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***Video Gaming, Let's Plays, and Religion:
The Relevance of Researching gameenvironments.***

by

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Sociology are also concerned with questions such as the link between game content and structure, and changes in knowledge and behavior on the part of the gamer.

Cultural Studies and its various sub-disciplines began to address the study of religion and video games in the early 2000s, and a small number of extended publications (edited volumes, books, and special journal editions) have appeared since then. The first edited volume on the topic was “Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God” (Detweiler 2010), which introduces a number of video games from different perspectives, allowing not only academics but also religious actors and game designers to speak. Video games as related to religion and ritual are also discussed in the edited volume “Religions in Play: Games, Ritual and Worlds” (Burger and Boret 2012), which is not solely dedicated to video games but has a broader reach and explores several aspects of games and religion. “Being Virtually Real? Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies’ Perspective” (Radde-Antweiler 2008) focuses on various ways of presenting or perceiving religion in a virtual setting. These include games, but also game-like virtual worlds. Geraci (2014) and Bainbridge (2013) focus on conceptualizing the sacred in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games).

Two recent volumes give a broad insight into the study of video games and religion. The special online journal issue, “Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches” (Heidbrink and Knoll 2014) and the edited volume, “Playing with Religion in Digital Games” (Campbell and Grieve 2014) offer new insights. The aim is to structure and systematize the emerging field of research on video games and religion in concise collections, and to include the most up-to-date work on the subject so far.

In addition to these bigger publications, a number of individual journal articles and book chapters have been published since 2000, addressing diverse topics and featuring diverse approaches and methods. Several articles focus on video games related to a specific religious tradition (but from various perspectives and within different theoretical frameworks, such as Šisler’s work on games and Islam published in 2006 and 2009), as well

as to theories and approaches drawing from aesthetics (Niedenthal 2009). Studies thus far have also discussed video games highlighting the construction and/or negotiation of post-mortality and the afterlife (Ahn 2011, Steuter and Wills 2010), ritual (Heidbrink, Miczek and Radde-Antweiler 2011), race (Langer 2008), and conflict (Wagner 2013). Other articles focus on the implementation and functions of history (Antley 2012, Chapman 2012), and myth and mythology (Krzywinska 2005, 2008) in video games. Various studies dating from around 2008 also discuss the experience of playing games, in other words gaming, in relation to religious practice or experience (Plate 2010, Pargman and Jakobsson 2008, Wagner 2012). Last but not least, the broader issue of religion and video games is also touched on, at times extensively, in some larger publications with contiguous foci, such as in studies on religion but addressing media genres other than games (Wagner 2012b), studies on video games but not focusing solely on religion (Bogost 2007), and studies concentrating on one specific video game and religious tradition (Schut 2013). Increasingly, efforts are being made to better structure and institutionalize the study of video gaming and religion, as in Campbell et al. (forthc.).

Apart from the general perspective of Religious Studies there is also the religious perspective on gaming. Schut (2013) considers video games from a Christian point of view, thereby bridging the gap between Cultural Studies, Religious Studies and Theology. Luft (2014) refers to the distinction between religion in games and religion in gamers, just as ludology and narratology do in Game Studies. Interestingly enough, most research on the religious identity of gamers is restricted to overtly religious gamers. Theological research on video games is restricted to their theologically interesting content, typically addressing the question of what religious tradition is represented and how this compares to the respective theological perspective. Examples include Pirner (2001), Scholtz (2004), Waltemathe (2011, 2014) and Haak (2010). Another interesting point is that most of these theological studies relate to the field of Religious Education. This reflects the general theological interest in the application of religious knowledge, wherever it may be portrayed, and also the firm belief that video games link the content and the individual gamer. Religious Education aims to

encompass youth culture and traditional forms of belief, and video games seem to serve that purpose. Attempts are made either to identify traditional religious content and then compare or relate it to religious teachings, or to show some structural equivalence between the gaming experience and the religious experience and thus to describe the game as a potential religious experience. According to Anthony (2014), religion and gaming could be better combined with reference to the idea that religious practice and gaming share a similar approach to mystic experience (Wagner 2014). From this perspective, games offer a virtual space for spiritual experience and meaning construction, as well as for partaking in religion. However, conducting research on religion as part of the game narrative, or as an interesting twist in a plot, is also a relevant objective in Religious Studies.

Any distinctions to be found between religious content and religious experiences, or religion in the game and religion in the gamer, arise from the structure of video games. A game is not a film or a book. Interaction between the gamer and the game is a vital aspect of the gaming experience. This is a discussion that has had a tremendous impact in the field of Game Studies as a discipline.

Game Studies are approached from a broad theoretical perspective. Wolf and Perron (2003) as well as Raessens and Goldstein (2005) attempted to compile collections of the most influential approaches and theories in the field, which are as extensive as they are diverse. Scholars from fields such as Cognitive Science, Artificial Intelligence, various areas of Psychology, History, Film Studies, Theater and Cultural Studies, and Philosophy, as well as game designers and developers are represented. Approaches, methods, theories and design imperatives vary from field to field. The common theme, not surprisingly, is the discussion about the 'real' nature of the video game experience. This also comes in many forms. What is especially interesting, however, is the (ongoing) debate between the fields of ludology and narratology. These fields drew apart in the early 2000s over the question of what makes a video game a game, or what defines the game-nature of the game – the story or the gaming experience. Whereas the narratology camp sees little or no difference between a game and a narrative, ludologists claim that games can only be understood as a different

medium. Proponents of classical narratology include Murray (1997) and Atkins (2003), who understand games as literal forms that can be accessed using methods from Theater Studies and Film Studies. The game is the performance of a story, and tells a story that makes up most of the gaming experience.

Ludology, on the other hand, favors an approach that focuses more on the experience of the immersed gamer. Frasca (2003) relates the difference between narrative and play to the distinction between simulational and representational media. Whereas it is possible to understand film as an output that one can observe, the gamer's input is vital to the simulation medium. Video games are seen as such simulation media. It is thus not possible to fully understand the content of the game without having experienced it directly while playing it. Consequently, research on video games has to include the gamer perspective such that the analyzed object is not reduced to the audiovisual output of the gaming system.

According to Juul (2001), whereas games and narrative share elements, they are not as closely related as narrative and film. He claims that narration and interactivity are mutually exclusive, and thus a different approach than mere research on narratives is needed. He advocates an approach that considers gamers and their experiences, and acknowledges that every gaming experience is different. This would also make it crucial in game research to thoroughly analyze the gamer's perspective and not just the content.

Juul (2006) goes a step further in "Half Real". He understands the rules of a game as something that the gamer encounters and learns while playing, and which are thus transformed through interactivity (Juul calls it negotiation). This is one of the notions that led scholars of Religious Studies to consider aspects of performed religion in games. This was vital in terms of understanding the video game as a playground for ideas, and fosters understanding of video games not only as fixed symbolic universes but also as flexible transformations of such symbols. The perspective of the research then shifts even more in the direction of the gamer, which raises the question of what effects video games have. On

the one hand it is interesting to see what the gamer does in the game world, and on the other hand there is the question of whether the game world changes the gamer. The concept of serious or educational games presupposes some effects in this direction. Research on violent video games and possible aggressive behavior patterns among gamers addresses this question on an empirical level.

Psychological research on the effects of video games lacks a definitive answer to the question of their effects on gamers. The frequently cited catharsis theory as well as the theory of social learning lack conclusive proof of an association between aggression and video games. Overall, the research field focusing on violence in video games is highly controversial. As a case in point, let us take a closer look at two recent meta-studies on the subject, and the ensuing debate. Greitemeyer and Mügge analyze 98 independent studies with roughly 37,000 participants. These studies revealed that for “both violent video-games and prosocial video-games, there was a significant association with social outcomes.” (Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014, 578) Elson and Ferguson (2014) report different findings from a similar meta-analysis, however. They conclude that the field is too diverse to make a definitive statement, and rather fear that unambiguous statements on the effects of video games damage the credibility of the research. The interesting thing about this study is not the fact that the authors consider the field too diverse to allow a definitive answer with regard to the effects of video games, but that they received comments on their paper that led them to publish a commentary themselves (Elson and Ferguson 2014b). Their original finding, that the research on the effects of video games is controversial and sometimes even ideologically charged, was supported – from their perspective – in the light of the attacks of other researchers from the same field. They claim in their commentary that they were victims of ad-hominem attacks and snide comments (Elson and Ferguson 2014, 2). They also point out that even the work of game researchers witnesses the divided nature of the field, meaning all fields they understand as conducting research on the effects of games, and not only psychology (Elson and Ferguson 2014). Thus, not only do researchers in the field disagree about methodology and outcomes, they cannot find consistent links between certain contents of games and the effects such content has on the gamer. One of the key

points in their arguments, however, is that the link between violent games and aggressive behavior is not consistent:

“Many studies pointing to such an effect suffer from weak methodologies and an artificial setup of both the measures and the playing situation itself, while more carefully designed experiments show there are many variables to be considered that are more important than violent content.” (Elson and Ferguson 2014, 39)

They also suggest that experimental studies are inconsistent in terms of outcome, giving way to long-term studies. This weakness shows itself in the experimental setting, which is artificially created. The aim in these studies is to measure the gamers’ reactions and to observe what ludology would refer to as the outcome of the interactive experience, but they identify no consistent effects. The effects they do identify are sometimes contradictory, and sometimes inconclusive. Other meta-analytical studies (Sherry 2007, Ferguson and Kilburn 2009) report minimal effects of violent games. Sherry also found differences between survey studies and experimental studies, the former reporting a bigger effect than the latter. This trend could be relevant to game research in the field of religion, and with regard to video games. Whereas ludology claims that gamer interaction is the foremost characteristic of the gaming situation, narratology gives greater weight to the content. As shown above, research on religion and video games already encompasses these two aspects, which nevertheless comprise two sides of the same coin. Delving into the research field of game effects revealed methodological problems related to experimental settings and their artificiality, as well as a certain bias in survey studies. Research on video games and religion needs to find a way of overcoming these problems while maintaining its broad and diverse approaches. There is a need for a methodological approach that maintains the cultural, theological and social aspects of game content, while at the same time incorporating the performative aspects and ritualized forms of ludic interaction that establish such a broad connection between religion and video games.

was reborn as Zachary Comstock. The only way out is to be drowned by Elisabeth during his baptism. The narrative of this game reveals a lot of religious symbols and topoi used by the game designers, such as Baptism and the motive of sin. Thus, when looking at explicit religious gamers we find quite interesting discussions about how to interpret the game in a Christian sense:

“Some reviewers have suggested that *B: I*’s violence trumps whatever lessons it has to share. I disagree; in fact, I think one can make the case that all of Booker’s violent acts throughout the game are the result of a profound spiritual dissonance within him ... In one of the voxophone recordings found early in the game, Comstock holds forth on the nature of baptism, musing, ‘One man goes into the waters of baptism. A different man comes out, born again. But who is that man who lies submerged? Perhaps the swimmer is both sinner and saint, until he is revealed unto the eyes of man. (..) Many Christians may share Comstock’s confusion. While God thinks of us as new creations, more often than not we struggle to “put off the old man” and assume our new natures. Our sins haunt us, as they haunt DeWitt, and we find ourselves struggling to understanding how God’s grace can really be as good as it claims. At such times, it’s easy to make recourse to tired platitudes and cliches about forgiveness or to sink into despair rather than asking ourselves whether or not we’re truly receptive to God’s love for the unloveable.” (Marshall 2013)

Are these symbols relevant to gamers, or do they just serve as a framing decoration? The use of religious symbols is quite obvious as aspects of the narrative such as the prophet, new Eden, Sodom, sin, rebirth and baptism show. Hence, it is obvious from analyzing the game design that the game designers use and transform specific Christian topoi. If we analyze the role of religion within the game narrative we would discuss, for instance, the reception and transformation of the topos ‘Baptism’ in this video game. What about the gamers’ reception? One can draw conclusions on the level of the game’s design by analyzing its narratives, but one cannot make any statements about the gamers’ reception of the religious symbols used.

Thus, although it is certainly rewarding and worthwhile to analyze the games in themselves, we propose a different approach, and suggest that the relevant aspects of researching video games lie elsewhere. Our approach is thereby based on the theoretical concept of social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1972). We are not primarily interested, for instance, to

find out if the game has a religious function (Wagner 2012, Anthony 2014), or if in itself it can be categorized as a new religion (Plate 2010) or dystopia (Bosman 2014). At the same time as it became accepted in the field of Religious and Anthropological Studies that cultural and religious systems are not fixed, but are socially constructed, it became clear that the concepts of religion and culture were dynamic and not fixed or fluid, meaning that they could change over time and place. We therefore ask how gamers are influenced by games in their individual construction of religious identity, and by discussion triggered by playing them. By way of a response we need an approach that takes the game as well as the gamer into consideration. Wiemker and Wysocki (2014) follow the same direction in stressing the need to go beyond the analysis of the game and its production process:

“An inquiry about religious topics in games should therefore also ask about the reception of historical phenomena of religious motifs and narratives” (Wiemker and Wiesocki 2014, 198- 199)

Unfortunately, in this study, they concentrate solely on the narratives of God in games without asking if these concepts are identified and/or discussed by the gamers as such. Luft (2014), on the other hand, integrates the perspective of Christian gamers, and wonders how their play is influenced by their religion.

Nevertheless, in all of the existing gamer-centered approaches, two questions remain unanswered:

1. What about ‘average’ gamers?

It is quite obvious that religious actors might have problems with representations of ‘their religion’ or specific moral concepts within the game design. Indeed, there are extensive discussions in various forums marked as explicit religious platforms. In addition to that, however, non-explicitly religious gamers also have to be taken into consideration, given that video games nowadays are among the most important media genres and no longer cater only for the younger generation. For example, studies have shown that only one third of gamers in Germany are between the ages of 14 and 19, the rest are older (Quandt and

Wimmer 2009). It is also common knowledge nowadays that video games are a significant factor in social as well as religious education. It is therefore important to include all gamers and people interested in games in studies analyzing the relationship between the construction of a religious identity and video games.

2. Is there a direct effect between the video game and the actor, or is it much more complicated?

Previous studies (Campbell 2005, Helland 2000, Hoover 2002) indicate that the new media are highly relevant in the study of recent religious discourses. Dawson (2004), for example, points out that the establishment of the Internet has changed the face of religion. The concept of media logic (Altheide and Snow 1979), which is based on the assumption that modern media influences social life to an increasing extent, has dominated the field of Communication and Media Studies. Various aspects of culture and society, such as religion, are driven by such logic, which serves economic interests. Hjarvard (2008), for example, applies this thinking to the field of religion and makes the case that the increasing mediatization of society contributes to secularization. The concept of media logic has been questioned in Communication and Media Studies. Media Studies presuppose a specific logic that has a specific effect on reality – outside the media, which are thereby considered a separate social field alongside politics, economics, and religion. Lövheim and Gynch (2011) published an extensive criticism of Hjarvard's work. She focuses primarily on his concept of religion, which recognizes only a theological doctrine represented as a fully-fledged religion, the main function of which is reflected in the definition and legitimation of social reality. Following Meyer (2006), she advocates an understanding of religion as practices of mediation, which “claims to mediate the transcendent, spiritual, or supernatural and make these accessible for believers.” (Meyer 2006, 7)

This underlying secularization thesis seems quite problematic in the light of recent theoretical debates. Recent religion is perceived as something that is individualized and dynamic (Hervieux-Leger 1993) and without boundaries in an institutional and cultural sense (Bourdieu 1987). Diverse empirical studies show that such fluid religion can be observed

inside and outside the major religious traditions. Bochinger et al. (2009), for example, showed how religious constructions with patchwork tendencies were pervading traditional areas such as parishes. Knoblauch (2014) opposes Hjarvard’s interpretation that mediatization is banalizing religion – on the contrary, it supports the transformation into popular religion in “allowing both access to the marked forms and transgression of these marks“ (Knoblauch 2014, 216).

In addition, the very concept of media logic has been questioned in Communication and Media Studies in recent years (Krotz 2007, Hepp 2012). The field of Media Studies has relied on a particular media logic based on the idea that content always evolves from a specific form and is dependent on it, which has a specific effect on reality outside the media. By way of contrast, German communication theorist Krotz (2007) stressed the fact that the media can only be understood as inseparable from the construction of reality. His approach reflects communication research based on Action Theory and Cultural Studies. He understands mediatization as a ‘meta process’ of change, meaning a comprehensive framework used to describe change in culture and society in a theoretically informed way. From such a long-term perspective, the history of humankind could be described as a process “during which communication media became increasingly developed and used in various ways” (Krotz 2001, 33).

“Today, we can say that mediatization means at the least the following: (a) changing media environments . . (b) an increase of different media . . (c) the changing functions of old media . . (d) new and increasing functions of digital media for the people and a growth of media in general (e) changing communication forms and relations between the people on the micro level, a changing organization of social life and changing nets of sense and meaning making on the macro level.” (Krotz 2008, 24)

Mediatization as a process has quantitative and qualitative aspects. In quantitative terms, the sheer amount of available technical communication media has increased over time, as has the various modes of appropriation of these media. Qualitatively, the processes of communicative construction of reality are increasingly marked by technical media. However, it is crucial to take the media not as isolated phenomena, but as reflecting the change of

communicative forms that goes hand in hand with media change. Furthermore, media alone are no longer to be seen as the only drivers of change processes, but should be understood as part of various socio-cultural processes of which mediatization is one. Both research traditions differ in their focus on how to theorize mediatization. Whereas the institutional tradition has, until recently, concentrated mainly on traditional mass media, the influence of which is described as a media logic, the social-constructivist tradition is more concerned with everyday communication practices – especially related to digital media and personal communication – and with the changing communicative construction of culture and society. Meyer also emphasizes that religious processes are always mediated:

“Religion, we argue, cannot be analyzed outside the forms and practices of mediation that define it ... the point is to explore how the transition from one mode of mediation to another, implying the adoption of new mass media technologies, reconfigures a particular practice of religious mediation.” (Meyer and Moors 2006, 7)

Thus our present-day everyday experience – also within the field of religion – is highly media-saturated. Classifications such as ‘online’ versus ‘offline’ (Helland 2000) and ‘virtual’ versus ‘real’ have therefore become highly problematic: “(t)he question arises how a dichotomy such as this can hold up, if presently everything is highly mediatized” (Radde-Antweiler 2013, 97), and offline and online are merging and interwoven (Consalvo and Ess 2011).

The media are not the only drivers of social change: it comes about via a combination of different socio-cultural processes in relation to which mediatization, as a “meta capital across different social fields” (Hepp 2013, 619), has to be considered. Methodologically, the consequence of this is that it is no longer a particular medium such as television or the Internet that constitutes a research subject in the analysis, but the individual actors in their mediatized – and in our field of analysis gametized – worlds, in so-called *gamevironments*.

What does this mean in relation to video games and religion? First of all, we should stress the point that, according to mediatization theory, neither media alone nor mediatized

worlds are the only reason for social and religious change, but both are parts of various interwoven processes such as individualization, globalization, or economization. Neither the Internet nor video games as such are changing the face of religion. Consequently, researchers intending to analyze video games and religion should focus on the mediatized worlds of the gamers. It follows from this that it is not only the game in its relation to religion that is the research object, but the whole gaming process. This process includes the people who play games and who are interested and influenced by them in their gaming environments, which is precisely what we call *gameenvironments*.

Gameenvironments is an analytical concept based on the actor-centered approach, which integrates the analysis of the game narratives with a view to combining the narrative and the ludic approaches. Thus, ‘games/gaming’ - ‘environments’ – in short *gameenvironments* – comprises two levels, as follows.

I. The technical environment of video games and gamers.

This concerns, first of all, the game itself. Studying a game involves analyzing it as a game in relation to textual and audiovisual narratives, interactivity options and in-game performance. It also requires consideration of the context, referring to the production and design of the game and its rule system, for example. Apart from that, the technical environment covers gamer-generated content, which is linked to gaming performance and experience. For instance, most gamers present and discuss game-related topics via their homepages, Twitter, chat rooms, and forums, and many post pictures and video material on diverse video and image hosting websites such as Youtube and Flickr. Hence, in addition to the qualitative analysis of the gamer in the form of participant observation, interviews and surveys, it is also necessary to include the media content as an integral part of analyzing the relation between games and religion.

II. The cultural environments of video games and gaming

As shown above, video gaming is an integral part of today’s mediatized world, and a major factor in cultural and religious education. Vice versa, the cultural and religious environment

influences the construction and design of video games as well as the gaming experience. One interesting question that arises is whether these gaming processes are the same worldwide, or whether there are different criteria for designing, experiencing, valuing and presenting games and gamer-generated content in different regional settings. Zeiler (2014) points out that a game centered on Hindu mythology draws the ire of some Hindu groups that question the appropriateness of incorporating Hindu deities into games. Šisler (2008) discusses the deliberate construction of Arab or Muslim identity in Arab video games in opposition to American games. In our understanding, this lays the foundation for a comparative approach, which could sharpen the theoretical and methodological considerations established and researched in 'Western' (European and American) contexts.

Let us come back to our case study *Bioshock Infinite*.¹ As we have shown, the game narrative comprises diverse religious topoi. Not surprisingly, there are many studies focusing on this game and its relation to religion (e.g., Bosman 2014). Although it is worthwhile to analyze game narratives, it becomes highly problematic if the results are generalized and claim conclusions on levels other than the design level. The question arises as to whether these results reveal anything except the use of religious topics within the game narrative. Most studies incorporating the analysis of narratives presuppose an inherent media logic according to which religious topics have a specific effect on gamers. The *gamevironments* approach may be helpful in avoiding such conclusions that are based on mere assumption. Let us consider the most prominent English-speaking and the most prominent German-speaking gamer, both of whom played *Bioshock Infinite*. The most prominent YouTuber in Germany at present is Gronkh, with over three million subscribers.² His *Bioshock Infinite* videos range from 65,000 to 400,000 views, with between 300 and 3,500 commentaries per video. As becomes obvious when one watches the videos, the religious references play only a minor role. The major topics of discussion include the quality of the graphics, the spoiler of other commentaries, the advertising of other YouTubers, and in-game strategies to improve fighting skills. The only exception is the discussion about the voice of the preacher, which belongs to Ned Flanders, a character from the TV serial *The Simpsons*. The most prominent English-speaking gamer is TobyGames

from the USA, with over six million subscribers on YouTube. His videos on *Bioshock Infinite* were seen by between 100,000 and 600,000 users, and each one has attracted between 1,000 and 4,000 comments. It was only in these discussions that we found five commentaries (out of 3,835!) on the question of what Christianity is and is not.³

We have to conclude that discussions about or even mentioning of religious symbols, topoi, and religious content in general, play virtually no role either within the game-play or in the discussions on the game and the game-play. Nevertheless, we found one thing that was particularly interesting when we analyzed the gamer-generated content. We observed the quite intense immersion of the gamer in some scenes, and a particularly emotional discussion in the commentaries. It became obvious that some scenes or performances – for gaming contexts, we term them ‘ethical dilemma situations’ – show a high level of immersion, to the extent that the gamer completely identified with his gaming character. These situations triggered heated discussions by the commentators on how to behave, and why.

The same processes are at play in cases in which games question existing symbol systems. *Bioshock Infinite* plays with existing parallel realities and is an interesting example of that. The game’s final scene – the drowning of Booker/Comstock – induced various reactions from gamers and commentators. These led to thousands of YouTube videos, all of which offered an interpretation of the game narrative, and to variant interpretations by users presented in different time-line graphics and accessible on the Internet. Other Internet discussions deal with the question of fate and the freedom to choose:

“So, in my opinion there is a way of fate, but in the end we are the one who decide which way we choose.” (Metalseadraking)

„This theme of dichotomies and sameness runs through the whole game. I took the pivotal baptism to mean that we can’t escape our past or wash it away. Whether or not he refuses, Booker is still a jackass. Even if we confront what we’ve done, it may still consume us. Booker’s death in that scene meant to me that we can’t change the past, but we can try to change the future...and it really helps if we have a few interdi-

mensional lighthouses. I don't mean to sound glib. I didn't take it as a positive message, which is welcome.“ (PC Gamer 2013)

3. Let's Plays

To facilitate a deeper understanding of *gamevironments* and to illustrate precisely what we mean with the term, let us turn to a specific example of what is one part of *gamevironments*. One new 'environment' of games are the so-called 'Let's Plays' – increasingly and widely popular self-recorded gaming videos in which the respective gamers, the 'Let's Players', comment on their journey through the game as well as on various aspects of it. Let's Plays are basically produced for sharing as user-generated content on video broadcasting sites (very often, although not exclusively, on YouTube) and streaming video platforms (such as Twitch, Ustream, and MyVideo). They make it possible (1) for the gamers uploading them to publicly and globally display, transmit and share their individual gaming experiences, and (2) for the watchers, in other words the gaming community and the generally interested broad public, to share opinions, interpretations and cultural understandings of the game, the Let's Plays, the gamers behind the Let's Plays, and their own gaming experiences.

In contrast to so-called 'Playthroughs' or 'Walkthroughs', which are basically manuals advising how to play or walk through a game in the easiest and fastest way possible that in most cases do not include any comments, Let's Plays focus on an individual's subjective experience of a game. They always include the live comments of the Let's Players as they play, and increasingly also their self-recorded video images, which visualize them in the playing process. Such self-filmed documentation, inserted as a small window into the Let's Play, allows the watchers to participate directly in the respective Let's Players' gaming experience, opening up another level beyond audio, and reveals not only verbal information but also non-verbal, facial expressions. Let's Players' verbal comments obviously cover a broad spectrum, ranging from humorous to critical. As one major online community puts it:

“Usually Let’s Play videos consist of jokes (Good, bad, and/or corny), frustration, and bewilderment by the ones playing. Some also explain gameplay, easter eggs, and general trivia pertaining to the game being played.”⁴

In general, Let’s Plays seem to draw such intense interest from a very large audience, which regularly follows the latest uploads and streams, because they offer a distinct, often highly individual approach to the way a game can be played and a game-play experienced. It is by no means a marginal phenomenon, as user numbers clearly show. Quite on the contrary: the most prominent Let’s Player worldwide, PewDiePie, has more than 32 million subscribers on YouTube,⁵ and his daily uploaded videos are watched by four to six million people. Other popular Let’s Players also have very high numbers of subscribers and views: TobyGames, for instance, has close to seven million subscribers on YouTube, Markiplier close to five million and Gronkh close to 3.5million.⁶ The attraction of Let’s Plays to so many people also, not surprisingly, brought about a new fandom culture centered on certain star gamers:

“Sometimes – most times, I’d say – it’s not the game people tune in for, but the player. It’s why people pick favorites, why you’re more likely to hear about the Let’s Player and not so much about the Let’s Play. People don’t care what game is being played, they want to see the person who plays it. That’s the big appeal to Let’s Plays. It’s kinda like a new form of comedy or reality television, I guess.”⁷

Let’s Plays also have increasing economic importance. Let’s Players are very often financed through commercial advertisement, which provides their income. The success of the advertisements depends on the numbers of views a Let’s Player attracts and led to the fact that Let’s Players increasingly become organized in so-called networks. Just recently, in December 2014, the German Let’s Player Unge (formerly Ungespielt) got intense media attention for public harsh critique on his network. With such (and other) media attention,⁸ Let’s Players also increasingly become visible in the public discourse.

Let’s Plays are produced and watched all over the world and are, by definition, highly global. The national or regional affiliations of both Let’s Players and people watching and commenting on a Let’s Play, in most cases for these very people play a very minor role, or even none at all. For the researcher this means that in most cases it is rather easy to detect

We argue for a methodical differentiation between three different levels in the analysis of video games and religion. The first level, naturally, is that of the game. Such research will bring to light, in particular, details of the religio-scapes, belief systems and other religious content incorporated into a game by its designers and producers. The game and its narrative(s), as well as other aspects such as the aesthetics, technical peculiarities and game-design, and its contextualization comprise the foundations on which all interpretations, debates, and negotiations evolving from a game, as discussed by the recipients.

The second level is that of the Let's Play, which is the first of two levels focusing on the recipients' perspectives. A Let's Play includes a number of layers that need to be analyzed. It comprises the Let's Players' gaming performance, including their live comments, and increasingly also their self-recorded video images. This means that the audio and the visual layers play a role in the analysis of both Let's Play and the Let's Player. Analysis on this level yields information on specific gamers who chose to publicly share their subjective experience of the game.

The third level comprises the comments on a Let's Play and necessarily and implicitly complements the Let's Play level. The analysis of these comments opens up public discussion on a Let's Play and the game as portrayed by a very large number of gamers and generally interested audiences. This major source gives direct, unfiltered access to personal statements of opinion and interpretation, and to the recipients' discourse in general. Such a huge quantity of data needs to be handled in a structured, organized manner based on suitable approaches and methods. As stated above, Let's Plays comprise three different levels, each requiring specific methodology. For instance, the methodical problems already start with the archiving of the comments. It often happens that the number of comments is so high that browsers cannot display all of them. Accessing and archiving these new research data would therefore also require new technical solutions, such as new software. There is thus a pressing need for new theoretical and methodological approaches in the research on *gamevironments* in general, and Let's Plays in particular.¹¹

Only by acknowledging all three levels, as we argue above, will it be possible to decipher and thoroughly analyze the role of religion from the perspectives of the people who play the game (the gamers) and the people discussing, debating and commenting on it (the Let's Play watchers, who of course may well be gamers playing the same game they are following). It is imperative to look at all three levels, especially if the interest is in the actors' (gamers, Let's Players, and/or Let's Play watchers) reception of the game and its contents. Let us give two examples that illustrate the risk in staying restricted to one level, whether it be that of the game narrative, the Let's Play, or the comments).

I. *Asura's Wrath*¹²

The globally very well received action video game *Asura's Wrath* (Japan 2012, Capcom) was explicitly developed for a global audience, and was released simultaneously in Asia, Europe and North America. Its unique multiple-genre style features cinematic anime shorts into which the game-play is integrated and thus allows the gamer to switch between third-person combat, rail shooting and interactive cinematic sequences with gamer input. The game's narrative (and its aesthetics) draws strongly from Buddhist and Hindu mythological constructs and beliefs, which are then interconnected with science-fiction elements, apparently also in order to edit the unfamiliar concepts for global gaming audiences. The game is a perfect example of the provision of religio-scapes for both Asian and global religious identities. In itself it contains very many references to Buddhist and Hindu traditions: the narrative makes use of belief structures and terminology (such as karma and samsara), mythological names (such as Asura and Durga), mythological weapons (such as the brahmasastra), mythological frameworks (such as the Vrtra mythology from the Rgveda), for example, and the game aesthetics lean heavily on Buddhist and, to some extent, Hindu traditions. All this has earned the applause of reviewers:

"The characters in *Asura's Wrath* have a unique look fashioned after Buddhist statuary. As they take damage, their skin begins to peel away in layers like a lacquer statue. The amount of thought, research and effort that went into conveying this process makes me smile from ear to ear. ... It's a very cool way to imbue the characters with a sense of mythology and high technology, making them feel like Buddhist cyborgs. It's simply awesome." (Lee 2012)

All aspects of the game thus strongly and unequivocally indicate one and the same thing: we have lots of religion here! This makes the game as such seem like the ideal case study for research on video games and religion. Analysis on this level only, however, allows no conclusions to be drawn with regard to how recipients receive and discuss this religious content, or whether it is important to them in any way at all. On the next level of analysis, the Let's Play level, it indeed soon becomes clear that religious topoi or issues are no longer as prominent as on the game level. The intensity and complexity of the Let's Players' comments on aspects of the game's religion background differ, of course, but nowhere is it even remotely close to prominent. Analysis of a sample¹³ of four Let's Plays on *Asura's Wrath* from two different Let's Players revealed that the Buddhist/Hindu religious termini and/or concepts implemented in the game rarely attract any comment.

The absence of comments reflecting on or referring to religion is certainly unexpected, given the prominent role of religion in the game, but it is also visible on the last level of analysis, that of the comments. Here, again, are very few comments on the religious content, the discussion rather focusing on the technical aspects of *Asura's Wrath*. When the discussion does turn to the religious content, it tends to be restricted to details of the game-immanent religious narrative, as in this comment referring to the *Asura's Wrath* game universe:

“technically, within the Asura Universe, Chakravartin (?) is the One God. But since your obviously a religious nut, you might as well ignore me.”¹⁴

Very few comments refer to the game-immanent mythology resp. terminology on a more universal level and adumbrate some commentator's background knowledge, which they share here:

“If you've studied hindu mythology, you saw this coming the second you first saw that spider...”¹⁵

“Huh? I've not studied hindu, and now you've made me very curious. Will you explain this, please?”¹⁶

“Karma is gonna bite u in the ass :P.”¹⁷

Only on very few occasions does the discussion go beyond negotiating details of game-immanent mythologies. A few short remarks touch questions of religion, obviously triggered by previous debate on game narratives but more general in nature. These comments ask for or state personal religious affiliations or sentiments:

“Just asking out of curiosity, but are you an Atheist? And don't worry, I'm not gonna preach the Bible to you if you are.”¹⁸

“I tend to keep my beliefs rather ambiguous as that gives the freedom to joke about anything.”¹⁹

“YOU ALL SOUND SURPRISINGLY BLASPHEMOUS AND SATANIC JUST STRONGLY DESIRED TO STATE THAT THOUGHT.”²⁰

It is clear from the above analysis of *Asura's Wrath* on the three levels we proposed that the amount and complexity of religious content varies a lot on the different levels. The gaming community at large clearly attaches little importance to religion in the game-immanent narrative, which indeed very prominently uses religious termini and mythologies. Religion on both levels beyond that of the game is extremely rarely reflected upon, discussed, debated or even mentioned in this case study. Even in a game like *Asura's Wrath* with its very elaborate and intense storyline evolving around religious concepts, there is little or no reflection on these concepts in the Let's Plays and the relevant comments. It seems that the game's narrative is often perceived as not as essential for the gaming experience as the game's technical settings, or even as purely decorative element.

Although surprising at first sight, these results quite clearly indicate that the recipients' perspective can entirely deviate from the game designers' or producing companies' perspectives as implemented in a game. They also re-affirm the need to include an actor-centered approach in the study of video games and religion, and highlight the benefits of researching Let's Plays as *gamevironments*.

It is clear from the results of our case studies that the three levels of analysis stress different topics and discussions. What the game's developers might consider important and what is included in a game en masse might be quite uninteresting to gamers and commentators. This also works the other way round, of course: even if no religious content is included in a game it does not necessarily mean that religious issues are not raised on the Let's Play and comment levels. Discussion of religion might emanate from ethical or moral dilemma situations. Having explicitly religious content on one level, then, does not necessarily lead to the inclusion of such content on another level. In general, the levels refer to each other only partly when it comes to religious content.

From this one can conclude that it is quite problematic to reduce research to the game level only. It is imperative to go beyond game-immanent narratives to include an actor-centered approach, and always to consider all relevant levels of religion and gaming. One way of doing this, and of deciphering the details of *gamevironments* is to look more closely at the huge new pool of research data on Let's Plays, which is just waiting to be analyzed. If we focus attention equally on all three levels of analysis – the game, the Let's Play, and the comments – we will be able to follow and analyze the discourse on the transformation of religious content by the people who perform this very discourse.

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¹ First discussed from this perspective by Radde-Antweiler 2014.

² Numbers by 22 December 2014.

³ Numbers by 22 December 2014.

⁴ Let's Plays defined by the reddit subthread 'letsplay', see r/letsplay 2014.

⁵ Numbers by 22 December 2014.

⁶ Numbers by 22 December 2014.

⁷ See Saetha 2014.

⁸ See for example articles in the most prominent German newspapers:

<http://www.zeit.de/news/2014-12/22/medien-streit-mit-netzwerk-youtuber-stellt-kanaele-ein-22160405>,

<http://www.bild.de/digital/internet/internet-hype/youtube-star-simon-unge-stoppt-kanaele-39063584.bild.html>,

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⁹ See PewDiePie 2013.

¹⁰ See PewDiePie 2012.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the new proposed methods for researching and analyzing the individual three Let's Play levels, see Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2015 forthc.

¹² First discussed with this approach by Zeiler 2014b.

¹³ For this case study, a sample of four Let's Plays, namely the respective first and last out of complete playlists on the game by two different Let's Players, were analyzed.

¹⁴ See Naraku9108.

¹⁵ See geekof92.

¹⁶ See TheEdgeOfTheCoin.

¹⁷ See Ranting Otaku.

¹⁸ See MacyPooh196.

¹⁹ See JoJoMdadara.

²⁰ See noelle Jones.

²¹ First discussed from this perspective by Waltemathe 2014b.

²² See FacelessDeadly.

²³ See Pyranut.