GAME OVER... AND THEN?
The Representation of Death and the Afterlife in Videogames

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Introduction

For many years the research on religion in popular culture has heavily focused on the analysis of representations and transformations of religious aspects in media such as movies, TV series or comics. But as the recent decade showed, a new field of pop culture research in conjunction with religion has emerged: religion and/in videogames. Like movies and TV series, videogames are part of the cultural discourse of representing religion in various aspects: The portrayal of religious spaces such as churches, mosques, temples or primitive places of worship, the depiction of religious experts such as priests, preachers or shamans to the adaption of real life denominations for narrative or design purposes up to the creation of entirely new religious systems within the games. Religion in games seldom functions as a pure decorative device, but often takes on an important narrative role in many games, and thus, for the player herself/himself. One can argue that certain aspects of religion are mediatized through the medium *game* therefore influencing the gamers view or awareness of religion itself in everyday life.[1]

According to many scholars, videogames can no longer be considered as an irrelevant pastime of no pertinence but rather as a place where fears and desires of society are represented and mirrored and therefore also taught.[2] Thus, digital games are not a cultural phenomenon without cultural activity, but more of an interface between religion and contemporary culture. They help to understand what religion is, does and means to an inexorably evolving society.[3]

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1   Cf. Hjarvard, Stig: The mediatization of religion. A theory of the media as an agent of religious change. In: Northern Lights, 6 (2008), 13.

2   Cf. Höglund, J.: Le gaming néo–colonial: géographie virtuelle et politique de l'espace dans Call of Duty 4. In: POLI: Politique de l'image, 1 (2009), 39.

3   Cf. Campbell, Heidi A./Grieve, Gregory Price: Introduction: What Playing with Religion Offers Digital Game Studies. In: Campbell, Heidi A./Grieve, Gregory Price (Eds.): Playing with Religion in Digital Games. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, 1–2.

Game Over! Life Over? — Death in Games

The elements of death or dying and the afterlife are elements that are hardly found in games as such and therefore have not yet been examined by scholars.

The main reason for that is the nature of games itself. Videogames are in themselves products with an entertainment value and as such they are created in ways, that they can be played at all times, that the player is challenged, or that he or she achieves a specific goal in the game. One takes over the avatar of the main character and steps into an artificial world. There one has to fulfill quests to reach a certain goal. That can be the assassination of a particular enemy, the rescue of the imprisoned princess — which follows the classic damsel–in–distress topos — or the elimination of all evil and thus the saving of the world.

In this narrative, the player is the main character. She or he must achieve all of the mentioned above. And here's why the element of death and dying is transformed: If the main character dies, the whole narrative would collapse and the game would become unplayable. Death is discussed in an article on the gaming site IGN. It says, that death in computer games is a representation of failure, and not of death *per se*. That means, if the player loses his life in the game, his character is resurrected at the last saving point. From there he can move on and try again to fulfill his duties. This means in summary that death in videogames has nothing to do with death in reality. Thus said, this means that death and dying lose their relevance as such, because the player can always restart the quest or the game with little to no consequences.[4]

All of the aforementioned refers to a concept, and that should be clear, which only deals with death of the main protagonist. There are of course games and stories where characters die and where their death is permanent. This happens to many side characters or supporting characters. Of course there are also games where the main character dies, for example in BIOSHOCK INFINITE[5], but this only happens in the end, when there is no narrative to move forward or to simply end it.

Heaven, Hell and the Worlds Between — Videogames and the Afterlife

The most famous death in videogame history is probably that of Super Mario. In the classic SUPER MARIO BROS. by Nintendo released in 1985, if

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4   Cf. Thomsen, Michael: Dealing with death in videogames. Accessed on 9. November, 2015. http://www.ign.com/articles/2010/04/06/dealing–with–death–in–videogames

5   In BioShock Infinite, released in 2013, the main character Booker DeWitt is drowned in the end of the game by his daughter.

Mario gets touched by an enemy he seemingly dies and falls down and out of the screen. This even happens when he falls down a waterfall, an abyss or even into molten lava. Those scenarios raise many questions. Where does Mario fall into? Into the void? To a second ground or even the afterlife?

As the part of death in games has been already discussed, the aspect of the life after will be further established. The afterlife is a more complicated and complex issue as a whole and much more regarding the analysis of videogames. The afterlife as such is lesser found in games than death, as it assumes on the condition that the character has already died or is dead from the very beginning. And this condition is seldom found in contemporary, mainstream games as such. Nevertheless, afterlife or postmortality, a term Gregor Ahn from the Heidelberg University has used in his article, plays a role in videogames. In his article, Ahn examines the multiple deaths one can encounter in games. He speaks of a fluid line that separates life and postmortal existence. This existence is part of the afterlife, but only, if the afterlife itself is represented in the game. Or, if it's not the afterlife, it has to be a world, that comes after the game world, which can be an anti–world, an intermediate state or a demimonde, but this world has to be grounded on religious historical motives. In this "afterlife–ish" world, the cultural conditions, wherein the game was generated, are mirrored.[6],[7] Examples for such cultural conditions will be exemplified on representations of the afterlife in games not only with a Judeo–Christian background, but also with an East Asian background.

The depiction of the afterlife in videogames differs enormously. Some game worlds are perceived explicitly as the afterlife, while others are only covert or an implicit understanding of the life after. Those depictions are mostly generic representation of the Christian concept of heaven and hell or inspired by Dante's Divine Comedy[8] and seldom by Greek mythology.

In the following different iterations and aspects of the afterlife will be analyzed and discussed on the basis of three games: Limbo, the The Legend of Zelda series, and Dante's Inferno. Therein one can find an intermediate state, the important role of spirits as a factor of death and afterlife as well as a classical interpretation of medieval concepts of hell, respectively.

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6   Cf. Ahn, Gregor: Multimortalität — Multivitalität. Konstruktionen von Tod und Postmortalität in den Computerspielen The Void und Venetica. In: Ahn, Gregor/Miczek, Nadja/Rakow, Katja (Eds.): Diesseits, Jenseits und Dazwischen? Die Transformation und Konstruktion von Sterben, Tod und Postmortalität. Bielefeld: transcript, 2011. (121–149) 127–128.

7   Cf. Ibid. 144–145.

8   Alighieri, Dante: Die göttliche Komödie. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010–2012.

Never Ending Circles — Limbo

The Danish puzzle–plattformer game Limbo, developed by Playdead and re-leased in 2010, tells the story of a little boy, who is caught in an nightmarish world. He travels the world in search for a girl, which is presumed to be his sister. This world he is in is viewed as something beyond, which is made clear from the visual representation of the world itself.

The visual aspect of the game — its specific black–and–white style — only portrays silhouettes. It references vaguely the film–noir or the German Expressionism; it is clear, from the onset, that the visual style is used to establish some form of otherworldliness. The title itself refers to the Limbo, and thus, it can be assumed, that the world itself is in fact *the* Limbo.

In the game the player has to overcome obstacles and solve puzzles to move forward. Those obstacles are represented as mere shadows or silhou-ettes, with little to no detail, and some of those clearly represent collective and generic fears of humanity, such as spiders or insects or even falling down.

Interestingly, the player can die within the game world. This is of par-ticular interest, because, if it is in fact Limbo and thus based on the Catholic concept, one cannot die in it — or die again as a result of already being dead.

In the end, when the boy reaches the girl, the game ends abruptly and restarts at the very beginning. This can be interpreted as a never ending circle of suffering, where the player and the boy has to go through the same process over and over again.

The portrayal of the limbo itself is further important. As we know, in the Catholic context, Limbo is an intermediate state, such as the Purgatory. Limbo is a place for the forefathers of the church or the righteous heathen and unbaptized infants, who are not free of the original sin.[9] Since medieval times, it is a place of natural happiness, where all the individuals are free of punishment, but are not allowed to see god (the teaching of Limbo itself has been reduced or vanished within the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council).[10] In contrast to the Purgatory, where people are punished or purified, Limbo is a place of mere waiting.[11]

In comparison, the game Limbo and the concept of the Limbo have noth-ing in common. One can say that the boy in the game could be an unbap-tized child, but it's more likely, that the game only took the name and the

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9　Cf. Werner, Helmut: Die Hölle. Die Höllenvorstellungen der Menschheit. Leipzig: Bohm-eier, 2011, 150–151.

10　Cf. McBrien, Richard P.: Roman Catholicism [First Edition]. In: Lindsay Jones (Ed.): Ency-clopedia of Religion. Detroit: Macmillan, 22005, (7873–7888) 7885–7886.

11　Cf. Smith, Jane I.: Afterlife: An Overview. In: Lindsay Jones (Ed.): Encyclopedia of Reli-gion. Detroit: Macmillan, 22005, (128–135) 134.

concept of an intermediate state and adapted it for the game. In fact, if one looks closer, the game world looks strikingly familiar to our real world, and thus can be interpreted as a demimonde or a halfworld, a world in between.

Where the Spirits Roam Free — THE LEGEND OF ZELDA series

The world–famous THE LEGEND OF ZELDA series by Japanese developer Nintendo does not have such explicit depictions of the afterlife or heaven and hell whatsoever, but the series, since it's release in the 1980s, deals in its more than 15 main games with various aspects that are linked to the afterlife. Such aspects are for example, the spirits of the dead, reincarnation, passing and liminality.

The series itself follows the main protagonist Link in the fictional, medieval world of Hyrule, where he often has to rescue the imprisoned or endangered Princess Zelda from the clutches of evil forces, mostly personified in the antagonist Ganondorf.

As mentioned in the introduction, death in games and also in ZELDA primarily happens to enemies and monster or, in some seldom cases, supporting characters. There are no explicit depictions of the afterlife itself, but one can find the belief in the afterlife within the games. This is represented for example in the various graveyards that can be found in the world of ZELDA, indicating this belief. There are different kinds of graves, underground tombs and even burial objects.

On the aforementioned graveyards, it often happens that spirits of the recently deceased will appear. For example, in THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME, the gravedigger dies and his spirit turns up at the cemetery. His demise is indicated with a halo around his head and his levitating status. He invites the player to a chasing game and in winning this, the player receives a gift from the spirit who then vanishes. Another spirit that appears is that of a queen. In THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS, she asks the player to help her son as her last wish. After fulfilling this, the spirit can rest and vanishes for good.

These two examples show that the spirits in ZELDA appear to the player, who then must fulfill some quest or a wish so that the spirits can rest. One of the most explicit scenes of that kind appear in the game THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK released in 2000. Therein, the salvation and healing of spirits or souls is a key element. The player encounters many deceased he has to heal from their suffering, using a specific song called the "Song of Healing". This song helps the troubled spirits to move on into the afterlife.

In MAJORA'S MASK, Link meets one spirit and one almost–dead person, who he heals from their suffering and pain. When he plays the song they remember their most cherished memory. In one case, a tribal leader sees

himself surrounded by his people, in another case, a musician plays one last song with his band and his lover. Their souls perish and manifest into masks. These masks can later be used to transform into the body of the deceased and to obtain its powers.

Another example shows a more explicit depiction of the afterlife as such within the game series. In OCARINA OF TIME, Link defeats two witches, who seemingly die after the battle. They both gather halos above their heads and ascend into a light, presumed to be some sort of heaven or afterlife. The unanswered questions are, if this scene shows in fact a concept of afterlife in the ZELDA series, and if so, does it suggest an Christian view or universalistic view of the afterlife?

War in Hell — DANTE'S INFERNO

Since Dante's Divine Comedy has already been mentioned as an influence on the conception of afterlife, especially hell, in media as a whole, the last example is directly based upon the work of Alighieri, DANTE'S INFERNO. The game, which was released in 2010 and developed by Visceral Games, is based upon the part of the famous poem that takes place in hell. It tells the story of Dante, a crusader and Templar Knight, who invades the nine circles of hell to save the soul of his late wife Beatrice from Lucifer. Portrayed as a warrior, Dante carries a scythe and a holy cross as weapons to fight his enemies and uses magic and spells against them.

Since the game is based upon the Divine Comedy, the game's story roughly follows the narrative of the book. It portrays the nine circles of hell and the eternal punishment of hell in its own interpretation and extravagant detail: the circle of lust is shown with voluptuous albeit demonic women, especially the so–called queen of lust, Cleopatra. In the third circle, gluttony, the player encounters Cerberus, stylized as a gluttonous demon while in the fourth circle, greed, sinners are boiled alive in molten gold.

In an article, the author Servitje mentions in his criticism of the game, that DANTE'S INFERNO shows a portrayal of hell that is transformed and redesigned with elements of war.[12] While the Divine Comedy is a poem of political critique,[13] the game is mere entertainment factor.

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12   Cf. Servitje, Lorenzo: Digital Mortification of Literary Flesh: Computational Logistics and Violences of Remediation in Visceral Games' *Dante's Inferno*. In: Games and Culture, Vol. 9(5), 2014, (368–388) 383–384.

13   Cf. Vorgrimler, Herbert: Geschichte der Hölle. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1993, 190.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen several iterations of the afterlife: The intermediate state in a supposed form of Limbo that seemingly never ends, the liminality of spirits that hold onto the world unless their last wish is fulfilled as well as explicit or implicit elements of hell or the afterlife and thus heaven, as we know it. That means this is a stereotypical or at least common interpretation and depiction of heaven and hell in a Christian context or borrowed from Christianity. Thus said, we have seen that Dante's Divine Comedy is still of great influence, when it comes to the portrayal of the afterlife.

Although many examples have been provided, the portrayal of the afterlife is an exception in the video game industry. It's rather more common to only refer to it or just put in some elements that are kind of "afterlife–ish", as we seen in the The Legend of Zelda series, than showing the afterlife itself in full spectrum.

Abstract

GAME OVER... AND THEN? THE REPRESENTATION OF
DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN VIDEOGAMES

In the last years, the analysis of postmodern religiosity and respective elements within videogames has emerged as a new field of study within the Religious Studies. However, the elements of death and the afterlife are factors that have been sidelined in this discussion, due to their absence in videogames as a whole. Death, on one side, is just a tool to punish the player for his failure, afterlife on the other side is hardly portrayed at all, because death is of no significance, hence the afterlife too. Nonetheless, several aspects of the afterlife are portrayed in exemplified games, such as the intermediate state of the limbo, spirits as well as the concept of hell in the games Limbo, the The Legend of Zelda series and Dante's Inferno, respectively.

Key words: Afterlife, Dante, Death, Divine Comedy, Hell, Limbo, Religion, Spirits, Videogames