

Video games and religion: Lutheran Church employees' perspectives on similarities between virtual and spiritual worlds

Samuli Laato^a, Sampsa Rauti^a

^aUniversity of Turku, Vesilinnantie 5, 20500, Turku, Finland

Abstract

Emergent religious phenomena arise in various contexts, also in cross-media franchises and video games. In this work we investigate the similarities between virtual game worlds, as created by location-based games (LBGs), and the spiritual world of Christianity through a survey study with 156 employees of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. Through thematic clustering of the reported similarities we discovered six categories: (1) shared belief system; (2) escapism; (3) presence of a higher power; (4) symbolism; (5) seeing the unseen; and (6) practical connections. We analyze the responses through Durkheim's view on religion. One interesting aspect that arose from this analysis is the possibility of games facilitating collective effervescence among players. Our work contributes to the gamification literature by providing insight into eudaimonia in games.

Keywords

Video games, Gamification, Religion, Escapism, Collective Consciousness, Eudaimonia

1. Introduction

"Man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs. To free him from all social pressure is to abandon him to himself and demoralize him" [1]

The prominence and importance of socially shared narratives can hardly be overstated. For example, Harari describes the human ability to create shared belief systems as one of the most important components of our success in large scale social interaction [2]. Our beliefs in fictional concepts such as money and companies are so widely accepted that we no longer realize they are based on our collective imagination [2]. It is therefore no wonder that studies in games have found sharing fictional worlds with other people (social play) to be engaging (e.g. [3, 4]) and that shared belief systems are also a fundamental, integral component of religion [5, 6].

Pioneering pervasive game designers suggested the use of imagination to increase immersion [7]. The same approach can be viewed as part of certain religious experiences. For example, during religious ceremonies, holy objects, narratives, sensory excitement (through music or smell) among others may be used to boost a sense of presence and ability to imagine otherworldly concepts. As narratives and especially socially shared beliefs can

be engaging in both video games and religion, this introduces the question of what other similarities there are [8]. Video game designers and gamification scholars have previously drawn inspiration from multiple sources including various theoretical approaches, a wide range of research methods and multiple different kinds of research settings. There also exist literature reviews that bring this body of research together and provide a set of best practises [9, 10]. These studies have identified various elements that are relevant in gamification. As an example, Mora et al. list five categories of game design elements: (1) economic; (2) logic; (3) measurement; (4) psychology; and (5) interaction [10]. Each of these categories contain several items, and more recent work has identified even more [9, 11, 12]. This speaks of the complexity of gamification and the difficulty of exhaustively answering the question of how to design games.

According to Hamari, gamification is the process of transforming reality to be more gameful, a process which can be intentionally invoked through applying game design [13]. Consequently, game design can borrow elements from the real world, meaning that reality can inspire game design. In this study we approach the interplay between gamification and religion by investigating the similarities between virtual game worlds, in particular those created by location-based games (LBGs), and the spiritual world. We define a virtual game world as a fictional narrative mediated by technology where the players can act. In the context of LBGs, this is digital content superimposed on top of paramount reality [14]. Subsequently we define the spiritual world in this study context through the Lutheran faith as expressed in Luther's cathicism [15]. Thus, a belief in a spiritual world involves

5th International GamiFIN Conference 2021 (GamiFIN 2021), April 7-10 April, 2021, Finland

✉ sadala@utu.fi (S. Laato); sjpau@utu.fi (S. Rauti)

ORCID 0000-0003-4285-0073 (S. Laato); 0000-0002-1891-2353 (S. Rauti)

© 2021 Copyright for this paper by its authors. Use permitted under Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

CEUR Workshop Proceedings (CEUR-WS.org)



believing in the existence of a higher power and presence of divinity that cannot be seen but who can influence the world when they choose to. As we study the similarities between virtual worlds and the spiritual, we contribute to the understanding of both games and religion. In summary, we formulate the following research question (RQ) that guides this study:

RQ: What similarities are there between virtual game worlds expressed in LBGs and the spiritual world as understood by Finnish Lutheran Church employees?

2. Background

2.1. Games and religion

There are multiple ways in which video games connect to religion [8]. Some popular game franchises have religion as a fundamental component of the game. In Sid Meier's Civilization series [16] players can establish their own historical or fictional religion and convert other civilizations to follow it. In the popular LBGs Ingress, Pokémon and Harry Potter: Wizards Unite, public places of worship are exemplar points of interest and consequently important playing locations [17]. Games can also provide a setting for religious dialogue [18] or even ceremony [19]. We have seen instances where digital funerals have been organized for players' online friends who have passed away [19], and while some of these funerals do not include a religious context, they can follow or at least borrow from existing religious rituals.

The one aspect of video games that has recently received attention is how they can be a medium through which spirituality and the meaning of life can be explored (e.g. [20, 21, 18, 22]). Connected to this is eudaimonia [23] which refers to gratifications derived from truth-seeking and pondering of the ultimate as opposed to hedonic gratification [24]. Research on eudaimonic gratification in video games has shown that players appreciate in retrospect meaningful playing experiences more compared to fun experiences, even though both are enjoyable [22]. Appreciation is associated with relatedness and story [22]. This finding highlights the game's narrative and world as crucial components for eudaimonic gratification. Besides the narrative, music, visuals and in particular other players have been associated with eudaimonic experiences in games [20]. Combining the narrative and the presence of other real people leads to discussing the concept of socially shared narrative [25], which can be viewed as parallel to the socially shared belief of religion [5, 6].

Pokémon is one of the game franchises where the socially shared narrative has been studied [26, 25, 27]. The game series has been linked to Shintoism in its origins [26] and discussed as an emergent religious phe-

nomenon of its own [27, 26]. Other popular game and media franchises which have been studied for emergent religious phenomena include Halo [28], Harry Potter [29] and World of Warcraft [30] among others [21]. The Harry Potter franchise received negative feedback from some religious groups, which Feldt explains was the consequence of the series dealing with religious expressions and phenomena [31]. However, Harry Potter fans have also formed religious cults of their own, one of the most popular examples being "Snapeism" i.e. a religion focused around the character of Severus Snape [29]. Alderton argues that Snapeism fits the definition of religion, as it has the following elements (1) individual and social practises that mediate expression and community behavior, (2) text or scripture that is paramount; and (3) a divine figure that can be channeled [29]. Such phenomena are not only specific to Harry Potter, but can be seen completely or to a degree in other contemporary cross-media franchises such as Pokémon [25, 27] and World of Warcraft [30]. De Wildt and Aupers categorize the approaches that players have towards the (religious) worldviews presented in the games they play into four categories: (1) rejecting; (2) debunking; (3) debating; and (4) connecting [18]. According to this, there is diversity in how players approach religion in games, and that religious game experiences are not universal but dependent on the player and other human players. Using the framework of De Wildt and Aupers, players' approaches to religious themes in games (e.g. disregard of religion or viewing it as a dichotomy of science vs religion [28]) can be mapped into one or several of these categories. Finally, eudaimonic experiences in video games are not confined within the game, but can be socially shared and discussed outside the immediate game context [20, 18, 22].

2.2. Theoretical lens: Durkheim

A particularly relevant lens for looking at religious experiences or components of games is that of Emile Durkheim, as expressed in his seminal work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, initially published in 1912 [6]. Durkheim's functionalism frames religion as a product of human activity, not as a divine intervention, and offers an approach for bridging games and religion. Also, in the field of sociology, Durkheim's views on religion are widely known and well established.

Durkheim was an armchair anthropologist, mostly basing his observations on the data other researchers had collected in the field [32]. However, the main elements of his theory, have been reaffirmed and reapplied over the years by various social scientists. Durkheim considered religion as a thoroughly social construct, a shared world with collective representations. He established the term *collective consciousness* to describe shared beliefs, something Jung later expanded on when he dis-

cussed the collective unconscious, which subsequently refers to unconscious thought patterns that are present across humans [33]. Durkheim went as far as to say that religion symbolically reflects the community itself, maintaining a strong in-group spirit. By sharing collective representations, the members of the community commit to a common conception of reality. [6]

This idea that religion is inherently a social phenomenon can explain why some of the strong shared narratives in game contexts have been given religious dimensions (e.g. [29, 25, 27]). For Durkheim, a core element of collective consciousness is *collective effervescence*. This describes a state of social enthusiasm which arises in moments when individuals in a community come together to perform rituals. As the members of the community participate in the same action, a certain energy, which Durkheim also describes as an extra-individual force, is released, and transfers the individuals into a new extraordinary and spiritual realm.

When perceiving the world through the religion's symbolic conceptions, Durkheim suggested making a distinction between two fundamental categories: sacred and profane [6, p. 36]. Profane things are ordinary and mundane. By contrast, sacred things are set apart from the profane, which gives them special meaning. Durkheim distinguishes the sacred as common beliefs and practices uniting a moral community of those who adhere to them, something forbidden from outsiders. The idea of sacred and profane can be used to understand social and communal attitudes towards video games. Players have been found to defend, with conviction, games they find meaningful [18]. Applying Durkheim's concepts of sacred and profane here, games can be perceived by players either as (1) mundane, profane and ordinary; but also as (2) something set apart from the ordinary, something special, sacred.

The collective conscious or belief system of religion is, according to Durkheim, inherently linked to the concepts of sacred and profane. He states "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" [6, p. 44]. Therefore, what we value, what we believe and what we hold sacred define our social in-groups and community. Subscription to understanding and valuing fictional narratives of game worlds can contribute to the manifestation of religion-like phenomena, where socially shared beliefs are formed that unite people and even invoke collective effervescence.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection

We surveyed employees of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church regarding what similarities they saw be-

tween the spiritual world of Christianity and virtual worlds created by LBGs. A reason for choosing Lutheran Church employees is that they can be considered an expert group when it comes to the spiritual world. In recent years, many of the employees have also met Pokemon GO (a popular LBG) players near churches and other places that can be considered sacred, which may also have prompted them to think about connections and possible collisions between virtual worlds and the spiritual.

We constructed a survey where we collected basic information from the participants and asked them with an open question to ponder on the topic of the study (e.g. similarities between virtual game worlds and the spiritual world of Christianity"). The questionnaire was implemented using a professional online survey distribution tool *Webropol*. For distributing the survey, we contacted the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church Education Office in January, 2020. They forwarded our message to their employees through their own internal list. This was important to ensure that no outsiders would be included in the sample. In addition, we asked a few local employees of the church that we knew to share the survey onward. The survey was online roughly for one month, during which it received 156 responses who all gave permission to use their data anonymously for research.

3.2. Participants

The basic demographic information regarding participants is displayed in Table 1. Here we notice that over 60% of our participants were other church employees than priests or youth workers. In an open text box, we asked the participants in further detail what their employment was like and we received various replies such as (1) deacon; (2) sacristan; (3) family advisor; (4) communications executive; and (5) coordinator. When comparing the demographic information to data about the overall employee demographics of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran church [34], we notice that we had slightly more priests and slightly less women in our sample than what was expected based on the overall employee statistics [34]. This combined with self-selection bias means that our findings should be generalized with care. Mobile games were familiar to 85% of the respondents and video games to 84% of the respondents.

3.3. Qualitative analysis

In this work, we followed a qualitative analysis procedure in three steps [35]: (1) familiarization with data; (2) formulation of a thematic framework for explaining the data; and (3) coding of the participants' responses and mapping to the framework. The familiarization with the data was done by reading through all responses once. Initial

Table 1
Demographic data of participants

Employment		Gender	
reverend	25.0%	male	39.1%
vicar	5.1%	female	60.3%
youth worker	9.6%	other	0.6%
other church employee	60.3%		
Employment duration		Age	
less than a year	5.1%	18–25	1.9%
one to five years	18.0%	26–40	23.7%
five to fifteen years	32.1%	41–60	64.7%
over fifteen years	44.9%	>60	9.6%

clusters were discussed between the two authors, which lead to the formation of the first version of the thematic framework. Next, the two authors independently coded the responses, guided by our research question: *"What similarities can be seen between virtual game worlds and the spiritual world?"*. Each item was placed into a cluster of the thematic framework, and those items that did not match the framework were put aside for further analysis. Cohen's Kappa values were calculated for inter-rater reliability as guided by Frey [36]. The thresholds for inter-rater reliability were set as follows: k between 0.41–0.6 can be considered moderate agreement, between 0.61–0.8 substantial agreement and over 0.8 almost perfect [36]. During the first round of coding, we reached substantial reliability or greater (Cohen's Kappa > 0.6) in only two categories. Here unclear interpretations were discussed until consensus was reached. The two coders then refined the framework to make sure all items could be placed within a cluster. During the coding phase, authors picked exemplar quotes from participants that they felt were representative of the cluster or particularly interesting. These quotes were originally in Finnish, but were translated into English by the authors. Once the coding and the clustering was complete, the authors went through the themes using the theoretical lens of Durkheim [6] to explain the discovered phenomena.

4. Results

The thematic clusters and the times they were mentioned by the participants are displayed in Table 2. A large number of participants found nothing in common between the virtual worlds of LBGs and the spiritual ($n=66$), which could be partially explained by the statistics that video games were familiar to only 84% of our respondents. However, this is far from being the complete explanation. Other reasons could include, for example, that participants simply found it unreasonable to compare profane with the sacred. The most often mentioned categories

Table 2
The thematic clusters and how many times each one was mentioned by the participants. The table displays the average of two coders rounded up.

Thematic similarity	Times mentioned
Shared belief system	16
Escapism	4
Presence of a higher power	4
Symbolism	23
Seeing the unseen	28
Practical opportunities	18
Nothing in common	66

were seeing the unseen ($n=28$) and symbolism ($n=23$), followed by practical opportunities ($n=18$) and a shared narrative ($n=16$). Escapism and the presence of a higher power were both mentioned by only a few participants ($n=4$). It is worth noting that while we present in Table 2 the frequency of mentions of each category, this does not automatically correspond to the relative importance of the categories. In the following we present analysis of each of the categories and refer to our participants with pseudonyms that are based on an assigned number (1–156).

4.1. Collective consciousness

According to our coding, 16 participants brought up in some form or another the category of socially shared beliefs. Past work has expressed that this is an important component in both video games and religion [8, 5]. The most explicit mention comes from Participant 3 who stated the following.

"– Games seem to unite people and add a sense of being united. Players seem to trust each other and expect them to be willing to discuss the game. In a similar way the spiritual community experiences unity, and in a spiritual community there are similar experiences and wishes for mutual connection".

Related to this, was the idea that LBG players are not disconnected from reality. Participant 44 explains:

"A player who plays location-based games is still living their real life, not a virtual life."

This implies that the playing experience and related social phenomena are real in the same way as religious experiences. This parallel between the two worlds implies that the two worlds (spiritual and virtual) may not be too disconnected from one another. In fact, the lens of Durkheim may provide insight into understanding communal experiences in playing as well as religion [6].

Surprisingly, some participants argued against the idea of collective consciousness playing a role in the Lutheran Christian faith at all. Instead, they emphasised individ-

ualism in both spirituality and games. E.g. Participant 11:

"Everyone believes in their own way and common spirituality is challenging to achieve. The same applies to games" and Participant 51:

"People experience places and games in their own way. – For others belief is about sacred places, for others it is about their relationship with God. It's the same with games –."

These arguments contradict Durkheim's view on religion [6]. This discrepancy can be explained by there being two components to beliefs and narratives: individual and social. While it is certainly true that humans share various fictional narratives which they can discuss, debate and develop [6, 2], there is also an individual component that is shaped by the persons' own (social) experiences, ideas and thoughts. However taken together, the shared belief system of religion and the socially shared narratives of video games can both be understood through Durkheim to be linked to the collective consciousness. Thus, video game stories receive added value from other people being familiar with them.

4.2. Escapism

Altogether four participants mentioned escapism as a common factor between spiritual worlds and virtual game worlds of LBGs. As an example, Participant 15 stated:

"The virtual world can help detach from the worries of our world, just like spirituality."

This finding is interesting, as escapism [37] is a construct commonly associated with video game playing and internet use [38]. One participant expressed that while both worlds fill a void and a need in our psyche, games only fill this void temporarily and cannot offer a lasting gratification in the same way as religion. Participant 100 explains:

"– Both worlds address a void that we have. – The problem with virtual worlds is that they can only temporarily fill this void, and cannot offer a lasting peace the same way that a belief in Jesus Christ can offer."

While escapism has the obvious component of a place to escape the worries of the world [37], approaching escapism from the perspective of Durkheim [6], it can be thought to also provide social bliss. The force that Durkheim calls collective effervescence or power of religion lifts the members of religious community into a state of collective emotional excitement that can be seen as a separate realm. This bears resemblance to immersion in pervasive games.

4.3. Presence of a higher power

Four participants brought into discussion God, or the virtual god, defined as a higher power or the presence of someone outside the laws of the world and realm of

observation. In the same way as Christians believe in a higher power, video game players can be aware of the creators of the game i.e. people outside the observable realm. In the words of Participant 16:

"Both worlds have someone large who oversees the world and takes care of it."

When playing digital games, players learn the laws and rules of the game and intuitively begin to understand which actions are possible and which are not. For example, players may learn that there is no jump in the game they are playing, however, they are free to move around by using control they are provided by the game developer. The more players play, the more they begin to understand the fictional game universe they are operating in. In the same way as we learn the rules and laws of video games, we learn the rules and laws of the real world and accept them as they are. An event that breaks these laws in a way we cannot explain may be interpreted by our brain as miraculous or even a religious experience. These experiences are an important part of many world religions such as Christianity. While such experiences may be individualistic, Durkheim stresses that such miracles inherently have a social component. They are either shared socially or produced socially through collective effervescence.

4.4. Symbolic stories and the battle between good and evil

Symbolic stories, especially that of the battle between good and evil, were mentioned by 23 participants. An exemplar comment from Participant 21 reads as follows:

"Good triumphs over evil - both in Christianity and in games".

Of course this statement is not true for all games, as in many games (e.g. Undertale [39], Doshin the Giant) the player can decide whether they are good or evil. Still, it brings forth an interesting aspect: the underlying duality of our world. The duality that Durkheim talked about in the religious context was primarily that of the sacred and the profane. Building off Durkheim, the real world concepts of sacred and profane manifest in our collective consciousness as narratives and stories. Abstractions such as good and evil are ways for humans to share and understand what is beneficial and what is not. These symbolic parallels can exist also beyond the battle between good and evil. Participant 44 states frankly and shortly:

"The spiritual world is virtual reality".

This indicates a holistic symbolic parallelism. Participant 77 has a similar approach:

Virtual worlds make use of the imagery of the Bible.

Implying that virtual worlds are symbolic representations of something pre-existing. Following the thoughts of Durkheim, people cannot follow high level goals and

purpose unless they feel they belong to something greater, a collective [1]. According to Durkheim, this higher level meaning, the symbolic god is in fact the society, social pressure - the collective consciousness [1].

4.5. Seeing the unseen: equipment and belief

Several of the responses (n=28) mentioned that both virtual and spiritual worlds need to be or can be entered or accessed in a specific way. Participant 55 explains:

"Virtual worlds cannot be seen without technology. The spiritual world cannot be seen without faith. Both require something to be seen."

and Participant 60:

"Both realities are viewed through a lens that makes them visible."

This idea of accessing something that is out there constantly is not present in all video games, but has been more prominently discussed with modern online games such as LBGs which were given as an example to participants in the current study [40]. This seems like a thoroughly religious idea, as channeling a divine force is one of the defining characteristics of religion [29]. Only here instead of prayer or travelling to a sacred place, players are using technology to access something that is present but which cannot be seen [40]. Imagination was also mentioned explicitly, by for example,

Participant 64: *"Imagination, mental images..."*.

Implying that imagination is one way to access the virtual or spiritual world. Durkheim [6] states that sacred objects, beliefs and practices are core elements of religion, as is the existence of a moral community. Or as Niekrenz put it: "All that counts is the present – the here and now – in which participants celebrate themselves in bodily co-presence." [41]

These elements are also present in several video games. Taking the previously mentioned LBG Pokémon GO as an example, players gather in raids¹ where they battle against a powerful pokémon together [42]. This resembles a religious rite that reinforces a conception of a shared world and common belief system. During a raid, players often stand in a circle near the gym² where the battle takes place. The gym, in this case, could be interpreted as a sacred object (similar to totem poles researched by Durkheim). Raids also have their own moral rules that community members usually follow, such as often waiting for other players to arrive and properly contributing to the battle with strong pokémon. All these things are ways to make the shared game world visible in

¹A raid battle is a cooperative experience where players work with each other to defeat a powerful pokémon.

²Gyms are locations around the world where the player can fight the pokémon of rivaling teams and take over the gym. Raid battles also take place at gyms.

the real world, often prompting questions from outsiders observing the raid.

4.6. Other issues and practical opportunities

In addition to the above described five categories, we had responses that were miscellaneous or did not fit any other cluster. These were characterized as suggestions or ideas related to how the virtual worlds created by games could be harnessed or used to support Christianity. Altogether, this category had 18 responses. Participant 8 wrote:

"[The virtual game worlds] open up ideas, interaction opportunities and mutual solutions"

and Participant 10:

"Virtual and augmented reality can be used to support and visualize spiritual content."

As previously mentioned, the idea of collective effervescence can be defined as an extra individual power, a certain kind of collective emotional excitement [6]. According to Durkheim, this collective energy has to be objectified as an external symbol, because the community can only become properly aware of the power of religion by somehow representing it. This power has to be made visible, and the object representing it becomes sacred. It can be argued that games can also visualize and objectify the power of religion in the way described by Durkheim. In addition, video games can also be vehicles for mediating existing religious stories and narratives.

4.7. Nothing in common

A surprisingly large number of participants (n=66) found nothing in common with LBGs and the Lutheran Christian faith. A partial explanation of this is that video games were familiar only to 84% of the participants, meaning it would be difficult for them to draw connections between the spiritual and virtual worlds. A quarter of the respondents in this category gave an explanation for why they found nothing in common between the Lutheran faith and virtual worlds of games. As an example, Participant 5 explained their reasoning as follows.

"Virtual environments are software and entertainment. By contrast, sacred spaces are part of this reality."

5. Discussion

5.1. Key findings

As the result of our qualitative analysis we discovered that virtual worlds expressed through LBGs and the spiritual world of Lutheran Christianity share similarities in that both:

- Construct a shared narrative that can be discussed and analyzed, and which unites people.
- Provide escapism from the worries of the world.
- Include the idea of someone powerful and omniscient being outside the world and in control of it.
- Contain symbols that relate to real world struggles.
- Require special action to be accessed.

5.2. Implications of the findings

Through our analysis we demonstrate that some aspects we tend to associate with religion, in this case the Lutheran Church of Finland, are present in the virtual worlds constructed by LBGs. Based on our results and the previous work [20], game design aiming to create meaningful/eudaimonic experiences for players should in particular focus on the story and in constructing a coherent narrative that can be socially shared and discussed between players. Symbolism and seeing the unseen are also game characteristics that could be experimented within game design aiming to invoke ruminations concerning the ultimate. Therefore, on a broad level this study suggests that religion could be a source of inspiration for game design, adding yet another approach to the already vast gamification literature (e.g. [9, 10, 11, 12]). One peculiar implication of the findings was how, based on Durkheim [6], collective real-world playing events such as raids in Pokémon GO [42] can be mirrored to religious meetings and spiritual social experiences.

The multi-modality of the manifestation of religion in games and the ability of games to expose players to new world views can direct players to seek and explore the meaning of life and existential questions [21]. Our work contributes to this literature (e.g. [21, 26, 25, 27]) by suggesting that religion can emerge in games in a concrete way through the identified similarities. While secular beliefs are receiving more and more ground in Western societies, there might be an inherent need for a certain type of religiosity or eudaimonic exploration and for this, video games may offer a vessel. Religion and religiosity have not disappeared, but rather they have transformed and now manifest in games and other human activities [18]. The similarity between religious texts and games has been brought up in observations in how players partake in heated discussion concerning meaning and meaningfulness in games [18]. This offers a perspective for the Christian Church and other religions on how to approach people wondering existential questions and suggests that video games can be a meaningful avenue for meeting, connecting and reaching out.

5.3. Limitations and future work

Our study has the following limitations. First, we observed religion in games by narrowing it down to LBGs and the Lutheran Christian faith. This was done due to practical reasons, but future work should explore this phenomenon between a wider range of games and religions. Second, we collected data from employees of the Evangelical Lutheran church. While these respondents can be regarded as the experts of the religion aspect, our participant sample lacks expertise on the side of the games. This could be seen in the large number of participants who could not identify any similarities between religion and video games. This was compensated to a degree by the authors being more familiar with games compared to religion, however, future work should address this limitation as well by collecting data from those experienced with games and the fictional narratives that they construct. Third, the richness of the data could have benefited from interviews instead of an online survey. This would perhaps enable respondents to disclose more ideas than what they did in the current study. Fourth, the data we collected was cross-sectional and the participants were self-selected. Avoiding these limitations is difficult. Obviously longitudinal data can help resolve the issue of cross-sectional data representing the situation only at a certain given time. The self-selection of participants can be compensated by supporting the findings with other data sources such as open online data, field experiments and analysis of real world phenomena.

Future work could look into the effects that personal inclination towards religiosity [43] has on engagement and immersion within LBGs and game franchises where religion has been identified to play a role (e.g. [31, 25, 26]). This could further advance our understanding of the role of religion in games, and whether as a society we are currently compensating our lack of religion by engaging with the shared belief systems of fictional media narratives. Another promising future research avenue is creating a measurement instrument for understanding some of the themes discovered in our analysis. While survey items already exist for the escapism construct for example [37], understanding eudaimonia and its components remains a challenge, as mostly only qualitative work has been carried out in this domain [20].

6. Conclusions

In this work, we focused on the intersection of religion and video games by surveying employees of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran church (N=156) about the similarities between virtual game worlds created by LBGs and the spiritual world. Altogether six categories of similarities arose from the data. Looking at the categories through the lens of Durkheim [6], the games may facilitate the

creation of a shared belief system and even collective effervescence. We showed that LBGs and the Lutheran faith may contribute to our collective consciousness, which can be a powerful unifying force in societies [2]. The impact of video games as a uniting force is magnified by the popularity of the constantly growing industry. For example, this year the total overall revenue of video games was 165 billion USD [44]. As we are experiencing social media induced polarization [45] and other struggles as a society, we need forces that bring us together. At the same time the diminished role of religion may have left a proportion of society devoid of ability to explore the meaning of life in a sufficient way. Video games may provide solutions to both these issues.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the employees of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran church who took the time to reply to our survey. Without their time and insightful expertise this research would not have taken place. We would also like to express our thanks to professors Erkki Sutinen and Antti Laato for providing us feedback on the survey used to collect data for this study. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude towards the anonymous reviewers and the editor for the uncommonly detailed and insightful feedback that enabled us to significantly improve the manuscript.

References

- [1] E. Durkheim, *Le suicide: étude de sociologie*, Alcan, 1897.
- [2] Y. N. Harari, *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*, Random House, 2014.
- [3] S. Bueno, M. D. Gallego, J. Noyes, Uses and gratifications on augmented reality games: An examination of pokémon go, *Applied Sciences* 10 (2020) 1644. doi:10.3390/app10051644.
- [4] H. Li, Y. Liu, X. Xu, J. Heikkilä, H. Van Der Heijden, Modeling hedonic is continuance through the uses and gratifications theory: An empirical study in online games, *Computers in Human Behavior* 48 (2015) 261–272. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.01.053.
- [5] H. A. Campbell, R. Wagner, S. Luft, R. Gregory, G. P. Grieve, X. Zeiler, Gaming religionworlds: Why religious studies should pay attention to religion in gaming, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84 (2016) 641–664.
- [6] E. Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*, translated by karen e. Fields. New York: Free (1995).
- [7] A. Waern, M. Montola, J. Stenros, The three-sixty illusion: designing for immersion in pervasive games, in: *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems*, 2009, pp. 1549–1558. doi:10.1145/1518701.1518939.
- [8] H. Campbell, G. Grieve, O. Steffen, P. F. Likarish, B. S. G. Walter, N. Abrams, X. Zeiler, J. Anthony, V. Sisler, M. Waltemathe, K. Schut, S. Luft, et al., *Playing with religion in digital games*, Indiana University Press, 2014.
- [9] B. Morschheuser, J. Hamari, K. Werder, J. Abe, How to gamify? a method for designing gamification, in: *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences 2017*, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 2017. doi:10.24251/HICSS.2017.155.
- [10] A. Mora, D. Riera, C. Gonzalez, J. Arnedo-Moreno, A literature review of gamification design frameworks, in: *2015 7th International Conference on Games and Virtual Worlds for Serious Applications (VS-GAMES)*, IEEE, 2015, pp. 1–8. doi:10.1109/VS-GAMES.2015.7295760.
- [11] D. Alexandrovsky, G. Volkmar, M. Spliethöver, S. Finke, M. Herrlich, T. Döring, J. D. Smeddinck, R. Malaka, Playful user-generated treatment: A novel game design approach for vr exposure therapy, in: *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 2020, pp. 32–45. doi:10.1145/3410404.3414222.
- [12] A. C. T. Klock, I. Gasparini, M. S. Pimenta, J. Hamari, Tailored gamification: A review of literature, *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* (2020) 102495. doi:10.1016/j.ijhcs.2020.102495.
- [13] J. Hamari, *Gamification*, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (2019) 1–3.
- [14] N. Liberati, Phenomenology, pokémon go, and other augmented reality games, *Human studies* 41 (2018) 211–232. doi:10.1007/s10746-017-9450-8.
- [15] M. Luther, J. C. Pfitzner, *Luther's small catechism*, Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Pennsylvania and the Adjacent States, 1863.
- [16] A. Chapman, Is sid meier's civilization history?, *Rethinking history* 17 (2013) 312–332. doi:10.1080/13642529.2013.774719.
- [17] S. Laato, T. Pietarinen, S. Rauti, T. H. Laine, Analysis of the quality of points of interest in the most popular location-based games, in: *Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on Computer Systems and Technologies*, 2019, pp. 153–160. doi:10.1145/3345252.3345286.
- [18] L. de Wildt, S. Aupers, Pop theology: forum discussions on religion in videogames, *Information, Communication & Society* 23 (2020) 1444–1462.

- doi:10.1080/1369118X.2019.1577476.
- [19] O. Servais, Funerals in the ‘world of warcraft’: religion, polemic, and styles of play in a videogame universe, *Social Compass* 62 (2015) 362–378. doi:10.1177/0037768615587840.
- [20] R. Daneels, H. Vandebosch, M. Walrave, “just for fun?”: An exploration of digital games’ potential for eudaimonic media experiences among flemish adolescents, *Journal of Children and Media* (2020) 1–17. doi:10.1080/17482798.2020.1727934.
- [21] L. De Wildt, S. Aupers, Playing the other: Role-playing religion in videogames, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22 (2019) 867–884. doi:10.1177/1367549418790454.
- [22] M. B. Oliver, N. D. Bowman, J. K. Woolley, R. Rogers, B. I. Sherrick, M.-Y. Chung, Video games as meaningful entertainment experiences., *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 5 (2016) 390. doi:10.1037/ppm0000066.
- [23] W. Wirth, M. Hofer, H. Schramm, Beyond pleasure: Exploring the eudaimonic entertainment experience, *Human Communication Research* 38 (2012) 406–428. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2012.01434.x.
- [24] M. B. Oliver, A. A. Raney, Entertainment as pleasurable and meaningful: Identifying hedonic and eudaimonic motivations for entertainment consumption, *Journal of Communication* 61 (2011) 984–1004. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01585.x.
- [25] M.-V. Lindsey, The politics of pokémon. socialized gaming, religious themes and the construction of communal narratives, *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 7 (2015). doi:10.11588/rel.2015.0.18510.
- [26] S. Gabriel, Pokémon go-how religious can an augmented reality hunt be?, *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 12 (2017). doi:10.17885/heiup.rel.2017.0.23766.
- [27] J. Saucerman, D. Ramirez, Praise helix! christian narrative in twitch plays: Pokémon, *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 10 (2016). doi:10.17885/heiup.rel.23549.
- [28] P. Paulissen, The dark of the covenant: Christian imagery, fundamentalism, and the relationship between science and religion in the halo video game series, *Religions* 9 (2018) 126. doi:10.3390/rel9040126.
- [29] Z. Alderton, ‘snapewives’ and ‘snapeism’: A fiction-based religion within the harry potter fandom, *Religions* 5 (2014) 219–267. doi:10.3390/rel5010219.
- [30] J. Schaap, S. Aupers, ‘gods in world of warcraft exist’: Religious reflexivity and the quest for meaning in online computer games, *new media & society* 19 (2017) 1744–1760. doi:10.1177/1461444816642421.
- [31] L. Feldt, Harry potter and contemporary magic: Fantasy literature, popular culture, and the representation of religion, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 31 (2016) 101–114. doi:10.1080/13537903.2016.1109877.
- [32] S. Lukes, Emile Durkheim, his life and work: a historical and critical study, Stanford University Press, 1985.
- [33] H. T. Hunt, A collective unconscious reconsidered: Jung’s archetypal imagination in the light of contemporary psychology and social science, *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 57 (2012) 76–98. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5922.2011.01952.x.
- [34] Church as an employer, Kirkko on suuri työnantaja, 2020. URL: <https://evl.fi/tietoa-kirkosta/tilastotietoa/henkilosto#6b0cc772>.
- [35] K. Papangelis, A. Chamberlain, I. Lykourentzou, V.-J. Khan, M. Saker, H.-N. Liang, I. Sadien, T. Cao, Performing the digital self: Understanding location-based social networking, territory, space, and identity in the city, *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 27 (2020) 1–26. doi:10.1145/3364997.
- [36] B. B. Frey, The SAGE encyclopedia of educational research, measurement, and evaluation, Sage Publications, 2018. doi:10.4135/9781506326139.n369.
- [37] N. Yee, Motivations for play in online games, *CyberPsychology & behavior* 9 (2007) 772–775. doi:10.1089/cpb.2006.9.772.
- [38] D. Kardefelt-Winther, The moderating role of psychosocial well-being on the relationship between escapism and excessive online gaming, *Computers in Human Behavior* 38 (2014) 68–74. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.05.020.
- [39] T. Fox, Undertale, Self-Published. Various platforms (2015).
- [40] L. J. Jensen, K. D. Valentine, J. P. Case, Accessing the pokélayer: Augmented reality and fantastical play in pokémon go, in: *Educational Media and Technology Yearbook*, Springer, 2019, pp. 87–103. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-27986-8_9.
- [41] Y. Niekrenz, The elementary forms of carnival: Collective effervescence in germany’s rhineland., *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 39 (2014).
- [42] A. Bhattacharya, T. W. Windleharth, R. A. Ishii, I. M. Acevedo, C. R. Aragon, J. A. Kientz, J. C. Yip, J. H. Lee, Group interactions in location-based gaming: A case study of raiding in pokémon go, in: *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2019, pp. 1–12. doi:10.1145/3290605.3300817.
- [43] A. N. Islam, S. Laato, S. Talukder, E. Sutinen, Misinformation sharing and social media fatigue dur-

ing covid-19: An affordance and cognitive load perspective, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 159 (2020) 120201. doi:10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120201.

- [44] Omri Wallach, 50 years of gaming history, by revenue stream (1970-2020), 2020. URL: <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/50-years-gaming-history-revenue-stream/>.
- [45] I. Quershi, B. Bhatt, S. Gupta, T. A.A, Call for papers: Causes, symptoms and consequences of social media induced polarization (smip), *Information Systems Journal*, available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/pb-assets/assets/13652575/ISJ_SMIP_CFP-1586861685850.pdf, visited 2th of August, 2020 (2020).