has rapidly grown and now includes dedicated books, edited volumes, methodological manuals and entire journals to extensively study the different dimensions of different religions and religious forms in different types of video games played and interpreted in

¹ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Pop Theology: Forum Discussions on Religion in Videogames*, in «Information, Communication & Society», 23, 2019, 10, pp. 1444-1462, here p. 1446.

different contexts by different audiences. The history of these studies on religion in video games is, however, somewhat complex.

On the one hand, religious references in video games have existed since the very beginning of the medium's commercial success. Two emblematic examples are Atari's *Red Sea Crossing* (1983), presented as «the video game bible that brings the fun home» and the 1984 collection of *Computer Bible Games*. Moreover, religious references existed also in non-educational products. Such is the case of the crucifix that has been used as a weapon to defeat demons in such famous titles as *Ghost and Goblins* (1985) and *Castlevania* (1986). On the other hand, however, the Western video game industry for a very long time avoided any reference to religion; most religious games were unknown to video game players. This is the case of the aforementioned *Red Sea Crossing*, which sold less than a hundred copies and remained a mysterious rarity. Furthermore, iconographic references to religion were even censored in the US, with the aforementioned crucifixes being turned into shields for the Western audience. An example of this is when, in 2012, Apple refused to distribute the game *Endgame: Syria* due to its representation and targeting of something culturally real². More recently, the inclusion of religion in the game *Cyberpunk 2077* was described by its creators as fundamental to recreate a real-world but also raised some preoccupations in regard to potential controversies³. This shows that, from the outset and for decades, religion has been a sensitive topic for video games. Finally, the cultural bias against games as 'non-serious' texts and practices has been another obstacle to these studies:

«It is hard to imagine two more different arenas than games and religion. Games appear to us as a pleasant distraction, a space where amiable conflicts are played out to a conclusion that tomorrow will not matter much. Religious activity is obviously quite different. It requires the utmost seriousness and a minimum of conflict, and our commitment will have consequences that may last a lifetime-or longer, depending on our views of eternity»⁴.

Therefore, the history of religion in video games may seem somewhat paradoxical since it appears to be primarily the history of hundreds of fictitious gods, rituals, myths, beliefs, and social practices invented and also enacted

² H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014.

³ <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/07/23/heres-what-cd-projekt-red-really-said-about-religion-in-cyberpunk-2077>.

⁴ J. Anthony, *Dreidels to Dante's Inferno: Toward a Typology of Religious Games*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Gregory (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, p. 25.

by the players in game narratives. Inventions which seem to have the explicit purpose of avoiding any reference to actual religions in games.

This ambiguous and complex presence of religion in video games may explain why academic studies on religion and video games are a rather recent phenomenon. Indeed, while academic studies on video games began to emerge in the late 1990s, with books such as Aarseth's *Cybertext*⁵, and the many important studies on religion in pop-culture and new media emerged in the mid-2000s⁶, a specific interest in the study of religion in digital games developed only ten years ago. Indeed, as recently as 2015, Heidbrink and colleagues affirmed that «the research of religion(s) in digital games is still quite new»⁷.

This newness, however, should certainly not be confused with an uninterest in or ignorance of the presence of religious content in digital games. Indeed, in their 2014 genealogy of these studies, Grieve and Campbell clearly mention conferences in the late 2000s that were already pointing to the importance of this topic:

«Scholarly work began to surface in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century and gained momentum through discussions at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion later in the decade. In 2007, at a panel titled 'Born Digital and Born Again Digital: Religion in Virtual Gaming Worlds', scholars presented work on religiously themed games, the problematic appearance of violent narratives in religious games, and the rise of the Christian game industry. In 2008, the panel 'Just Gaming? Virtual Worlds and Religious Studies' examined the use and presence of religious rituals and narratives in mainstream video games. These presentations drew attention to the need for a more focused study of religion in games and virtual worlds»⁸.

Similarly, in the inaugural issue of the journal «Gamvironments» the authors point out that «Cultural Studies and its various sub-disciplines began to address the study of religion and video games in the early 2000»⁹. Furthermore, consideration of religion in digital games also begins long

⁵ E. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

⁶ A. Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2005; S.M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, London - New York, Routledge, 2006.

⁷ S. Heidbrink - T. Knoll - J. Wysocki, *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 5, 2014, pp. 5-50.

⁸ G.P. Grieve - H.A. Campbell, *Studying Religion in Digital Gaming. A Critical Review of an Emerging Field*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 5, 2014, p. 56.

⁹ K. Radde-Antweiler - M. Waltmathe - X. Zeiler, *Video Gaming, Let's Plays and Religion: The Relevance of Researching Gamevironments*, in «Gamevironments», 1, 2014, pp. 1-36.

before 2014 if one looks at discussions about the supposed educational dangers they may represent¹⁰.

The birth of specific a field of research on digital games in the 2010s was, however, not a simple consequence of these past works and scholars interested in religion. In fact, one should not underestimate the role of the multidisciplinary context of culture and video game studies. Indeed, this 'belated' interest in religion in digital games originated not only from a by then consolidated field of academic research on new media¹¹, cyberspaces¹², virtual worlds¹³, digital games¹⁴, and game culture¹⁵, but perhaps also from anthropological inquiries in the late 2000s that depicted video games as a return to an enchanted world steeped in magic and mystery¹⁶ and that pointed to digital technology as a new form of the sacred¹⁷ indicative of the re-enchantment of the West¹⁸. Finally, the rise in academic studies on this topic can also be seen as a consequence of both (i) the establishment of video games as a dominant form of entertainment across life ages, with millions of users intensively frequenting gamified virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* (2004) or *Second Life*(2003), and (ii) of a general popular interest in the cultural content of these games, as

¹⁰ C. Scholtz, *Religious Education and the Challenge of Computer Games: Research Perspectives on a New Issue*, in E. Steuter - D. Willis (eds.), *Towards a European Perspective on Religious Education*, Sweden, University of Lund Press, 2004; C. Scholtz, *Fascinating Technology: Computer Games as an Issue for Religious Education*, in «British Journal of Religious Education», 27, 2005, 2, pp. 173-184.; K. Schut, *Of Games and God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games*, Ada, Brazos Press, 2013.

¹¹ L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002; N. Wardrip-Fruin - N. Montfort (eds.), *The New Media Reader*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003.

¹² M. Højsgaard - M. Warburg (eds.), *Religion in Cyberspace*, London - New York, Routledge, 2005.

¹³ S.W. Bainbridge, *The Scientific Research Potential of Virtual Worlds*, in «Science», 317, 2007, 5837, pp. 472-476.

¹⁴ I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007; F. Mayra, *An Introduction to Game Studies*, London, Sage Publishing, 2008.

¹⁵ C.A. Steinkuehler, *Why Game (Culture) Studies Now?*, in «Games and Culture», 1, 2006, 1, pp. 97-102.; A. Shaw, *What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies*, in «Games and Culture», 5, 2010, 4, pp. 403-424.

¹⁶ S. Aupers, *'Better Than the Real World'. On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games*, in «Fabula», 48, 2007, 3-4, pp. 250-269; D. Pargman - P. Jakobsson, *Do You Believe in Magic? Computer Games in Everyday Life*, in «European Journal of Cultural Studies», 11, 2008, 2, pp. 225-243.

¹⁷ S. Aupers - D. Houtman (eds.), *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, Leiden, Brill, 2010.

¹⁸ C. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol. 1: *Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, London, T&T Clark International, 2004.

testified by the book *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games With God*¹⁹ edited not by an academic but by a cultural commentator. In other words, the more scholars discovered significant aspect of video games both as cultural objects and social practices and the more religion became a possible key to understand the significance of digital games in every facet.

As a result of this process, the first book establishing a clear connection between games as virtual realities and religion was published in 2012²⁰; in the same year the *Encyclopedia of Video Games* for the first time mentioned educational religious games²¹ and Bornet and Burger published a chronological overview of the presence of religion in different forms of games²². However, a specific study on the sacred within MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) was published only in 2013²³. This would pave the way, in 2014, for the first internationally renowned book explicitly devoted to case studies of religion in digital games²⁴, to the birth of a journal explicitly dedicated to «the cultural theological and social aspects» of video games²⁵ and to the first special issue of the journal «Online» on «Religions in Digital Games»²⁶. These studies were then followed by two further issues of «Online» devoted to the topic of religion in digital games²⁷, with more case studies and methodological proposals on the different cultural aspects and occurrences of religion in digital games such as *Smite* (2014). Moreover, in 2016 the article *Why Religious Studies*

¹⁹ C. Deitweiler, *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

²⁰ R. Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*, London, Routledge, 2012.

²¹ M. Hayse, *Education (Religious)*, in M. Wolf (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, Westport, Greenwood Publishing, 2012.

²² P. Bornet - M. Burger, *Religions in Play. Games, Ritual & Worlds*, Zurich, TVZ Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012.

²³ S.W. Bainbridge, *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

²⁴ H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*.

²⁵ K. Radde-Antweiler - M. Waltmathe - X. Zeiler, *Video Gaming, Let's Plays and Religion*.

²⁶ S. Heidbrink - T. Knoll, *Let's Talk Video Games!* - Introduction to the Special Issue on Religion in Digital Games, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 5, 2014, pp. 1-4.

²⁷ S. Heidbrink - T. Knoll - J. Wysocki, *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games*; S. Heidbrink - T. Knoll - J. Wysocki, *Venturing into the Unknown (?) Method(ological) Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 7, 2015, pp. 61-84; S. Heidbrink - T. Knoll - J. Wysocki, *'What Would Jesus Play?' Actor-Centered Perspectives on Gaming and Gamers (In Lieu of an Introduction)*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 7, 2015, pp. 1-16.

Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming was published in the «Journal of the American Academy of Religion»²⁸.

All these publications, many of which had since the beginning at their centre methodological and disciplinary themes²⁹, eventually led to the first book entirely devoted to the scientific study of religion in video games in 2017³⁰ and, in 2019, to special issues on journals such as «Religions» and to new foundational books such as Bosman's *Gaming and the Divine*³¹.

In light of this flood of studies on the topic, some criteria must be chosen to write an overview about the study of religion in digital games. First, we have limited this overview to academic documents mentioning and studying explicitly both religion and digital games³² in light of the specific computational properties, mediations and interactions they involve. Therefore, this overview does not include broader research on the relation between religion and gamification or games³³, which are certainly related to digital games but are not the same object³⁴ and would require much more than an article to be qualitatively tackled with (Scopus search of «religion» and «games» currently present more than nine hundred results). Analogously, although digital games have certainly been part of the fourth waves of «digital religion research»³⁵, this overview will limit itself to academic works focusing specifically on video games and will not examine many related aspects of digital media studies.

²⁸ H.A. Campbell et al., *Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming*, in «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», 84, 2016, 3, pp. 641-664.

²⁹ G. Grieve - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler, *Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion. Introduction*, in «Gamevironments», 3, 2015, pp. 1-5.

³⁰ V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*, London, Routledge, 2017.

³¹ F.G. Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine. A New Systematic Theology of Videogames*, Routledge, New York, 2019.

³² Also referred here as «video games» since in the scientific literature they have now been used for many years as synonyms.

³³ For an example see M. Leone, *La Pallavolo Sacra*, in «E/C», online, 2015, pp. 1-16.

³⁴ J. Arjoranta, *How to Define Games and Why We Need to*, in «The Computer Games Journal», 2019, 8, pp. 109-120.

³⁵ H.A. Campbell - G. Evolvi, *Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies*, in «Hum Behav & Emerg Tech», 2, 2020, pp. 5-17.

Second, rather than a systematic literature review aimed at defining *all* the literature *on* a topic³⁶ we have decided to adopt a semiotic methodology by focusing on the different *kinds* of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary scientific discourses and approaches *to* the topic. While trying to include as much literature as possible, the main preoccupation here is epistemological and the cited works have been selected following a criterion of perspectival representativeness: the articles and books cited here are relevant because of all the other similar works that exist as well as because of their belonging to a *typical* way of conceiving how and why scholars should study religion in digital games. Indeed, digital games are multifaced objects of study presenting different aspects from which it is possible to look at their cultural and philosophical implications. Such heterogeneity was already addressed in the beforementioned 2014 special issue of «Online» in which scholars stressed the importance of distinguishing the level of textual content from that of players' behavior in virtual contexts³⁷. Likewise, the already mentioned 2014 inaugural issue of «Gamevironments» would dedicate several pages to the main differences between narrative and ludological approaches to video game content, with a great emphasis on the challenge represented by taking into account all the aspects of religiousness in digital games: from represented symbols to the performative aspects and ludic interactions that are involved³⁸. This distinction was taken up and later complexified by Šisler³⁹ that pointed out five main aspects of religion in digital games:

1. Narratives: the fictional stories of the games and their dialogues;
2. Performance: the behavior and role-playing of players in videogames;
3. Production: the design choices that underlie video game content;
4. Rule system: the implication of game rules in the representation of religion;
5. Player-generated content: the players' discussions and creations outside the game.

³⁶ H. Snyder, *Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines*, in «Journal of Business Research», 104, 2019, pp. 333-339.

³⁷ S. Heidbrink -T. Knoll - J. Wysocki, *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games*.

³⁸ K. Radde-Antweiler - M. Waltmathe - X. Zeiler, *Video Gaming, Let's Plays and Religion*.

³⁹ V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*.

Loosely based on this specification, the present paper will examine the most relevant academic research produced in recent years in order to highlight some possible lacking areas of research at the current time of writing (august 2022). Third, as a consequence of our semiotic approach, we will also conceive religion as a set of cultural discourses and practices shaped by the narrative form of the myth (a key term in the field⁴⁰) understood not as literary genre but as the root and heart of interpretative meaning-making for human beings⁴¹. Counterbalancing the necessary exclusion of all the different forms and meanings of 'games', the choice of a weak notion of 'religion' is functional to include most of the relevant academic literature on this topic. In other words, for our purposes it is extremely important to avoid any *a-priori* definition of religion that would exclude part of the existing literature: the fact that the notion of religion in the studies on digital games ranges from generic magic or faith to explicit references to the Bible is part of our results. Finally, as a consequence of the focus on the multi and interdisciplinary approaches to the different aspects of digital games in which religion is involved in both cultural and philosophical terms, such overview certainly has some limits. Most notably, academic works i) in English language, ii) with multi and interdisciplinary aims and outcomes (such as the ones of game studies), iii) focused on analysis rather than development⁴² or design⁴³ and iv) pertaining to humanities or social sciences have been privileged. However, we are confident that such limits do not substantially compromise the validity of our findings and that, more generally, our narrative approach was essential to achieve our qualitative goal of highlighting how the currently dominant approaches to digital games may determine our current knowledge about the nature, forms and consequences of the presence of religion in digital games.

⁴⁰ E. Gandolfi, *Empirical Triangulation: Applying Multiple Methods to Explore Religion and Myth Through Video Games*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - Xenia Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*, pp. 83-100.

⁴¹ R. Barthes, *Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits*, in «Communications», 8, 1966, pp. 1-27.

⁴² For an example of development-focused reflection in the field see G.P. Grieve et al., *Video Game Development in Asia: Voices from the Field*, in «Gamevironments», 8, 2018, pp. 1-9.

⁴³ For an example of a learning design-focused reflection in the field see O. Gottlieb, *Finding Lost & Found. Designer's Notes from the Process of Creating a Jewish Game for Learning*, in «Gamevironments», 7, 2017, pp. 42-65.

2. Religious Behaviors and Practices in Online Video Games

A persisting trend in research on video games and religion consists of the observation of player's behaviors, practices and thoughts in both offline and online virtual worlds. It is easy to notice how this kind of study has its epistemological roots in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology and find sometimes a precious ally in psychology. Most of these scholars, despite having sometimes different interests and backgrounds, seem mostly interested in gamer-centered approach trying to answer to how gamers are influenced by games in their individual identity (and by extension how games influence communities). From this perspective, digital games are phenomenological and social extensions of the lifeworld, although with some important differences⁴⁴. To study these gamers, they either practice a virtual form of ethnography (in line with the new field of digital anthropology⁴⁵) by going personally inside virtual worlds impersonating an avatar⁴⁶ or examine their behaviors and beliefs from 'outside' through footages, discussions and by doing interviews. As a consequence of this sociological take, using approaches such as the actor-centered one⁴⁷, interviews have a central role in this type of investigation and many articles⁴⁸ of this branch focus on the methodological aspects of using them to study cases such as MMOs religion. Instead of starting from an in-depth analysis of the game's features (from narration and rules to technology) that may be able to convey religious ideas or even simulate religious experience, these scholars start from the players' (sometimes the researcher itself) observable actions and from their personal thoughts expressed through different form of testimonies. This approach is particularly interesting for at least two reasons. First, it includes texts which may have no explicit religious content but around which religious

⁴⁴ J. Tuckett, *Extending the Dimensions of the Social World Through GameWorlds*, in «Gamevironments», 2, 2015, pp. 61-99.

⁴⁵ G.W. Weber - F.L. Bookstein, *Virtual Anthropology. A Guide to a New Interdisciplinary Field*, Vienna, Springer, 2011.

⁴⁶ S.W. Bainbridge, *Surreal Impersonation*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*, pp. 65-79.

⁴⁷ K. Radde-Antweiler, *How to Study Religion and Video Gaming: A Critical Discussion*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 207-216.

⁴⁸ S. Aupers - J. Schaap - L. de Wildt, *Qualitative In-Depth Interviews: Studying Meaning-Making and Religious Reflexivity in MMOs*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler, *Games, Gods and Gamers: Methods for Studying*, pp. 153-167.

dilemma may raise⁴⁹. Secondly, it is in line with the, so to speak, new face of interdisciplinary game studies which seem now far less interested in 'textual' issues and much more in the topic of experience and communities⁵⁰. A shift that may be also related to the new reality of digital games as most of all social games⁵¹.

Inside such perspective, a long-lasting preference can be seen in online titles such as *World of Warcraft* (WoW from now on) or *Minecraft*⁵² and for the online modes of games such as *Call of Duty*⁵³. An emblematic case of this is the book *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*⁵⁴ which was one of the first books on religion in digital games and «looks at conceptualizations of the sacred in massively multiplayer online role-playing games»⁵⁵. The focus on this type of digital setting seems clearly related to some key studies of the late 1990s claiming that «online worlds» became an integral and fundamental part of people's identities⁵⁶. It is thus no coincidence that one of the academic journals most interested in this research topic was the «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet». Moreover, it is worthwhile to notice how before 2010 the interest in games such as WoW had a general focus on the dimension of magic, mystery⁵⁷, and myths⁵⁸. In other cases, the religious theme and content of online games emerged indirectly as a result of the study of social practices such as funerals in virtual worlds and the ethical issues associated with these practices⁵⁹.

49 K. Radde-Antweiler - M. Waltmathe - X. Zeiler, *Video Gaming, Let's Plays and Religion*.

50 F. Mayra, *Exploring Gaming Communities*, in R. Kowert - T. Quandt, *The Video Game Debate: Unravelling the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Video Games*, London, Routledge, 2015, pp. 153-178.

51 <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/industries/tmt/media/outlook/insights-and-perspectives.html>.

52 G. Grieve - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler, *Current Key Perspectives*.

53 J. Tuckett, *Extending the Dimensions*.

54 S.W. Bainbridge, *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy*.

55 H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*.

56 S. Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

57 S. Aupers, 'Better Than the Real World'.

58 T. Krzywinska, *Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests and Backstories: World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft*, in «Games and Culture», 1, 2006, 4, pp. 383-396; T. Krzywinska, *World Creation and Lore: World of Warcraft as Rich Text*, in H. Corneliussen - J.W. Rettberg (eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2008, pp. 123-142.

59 M. Luck, *Crashing a Virtual Funeral: Morality in MMORPG's*, in «Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society», 7, 2009, 4, pp. 280-285; O. Servais, *Funerals in the 'World of*

A later example of one of the first studies on the specific topic of religion is David Feltmate's analysis of the text-based MUD *Darkmists* (1996), a work highlighting the central importance of religion in online fantasy virtual worlds⁶⁰. But MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) are very different from video games. Thus, if one had to point to a seminal book about this theme, Campbell's 2010 *When Religion Meets New Media*⁶¹ would immediately come to mind. Indeed, in this book the author extends previous studies on the relationship between the Internet and religion⁶² to media such as video games. Most importantly, with her methodology of «religious-social shaping of technology», Campbell emphasizes her interest in studying how religious people are «constrained by several social and faith-based factors that inform and guide their responses to the opportunities and challenges offered by new forms of media»⁶³, and she compares Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities. The video game used as a case study by Campbell is not a MUD but the online mass simulation 'game' *Second Life*. This is examined in Chapter Five – «Negotiating with New Media» – in which she offers a description of a virtual cathedral that seeks to be an 'official' Anglican presence in Second Life. An online game was also studied in the same year by Wagner⁶⁴ to investigate the existence of the profane, and again, a year later, by Leone⁶⁵, who adopted a semiotic perspective interested more in the possibilities of sacred virtual spaces than in the behaviors observed. In 2012, a doctoral dissertation by Ryan Hornbeck mixing sociology and anthropology considered similar aspects of the experience of religion in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. Hornbeck concluded that the high-contingency aspects of WoW's gameplay can be seen as Durkheimian religious rituals⁶⁶. In 2014, Geraci's book

Warcraft': Religion, Polemic, and Styles of Play in a Videogame Universe, in «Social Compass», 62, 2015, 3, pp. 362-378.

⁶⁰ D. Feltmate, 'You Win in Agony as the Hot Metal Brands You': *Religious Behavior in an Online Role-Playing Game*, in «Journal of Contemporary Religion», 25, 2010, 3, pp. 363-377.

⁶¹ H.A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, New York, Routledge, 2010.

⁶² B.E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2001; L.L. Dawson - D.E. Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, London, Routledge, 2004.

⁶³ H.A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ R. Wagner, *Our Lady of Persistent Liminality: Virtual Church, Cyberspace, and Second Life*, in M. Mazur - K. McCarthy, *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, London, Routledge, 2010, pp. 258-271.

⁶⁵ M. Leone, *The Semiotics of Religious Space in Second Life*, in «Social Semiotics», 21, 2011, 3, pp. 331-351.

⁶⁶ R.G. Hornbeck, «A Pure World: Moral Cognition and Spiritual Experiences in Chinese World of

Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life took *WoW* and *Second Life* to study how religion was finding new forms within these virtual worlds. The book found that «many residents are now using virtual worlds to reimagine their traditions and work to restore ‘authentic’ sanctity or replace religious institutions with virtual world communities that give meaning and purpose to human life» and that *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* are, therefore ‘virtually sacred’. They do religious work, and therefore they are sacred. Yet they often do so without regard to – and frequently in conflict with – traditional religious institutions and practices; therefore, they are ‘not quite’ religious but are an emerging aspect of contemporary secularism»⁶⁷. One year later, Aupers would use interviews with twenty dutch *WoW* players to confirm this claim and to specify how

«we are increasingly witnessing the rise of new forms of spirituality outside religious institutions that scrutinize ‘belief’ in a transcendent God and embody alternative epistemological strategies to interact with the sacred (Aupers and Houtman 2010; Houtman and Aupers 2007). One such strategy is, what I will call, «mythopoeic spirituality», which is a manifestation of spirituality that fully acknowledges the constructed, fictitious nature of supernatural claims, but, at the same time, maintains that such claims have real spiritual value»⁶⁸.

Furthermore, these findings would also be used as a ground for a philosophical reflection on both the theory of Huzinga’s magic circle and Weber’s disenchantment of the world, showing how research focused on gamers can become in this view the basis for a more theoretical pertaining to ludology and sociology.

With already so many studies done through this perspective, it was only natural to have in 2015 one of the first paper explicitly dedicated to the methodology of participant observation-style virtual ethnography⁶⁹ published together with one of the first paper on the methods to analyze *Let’s Play* videos on YouTube⁷⁰.

Warcraft», PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2012.

⁶⁷ R.M. Geraci, *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁶⁸ S. Aupers, *Spiritual Play: Encountering the Sacred in World of Warcraft*, in V. Frissen et al. (eds.), *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2014, pp. 75-92, here p. 77.

⁶⁹ S.C. Sapach, *The WoW Factor: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Sacred Things and Rituals in World of Warcraft*, in «Gamevironments», 2, 2015, pp. 1-24.

⁷⁰ K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler, *Methods for Analyzing Let’s Plays: Context Analysis for Gaming Videos on YouTube*, in «Gamevironments», 2, 2015, pp. 100-139.

Still, from a methodological point of view, it may be worthwhile to highlight that for some of these scholars the topic of religion in digital games is studied by looking almost exclusively at the explicit discussions (found in online communities and platforms) during which non-gamers, gamers, and game experts talk about religion or religious content. Although it is undeniably true that the analysis of these discussions and debates is generally conducted in relation to the content of the games, such content is in these cases often even less at the center of the researcher's reflections in respect to most of the previously mentioned works. Similarly, traditional interviews are in some cases mixed with data analysis. These analyses range from forums exclusively dedicated to games, to generic forums, to game-specific pages on generic social media such as Facebook or YouTube; and they may even include a specific association such as GameChurch⁷¹.

This specific kind of social research is articulated among the following four types:

1. Studies on the religious content and behavior created by the communities of players.
2. Studies on the reception by players of the religious content created by the authors of the game.
3. Studies on the social reception of religious content created by game authors and players.
4. Studies on the religious roots of social discourses on video games.

One of the first studies in the first category analyzed the social phenomenon of Twitch Plays Pokemon and it was conducted by Marley-Vincent⁷², who investigated how religious interpretations and content emerged within the gaming community by examining the chat and subreddit. This topic was continued in the following year by examining how Christianity influenced such narratives⁷³.

⁷¹ S. Heidbrink - T. Knoll - J. Wysocki, 'What Would Jesus Play?'

⁷² L. Marley-Vincent, *The Politics of Pokémon. Socialized Gaming, Religious Themes and the Construction of Communal Narratives*, «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 7, 2015, pp. 107-138.

⁷³ J. Saucerman - R. Dennis, *Praise Helix! Christian Narrative in Twitch Plays: Pokémon*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 10, 2016, pp. 74-94.

Of the second, and more fertile, type, two of the earliest analyses are a study on the website *Hardcore Christian Gamers*⁷⁴ and another study on the *Game Church*⁷⁵. In the former case, the focus is on the intertwining of religion and gaming to elucidate some of the ways in which evangelicalism impacts the gaming experience and interpretation of video games, particularly violent games. In the latter case, the article focuses primarily on how this contemporary religious initiative related to video games is able to address «games and gamers from a broad perspective, while at the same time making it a medium and tool for socialization, communication, and even religious mission»⁷⁶. A later and very interesting study adopting this approach is *Creeds, Souls & Worlds of Worship: Players' Appropriations of Religious Worldviews through Game Forums*⁷⁷, which conducts a content analysis of 92 threads and identifies two groups (believers and atheists) adopting three different attitudes towards this religious content: debunking (trivializing the religious content), debating, and incorporating (discussing it). The study highlights in its conclusion how religious and non-religious debaters engage with the worldviews they are discussing, drawing completely different understandings of the same games and defending them in elaborate debate. The study was continued and refined in 2019 by the same authors⁷⁸. Another example from these authors is the 2017⁷⁹ work on *BioShock* which «set out to analyze and categorize the attitudes exhibited by communities of gamers on internet forums, debating religious worldviews in games such as *BioShock* and *Assassin's Creed*. Based on 91 discussions, they created a typology of user attitudes that «are theorized in the context of two affordances: the theological affordances of certain interactive systems that invite play with religious worldviews in a secularizing world; and the technological affordances of the Internet forum as a plat-

⁷⁴ S. Luft, *Hardcore Christian Gamers: How Religion Shapes Evangelical Play*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve, *Playing with Religion*, pp. 154-168.

⁷⁵ S. Heidbrink - T. Knoll - J. Wysocki, 'What Would Jesus Play?'

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁷⁷ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Creeds, Souls & Worlds of Worship: Player's Appropriations of Religious Worldviews through Game Forums*, in «DiGRA/FDG '16» - Abstract Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG Dundee, Scotland: Digital Games Research Association and Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games, 13, 2016, 2.

⁷⁸ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Pop Theology*, pp. 1444-1462.

⁷⁹ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Bibles and BioShock: Affording Religious Discussion on Video Game Forums*, in «CHI PLAY '17»: Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play October 2017, pp. 463-475.

form that enables but shapes forum discourse»⁸⁰. Still using *Bioshock* as a game, in 2017 Radde-Antweiler used the baptism scene in *Bioshock* to conduct elicited interviews about religious rituals in games⁸¹. Perhaps even more ambitious is Zeiler 2017's attempt to capture such discourse through comments on YouTube *Let's Plays* videos⁸² and specifically on videos of *Asura's Wrath* (2012), a Buddhist and Hindu-inspired game. This attempt involved the use of coding as a method with which to search for the vast amount of primarily textual data.

As regards the third type, a good example is another of Zeiler's research on Hinduism which related the game's content analysis to «analysis of the intense debate over the game, which was initiated by the diaspora-based Universal Society of Hinduism organization, which criticized an alleged lack of respect for Hindu deities in game environments»⁸³.

Finally, in the last category, a fundamental reference is Šlerka and Šisler's 2017 study of 15 religion-focused game pages on Facebook that analyzed «publicly available data on 10,275 users of these pages» and indicated «that there are several closely related groups of religion-focused game pages on Facebook, whose audiences are significantly 'close' to each other and share similar intentional positions»⁸⁴. This type of study, moreover, has been conducted not only on gamers but also on game experts/critics and game journals. One example is Perreault's 2015 dissertation⁸⁵, which aims to uncover what in his view is a «religious hegemony» operating in a niche of journalism. Perreault's research explores the nature and operation of religious hegemony in games journalism through in-depth interviews with games journalists and narrative-framed textual analysis of games journalism texts from 1993 and 2013.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 463.

⁸¹ K. Radde-Antweiler, *Gaming Elicitation in Episodic Interviews*, in V. Šisler, K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*, pp. 33-48.

⁸² X. Zeiler, *YouTube Let's Plays, Asian Games, and Buddhist and Hindu Religions*, in V. Šisler, K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*, pp. 189-204.

⁸³ X. Zeiler, *The Global Mediatization of Hinduism Through Digital Games*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, p. 67.

⁸⁴ J. Šlerka - V. Šisler, *Normalized Social Distance: Quantitative Analysis of Religion-Centered Gaming Pages on Social Networks*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*, p.171.

⁸⁵ G. Perreault, «Sacred Space Evaders: Religious Hegemony in Gaming Journalism», PhD diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 2015.

Generally speaking, despite focusing more on the observable experience of the gamers or on the *a-posteriori* verbalization of such experience, most of the studies mentioned up to now have highlighted the deep social significance of the secularized religious experience offered by digital games outside of religions and even to non-believers. Such thesis that can be traced back to Aupers and Schaap's 2015 article on pagan spirituality in *World of Warcraft* which «offers young World of Warcraft players the opportunity to experience spirituality without necessarily believing in supernatural claims; to fully immerse themselves in the 'magic circle' without converting to a predefined set of beliefs, and to freely experience religious narratives without becoming a true believer»⁸⁶. And its conclusion is still valid in 2018 as shown by de Wildt and Aupers that interviewed several video game players about their experience of role-playing within the games. The conclusion drawn from these interviews was that

«gamers of different (non-) religious beliefs adopt different worldviews while role-playing the (non-) religious Other. Atheists relativize their position, opening up to the logic of religious worldviews; Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, in turn, compare their traditions and can draw conclusions about the similarities underlying the different world religions ... The conclusion is that playing the religious Other in video games offers the possibility of suspending (non-)religious worldviews and empathizing with the (non-) religious Other»⁸⁷.

Similarly, in 2017 a series of interviews were conducted by Julian Schaap and Stef Aupers with 22 international WoW players⁸⁸. These interviews highlighted three different forms of 'religious reflexivity' that demonstrated how online games can serve as 'laboratories' where young people freely experiment with religion outside of established churches. As an alternative to interviews, such religious behaviors have also recently been studied using the ethnographic methodology and reaching similar conclusions. This is the case of Grieve's ethnographic study of Buddhist practices in *Second Life*, whose conclusion is that «Second Life can be considered a game and its religious practice is authentic because its game engages with what its users perceive as sacred»⁸⁹. Indeed, this religious dimension has also been found in games without any explicit form of re-

⁸⁶ S. Aupers - J. Schaap, *Beyond Belief: Playing with Pagan Spirituality in World of Warcraft*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 7, 2015, pp. 190-206.

⁸⁷ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Playing the Other: Role-Playing Religion in Videogames*, in «European Journal of Cultural Studies», 22, 2018, 5-6, pp. 867-884.

⁸⁸ J. Schaap - S. Aupers, *'Gods in World of Warcraft exist': Religious Reflexivity and the Quest for Meaning in Online Computer Games*, in «New Media & Society», 19, 2017, 11, pp. 1744-1760.

⁸⁹ G.P. Grieve, *An Ethnographic Method for the Study of Religion in Video Game Environments*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler, *Methods for Studying*, p. 107.

ligion, such as in the case of *The Last of Us* examined by Rautalahti as an interesting case of a life-changing game that has generated several discussions and videos presenting a confessional tone posing an interesting structural analogy to other types of confessional talks where a life-change has a similar focus, mediating self-transformation⁹⁰.

At the same time, however, it is extremely interesting to note how all these socio-anthropological researches and findings on «non-traditional» religious experiences through digital games have recently led to the proposal of abandoning the very notion of religion.

«This article argues that researchers of religion and video gaming, including but not limited to gameenvironments, should now leave their initial use of the category of religion behind. While religion might work for interpreting explicit religious elements in the content of a video game, it misses the majority of underlying or implicit religious topics within the game and gameplay as well as the surrounding media platforms»⁹¹.

A claim that, by looking at journals such as «Gamevironments», born with explicit interests in religion, seems to concretely highlight a new path for research as proved by the last five issues in which religion is mostly absent and substituted by more explicit dilemmas and questioning of political values.

3. Textual Analysis of Religious Content and Experience

The second stream of studies on religion in digital games examines the presence of religious content in these cultural artifacts as an explicit reference to both specific existing historical religions and invented/implicit ones⁹² or ‘hyper-real’ religions⁹³. This type of study is mostly related to an interest in human artifacts from the point of view of their creation, their meaning-making and of their experiential potential and design (resulting here in the simulation of religious experiences arising from digital and ludic interactions). As in the previous case that we have just analyzed, these studies highlight a massive presence of religion in digital games that is seen by many scholars as even more significant than some other

⁹⁰ H. Rautalahti, ‘How Video Games Changed My Life’: *Life-Changing Testimonies and The Last of Us*, in «Gamevironments», 10, 2019, pp. 1-38.

⁹¹ G.P. Grieve - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler, *Paradise Lost. Value Formations as an Analytical Concept for the Study of Gamevironments*, in «Gamevironments», 12, 2020, pp. 77-113.

⁹² C. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010; M.A. David-
sen, *The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach*, in «Religion», 46, 2016, 4, pp. 521-549.

⁹³ A. Possamai (ed.), *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, Boston, Brill, 2012.

forms of non-religious contact with religions: «As churches become tourist landmarks rather than places of worship; the stories and characters of religions – their intangible cultural heritage – survive as rich bases for popular media alongside their traditional use of mediating divinity»⁹⁴. Therefore, many studies exist on such topics.

While these studies are not opposed to the ones hitherto considered, their focus is no longer on player behaviors observed (in online contexts or recorded) or in their expressed experience (on websites or during interviews) but on 'textual' content, including its production and interpretations. As a result, the preferred methodologies are no longer sociological or ethnographic, but ones drawn from humanities disciplines such as discourse analysis, semiotics, comparative literacy, media studies, and ludology.

One of the first work to blend implicit and explicit religious content of video games was Anthony's 2014 remarkable study⁹⁵ conducted on the history of both pre-digital and digital games that designed different strategies for «engaging with the 'divine' or the central object of a religious tradition», creating a typology of games that can be used to understand the contemporary digital game landscape. Most works on the religious potential of texts, however, typically focuses on either implicit or explicit content. Therefore, for the purpose of our discussion, we will divide these aspects into two subsections.

3.1 *Fictional Religions, Implicit Religious Content, and Meta-Religious Experiences*

The intertextual presence of references to historical religions in video games presenting fictional systems of metaphysics was very well known to scholars since the very beginning of these studies. A good example of this is Love's 2011 study on the intertextuality of religion in digital games⁹⁶ with a particular focus on the ethical function of religion in video games in a title such as *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. Such interest has not faded and in recent years many researchers have studied fictional religions, theological *topoi*, and how the act itself of playing in a virtual world often

⁹⁴ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Marketable Religion: How Game Company Ubisoft Commodified Religion for a Global Audience*, in «Journal of Consumer Culture», 1, 2021, 1, pp. 1-22.

⁹⁵ J. Anthony, *Dreidels to Dante's Inferno*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Gregory (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 25-46.

⁹⁶ M.C. Love, *Not-So-Sacred Quests: Religion, Intertextuality, and Ethics in Video Games*, «Religious Studies and Theology», 29, 2011, 2, pp. 191-213.

has a religious dimension and can therefore be used to better understand contemporary post-secularism.

These studies tend to focus on how invented religions in popular culture arise from many elements of historical religions that are reinterpreted and modified and, more importantly, still convey ideas about real religion. In Bosman's words:

«'Traditional' or 'classic' Christian theological topoi such as salvation, incarnation, sacrifice, and the Eschaton are yet easily found in modern-day video games, such as the Mass Effect series, Bioshock, Bioshock: Infinite, Master Reboot, Limbo, Brink, Fallout 3, Fallout 3: New Vegas, Metro 2033, Metro 2033: Last Light, and the Diablo series. Ancient stories from the Christian tradition are reappearing in new and inventive forms and modes in modern video games. Can God be found in video games? And if so, how and where?»⁹⁷.

An example of this type of work is Wysocki's examination of how religion is represented in *Bioshock Infinite* (2013). In his work, he explains «how motifs from American religious history are used to construct its game world» and how the game plays with popular notions of evangelical religion «mixed with themes related to so-called dangerous cults and sects»⁹⁸ a consequence of the inability to directly critique the mainstream religious movement as evangelical Christianity. In a similar vein, one can also find Rautalahti's study⁹⁹ of *Dishonored* (2012), which examines how themes of authority and religion are represented and discussed in this game where religion is referenced through explicit constructions of authority. Indeed, it would seem that it is precisely in fictional contexts and religions that we find most of the critical depictions of religion¹⁰⁰. Furthermore, we find here again the conclusion that the fictionally represented religion of digital games tends to always be shaped and determined by secularism¹⁰¹, as in the case of *The Witcher 3*.

⁹⁷ F.G. Bosman, 'Playing God'. *On God and Game*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 7, 2015, pp. 185-189, here p. 185.

⁹⁸ J. Wysocki, *Critique with Limits – The Construction of American Religion in BioShock: Infinite*, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 150.

⁹⁹ H. Rautalahti, *Disenchanting Faith – Religion and Authority in the Dishonored Universe*, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 5, p. 146.

¹⁰⁰ F.G. Bosman, *The Sacred and the Digital. Critical Depictions of Religions in Digital Games*, in «Religions», 10, 2019, 2.

¹⁰¹ M. Podvalnyi, *Religious Cults in the Fictional World of the Witcher RPG*, in «Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration», 37, 2019, 3, pp. 179-190.

Such research can also highlight how fictional narratives can represent critically relevant social themes, as in the case of Paulissen's 2018 study on how the relationship between science and religion can be explored through video games¹⁰². More recently, the second edition of *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*¹⁰³ has included a similar analysis of religious content in the *Fallout* series. Furthermore, this line of inquiry has also examined the relationship and function of this fictional religion in contemporary reinterpretations of history and religion. Gregory did so already back in 2014 with a contribution highlighting how «Eco's notion of neomedievalism is essential to understanding the experience of realism elicited by religion in video games»¹⁰⁴ and how «the religious systems and neomedieval cosmologies invented for video games are not merely replicas of historical religions; they reflect contemporary values, resonate with modern audiences, and guide players into and through game worlds»¹⁰⁵, concluding that religion is a narrative technique in neo-medieval game worlds in which «quotations from medieval religion have many of the same effects as their medieval historical analogues»¹⁰⁶. A similar study published the same year is Walter's 2014 work exploring «supernatural horror in the ritualized game worlds of *Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*» and arguing that «upon entering these horrific magical circles, Western and Japanese players experience terror, abjection, and ultimately, religious transcendence»¹⁰⁷. Interestingly, this work conducts the intertextual analysis of these games as «a mixture of purposely distorted elements, or simulacra, drawn from Western and 'non-Japanese' religions integrated into a strict pseudo-Christian hierarchical model»¹⁰⁸ with the experience of the play. Finally, it has also been pointed out that technology itself is increasingly represented as faith and belief, especially in post-apocalyptic game narratives¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰² P.C. Paulissen, *The Dark of the Covenant: Christian Imagery, Fundamentalism, and the Relationship between Science and Religion in the Halo Video Game Series*, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 4, p. 126.

¹⁰³ R. Santana - G. Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*, McFarland, Jefferson, 2021².

¹⁰⁴ R. Gregory, *Citing the Medieval. Using Religion as World-Building Infrastructure in Fantasy MMORPGS*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 134-153, here p. 135.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁷ G. Walter, *Silent Hill and Fatal Frame. Finding Transcendent Horror in and Beyond the Haunted Magic Circle*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 88-106, here pp. 88-89.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁹ L. de Wildt et al., 'Things Greater than Thou': Post-Apocalyptic Religion in Games, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 6, 169.

The 'fictional' religious content of video games, however, has also been studied more often in terms of its religious potential from an experiential perspective. This 'experience' is studied either as an outcome of a game's cultural content or by focusing instead on various significant features involved in both the technology of video games and their design: agency, creation, avatars, death, empowerment, moral choices¹¹⁰, etc. As we have seen in the socio-anthropological approach, the presence of religious elements in the narrative may once again be applied also to a game which has no religious references at all: this is the case of the study by Gil-Gimeno and colleagues in which they argued that «in our digitalized societies, soccer video games are a kind of game about the game from which an associated religious transcendence emerges»¹¹¹, an assertion made in light of the different narrative aspects of the sport that are enacted and implied during play.

Most studies that focus on religious experience are in fact studies that consider the act itself of interacting with both digital technology and the rules involved in playing video games. The birth of this perspective is related to two different traditions of academic literatures and disciplinary reflections.

The first one is connected to the recognition of a link between spirituality and technology since the late nineties¹¹² and to the idea in the mid-2000s of a potential religious dimension within technoculture¹¹³. Such ideas resulted in phenomena still at the center of academic studies such as the one of technopaganism¹¹⁴ and in the possibility of considering video games inside the broader field of digital religion research¹¹⁵. Of course, this correlation was not immediately nor simply accepted, and has seen both researchers fundamentally denying such idea and others accepting it. Among those who criticized this connection was Herzfeld¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ T. Knoll, 'Instant Karma' – Moral Decision Making Systems in Digital Games, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 4, p. 131.

¹¹¹ J. Gil-Gimeno - C. Sánchez-Capdequí - J. Beriain, *Play, Game, and Videogame: The Metamorphosis of Play*, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 5, p. 162.

¹¹² M. Bauwens, *Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship*, in «First Monday», 1, 1996, 5.

¹¹³ P. Hefner, *Technology and Human Becoming*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003.

¹¹⁴ V. Dos Santos, *Technopaganism: A Contemporary Spirituality in the Digital Space*. Available online: <https://www.crem.it/technopaganism-a-contemporary-spirituality-in-the-digital-space/>.

¹¹⁵ H.A. Campbell - G. Evolvi, *Contextualizing Current Digital Religion*, pp. 5-17.

¹¹⁶ N. Herzfeld, *Terminator or Super Mario: Human/Computer Hybrids, Actual and Virtual*, in «Dialog», 44, 2005, 4, pp. 347-353.

whose reflection on the hybridization characteristic of technoculture took the video game as a symbolic example of virtual hybridization and complained about the lack of relationships involved in such interactions. Similarly, one of the first doctoral dissertations on the relation between gaming technology and religion was published in 2009 by Hayse who criticized how the capitalist and militaristic architecture of many evangelical Christian video games undermined their potential for faithful religious education¹¹⁷. Indeed, given the premise that «The video game medium is ideally suited to represent one aspect of religion: the experience of being a god»¹¹⁸, it was natural to see a strong critical awareness about this medium shared between scholars of religion. Diversely, and perhaps not coincidentally in works with less explicit educational purposes and preoccupations, an emblematic case of scholars endorsing such view is Garner's 2005 introductory paper, which points out that

«The metaphors of God as a hacker and of human beings as made in the image of a hacking God are possible avenues for engaging with the creative narratives found in technoculture – in the desire to create new things, to build first and ask questions later, and to create new worlds, virtual and physical, to inhabit. In doing so, some of the existential and practical questions of living in such a world might begin to be addressed»¹¹⁹. A later and very interesting take on this issue is Schut's somewhat middle ground position in 2014, for which «the systematic nature of game rules and computer programming directs the video game medium toward a mechanical and demystified representation of religion. At the same time, other factors, such as video games' ability to weave narratives, invoke out-of-game texts and themes, and provide space for emergent play, complicate video game bias toward mechanized religion»¹²⁰.

As we can already see in these two views, the technological and culturally gamified elements are not easy to distinguish. Certainly, there are in this tradition works that focuses mainly on technologies, such as in works on the specific technology of Virtual Reality (VR) to reflect on how «contemporary virtual reality technology can change video gaming relationship to death through its ability to trigger out-of-body experiences»¹²¹.

¹¹⁷ M. Hayse, «Religious Architecture in Videogames: Perspectives from Curriculum Theory and Religious Education», Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2009.

¹¹⁸ K. Schut, *They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 255-276.

¹¹⁹ S. Garner, *Hacking with the Divine: A Metaphor for Theology-Technology Engagement*, in «Colloquium», 37, 2005, 2, pp. 181-195.

¹²⁰ K. Schut, *They Kill Mystery*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, p. 256.

¹²¹ J. Loewen, *Death, Fabulation, and Virtual Reality Gaming*, in «Gamevironments», 9, 2018, pp. 202-221.

Moreover, even long before the second spring of VR (around 2019-2020) some games have tried to use the involvement of the player's body to enact some religious aspect of spirituality as in the case of the meditation in *Deepak Chopra's Leela* (2011). Yet when moving from the specificities of the hardware to the represented content of the software the distinctions become far more blurred. As an example: are the studies on the religious dimensions of the avatar related to the specificities of the video game's technology, game design or narration? The three different aspects are clearly one and the same and interrelated. Such unified view has been the one used to study through multimodal semiotics the notion of «spirit» in relation to the act of acting as an avatar in a liminal place of existence¹²². Likewise, in 2016 Ohlendorf¹²³ used a mix of game studies and folklore studies to inquire on the religious dimension behind the legendary figure of «Herobrine» (a legend invented by the players of *Minecraft*), by reflecting on the notion of virtual game space and on the liminality of such space. It is also in this perspective that Wise used digital in-games death for a reflection on the theme addressed by Christian of difficulty of continuity of identity across the gap of death¹²⁴ and that McConeghy studied the representation of death in *anime* set in secularized video game¹²⁵. Similarly and recently, Natale and Pasulka have argued in a 2019 edited volume¹²⁶ that religious beliefs and practices are inextricably linked to the functioning of digital media. In such work, the semioticians Cassone and Thibault analyzed several games such as *Planescape Torment* (1999), *Nier: Automata* (2017), *The Talos Principle* (2014), and *The Stanley Parable* (2013) to show different peculiar dynamics involved in the relationships between religion, belief, and the ludic experience¹²⁷. Another good example of this is the interest in the 'god games' genre, presenting both a particular technological mediation and cultural representation of

¹²² T. Appignani - K. Kruzan - I.N. Neill, *Spirits in the Aether: Digital Ghosts in Final Fantasy XIV*, in «Gamevironments», 2, 2015, pp. 25-60.

¹²³ R. Ohlendorf, *Playing with the Legend: Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in Minecraft*, «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 10, 2016, pp. 27-44.

¹²⁴ J. Wise, *The Self Across the Gap of Death: Some Christian Constructions of Continued Identity from Athenagoras to Ratzinger and Their Relevance to Digital Reconstitutions*, in «Gamevironments», 9, 2018, pp. 222-249.

¹²⁵ D. McConeghy, *Win to Exit: Perma-Death and Resurrection in Sword Art Online and Log Horizon*, in «Gamevironments», 9, 2018, pp. 170-201.

¹²⁶ S. Natale - D. Pasulka (eds.), *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural*, New York, Oxford Academic, 2019.

¹²⁷ V. Idone Cassone - M. Thibault, *I Play, Therefore I Believe: Religio and Faith in Digital Games*, in S. Natale - D. Pasulka (eds.), *Believing in Bits*, pp. 73-89.

'control'. One of the first analyses was conducted by the semiotician Meneghelli in a book devoted to this genre¹²⁸, which did not focus on religious aspects but investigated some semiotic causes of the sense of empowerment due to the interface and top-down view. Much later, analysis of this genre would be continued by Wiemker and Wysocki's 2014 study on the 'god game' genre in which they discussed «the 'god game' genre that puts the player in a position to influence different layers of a complex game system, such as a tribe, a city, or other social or economic systems, etc.» and asked «what this genre has to do with the concepts of 'god' or gods»¹²⁹, eventually exploring «games that present more distinct images of gods and show how concepts from different religious contexts, such as Greek or Japanese mythology, are used in a game's narrative»¹³⁰. A year later, Bosman once again emphasized the importance of studies on this genre¹³¹. Finally, it should be highlighted how this approach is also deeply rooted and influenced in Galloway's idea of the allegoric power of the underlying code of games¹³², a notion that is behind (in part at least) the fact of justifying why the digital interactions of the players can be studied as meaningful actions. See for example the 2012 paper of Wagner on some religious issues around first-person shooter¹³³.

The second tradition at the origin of this inquiry is related to the affirmation of ludology and looks at how such an experience of religion is also found in the very act of playing and in the game mechanics themselves. This perspective, formally founded by Bogost in 2007, was *in nuce* present from the beginning of studies on religion in digital games such as Plate 2010¹³⁴. This of course does not mean completely disregarding the narrative, as testified by these studies that may sometimes focus on

¹²⁸ A. Meneghelli, *Dentro lo schermo. Immersione e interattività nei god games*, Milano, Unicopli, 2007.

¹²⁹ M. Wiemker - J. Wysocki, 'When People Pray, a God Is Born ... This God Is You!' *An Introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 5, 2014, pp. 197-223, here p. 197.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹³¹ F.G. Bosman, 'Playing God', pp. 185-189.

¹³² A.R. Galloway, *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

¹³³ R. Wagner, *First-Person Shooter Religion: Algorithmic Culture and Inter-Religious Encounter*, in «Cross Currents», 62, 2012, 2, pp. 181-203.

¹³⁴ B. Plate, *Religion Is Playing Games: Playing Video Gods, Playing to Play*, in «Religious Studies and Theology», 29, 2010, 2, pp. 215-230.

the story¹³⁵, always putting it in relation with the game mechanics and interactions. One of the earliest works in this regard was Wagner's 2014 reflection on the analogy between games and religion in terms of how both are

«ordering activities that offer a mode of escape from the vicissitudes of contemporary life, and both require, at least temporarily, that practitioners surrender to a predetermined set of rules that shape a worldview and offer a system of order and structure that is comforting for its very predictability»¹³⁶.

Similarly, in the same year, Steffen reviewed «a number of scientific and journalistic publications that, in their discussion of the effects of digital games, not only refer to religious terms, metaphors, and themes but also provide details about the characteristics of the corresponding ludological structure»¹³⁷ and proposed several criteria «for comparing the spiritual efficacy of digital games – a key aspect of the implicit religious potential of games »¹³⁸ by taking into account some very specific characteristics of both games and video games, such as «flow, meditation, empowerment, disempowerment and morality»¹³⁹, and applying them to the indie horror game *The Path* to explain why players on the game's forum often referred to religion to explain their experience and understanding. Later, the same author would write a dissertation¹⁴⁰ on how the *Risen* (2009) and *Anno 1404* (2009) games convey religious ideas through both their narrative content and the ludic specificities of the medium. This ludological approach was subsequently adopted by scholars from different disciplines, as in Fiadotau's use of phenomenological hermeneutics to «examine ludo-narrative interaction in games and relate it to the phenomenological dimension of religion» connecting it «to the Japanese religio-aesthetic

¹³⁵ S.A. Bennis, *When All You Can Be Is about Who You Already Are: Dragon Age: Inquisition and the Uncovering of Real-Life Behavior Patterns*, in B. Kuhn - A. Bhreur-Lagounaris (eds.), *Levelling Up: The Cultural Impact of Contemporary Videogames*, Leiden, Brill, 2016, pp. 63-72.

¹³⁶ R. Wagner, *The Importance of Playing in Earnest*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 193-213, here p. 193.

¹³⁷ O. Steffen, 'God Modes' and 'God Moods': What Does a Digital Game Need to Be Spiritually Effective?, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 214-237, here p. 215.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁰ O. Steffen, *Religion in Games: Eine Methode für die religionswissenschaftliche Digitalspielforschung*, Berlin, Reimer, 2017.

concept of *ma*»¹⁴¹. Likely, in 2018 Bosman also analyzed the relation between the three different types of death narratives and design in modern video games and how religions (especially monotheistic ones) help people to deal with the universal inevitability of death¹⁴². In the same year, Barnes would also study the presence of death in games by examining the role of both a material 'toy' (Amiibo) and of the ritualized dimension of play in the video game *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*¹⁴³. Finally, a recent and original example of this experiential approach that give great attention to game design affordances is Wolf's 2018 article outlining how «religion and theological ideas can be made manifest in video games»¹⁴⁴ and describing the creation of video games as a religious activity by examining contemplative experiences in video games such as *Myst* (1993).

Despite a great emphasis of these last works on the ludological structure, however, it must be noted that also in these cases many technological elements of digital technology are often taken into account. We can therefore conclude that this specific line of research on the implicit religious elements in the experience of video games is perhaps the most interdisciplinary and multilayered of all, both for the methods used and for the object researched.

3.2 *Explicit Content*

This second stream of research assumes that «video games increasingly recreate real-world events and spaces, making tangible connections to the outside world. In doing so, they use real people, places, and cultures as referents, opening up new forms of representation»¹⁴⁵. These studies tend to focus on games with stronger historical situations, with specific titles that have extremely long traditions of study as it is the case for the *Assassin's Creed* series, with studies on their narrative that still continues to the present day¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴¹ M. Fiadotau, *Phenomenological Hermeneutics as a Bridge Between Video Games and Religio-Aesthetics*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*, pp. 101-114.

¹⁴² F.G. Bosman, *Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games*, in «Gamevironments», 9, 2018, pp. 12-52.

¹⁴³ R. Barnes, *Perilous and Peril-Less Gaming: Representations of Death with Nintendo's Wolf Link Amiibo*, in «Gamevironments», 9, 2018, pp. 107-134.

¹⁴⁴ M. Wolf, *Contemplation, Subcreation, and Video Games*, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 5, p. 142.

¹⁴⁵ V. Šisler, *From Kuma\War to Quraish: Representation of Islam in Arab and American Video Games*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 109-133, here p. 109.

¹⁴⁶ Ö. Mirza - S. Şengün, *An Analysis of the Use of Religious Elements in Assassin's Creed Origins*, in

Within this stream, it is possible to distinguish between studies on the representation of religious communities and studies on the representation of religious deities, figures, and symbols. A significant feature of these studies concerns the difference between mainstream games produced by the largest companies for a global audience and 'less famous' games produced for specific audiences and by specific countries. In all of these cases, however, the primary interest is in how game narratives and aesthetics convey ideas about religion. There are three broadly different approaches.

The first approach is discourse analysis of the stories, dialogue, and visual representations of the games. This analysis can be conducted on a single game or comparatively across different titles. In addition, a contrast between games produced for a broad target audience and games produced for an audience that believes in a specific religion is often highlighted. One of the earliest examples of this interest in religiously influenced content influencing the social imaginary about religions is Šisler's 2008¹⁴⁷ and 2009¹⁴⁸ cultural survey comparing the representation of Muslims and Arabs in video games produced in the US and video games produced in the Muslim world: a topic that would be studied again by Šisler several years later¹⁴⁹.

This comparative approach to religious representations was also discussed and extended a few years later by Campbell in an essay on the alternative narratives created in selected games aimed at Christians, Jews, and Muslims¹⁵⁰. Other examples of these studies are Trattner's 2016&2017 analyses of the ideological misrepresentation of Islam in recent Western military shooter games¹⁵¹ (using the example of the 2012

B. Bostan, *Games and Narrative: Theory and Practice*, Cham, Springer, 2022, pp. 249-265.

¹⁴⁷ V. Šisler, *Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games*, in «European Journal of Cultural Studies», 11, 2008, 2, pp. 203-220.

¹⁴⁸ V. Šisler, *Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam: New Media and the Communication of Values*, in J. Pink, *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption*, pp. 231-258.; V. Šisler, *Palestine in Pixels: The Holy Land, Arab-Israeli Conflict, and Reality Construction in Video Games*, in «Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication», 2, 2009, 2, pp. 275-292.

¹⁴⁹ V. Šisler, *From Kuma\War to Quraish*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 109-133.

¹⁵⁰ H.A. Campbell, *Islamogaming: Digital Dignity via Alternative Storytellers*, in C. Detweiler, *Halos and Avatars*, pp. 63-74.

¹⁵¹ K. Trattner, *Religion, Games, and Othering: An Intersectional Approach*, in «Gamevironments», 4, 2016, pp. 24-60; K. Trattner, *Studying Religion and Hegemony in Video Games*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler, *Methods for Studying*, pp. 17-32.

video game *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*) and Bosman's 2016 analysis of the non-stereotypical representation of Muslims through the historically correct representation of the Nizari Isma'ilis¹⁵². This kind of study has been done not only for the representation of Muslims but also for representations of Jews in articles such as Masso and Abrams' paper which uses «the hard-boiled Jewish crime video game, *The Shivah*, as a case study» to uncover and discuss the «representations of Judaism by adopting a semiotic approach derived from film studies combined with a new corpus-based critical discourse analysis: a multimodal approach»¹⁵³. In relation to Christianity, studies have also focused both on the symbolic representation of redemption through baptism¹⁵⁴ and on the reinterpretation of traditional Christian Mythology through Gnostic, Docetic and Islamic theological elements¹⁵⁵. Even entire religious episodes can be represented in games and thus have been studied, as in the case of Bosman and colleagues' narrative analysis of *The Binding of Isaac* (2011) which performs an intertextual comparison with the biblical story of Genesis 22:1-19 that illustrates a case of criticism of religion related to abuse and violence¹⁵⁶. Furthermore, these analyses may also focus on the representation of eastern deities, as in Zeiler's analysis of «Hindu deities and narratives in digital games produced in India and focused on the disclosure of negotiations of Hindu authority and identity in game contexts»¹⁵⁷. Similarly, de Wildt and Aupers have very recently published an article¹⁵⁸ on the implication of using real-life deities in fictional video games, such as the *Final Fantasy* Japanese series, by studying their representation. Very recently, a specific history of the representation of religion in the series

¹⁵² F.G. Bosman, 'Nothing Is True, Everything Is Permitted'. *The Portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's Creed Game Series*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 10, 2016, pp. 6-26.

¹⁵³ I.C. Masso - N. Abrams, *Locating the Pixelated Jew. A Multimodal Method for Exploring Judaism in The Shivah*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 47-65, here p. 47.

¹⁵⁴ F. Bosman, *Accept Your Baptism, and Die! Redemption, Death and Baptism in Bioshock Infinite*, in «Gamevironments», 6, 2017, pp. 100-129.

¹⁵⁵ F.G. Bosman, 'The Poor Carpenter': *Reinterpreting Christian Mythology in the Assassin's Creed Game Series*, in «Gamevironments», 4, 2016.

¹⁵⁶ F.G. Bosman - A.L. van Wieringen, *I Have Faith in Thee, Lord: Criticism of Religion and Child Abuse in the Video Game the Binding of Isaac*, in «Religions», 9, 2018, 4, p. 133.

¹⁵⁷ X. Zeiler, *The Global Mediatization*, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, p. 66.

¹⁵⁸ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Eclectic Religion: The Flattening of Religious Cultural Heritage in Videogames*, in «International Journal of Heritage Studies», 27, 2021, 3, pp. 312-330, here p. 312.

Civilization has been published¹⁵⁹, comparing one title with another.

Moreover, these studies can also focus on other religious figures, as in O'Donnell's investigation of the use of demons in video games. Indeed, this article focuses on the games *DmC: Devil May Cry* (2013), and *Shin Megami Tensei IV* (2013) to analyze how representations of demons in video games reproduce and subvert theological and socio-historical representations¹⁶⁰. Under a slightly different perspective, religious figures and symbols in video games have also been studied comparatively in terms of censorship and different localizations of the same game¹⁶¹.

Leaving aside all these comparative studies, an original take on the study of explicit historical religion in digital games can be seen in works such as Walthemate's 2014 sociophenomenological reflection on the famous case of the Church of England suing the producers of the game *Resistance* (2006) for depicting violence in this sacred place without their permission. In this work, Walthemate asks «whether it is possible to describe religious symbols – which are often used in video games – as samples of 'real' religiosity?»¹⁶² and concludes that «what makes a video game 'religious' is not just the occasional mention of a deity or other overtly religious aspects, but the relationship between the mode of playful experience of symbolic universes and the transformation of these experiences into other parts of the lifeworld»¹⁶³. Likewise, another interesting research is the one on the specificities of enemies to 'kill' in Christian Games, which has been used to make ethical reflections on the controversial violence involved in digital games¹⁶⁴.

The second approach is to move from the level of explicit discourse to the level of game rules and mathematics. For example, Šisler uses the Petri net to analyze rule-based representations of Catholic Christianity, Sunni

¹⁵⁹ B.E. Zeller, 'American Wise Men Discover the Secret of Religion': Religious Content in the Civilization Computer Game Series, in «Journal of Religion and Popular Culture», 34, 2022, 1, pp. 37-52.

¹⁶⁰ J. O'Donnell, A Digital Devil's Saga. Representation(s) of the Demon in Recent Videogames, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 7, 2015, pp. 139-159.

¹⁶¹ P. Likarish, Filtering Cultural Feedback: Religion, Censorship, and Localization in Actraiser and Other Mainstream Video Games, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 170-190.

¹⁶² M. Walthemate, Bridging Multiple Realities. Religion, Play, and Alfred Schutz's Theory of the Life-World, in H.A. Campbell - G.P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion*, pp. 238-254, here p. 239.

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁴ V. Gonzalez, No Sympathy for Devils: What Christian Video Games Can Teach Us About Violence in Family-Friendly Entertainment, in «Gamevironments», 9, 2018, pp. 53-106.

Islam, and Iroquois religious beliefs in the strategy game *Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs*. He states that, in terms of the rules system,

«the three religions are schematized and reduced to a system of effects and bonuses that make players more powerful economically and militarily. Nevertheless, while the rule-based representations of Catholic Christianity and Sunni Islam are nearly identical, the representation of Iroquois religious beliefs differs significantly from these two and manifests a post-colonial bias»¹⁶⁵.

This line of inquiry, more related to ludological and rhetorical studies of meaning construction in games, is however not very common in the study of explicit religious elements.

Finally, another stream of research concerns the cultural context behind the production of game content. From this perspective, a first type of analysis focuses on how religion is 'changed' for the specific audience of gamers. A recent study providing critical insight into this phenomenon is de Wild and Aupers 2021 paper which shows, through interviews with developers, how religions are transformed into a «depoliticized, universalized, science fiction» version called «marketable religion» in virtue of its ability to be «consumed by everyone – regardless of cultural background or belief»¹⁶⁶. A second type of analysis looks at the other side of the coin: at the influence of the designers in the religious and political content that will inevitably be incorporated into video games¹⁶⁷ as well as how the Bible study paradigm influence the production of religious games¹⁶⁸.

4. Final Observations

¹⁶⁵ V. Šisler, *Petri Net Modeling: Analyzing Rule-Based Representations of Religion in Video Games*, in V. Šisler - K. Radde-Antweiler - X. Zeiler (eds.), *Methods for Studying*, pp. 133-151, here p. 133.

¹⁶⁶ L. de Wildt - S. Aupers, *Marketable Religion*.

¹⁶⁷ S. Piasecki, *Redemption Through Annihilation?! - Game Designer's Views on Religion, Culture and Society and Its Influences on Digital Games*, in «Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 10, 2016, pp. 45-73.

¹⁶⁸ A.M. de Novaes - E.E. Lima, *Bible Games as Religious Educational Tools in Seventh-Day Adventist Church. A Ludic Inventory*, in «Gamevironments», 15, 2021, pp. 56-101.

In light of this overview, we will now conclude with a brief reflection on four points of the past and future of the studies on religion in digital games.

The first point to highlight is how in the last twenty years no significant work has been able to demonstrate the non-religious relevance of digital games both as a practice and as cultural artifacts. A relevance mostly rooted in the idea that digital games testify how through secularism many western cultures have developed a somehow new and widespread form of religiousness. On the one hand, this may paradoxically be seen negatively because of the impression of many studies (especially of the first type) all finding the same results and therefore 'nothing new'. On the other hand, however, the outstanding diversity of both the methods and objects used to reach such conclusion make it constantly new and make the value of this claim ever-growing. Furthermore, these results are even more significant in the light of the socio-economic and cultural transformations that have occurred in the last ten years and that deeply changed many of our societies. Nonetheless, it would be perhaps interesting in the following years to direct some of the research on the conditions and cases in which both implicit and explicit spirituality of video games somehow fails to achieve a relevant significance or has unpredicted outcomes. Additionally, a generational perspective looking at this religious significance in new users of digital games may be another interesting path to follow.

The second point is that the 2014 foundational distinction between «actor-centered» and «immanent» approaches in this field is still valid today and has certainly shaped the results obtained in the last ten years. This influence is in a way positive from a methodological point of view, which is particularly well-defined and constructed in the gamer-centered perspective. In the case of the immanent analysis, this distinction has also allowed us to highlight a certain lack of proper ludological procedural analyses that should be addressed. But such distinction may also be a limit in the results obtained. Only very recently, important scholars such as Bosman¹⁶⁹ have explicitly expressed the need to bridge this gap and tried to do so. In the light of the examined literature, such claim seems well-justified and unifying these two traditions may shed a new light on the fundamental questions at the center of the studies of religion in digital games.

The third point is that in these years some specific games have been clearly at the center of the attention much more than others. Triple A and

¹⁶⁹ F.G. Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*.

notorious games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, *Assassin's Creed* (series), and several RPGs from Bethesda and Bioware are some of the most evident examples. On the one hand, this recurrence is certainly positive as it allows the scholars to make growingly deeper analysis thanks to the previously existing literature on the specific case study. On the other hand, however, this is also a limit, and it is so especially in the field of gamer-centered approaches that have very little variety on which their general theses on video games are based. But actually proper analysis of these underrepresented games is often lacking even in «immanent» approaches. This lack of diversity may explain the absence of multiple papers on some very relevant topics such as the act of «killing god» in JRPGs or playing as the Devil. It could also explain a certain recurrence of Christianity and Islam as the main religions discussed because of their strong presence in such games. Finally, it is a limit with respect to the underrepresented and studied contemporary situation of gaming in which most players are engaged with mobile games, indie games¹⁷⁰ and in which there are new investments for deeply embodied forms of playing such with the new products for VR.

Fourth and finally, in our overview we have tried to constantly put in relation the views adopted by scholars with the interdisciplinary and cultural context. Indeed, it would seem legitimate to think that the important results obtained by this field of study is due to the knowledge and awareness of its scholars about the newest theories and findings in the academic and scientific world, and especially in relation to digital technology. Therefore, it is legitimate to think that in the near future this field would, and perhaps even should, be influenced on the one hand by the newest applications of artificial intelligence and on the other hand by the different media and artistic forms that are nowadays being deeply affected by the culture of video games (such as movies).

¹⁷⁰ Some of which are discussed in catholic newspapers such as «Cult of the Lamb» <https://catholic-virginian.org/reviews/video-games/cult-of-the-lamb-and-the-bleating-heart-of-nihilism/>.