

# **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF COMPUTER GAMES RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON A NEW ISSUE**

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## **INTRODUCTION: COMPUTER GAMES AS RESEARCH OBJECT**

Research on computer games is a rather new subject for religious education (RE). With this brief overview I will present some existing research projects and I will introduce a research design for the whole subject, which includes many future projects.

While there is still a limited number of RE research projects on computer games, research in the field of cultural studies und social sciences is already very extensive. For example, there are some very interesting online magazines such as [www.game-culture.com](http://www.game-culture.com), <http://gamestudies.org> and [www.game-research.com](http://www.game-research.com). In this paper, I will refer to some non-RE publications which I found helpful from a RE perspective.

### **Three Basic Assumptions**

The following three assumptions are the starting point of my paper and I am not going to discuss them. The first and the second are common assumptions, whereas the third is part of my research design. Although it would be interesting to ask for the implications of these assumptions, I want to restrict myself to mention them briefly to be able to concentrate on the games as a challenge for RE.

#### *Daily Life Culture and Media are Important to Religious Education*

Referring to an ongoing discussion, I posit that daily life culture (Failing & Heimbrock, 1998) and media (Gräb, 2002) are relevant to theology and RE.

As this paper is focused on school-related aspects of computer games, I want to put this assumption in concrete terms by saying that understanding computer games can be a central competence for working and living with young people: Not only for school work in general, but also specifically for teaching RE, because teaching RE is much about understanding young people's life world (1), which is highly influenced by computer games. Moreover, working with computer games in RE might offer the possibility to learn differently and/or to learn different things.

## *Computer Games Play a Central Role in Today's Youth Culture*

Second I think that computer games are an important part of today's youth culture (e.g. Fromme (2003) on children's culture). While examining recent developments in the United States, we can expect them to become even more important in the next years, also for the group of young adults up to the age of 30. However, this influence is not limited to youth culture. Within popular culture, in general, computer games play an important role: they are often highly connected with popular movies, music and sport events and there already are reports on the history of computer games and their biographical importance for those born around 1970 (Poole, 2000). Even in reference to social life, we find the importance of computer games: 'The post-pub PlayStation session is one of the joys of modern British life.' (Poole, 2000, p. 17)

### *It is Useful to Restrict the Research Focus to Games*

RE discussion in this field is very often about computer use in general. Such an overview is necessary, but it misses important distinctions between the different ways of using computers. It is without any doubt useful and promising to deal with possibilities that email and internet offer for RE (McGrady, 2002) and to ask for the influence of computer use on RE educational processes (Dinter, 2003), but computer games ask for a specific point of view, because they are an own category of computer use: The major difference is the fact that entertainment is usually the central motivation for playing computer games. Therefore, this paper presents an approach focussed on the specific computer use gaming.

But we have to be aware that this concentration on computer games is in itself a very far-reaching generalization, because to talk about 'computer games in general' is similar to talking about 'books in general'. For example, there is a huge variety of different computer games and two games of a different kind can have very little in common. That is why a statement on one game often has relevance for a certain number of games and can be totally inadequate for a lot of other games. Therefore, every approach which is not limited to give an overview like this paper has to make distinctions between different types of games.

With this paper, I want to present three main research topics. The first one deals directly with the games and their contents. The second one, entitled 'Playing Experiences', aims at the human beings and what they experience while playing the game, which is of course in some aspects highly connected to the previous section. Finally the section 'Research on didactic perspectives' debates how computer games can become an explicit subject in RE.

## **RESEARCH ON GAMES AND THEIR CONTENTS**

### **Which Plots, Contents and Themes are Used**

This is very often the first academic approach to a computer game: To transform the game into a story by writing a text, which reports everything about the setting, the hero, the adventures he has to survive and the goal he has to reach. In addition to this text oriented approach one can look upon a computer game as on a movie and analyse the visual and acoustical dimension. Both will very often lead to the discovery of various symbols and elements from religious and mythological traditions (e.g. Wessely, 1997).

Although this combination of modern technology and religious/mythological elements is interesting for RE research, one should always be aware that academic research is in danger of considering the story elements to be more important than they are for the playing experience (Lange, 2001), because a player is usually not interested in symbols and story elements, but in solutions. By reducing the game to a text such an approach easily misses the very important feature of interactivity which implies a different mode of perception of story elements and of aesthetic phenomena.

Therefore, one has to take into account that religious and mythological elements are often perceived as mere illustration and that they are used as a part of the marketing concept based on the strategy 'religion sells'.

Going beyond that concentration on explicit religious und mythological elements, RE research can discover so-called implicit religious aspects in the story of computer games. Already in 1982 John Robert McFarland reflected on 'The Theology of Pac-Man' and came to the conclusion that 'Pac-Man is the story of life as we hear it in the Judeo-Christian tradition'. Such a context orientated approach also has to consider the gender models which the story and the visual representations impart.

### **Different Types of Games**

This refers to the different categories one can set up to distinguish the games. These categories do not only depend on the story, but rather on the way the player can act in the game: How s/he controls the virtual characters, which point of view does s/he have, and what are the means by which s/he can reach the goal of the game and so on. The creation of new types of games does not only depend on the fantasy of the game designers, but also on the technical developments. So it is an ongoing task to look at the development, because new ideas and the constantly developing technical possibilities create new types of games with new implications: Only some years ago the now so important game type network gaming emerged or recently the '\_Eye-toy' technology, an interface,

which integrates the player's picture and body movements into the screen action in real-time, made new games possible.

For RE it is very interesting to ask about the theological implications of the setting and structures of a game, even or especially when they do not refer explicitly to religion. To mention one of the possible approaches: Thomas (2003), a professional 'secular' game reviewer, locates the 'Theology of Games' not in traditional religious story elements but in 'the structure of games [that] themselves have [...] a fundamentally theological message': 'Just like the Christian notion of the universe, every game has a creator and that creator has a special plan in mind for you.' For a RE analysis of this interpretation, it would be interesting to compare this understanding to the ancient concept of the 'teatro mundi'.

### **Protection of Children**

An extensive discussion on its own is that on possible negative consequences of (violent) computer games. It goes far beyond the scope of this paper to give an overview of this argument, as it is a highly polarized field of research and no one should expect a consensus in this field. A pragmatic approach of RE work to this argument could be a commitment to the less controversial field of age rating systems that serve as an orientation for parents. The work of age ratings providing institutions like the 'British Video standards Council' (VSC) ([www.videostandards.org.uk](http://www.videostandards.org.uk)), the German USK, 'Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle' ([www.usk.de](http://www.usk.de)) or PEGI, the 'Pan European Games Information' ([www.pegi.info](http://www.pegi.info)) can benefit from RE research, especially when RE research develops a competence to assess if a game has a religious harmful influence, such as when it uses satanic messages, etc. Of course all age rating systems have strong limitations, but nevertheless they can be considered useful within these limitations.

While age rating systems usually only reflect on the effect of one specific game, RE research has to consider also the effect of a manifold use of computer games, especially when it affects the being-a-subject of players. For our school-related work, it is important to consider that the use of computer games, just like other media, corresponds with the level of education: the higher the education, the higher the chance that a young person has a productive and balanced use of computer games.

### **'Good' Games and 'Christian' Games**

After focussing the question about which games can be harmful, it is now time to ask, 'When do we consider a game to be a good game?'

One could propose that a criteria for a good game is that by playing it you learn new facts. But most of the time there is a conflict between learning facts and entertainment. And entertainment is the main motivation to play a game. To learn facts by playing is not the domain of normal computer games, but of 'Edutainment' software, which I consider to be a different category of computer use (see above). Apart from learning other things than facts (see below) entertainment and fun is the domain of computer games. It becomes easier to accept this usage when we see play as an end in itself, integrating the understanding of the anthropological importance of the 'homo ludens' (Huizinga, 1970) and of the theological importance of the 'feast of fools' (Cox, 1969). So there are important theological reasons to welcome playing as an end in itself (cf. Theomag, 2003).

For a RE assessment a game is not automatically good, when it meets naïve conceptualized 'biblical standards' (2) or when it is located in a Christian setting: Explicit 'Christian' games often take conventional game concepts and create a 'Christian' story.(3) RE research has to explore what message a game communicates that 'prettifies' a normal game concept by creating a surface with Christian story elements.

Moreover, the search for criteria for a 'good game' leads us quite soon into a dead end street: Notwithstanding the big quality differences between the games, we discover that it is very difficult to find universally applicable criteria for a good game. And even more important we discover that there are many ways to play one and the same game and even more ways to handle this playing experiences. The differences between these ways enable us to say that there are good and bad ways to play and handle a game. So the question about a good game leads to the question about a good use of games, which will be picked up below.

## **RESEARCH ON PLAYING PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCES**

### **Reasons for Fascination**

There are several approaches to explain the fascination of computer games (Fritz, 2003a,b). One of the major arguments is that the player often experiences a flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), a condition of high concentration which implies a loss of sense of time and to forget about the world outside the game. This explanation is interesting for RE research, because flow experiences are traditionally also a vital part of religious practices and a computer game seems to make it easier to reach flow experiences than meditation, for example.

Moreover the fact that computer games are able to fascinate so many people is relevant for RE, since fascination is itself a key term for religion. Picking up this line one can ask what needs and desires become visible in the use of computer games. Do we find desires which are traditionally located in

religion and is there a dealing with this desires, which reveals a functional analogy to religious practice? (cf. Scholtz, 2002)

In this area, just as in many others, it seems to be promising to consider the results of non-RE research projects on computer games, also from natural sciences, which might help to understand the effect of gaming in its cognitive, neurophysiological, and bodily dimensions better.

### **Social Phenomena**

That persons playing computer games generally are less socially integrated has by several empirical studies been proven as a bias (Fritz, 2003c). On the contrary, these games can be in various ways a catalyst for social encounter and interaction. People do meet to play together and the games provide topics of conversation even among strangers.

That computer games can create social activities, becomes most obvious at the so-called LAN (Local Area Network)-parties, an important part of today's youth culture when hundreds of adolescents meet in a gym to play network games an entire weekend long (Baumgärtel, 2002). But even if the players do not meet face to face, network gaming (e.g., on the internet) can generate social interaction which sometimes can even be transformed into real life contacts. Evangelical circles have already discovered the intensity of social contacts within some online games and started missionary work within the games (Loftus, 2003).

For RE, it would be valuable to know more about these forms of social interaction and their function within youth culture, especially concerning the fact that LAN-parties include highly ritualised elements and that by playing two or three days with hardly any sleep, young people are doing experiments on ecstatic experiences.

### **Learning Experiences while Playing**

Although computer games usually do not impart knowledge in form of facts (see above), you do learn *something* by playing them: Gee (2003) analysed extensively the useful learning principles a good game can teach. A similar comprehensive study on the negative effects is still missing.

For our context it is necessary to explore the effects for RE learning that non contend-orientated learning processes of computer gaming imply. Gee (2003, p. 13) speaks, for example of a new kind of literacy that computer games generate and require. It has to be analysed how this literacy is related to the 'religious literacy' (Wright, 1996) RE is committed to.

### **Influence on Life World and World View**

In addition to the above mentioned learning processes, it is necessary to ask how the gaming shapes the life world and world view of gamers because: 'A game's influence doesn't end when you turn off the console.' (Loftus, 2003)

On a very general level, one can ascertain the influence on culture when computer games create wide spread narratives like Lara Croft or when they shape the aesthetics and camera work of a certain type of movies (e.g., the Matrix Trilogy).

When we look at the individual level the first thing to talk about is a (temporary) change of perception, because gaming requires a special way of concentration and perception, and after intensive playing sessions this specific perception is still present in daily life and this for example, can make a normal school situation seem to take place in slow motion (Baumgärtel, 2002). This is an interesting aspect for RE, because religion itself is about changing the perception of life and reality. But here we find also the danger that very intensive use can result in (partly) losing contact to reality by creating an unadjusted perception or by nurturing omnipotence fantasies (Pöhlmann, 2001).

In the long term, it is possible that certain problem-solving strategies, which are successful in computer games, are integrated into daily life. Also the imaginative abilities, highly trained by some games, can influence the view on daily life maybe even with positive effects for the religious competence. Moreover, certain interpretations of reality can derive from gaming. For example, influencing the understanding of God, seeing God as analogous to the game designer, or maybe more problematic for a religious worldview, taking over the world concept of many computer games that the world is purely determined by causal, technical relations and that everything in the world can be influenced by technical or rational actions.

Highly relevant for RE is that the use of computers in general (cf. Dinter, 2003), and especially of computer games can contribute to young people's identity construction. Again, we have to be aware that there is no automatism in the sense that a computer game creates an identity, but the player creates his or her identity maybe also by choosing elements that computer games (and other media) offer.

## **A Good Use of Games**

All this research on the practice and the experience converges in the question, how we in a RE perspective, can define 'good practice'. Such a good practice might be more important than a good game and therefore we also need to know more about the factors that lead to a practice defined as good. At present we can name two main elements: On the one hand a good practice depends on the player, e.g., his/her age, gender, education, social position, and personality. On the other hand, it depends also on his/her social surrounding: Do his/her friends, parents, and teachers take note of the playing practice? Do they participate occasionally in it? Do they, as reflecting on the playing seems to be crucial for a successful dealing with computer games experiences (Müller, 2001, p. 45), communicate about these experiences and do they help him/her to find a reflexive approach to his/her experiences?

Further RE research is necessary to clarify the characteristics of a useful practice by the player himself/herself and by his/her surrounding, and to explore if it is possible to influence this practice by educational processes.

## **RESEARCH ON DIDACTIC PERSPECTIVES**

Working with youth culture elements in RE always implies the risk that students might not like it that their own culture, which always serves as a phenomenon of difference, becomes a school subject. This forms a boundary which has to be observed carefully. The most important consequence for working with computer games in RE is the fact that only those teachers who, in spite of a critical attitude towards some particular games, truly can accept computer games as a normal part of today's popular culture and therefore do not follow a hidden agenda of showing the students that gaming in the end is an inferior activity. Working with computer games in RE with such a negative attitude, even when it is well hidden, would probably meet the students' stiff opposition and would lead to poor didactic results.



## **Aims of Religious Education Working With Computer Games**

The first aim of a RE dealing with computer games picks up the concept of a good practice and tries to enable students to handle computer games in a better way. Such a media education as a part of RE aims at a subject which can use the modern media in a self-determined and an emancipatory way. Looking at the key role modern media plays in youth culture, this ability turns out to be vital for every (RE) educational process. But to improve the gaming practice does not primarily imply to influence the players' choice of games, but to empower the players to play their games differently and, most important, to deal with their playing experience differently.

The second aim of an RE dealing with computer games uses the games as a tool to work on 'traditional' subjects of RE. So the use of media is not the subject itself, but it is part of the life world RE deals with. But it would be counterproductive for the educational process if the games are just used as a modern surface or as an appetizer for an old-fashioned teaching concept.

These two aims show that we, theoretically speaking, can either do teaching *on the media* 'computer games' or we can use computer games *as a medium* for RE teaching of different contents.

When we use computer games as a medium in RE, the medium has of course its own message (cf. Marshall McLuhan), but *to work with* computer games in RE can be much more than *teaching on* computer games. One result of using computer games in RE is that it levels the relation between teacher and students to a certain extent because usually the students turn out to be the real experts in this subject. If the teacher can handle this situation, it helps to get an intensive communication in class and to motivate the students.

## **Ways to Work With Computer Games in Religious Education**

### *Computer Games as a Theoretical Subject in Religious Education*

It is one possibility for RE to work with computer games without playing them in the classroom, even without having a computer in classroom at all. Then, the first step is always to ask the students to present one game and their experiences with it for the whole class or let the students work as ethnographers to report about the results of their observations of other players. In doing so, it is very important not only to focus on the games and their contents, but also on the playing experiences and the function computer games have in youth culture.

This approach can be used for a variety of topics and situations, especially if there is a connection between the teaching subject and the content of the game (e.g., magic), if one game tells a story that is interesting for RE, if it is the aim to make students' experiences a subject of discussion (in a teaching unit that tries to improve the students capacity to reflect his or her living situation and emotional experiences) or if you want to discuss media use itself.

### *Computer Games as a Practical Subject in Religious Education*

The other possibility for RE to work with computer games is playing them in the classroom. Here you often have to face technical problems and such an activity hardly fits in a normal school timetable. But a well chosen game offers a new and promising teaching situation. If it is possible to set a distinct frame and set of rules for the playing time, one can use this approach for the topics mentioned above and for many others: To focus on those virtual persons which are only treated like objects (e.g., the hostages in Counterstrike) and then start to look at them from a different angle, could be one step in a teaching unit on social marginalized or on empathy: it is an important difference not only to look at a movie or read a text on such a situation, but to have the interactivity of a computer game, which makes it possible to experience such a situation in a performative way.

To have the games in the classroom makes it also possible to concentrate on the playing experience itself; for example, it is possible to have a mix between periods of playing and periods of reflection on the playing experience. Furthermore, it is an important possibility to use a game for an activity that the game designer did not intend to be part of the game. Such a reinterpretation of a virtual world can be an example of how a bad game can lay the foundations for a good practice. In a concept for a series of RE lessons that Waltemathe (2003) presents, one element of a shooter game is used to let the students create a model of a religious room or church they do dream of and this serves as a catalyst for communication about religious rooms and churches and the personal experiences with such rooms.

We can conclude that when using computer games as a medium in RE neither the explicit content of the game nor the intended playing practice necessarily defines the limit how to use the computer game in RE.

## CONCLUSION

This overview shows that there are different approaches of how RE can benefit from research on computer games. It can offer new insights in young people's life world, which is an important hermeneutical competence for school. In addition, it can deepen the understanding of today's (pop) culture, and it can even discover practices that are functionally comparable to religion, which can have an effect on how RE contextualizes itself. Furthermore, there are many possibilities to use computer games for teaching RE, which among others may make it easier to integrate students from lower social classes, which are more distanced to the educational system and at the same time very often have an intensive use of computer games.

Since computer games are a category of media on its own, to work with them offers different chances and difficulties than working with texts and movies and creates specific methodological problems. For example, this sector is so dynamic and the games and fashions change so quickly that it seems to be necessary for the research not to focus too much on one specific game, making the results applicable to different games. Therefore, RE research on computer games needs to develop adapted research methods. The different research topics require specific methods, but in my perspective one major concern has to be the consideration of the experiential dimension (cf. Scholtz, 2002), e.g. by integrating first hand playing experiences into the research process, just like McFarland did in 1982; first, he played Pac-Man; then, he started writing about it.

## Notes

1. There is a limit of understanding, as youth culture phenomena often have the function to establish a microcosm clearly separated from the grown up world. Youth culture as a phenomenon of difference therefore often uses shocking contents, for example, computer games with extreme violence or political radicalism, to create something that goes beyond the limits of adults.
2. An assessment by applying 'biblical standards' to computer games is down at [http://www.almenconi.com/topics/games/amm\\_game\\_ratings.html](http://www.almenconi.com/topics/games/amm_game_ratings.html): 'What this means is that we attempt to judge games the way God would.'
3. E.g.: In 2003 the US-American 'Christian Game Developers Conference' elected 'Eternal War: Shadows of Light' as best Game of the year. It is based on the famous ego-shooter 'Quake' and uses the same violence. The only difference: The player is not an evil character, he is an angel called Mike and his task is to fight dark demons, using all kind of weapons (cf. Loftus, 2003).

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