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Qualitative In-Depth Interviews: Studying Religious Meaning-Making in MMOs

Stef Aupers, Julian Schaap, and Lars de Wildt

Different methodological approaches have, each in their own right, contributed to substantial insight in the complex relation between games and religion. On the one hand, content analysis identifies religious representations in game narratives, such as Judaism (Masso and Abrams 2014), Islam (Šisler 2006, 2008), Hinduism (Zeiler 2014; O'Donnell 2015), or "god" (Krzywinska 2006; Wiemker and Wysocki 2014). From another perspective, scholars have focused on game-design, rules, and procedures to demonstrate that games function as religion. Design, after all, may disclose what Huizinga called a "magic circle" (1938) and temporarily afford collective effervescence (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Geraci 2014), provide rule-structured ethical dilemmas for reflection (Sicart 2011; Geraci 2014), and, like religion, produce ultimate meaning (Wagner 2012).

Such studies of religious narratives, procedures, and rules are pivotal to understanding the way religion is encoded in the game world. Every method, however, has its limitations. If we want to study how religious "codes" in the game are "decoded" (Hall 1980)—how they are interpreted, negotiated, and appropriated by consumers—we need to complement a "game-immanent" approach with a player-centered approach (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2015). In this chapter, we therefore focus on in-depth interviews as an important method to study religious meaning-making in video games. The goal is to demonstrate the relevance of this method, particularly in contemporary times when (religious) meaning has become an active, "reflexive project" (Giddens 1991). We will use a case study of World of Warcraft (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) to empirically illustrate this.

An in-depth interview concerns a semi-structured conversation between the researcher and a particular research subject in which the former taps into the life-world of the latter. The overarching goal is to gain insight in the meanings of people, i.e., their experiences, motivations, and worldviews (Patton 2005; Flick 2006; Boeije 2010; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2003, 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Kelle 2005). In particular, three elements constitute the goal of in-depth interviews. It is a useful method to:

1. Analyze experiences, motivations, worldviews, and meanings of individual people in empirical detail.

2. Construct concepts, classifications, and typologies based on a systematic comparison of the similarities and differences between individual people.
3. Develop an empirically grounded theory about shared meaning in a particular (sub)culture, organization, or institution.

To demonstrate the value of in-depth interviews in assessing religious meaning-making, we will discuss the case of WoW. The fiction of WoW is known to feature religion in all its variety—it is brimming with monotheism, polytheism, animism, sorcery, shamanism, magic, and other forms of re-enchantment (Aupers 2007; Krzywinska 2006). The question is, however, if, how, and why online gamers reflect on such religious-spiritual narratives in the game, and what influence this has on their (non)religious worldviews. To answer this question, the second author conducted in-depth interviews with 22 international players of WoW over video conferencing software Skype, which resulted in an article with the first author (Schaap and Aupers 2016). The analysis of interviews with players of WoW resulted in a typology of meaning-making—three different ways in which players relate to and reflect on in-game religion. Before demonstrating the use and analysis of interviews in this particular study, we will first elaborate on the general relevance of this particular method for the study of meaning-making in online games.

Theoretical Background

Studying Religious Meaning-Making in MMOs

Why do we need in-depth interviews with gamers to study (religious) meaning-making in games? The most general argument is developed in Symbolic Interactionism, which argues that "humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things" (Blumer 1969). The ontological, epistemological, and methodological implications of this approach are far-reaching and resulted, ultimately, in a social constructivist perspective (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966). Dismissing the positivistic assumption that there is a "real" out there—underlying, informing, or structuring human behavior—opens up the possibility of studying the way people construct the world and provide it with meaning (Flick 2006; Guba and Lincoln 1994). According to Alexander (2003: 12), meaning-making is the essence of culture and is, as such, a legitimate subject of study in itself—it should not be seen as a "dependent" variable determined by social-economic position, but as an "independent variable" motivating social action.

The question is then: How do people think and feel about themselves, the other, and the world that surrounds them? What different ideas do they have about what is essentially true, just, and beautiful? And

indeed, (how) do people act on the basis of their beliefs? Although such questions can be studied with quantitative methods—such as surveys and experiments (Houtman and Achterberg 2016)—they are generally addressed in qualitative research. In-depth interviews, particularly those inspired by the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2003, 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Kelle 2005), provide an opportunity to tap into the life-world of individuals open-mindedly—to inductively establish patterns, systematically develop concepts and categories, and, in doing so, develop a full-fledged theory about cultural meaning in a particular field.

Following this approach, it is pivotal to study the way gamers make sense of religious texts, narratives, and references in a game. In addition, recent transformations in the field of media and religion have made a focus on meaning-making extra relevant.

Media: From Passive Consumption to Participatory Culture

The first argument is related to the way our media environment developed over the last decades—a development that is historically reflected in academic media theories. Until the 1960s, mass media—film, television, radio—were initially and generally conceptualized as part of an omnipotent "culture industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944), colonizing the minds of consumers and, in turn, reinforcing a state of passiveness, conformity, and alienation. This perspective of the audience as inherently passive flowered in the well-known "hypodermic needle theory" (Shearon 1995; Asa 1995) and mono-causal effect-studies in communication science, but has increasingly been criticized since the 1970s and 1980s. Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding" model introduced a more active, meaning-making audience and emphasized the polysemic character of media texts. The messages in such texts, he argued, are decoded in multiple ways, while the meanings consumers attribute to the text are related to their social-economic-cultural and gendered positions. Building on such assumptions, John Fiske (2010: 23–24) argues that "culture is a living, active process [. . .] made by the people, not produced by the culture industry."

Whereas this media approach motivated a new generation of research and various reception studies, the rise of "new media"—online, social, interactive media—has indicated a new shift in perspective from an active audience to an interactive audience that socializes, communicates, and generates content. Whereas video games may be "interactive media par excellence" (Klein, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003), MMORPGs such as WoW are often portrayed as "virtual worlds" (Bartle 2004) that are co-created by consumers: in MMORPGs, players experiment with personal identities (Turkle 1995; Jansz 2015), share worldviews, and actively construct social networks that transgress the boundaries between on- and offline (Taylor 2006; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006). MMORPGs

constitute a "participatory culture" (Jenkins 1992; Raessens 2005) in which meaning-making has become pivotal. Given this development, it becomes imperative for academics to complement media/game-centered methodologies with a player-centered analysis of meaning-making. In-depth interviews provide a means to do this.

Religion: From Passive Belief to Religious Bricolage

A similar trend towards active meaning-making characterizes the field of religion in Western countries. In academia, the definition of religion was often ethnocentric, informed by Christianity and hence simply conceptualized as belief in a transcendent deity, i.e., a Christian God. Believers in this sense were generally understood to be a passive audience subjected to the authority of god and the guidelines of the church. Over the last few decades, however, the decline of Christian churches in North-West Europe invoked a more active form of religious meaning-making. Already in 1967, Thomas Luckman claimed in The Invisible Religion that the monopoly of Christianity on religion in the West is replaced by a "market of ultimate significance"—a milieu in which individuals outside the churches are involved in an active form of "religious bricolage" (e.g., Van Otterloo, Aupers and Houtman 2012). Like consumers, they are not loyal to one "product" but experiment with different religious traditions including Christianity, Buddhism, esotericism and the like, to construct their own system of meaning. This non-institutional type of religion is described as "pick-and-mix-religion" (Hamilton 2000) or "religious consumption à la carte" (Possamai 2003) and is considered by those involved as more "authentic" and "pure" than institutionalized ones (Roeland, Aupers, Houtman, de Koning and Noomen 2010).

Ideal-typically speaking, this implies a shift from passive belief in stable religious doctrines to an active form of religious meaning-making. Religious bricolage, however, is also extended to the domain of popular culture (Possamai 2005; Partridge 2004). Media texts, film, series, and games are infused with religious narratives, and consumers often approach them as "sacred texts" (Partridge 2004): a phenomenon dubbed "fiction-based," "invented," or "hyperreal" religion (Davidsen 2013; Cusack 2010; Possamai 2005). Although many such studies focus on small movements such as Matrixism or Jediism, we opened up the question whether, how, and why players in general make sense of religious narratives in games like WoW. The research problem was: (1) whether, how, and why online gamers reflect on religious narratives in the game and (2) what influence this has on their personal assumptions about religion in the offline world.

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In-Depth Interviews: Respondents, Interviews, and Analysis

In our theoretical section, we argued why in-depth interviewing is the appropriate method to study these research questions on religious meaning-making in games. In this section, we further elaborate on the method itself and its use in the research process. We ideal-typically distinguish three different steps in this process related to the questions: How do we select our interviewees? What types of interviews do we use? And: How do we analyze our interview transcripts?

Sampling Respondents

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies do not use large, representative samples of the population in their research. Conducting interviews, transcribing, and analyzing data is time-consuming, thereby limiting the research population. Qualitative research built on interviews, then, is generally based on a "selective sample" (Schatzman and Strauss 1973). To select interviewees, researchers use different sampling strategies, varying between "extreme sampling," "typical case sampling," "maximal variation sampling," "snowball sampling," etc. (Flick 2006: 130–131).

What particular sample strategy one chooses depends on the research question. To give an example, if we want to gain insight into "addiction" to games, we might choose to select and interview young "hardcore" gamers that neglect family, friends, and school and are treated in clinics. This selection of radical cases is a form of "extreme sampling" and may be instructive in analyzing the anatomy of the problem of game "addiction" through a magnifying glass. One might, on the other hand, also select "typical cases" (based on average characteristics) or instead construct a "maximal variation" sample in which one aims to include as much diversity as possible. From hardcore addicts to casual addicts; lower-educated to higher-educated; male or female—qualitative researchers may argue that addiction comes in many flavors and has many causes and, hence, that one needs to strive for maximum variation to analyze the problem in all its variety. The main point in sampling respondents, in any case, is to explicitly discuss why one chooses a particular sampling strategy given the formulated research question.

Type of Interview

Once respondents are selected, researchers should decide what type of interview they will use to collect the relevant data. Interviews vary in different ways. First, there are individual interviews to open up private, personal worldviews and experiences of a respondent; and focus-group interviews if one wants to capture a particular group-dynamic. If one studies the formation of social networks in games, for instance, it might be instrumental to do a focus-group interview with a group of playing friends or members of an online "guild" to capture the collective effervescence, social cohesion, or shared goals (Taylor 2006).

Second, we may choose different approaches in the interview itself—a "problem-oriented interview," a "focused interview" related to a particular topic, or a more open-ended "narrative" or "life-story interview"—generally tapping into the biography, development, and personal background of a respondent (Atkinson 1998; Flick 2006; Hopf 2004).

Thirdly, interviews vary in structure—from open, free-floating conversation to a highly standardized interview with predefined questions. The advantage of the former is that it remains completely open to the experience of the respondents and their natural life-world. The advantage of the latter is that it is a more direct operationalization of the research question and it is, due to its standardization, easier to systematically compare interviews on similarities and differences (Patton 2005; Flick 2006; Boeije 2010). Perhaps the most common format in interviewing is a semi-structured interview (Hopf 2004). In this type of interview, the researcher is not so much using well-defined questions but "topics of conversation" that guide the interview. Such topics are often so-called "sensitizing concepts"—discussion themes that are derived from the research problem and theoretical assumptions. Introducing the term, Herbert Blumer (1954: 7) argued that "A sensitizing concept [. . .] gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances." More recently, Charmaz (2003: 259) added that sensitizing concepts are "those background ideas that inform the overall research problem." Sensitizing concepts should be formulated to be as broad as possible, to give the researcher some guidance in interviews, while simultaneously guaranteeing the open, inductive nature of the study.

Finally, and particularly relevant for interviews with gamers, is the choice to conduct face-to-face interviews or online interviews using video conferencing software such as Skype or FaceTime. Although face-to-face interviews allow for the most natural form of conversations, affording close attention to non-verbal communication (Roulston 2010), there are many merits to interviewing using video conferencing software (Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Hanna 2012; Seitz 2016). First, conducting interviews online has the practical advantage of constructing a diverse and international sample with relative ease. Second, face-to-face interviews are rarely conducted at locations where respondents feel comfortable. Even inviting a sociologist in the comforts of one's home can feel intrusive and may invite frontstage performances and social desirability. Video conferencing is less invasive—there remains distance with the interviewer, and, ultimately, the researcher can easily be removed from the personal environment with a single mouse-click. In addition, respondents are commonly adjusted to online sociality and, perhaps more than in an offline situation, may feel free to say what they think and feel. Finally, the digital potential of video conferencing exceeds the sole possibility of having a long-distance conversation: respondents can send direct links, images, and videos of what they are talking about during the interview. Common drawbacks, such as low

sound/video quality or respondents "dropping out" of conversations due to internet issues, are relatively easy to adjust to and are increasingly waning due to technological developments (Seitz 2016).

Analysis: Grounded Theory Approach

How the interview data is analyzed depends on whether the research is overly deductive (guided by an already formulated theory/hypothesis) or inductive (open-ended with the explicit aim of developing theory). In general, however, interview-based research is aimed at openly assessing different meanings. The core principles of such an analysis are generally derived from the Grounded Theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), although Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) makes use of similar underlying notions (Rihoux and Ragin 2009). It is important to note that the analysis of interview data can be improved and streamlined by the usage of software that enables Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS), such as Atlas.ti or MAXQDA, and allows for Grounded Theory approaches (Lewins 2008).

In Grounded Theory, it is assumed that collecting data and analysis are not separate activities. It is an iterative process (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Kelle 2005), in which "generating theory and doing social research [are] two parts of the same process" (Glaser 1978: 2). Central to this method is that the researcher collects data, compares between interviews, and underlines similarities and differences. By using this "method of constant comparison," overarching patterns become apparent in the data that, ultimately, form the basis for a social scientific theory about a particular phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As Holton (2008: 273) argues:

> The skill of the grounded theorist is to abstract concepts by leaving the details of the data behind, lifting the concepts above the data and integrating them into a theory that explains the latent social pattern underlying the behavior in a substantive area.

This inductive, theory-generating approach to analyzing in-depth interviews follows three ideal-typical steps: open, axial, and selective coding. In the first, highly inductive phase of open coding, all words, sentences, and fragments of the interviews are labeled with codes. These codes can be "emic codes" or "in vivo codes"—derived from expressions from respondents—but may also be "etic codes" or "constructed codes" borrowed from social scientific literature (Flick 2006: 299). In the process of open coding, researchers will stay very close to the interview texts and perform line-to-line coding that may result in hundreds of different codes. Once codes have been cross-compared and adjoined, certain similarities and differences will become noticeable. The process of reducing multiple codes to several core concepts and sub-concepts is referred to as axial coding—the second phase in process of analysis. Strauss

and Corbin (1998: 114) argue in this respect that "axial coding is the process of relating subcategories to a category," a process that is "geared towards discovering and relating categories in terms of the paradigm model." Finally, the analysis enters the third stage of selective coding. In this phase, no fundamentally new insights or categories emerge from the data and "saturation" is approaching. This part of the analysis is more deductive: on the one hand, the concepts become more empirically grounded by "testing" whether the stories of new respondents confirm the emerging theory. On the other hand, these new interviews are used to empirically and theoretically refine the established categories and concepts—to establish their relations, open up for nuances, and find vivid anecdotes to support them.

Case Study: Religious Meaning-Making in World of Warcraft

Let us now see how we applied these different methodological steps—sampling, interviewing, and analyzing—in our case study of religious meaning-making in WoW.

Maximal Variation Sampling

First of all, we had to decide what respondents to select to answer the research question: to convincingly address the question of whether, how, and why online gamers reflect on religious narratives in the game and what influence this may have on their assumptions about religion. In our study we chose maximal variation sampling in order to "disclose the range of variation and differentiation in the field" (Flick 2006: 130). In doing so, we opened the scope for all players to talk about religion in the game instead of studying the "extreme," "typical," or "radical" cases. Why this choice? The reason is theoretical; influential studies (Possamai 2005; Davidsen 2014) had already examined the "radical" or "typical" cases—those individuals, groups, and cults that explicitly attribute religious meaning to media texts and turn it into a system of belief. To develop a theoretical perspective on how consumers in general make sense of religion—including atheists, agnostics, New Agers, Christians, Muslims—we chose "maximum variation sampling." In practice, we placed an open call on three international WoW-related forums, asking for people from different backgrounds who were willing to be interviewed on the topic of role-play and character development. We did not explicitly mention "religion" to avoid bias towards those who either love or hate religion and, again, doing so with the purpose of including as much diversity as possible.

About 31 reactions came in, of which 22 agreed to be interviewed. The large majority of these players played on a Role-Playing server (n=19) instead of a Player-Versus-Player server (n=3). Furthermore, the respondents varied in different ways and came from 11 different countries. The average gender (18 male vis-à-vis 4 female) and age (21.9 years old, ranging from 17 to 34) were largely in line

with quantitative findings in the WoW gamer community (Billieux et al. 2013; Taylor 2006; Yee 2006). Most importantly, there was variety in the (non)religious background of respondents: half of our sample claimed atheism or agnosticism, whereas others associated with Eastern religions (e.g., interpretations of Hinduism and/or Buddhism), New Age spirituality (18.2%), or Christianity (13.6%). The remaining respondents explained beliefs in "something" undefined (18.2%).

Half-Structured Skype Interviews

Given the focus of our study on personal (religious) worldviews, we chose to work with a semi-structured topic list that particularly focused on narratives of respondents and their biographical backgrounds. To structure the conversation from "light" issues to more personal, private information, we started with a discussion about the main in-game character of the respondent. By discussing the construction, background story, and experiences of a character, important topics for this study, such as in-game religion, spirituality, and its implications for offline life, emerged. Once the interviewee discussed an important character life-event—for instance, the turning away from certain beliefs—the interviewer picked up on the topic and elaborated on it by asking additional questions about offline elements. None of the respondents failed to bring up religious and/or spiritual narratives and dispositions, underlining the salience of the topic in game-play.

Analysis: Coding Religious Reflexivity

During the process of interviewing and analysis, we gradually developed various concepts and a theory. Initially, we came to use the term "religious reflexivity" as a first, broad sensitizing concept. Around the thirteenth interview, we realized that the starting point of our study was too narrowly focused on the possibility that online interactions could enhance or create offline religious beliefs—something which, we found, only occurs in a marginal amount of cases. Instead, all respondents reflected on their encounters with in-game religion in various, complex, and often subtle ways.

Lance (23), for instance, a self-assured atheist, explains that religious texts in the game motivated reflection on what religion is, what it means for others, and how he relates to it in his offline life: "WoW is an opportunity for me to play with the consciousness of people who think about gods like people in our world do." Hence, we found it appropriate to use the term "religious reflexivity" as a sensitizing umbrella-concept for methodological and theoretical reasons. As to the former, the term fits the "emic" thoughts, talk, and speech of gamers and remains completely open to the different types of religious reflexivity in the field. In other words: It structures the inductive process of the research without turning the study into a full-fledged deductive exercise. From a theoretical perspective, the concept aligns with the assumption in

religious studies that religion nowadays is an open-ended process—a form of meaning-making that is active and principally uncompleted (Luckmann 1967).

During analysis, we distinguished different forms of religious reflexivity and established how they relate to offline worldviews. In the initial process of "open coding," however, we were still involved in "line-to-line coding" in which we made multiple codes, concepts, and categories that took us in different directions. A sentence from one of our respondents about his in-game character—for instance, "He's more like, you know, he doesn't have this spiritual thing. He's just a guy, you can say. I haven't really created any things like that for him" (Colin 17)—can be coded in various ways on various levels (see Table 9.1). When all data is subjected to open coding, all detailed codes are cross-compared to see how various codes are actually more similar or different than originally thought. For instance, parts of the interview with Colin that have been coded in detail could be merged with a more general code: "character without religious affiliation."

Table 1: Example of Open Coding Process of Interview Data.

Original quote	Detailed coding	Section coding
He's more like, you know, he doesn't have this spiritual thing.	No spiritual affiliation; neutral towards spirituality	Character without spiritual affiliation
He's just a guy, you can say.	Masculinity; normality; doubt	
I haven't really created any things like that for him.	Conscious decision not to use religious narrative	

In the phase of "axial coding," we made a distinction between three concepts that are sub-categories of the sensitizing concept "religious reflexivity": religious performances, religious relativism, and religious quests. Starting with the first sub-category, a common pattern was that players perform religion in WoW by explicitly choosing a character with a religious-spiritual affiliation (i.e., priests, magician, sorcerers, etc.) or by constructing a background story that involves religion. Liam, for instance, argues that his Goblin character "found the ways of Shamanism"—a worldview he considered fundamental to the performance of his online character. Within this category of religious performance, however, we found a sub-category of players who perform religion online to work out "issues" with religion in their offline lives and biographies. Berndt (17), for instance, describes how the religious

performances of three characters represent conflicting parts of his personality and the conflicts "they" have with religion:

> The young one, he had conflicting feelings about religion. Part of him just wanted to say "fuck it all" while other parts of him said "yeah this is right." But the middle one, he was kind of skeptical. He didn't really have any belief. He shunned the others; he shunned every belief and just had his own, just to have control. While the third, he had it all figured out. He had his feet planted firmly in his belief.

Religious performance in WoW, in this respect, can add to a reflection on one's personal relation to offline religion.

A second type of religious reflection we distinguished during the phase of "axial coding" is conceptualized as "religious relativism." Based on their encounter with religious plurality in the game, various respondents said they modified their dogmatic judgement vis-à-vis religion and became more tolerant, open, and sympathetic to the religious Other. Tom, a hard-boiled atheist, is a good example:

> I'm not religious. But I do think about those big questions, and trying to find if there is an answer that I can find or a reason. I wouldn't go as far to say that WoW holds answers in that or has the promise of them, but looking at their belief systems and why they see things like that does make me wonder about our own, and why we sometimes think as we do.

Tom's statements indicate a mechanism of increased tolerance vis-à-vis religion and was a starting point for the axial coding of "religious relativism" in other interviews (see Table 9.2). This increased relativism, we found, was not restricted to atheists like Tom, but was sometimes found amongst (formerly) dogmatic Christians.

Finally, we distinguished a third form of religious reflexivity that we called "religious quest." In this variety, respondents argue explicitly that their encounter with religion, spirituality, magic, and mysticism online has contributed to a veritable spiritual quest in offline life. Colin (17) explains how he became interested in Buddhism due to his experiences with WoW's "Tauren" culture:

> I came across the Tauren one day and I became really interested. So I started reading a lot about it. So I just Googled around and found a lot of information and I got really interested in just reading about it. [. . .] I could see how it looked a lot like Hinduism

and Buddhism. So I Googled a lot about that too and watched quite a few movies about it. [. . .] It had a big impact on my life and it changed the way of looking at things.

Table 2: Example of axial coding process of interview data.

Original quote 1	**Detailed coding**	**Section coding**
(cont.) *…but looking at their belief systems and why they see things like that does make me wonder about our own and why we sometimes think as we do.*	in-game religions; translation to existing religions; relativism regarding meaning-making systems; online/offline comparison	"religious relativism"
Original quote 2	**Detailed coding**	**Section coding**
(cont.) *...even though I wouldn't take it up myself I do see the logic myself like not believing in an actual god but instead just living life through logical means*	Atheism; non-religious; personal worldview; God; understanding religious thought; online/offline comparison;	"religious relativism"

Axial coding

Colin's religious quest is in line with theories that dominated the field of fiction-based religion (Cusack 2010; Davidsen 2014; Possamai 2005, 2012), which was formative for the outline of our research project. Although it is just one of the three types and hence not common amongst our respondents, we see here how religious reflexivity can motivate social action. Youngsters get acquainted with religion—its concepts, belief systems, and ritual—through a game like WoW and actually use these materials in their offline quest for religious meaning.

Having established the main category (religious reflexivity), subcategories (religious performance, religious relativism, and religious quest), and their relation, we entered a form of selective coding. In this phase, we validated the concepts in the last interviews by asking more focused questions about religious performance, relativism, and quests. On a theoretical level, we theorized that MMOs can be understood as "religious laboratories." Outside the churches, but within the safe boundaries of the game world of WoW—former Christians work on religious traumas through religious role-playing, hard-boiled atheists

become more tolerant through their encounters with religious pluralism, and agnostic players are sometimes motivated to embark on a religious quest. Studies on religious meaning-making in games, we argue, may contribute to the sociology of religion. Instead of focusing on established churches, religious belief, and secularization, academia should open up to subtle forms of religious play in and through online computer games.

Discussion

In this chapter, we have developed the argument that the study of religion and games needs in-depth interviews to study, analyze, and theorize religious meaning-making. Our case study of WoW, we hope, demonstrates the relevance of this aim.

Notwithstanding the benefits of qualitative in-depth interviews, there are of course shortcomings. First, practical drawbacks of using Skype interviews—such as low sound/video quality and the occasional loss of connection—can disrupt the "flow" of conversations. Nevertheless, these disadvantages outweigh the benefits of the method. Obtaining an international sample without notable financial expenditures, reaching respondents whom would have refrained from being interviewed face-to-face, and the ability to reflect on game content during the interview are some of the advantages of our approach.

A more substantial shortcoming of both Skype interviews and face-to-face interviews is that the stories of respondents do not necessarily reflect what gamers actually do in- and outside of the game. To be sure: Play is above all a practice, so the question is, what choice do gamers make while playing? What roles do they play? What rituals do they perform, how do they talk, communicate, and move in and through the game world? Such practices are important to understand religion and game culture—not only because it shows the discrepancies between what they do and say they do, but also because "play" is in and of itself a practice that engenders meaning (Huizinga 1938). Participatory observation or "situated play" is therefore a valuable method (Taylor 2006), whereas a full-fledged ethnography provides a more "thick description" of the meaning created in the game world (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006).

On the other hand, there is the critique that qualitative studies on religious meaning-making in games are overly exploratory and in need of more systematic research designs, allowing for generalizations. We therefore, first of all, need larger qualitative studies or focus groups to systematically assess the appropriations of religious content and how these are related to the different (non)religious worldviews of players, i.e., of Muslims, Christians, New Agers, and atheists. In addition, this exploratory study also has a bias towards players on Role-Playing servers (19 out of 22) which raises questions about the rest of the player population: How do gamers choosing the Player-Versus-Player server relate to

religious content? Are they less interested—more focused on rules, procedures, points instead of religious narrative and meaning? And finally: We may also apply survey-based, quantitative research to further study the relationship between offline worldview and the affinity with in-game religion. In taking this quantitative/deductive approach, we lose some of the richness, variety, and nuance that characterizes qualitative research, but the benefit is generalization. Do online games indeed provide the opportunity for atheists to experience enchantment without believing? To consume spirituality without converting to a particular religious tradition? And, ultimately, to find "ultimate meaning" in a secular, disenchanted world? By empirically studying these questions, we gain a more profound understanding of the meaning-making in games and the broader implications for theories about secularization and religious change in contemporary society.

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