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# RELIGIOUS MOTIVES AS PART OF VIRTUAL REALITY CREATED BY THE DIGITAL GAME 'THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT'

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## Abstract

The study is focused on religious motives and the ways they are used in virtual realities created by digital games. Its main objective is to determine the basic terminological axis related to the given issue and discuss religious aspects in relation to the digital media environment. The author is particularly interested in digital role-playing games and their ability to involve various religious elements. The second part of the text therefore presents the case study of 'The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt', one of the most popular digital role-playing games of today, and its narrative elements associated with religion and spirituality. Given the analysed game's genre classification and historical framework, the author works with the basic assumption that religious themes and spiritual aspects, even though many of them are portrayed in rather negative contexts, enrich the game's narrative and underline its complexity.

*Keywords:* media, reality, Middle Ages, religious, motives

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of game can be seen as one of the most complex problems of contemporary Social Sciences and Humanities. However, its social and cultural significance reaches far beyond the common boundaries of Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, History or Arts. Amongst other scientific disciplines, Media Studies are interested in games as well. However, it is not surprising if we consider the fact that the expansion of digital technologies has adapted games – originally bound to everyday social and cultural reality – to the immersive environment of virtual reality.

The existence and popularity of digital games has led Media Studies scholars to recognise and develop a new specialisation within the discipline – Digital Games Theory or Game Studies. Its aim is to establish innovative theoretical concepts and definition frameworks related to games and digital games. One of the most important parts of the process is reconsidering well-

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known social and cultural phenomena in many new contexts associated with the media and virtual reality, respectively. One of these contexts refers to religion and spirituality, i.e. to the ways sacral and spiritual elements are portrayed in the virtual gaming environments. However, it is necessary to note that many questions of presenting (any kind of) religion in digital games still remain unanswered and Game Studies have only begun to discuss them thoroughly.

Offering an overview of the existing theoretical notions and considerations related to the complex relationship between religion and digital games, the study aims to reflect on various opinions of interested scholars on the sphere of digital games and virtual reality it constitutes. To fulfil this goal, we have to acknowledge that digital games – at least some of them – are able to function as visually compelling forms of virtual reality and convincing narratives. We also aim to discuss the theoretical notions of T.M. Malaby [1], O. Steffen [2], R.M. Geraci [3], H. Pravdová & J. Radošinská [4] and apply them to the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. The case study is based on the principles of discourse analysis and strives to identify religious motives and spiritual elements present in the given digital game.

## 2. Terminological axis of the discussed issue

The term ‘social reality’ may serve as a definition framework of our everyday reality. As stated above, games can be seen as very important parts of the social and cultural reality we experience on daily basis. ‘Game’ is one of our basic needs, functioning as a tool for exploring the world. T.M. Malaby defines ‘games’ as half-bounded arenas that are relatively detachable from our everyday life. The links between games and social reality are, as the author remarks, influenced by one’s emotional state and cultural capital. The emotional states people experience while playing games lead to productivity. Those who play games may consider various contexts and find diverse meanings the games imply. These meanings might be ‘deep’, but also less serious; one way or another, they influence the players’ ordinary social and cultural reality [1]. Those discussing games and their social and cultural significance tend to favour some of game’s expressions and meanings, ignoring or marginalising its other traits. It is therefore no surprise that the issue’s interdisciplinary nature results in multiple and sometimes even contradictory definitions of the term ‘game’.

A. Koltaiová determines the basic aspects of a game. The author claims that a game is a breeding ground for a large number of fundamentally different expressions of one’s life and interests – gaining experience while growing up, developing the sensory-motor functions, playing various roles. According to the author, no game is meaningless; games are not only entertaining but also useful. Each game includes certain elements of repeating, rituals and purposeful activities. Games thus constitute communication spaces that allow us to deal with the real world within a different kind of reality [5]. Other approaches to defining the term ‘game’ are based on underlining its elementary purpose – to entertain. F. Jost focuses on the two most essential characteristics of game –

its spontaneity and insubstantiality in terms of physical or intellectual activities. A person who plays a game does so only to experience fun, i.e. to feel “the joy of playing a game” [6]. T. M. Malaby sees ‘game’ as an activity based on three essential traits – it can easily be separated from the everyday life (mostly through its contrast with work), it is safe (non-productive, ‘inconclusive’) and pleasant (i.e. entertaining, normatively positive). However, none of these characteristic traits are universal – as the author remarks, ‘game’ is rather experience than an activity [1]. The given definitions and many other existing scholarly opinions only underline the fact that it is very hard to find a universally applicable and timeless definition of ‘game’. Moreover, the emergence of digital games has made the process even more complicated.

Media reality (and virtual reality as its constitutive part) possesses many specific features that are not present in any kind of social and cultural reality. P. Virilio sees this “virtual dimension” as a world full of ideas and imagination. Virtual reality is fictitious, unreal – it is represented by “a game of dimensions and formations that may emulate the ordinary reality” [7]. It is a made-up, synthetic or less real reality [8]. We may state that today, virtual reality is defined as a type of environment created by ‘acceptable’ reproductions of real objects – its purpose is to provide knowledge, offer entertainment, etc. Virtual reality typically uses computers and various digital technologies to create spaces, within which it is possible to ‘travel’ and interact with other users or objects. In this context, ‘to navigate’ virtual reality means to be able to move and explore the functions of the displayed environment; in other words, such interactions are based on one’s ability to choose various objects and manipulate them within the given environment [9].

One of the timeliest definitions of ‘virtual reality’ is proposed by S.M. LaValle. The author claims that ‘virtual reality’ is a form of purposeful behaviour expressed by an organism, based on an artificial sensory stimulation; however, the person experiencing this stimulation is only partly aware of the virtual reality’s interference or even not aware of it at all [10]. The given specifics of virtual reality stress its uniqueness. It may be unreal, but it still can create very convincing illusions simulating the existence of phenomena that do not exist in our everyday reality. Virtual reality is thus a visually compelling simulation of the ‘real’ (social and cultural) reality.

Adapting to the endless possibilities of media or rather virtual reality, game may have changed its outer structure, but its internal character has not changed at all. Nevertheless, new media technologies have inspired both professionals and scholars to look for modified definitions of the phenomenon of game – and thus the terms ‘electronic game’, ‘computer game’ or ‘videogame’ have been coined. However, all of them, at least to a certain extent, just represent the term “digital game” [11]. This etymological ambiguity only deepens the problem’s complexity. Moreover, studying digital games is only a part of the on-going wider discussions within the field of Game Studies. These disputes typically centre on the broader concepts of ‘games’ and their structures, rules and genres [12].

‘Digital game’ is a part of the media sphere. It is a medium that allows players to actively co-create a specific form of virtual reality. The players represent or rather control their avatars (most often by using various gaming devices) and interact with the virtual environment and other players. ‘Digital games’ may be defined as a group of programmes created for people who use different kinds of communication technologies (e.g. personal computers, tablets, mobile phones). It is to be used in one’s free time, at least predominantly. In order to play a digital game, a player has to be active; moreover, she/he has to respect a set of predetermined rules and take responsibility for own decisions. In most cases a player is able to lie or choose between the truth and mistake [13]. However, one of the most typical features of digital game is its interactivity, i.e. a mode establishing communication between a player and a game. Interactivity is one of digital game’s most essential principles, as it determines the nature of emotions and feelings players experience while interacting with digital games [14].

Digital games offer us an opportunity to visit places and experience situations that do not exist in the real world. They function as a source of otherwise unavailable experiences, creating an unreal space within reality [15]. Even in case of digital games we still define a certain game space, a time frame and a set of rules that drive the whole activity related to playing digital games [16]. The rules provide digital games with seriousness and also eliminate possible conflicts, strengthening its entertaining character [17]. However, while reflecting on the issues of games and digital games, we have to consider not only the values, practices, principles or languages and expressions players respect or apply but also the presence of heterogeneous socio-cultural phenomena such as religious elements. The next chapter of the study thus focuses on the presence of religious motives in digital role-playing games, namely in the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

### **3. The ways ‘The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt’ depicts religious motives**

The following analysis of the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* [CD Projekt Red, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (PlayStation Version)*, CD Projekt, Warsaw, 2015] aims to find out how and in which contexts the game’s creators employ various religious motives. Our choice of the analysed media product was deliberate – *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is currently one of the most popular and discussed digital role-playing games. Digital game genres exist to provide a unifying classification of digital games on basis of their common and different elements and formal characteristics. Even though digital game genres are fundamentally different from literary, journalistic or film genres, they still underline, very much like any other genre classifications, specific representations of reality present in various types of media products [18]. Our primary objective here is to identify and clarify the presence of religious motives in the selected digital role-playing game. It is therefore necessary to define the genre itself, at least briefly. As we believe, understanding the genre’s

features, traits and typical aspects allows us to better explain sacral elements present in one of the most popular digital role-playing games of today.

While playing a role-playing game, players assume roles of various (typically) fictional characters. This allows them to experience a wide range of strong feelings and emotions accompanying the symbolic acts of heroism happening during the game. Role-playing games offer certain 'alternatives' to one's everyday reality, eliminating any rational limitations. However, they also respect conditionality – such games transform ontological reality into 'unreal' reality, but still follow clearly defined causality (cause – effect, action – reaction). Their characters typically possess magical or supernatural powers, fulfil various goals or quests and obtain different kinds of experience and new abilities. Role-playing games often take place in magical worlds filled with elements of science-fiction and fantasy; however, some of them directly refer to ordinary reality corresponding with either the contemporary world or a real historical period. Moreover, there are a few digital games that aspire to predict the future (some of them can be characterised as 'post-apocalyptic') [19].

As we are predominantly interested in religious aspects of digital games, our analysis is related to a digital game that depicts a certain alternative to social and cultural reality of the Middle Ages. The term 'the Middle Ages' has been used since the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. J. Le Goff divides this historical period into three basic stages – the early Middle Ages (from 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century AD); the high Middle Ages (from 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century AD) and the late Middle Ages (from 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century AD) [20]. Each of the given medieval epochs had its own societal framework and cultural life. While the early Middle Ages were dominated by political and religious questions of humanity, the high Middle ages were marked by progressive economic changes (e.g. more effective agricultural production, urbanization). And then, the late Middle Ages completed the cultural development of the era in question; especially in terms of artistic creation and playing games. The story told by the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* seemingly starts in 1272 AD; nevertheless, the analysed media product contains various aspects and traits of all phases of the Middle Ages. More specifically, the game we analyse represents the medieval period as a complex of political, economic, cultural and ideological developments spread across several centuries.

There are various ways of analysing religious motives in digital games. One of them often applies R. Caillois' theory of four game principles that takes into account religious functions of games. This typology is also useful when we try to specify a game's narrative and its genre determination. Agon contains cosmological and eschatological functions, as well as struggles of different moral and ethical frameworks. Alea represents fortune telling and prophecies, while mimicry refers to imitation and magical and ceremonial functions of games. And last but not least,ilinx or vertigo is based on alternative states of one's consciousness [2].

Any analysis of religious aspects of digital games is closely associated with these media products' complex narrative structures. Digital games created decades ago were narratively simple and bereft of any deeper ideological meanings. The technological advancements, however, allowed producers of digital games to create visually compelling narrative structures rich both in form and content. That is why the contemporary digital games often offer wide spectrums of mythical, magical or openly religious motives. Today, the ways mythology, magic or religious and sacral aspects are presented in digital games are very complex and immersive [3]. Since many of these digital games are very popular and globally distributed, we may presume that although their audiences do not have to be religious, they are still interested in the universal questions of religion and spirituality. G. Lipovetsky argues that the contemporary globalised era represents a certain "return to spirituality" – after all, oriental wisdom, Eastern religions, esotericism or meditation have been very popular lately. However, the essence of being religious has changed; the sense of religious collectiveness has been replaced by individual choices and volatile combinations of various aspects of faith originating from many different religions [21].

H. Pravdová and J. Radošinská also discuss the outlined problem by saying that each media product (digital games being no exception) is, at least to certain extent, a story. Most of them may appear to be secular, but they still implicitly refer to complex sets of meanings related to spirituality and many different elements of religious traditions: "*Commercial media culture is, in many cases, able to bring recipients who have no conventional religious beliefs into confrontation with traditional religious culture by showing deeper cultural values that would normally be rejected by these audiences as incomprehensible or simply too different from their own worldview*" [4]. This statement also applies to the digital dimension, i.e. to most narratively rich digital games – including *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

The digital game in question was produced by the Polish digital game developer *CD Projekt Red*. Its story takes place in a fantastic world reminiscent of the Middle Ages. The game's lead character, Geralt of Rivia, is a 'witcher'. He thus performs various tasks and activities, engages in intimate, friendly, professional, but also hostile relationships, and often kills or otherwise eliminates his opponents (human and monstrous alike). However, we are predominantly interested in the strong presence of medieval cultural and religious elements in the given game.

Throughout the game, Geralt the witcher does not express any particular sympathies towards any kind of religion, at least not explicitly. Nevertheless, many of his quests involve deep and complex religious questions. People living in the countryside (but often also townsmen residing in the towns of Novigrad, Oxenfurt or Wyzima) tend to ask him to save sacred places that have been destroyed. Geralt's proclaimed 'atheism' is thus subject to the essence of role-playing. To solve a situation like this, players are forced to use one of the available dialogue choices. In most cases there are contradictory options

to consider – on basis of a specific player's chain of choices, Geralt may, for example, support the believers and help them, but he might also agree with fanatics trying to apply extreme measures against sorcerers or ignore these kinds of situations and take no action whatsoever. However, most players do not ignore these secondary quests, since the lead character, Geralt, has to gain as much experience points as possible to become stronger.

In order to renew his physical and magical powers after particularly difficult physical confrontations, Geralt uses a meditation technique, which refers to various Eastern religions (especially Buddhism) but also to Christianity. The reason for including the meditation technique in the game is quite clear – in late modern societies, meditating is a fashionable spiritual element. However, today's people do not tend to see meditation as a religious aspect bound to a specific religion, at least not always. This only underlines the unstable nature of contemporary spiritual life that may even appear as 'atheistic'.

Regardless of Geralt of Rivia's uncommon and vague spiritual determination, the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* still contains various religious motives and traits. They occur not only within the game's main storyline but also in its secondary quests and at the level of metanarratives. While playing the game, players encounter controversial and often dangerous magical rituals that defy the laws of nature. They are typically able to support, condemn or ignore such situations. Here we would like to mention one of the most important quests of this kind Geralt has to complete. The quest is titled *Va fail, Elaine* and to fulfil it, Geralt and his companions must figure out how to perform a magical ritual (to break a curse). The aim is to transform a deformed inhuman being called Uma back into his original shape and the only way to do so is to use magic and various kinds of elixirs.

The game's narrative structure also includes multiple types of philosophical and axiological questions. The most common moral dilemma Geralt experiences is the value of his (very few) loved ones and their lives confronted with the value of hundreds or even thousands of lives of people he does not know. However, when Geralt's loved ones (his protégé Cirilla, Yennefer of Vengerberg, his long-term lover, or Triss, his friend) are in danger, Geralt or rather those playing the game tend to quickly abandon the witchers' duties and responsibilities. This fact further deepens the moral ambiguity of the lead character. The questions of life and death are ever-present in the game. In many cases players have to decide whether Geralt will let thugs, thieves or fraudsters live or whether he will attack and kill them. Are their previous actions too serious, too dishonourable, too unforgivable to let them alive? Is Geralt, originally a monster hunter, even supposed to solve these kinds of moral dilemmas?

Geralt of Rivia often helps people who – for various reasons, mostly due to the fact that they are afraid of war and death – perform protective rituals. These rituals typically involve worshipping of thoughtfully decorated statues portraying deities or leaving other kinds of religious artefacts in diverse places

(most frequently alongside the roads, in order to protect pilgrims and people seeking refuge in the times of war).

Fictitious political and Church authorities portrayed in the game (e.g. General Menge, King Radovid of Redania) explicitly represent medieval-like religious ideologies. They act as self-appointed moral authorities or ‘sentinels’ of what is moral and ethical. Most of ordinary but also well-situated people ‘living’ in this fantasy gaming environment despise them. However, those who are afraid of mages and/or have been their victims support such authorities. One of Geralt’s closest allies, the well-known sorceress Keira Metz, therefore lives in a humble, distant hut in the woods, hiding from the authorities and helping local people at the same time. If Geralt does not solve her part of the story properly, Keira is executed by burning for practising witchcraft.

The game also works with the notion of a corrupt, violent religious organisation – here named Church of the Eternal Fire. This religious fellowship is based in a gold-plated temple located in the wealthiest district of the city of Novigrad. The lead character (and thus players controlling him) are, however, not able to visit the temple. Paradoxically, the richest townspeople are mostly atheistic so situating the temple in this part of the town is quite illogical and refers only to the Church’s representatives’ aspiration to lead a wealthy, comfortable and, above all, privileged life. Church of the Eternal Fire employs various measures referring to the Medieval Inquisition – they burn ‘witches’ (here, however, called ‘sorceresses’) and torture people suspected or even falsely accused of practising witchcraft or performing unapproved religious rituals. Members of this Church are portrayed as corrupt fanatics who often commit racially motivated crimes (e.g. they harm non-human characters inhabiting this fantasy world or damage their properties in the name of their faith).

Another religious element worth noting is the game’s system of specific places that temporarily increase one of Geralt’s magical talents. These places are called ‘Places of Power’. They are universally designed and their architectonic composition – even though very simple or rather minimalistic – reminds players of the historical landmarks like Stonehenge or Avesbury. These historical sites have widely been discussed in terms of their presumed original functions (ritual, magical or religious). However, today they are known as tourist attractions, at least predominantly.

As of specifically religion-based quests, one of them is the quest named *A Greedy God*. During the mission Geralt encounters a mythological ‘deity’ that is worshipped by local villagers. The locals call it Allgod. In fact, it is a monster known as Sylvan appearing as an excessively overweight, half-naked hairy man with horns. The name evidently refers to Silvanus, the Roman god of fields and woods. Sylvan demands worthy material offerings; or else, as he says, the village will face drought, driving hail, earthquakes and avalanches (even though there are no mountains anywhere nearby). Geralt starts his conversation with Sylvan by saying mockingly: “*Oh, Allgod. Help a poor wretch in need. Pretty please*”. By doing this, he lets the monster know that he is aware of its true nature. There are three ways to solve the conflict – to threaten the monster



and thus reduce the amount of offerings it demands, to leave the situation as it is or to kill the monster. However, if Geralt kills Sylvan, the villagers are not grateful. Afraid of Allgod's punishment, they start to organise group prayer, claiming that it is the only thing that can save them now.

Another quest of religious nature is called *Defender of the Faith*. The given mission is quite unimportant, at least with regard to the main storyline; just like many similar quests of this kind. However, these micro-stories develop players' empathy in terms of religious beliefs expressed by ordinary people (or their lack thereof). In this particular case Geralt meets an old, feeble woman telling him that vandals have profaned the shrines to Verna the Merciful and if they are not repaired immediately, the local cows will croak, the children will be covered in warts and dogs will get the mange. Geralt thus fixes vandalised shrines and tries to identify those responsible. As it turns out, the vandals are students of the prestigious Oxenfurt Academy (which is probably the game's own version of Oxford University). They refuse to apologize for their behaviour and argue by quoting Nietzsche and partly Marx: "*We are the heralds of lightning, heavy drops from leaden clouds. Unleashed, the lightning's name shall be Overman.*" (...) "*The Gods are dead.*" (...) "*Religion is the opiate of the masses. Thus speaks Master Friedrich of Oxenfurt.*" Unlike the locals who believe that the shrines protect them and their children and livestock, the students see the places of worship as "*the dying embers of superstition that harms*". There are two ways to solve the situation. Geralt may attack the vandals and kill them or let them go and strongly recommend them to never come back. One way or another, the students are not willing to change their attitude or even apologize for their actions.

The narrative elements and motives outlined above clearly prove that the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* contains a lot of religious and spiritual aspects. After all, if the producers had decided to neglect this religious framework, the medieval epoch would not have been portrayed so thoroughly and persuasively. Given the game's genre classification, the fantastic world it presents would not be so compelling, multi-layered and immersive without the elements of spiritual life that shape it, although most of them are portrayed in overly negative contexts. This fact only underlines the importance of reflecting on the ways spirituality and religious motives, elements or ideas are implemented within the dimension of digital games.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The problems of gaming – regardless of in which kind of reality a game takes place – may be seen as one of the most topical questions of today's Media Studies and Game Studies. Given the obvious complexity of the related issues, the study aimed to discuss religious motives and their presence in the dimension of digital games. The phenomenon of religiousness has been, in this particular context, evidently overlooked so far – scholarly case studies that would address the practices of depicting religions in digital games in detail are notably absent.

Even though there are many different genres of digital games and their existence often results from hybridization of so-called supergenres, we may still name a few genres that are relatively stable and widely established. As we believe, the genre of role-playing games is one of them. The genre's cultural significance has recently been reflected on by J. Radošinská [22], even specifically in terms of media culture [23]. Following the mentioned author's line of thought, we believe that the 'steady' and culturally diverse nature of today's digital role-playing games allows us to thoroughly explore various motives and themes depicted in them.

Our ambition was to analyse sacral elements present in the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, which unambiguously and thus very clearly represents the genre in question. Taking into account the remarks and findings mentioned above, we may conclude that the game specifically portrays (in our case predominantly Western) religious ideology typical for the medieval period. Non-human beings present in the game's narrative structure are often based on creatively employed elements or deities of Slavic paganism and its mythology – however, here they are 'real' monsters the game's lead character has to eliminate. Moreover, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* merges these aspects of pagan mythology with various rituals evoking nature deities and depictions of distinctively 'medieval' religious life (e.g. unfounded suspicions related to presumed witchcraft, inquisitive practices, no differentiation between peaceful mages and those who are truly dangerous, etc.). The analysed game also tends to see organised Church life (here depicted by the Church of the Eternal Fire) negatively, as an environment filled with moral corruption and fanaticism, zealotry.

Transforming many mythological elements, fantastic stories and narratives we normally see as fairy tales into virtual reality, *The Witcher 3* creates a compelling depiction of a world where natural forces, mythological monsters and magical rituals performed by sorcerers collide with the sceptical, morally ambiguous hero and religious fanaticism he often comes into contact with. These depictions of religious fanaticism purposefully refer to the most pathological consequences of the Medieval Inquisition and the Counter-Reformation, including persecution of those suspected of heresy. Although the digital game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is, above all, a fantasy role-playing game, a part of the genre strongly interconnected with the medieval religious traditions, its creators obviously presume that their target audiences mostly consist of atheists and people who express scepticism towards religion or, more precisely, towards its institutionalised forms and official representatives.

As we have stated above, the issue of sacral motives used in digital games and their narratives is very complex. That is why we would like to put emphasis on the fact that multiple case studies are needed; otherwise we will not be able to understand how, why and to what extent religious motives are used across the whole genre spectrum of digital games.

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