

RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF COMPUTER GAMES*

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Abstract

Modern computer games are huge virtual worlds that raise sophisticated social and even religious issues. The “external” aspect of the religious dimension of computer games focuses on the problem of the polysemantic relation of world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) to computer games. The “inner” aspect represents transformation of monotheistic and polytheistic religions within the virtual worlds in the view of heterogeneity and genre differentiation of computer games (arcades, action games, role-playing games, strategies, simulators, hybrid genres).

Keywords: computer games, religion, game studies, religious studies, virtual reality, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, arcades, action games, shooters, role-playing games, strategies, simulators.

1 INTRODUCTION

Computer games are complex phenomenon of contemporary culture, vivid example of the fast development of audiovisual technologies. If the first computer games were simple entertaining arcades with primitive gameplay, many modern computer games have become huge virtual worlds (like “TES V: Skyrim” (2011) or “Total War: Attila” (2015), that raise sophisticated social, ethical, aesthetical, political, educational, gender, historical or even religious issues. The paper devoted to the research of religious dimension of computer games.

2 METHODOLOGY

Methodologically it is possible to identify two main problematic aspects in the study of the religious dimension of computer games: “external” and “internal”. The *external* aspect focuses on the problem of the relation of world religions to computer games (as to «external» object for them). This research first analyzes a wide range of *relevant sources*, both canonical (sacred texts) and modern (including actual theses of authoritative contemporary religious leaders). Second, the research considers historical, cultural and regional characteristics of world religions. The *inner* aspect of religious dimension of computer games in terms of methodology more linked with the phenomenology of games. Here, in the view of heterogeneity and genre differentiation of computer games (arcades, action games (‘shooters”, “slashers”, “fightings”), role-playing games, turn-based and real-time strategies, transport and economic simulators, various hybrid genres) we will analyze how monotheistic and polytheistic religions represent and transform *within* the virtual worlds of computer games.

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3 “EXTERNAL” ASPECTS OF THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF COMPUTER GAMES

Most of traditional monotheistic religions refer to videogames quite cautiously. This can be explained by the fact, that computer games are relatively *young* phenomenon of world culture. That is why in religious discourse has not yet emerged a serious discussion, which may systematically considers all the capabilities of virtual worlds of computer games. The existing reflection in modern religious discourse usually concerns issues of computer game *addiction* and the problem of *violence* in video games.

3.1 Contemporary Judaism

Contemporary *Judaism* marks immersion to the virtual worlds mostly negative. Ashkenazi ex-Chief Rabbi of Israel Jonah Metzger said computer games “cultivate violence” (Interfax, 2005, <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/arm/?act=news&div=6858>). Another famous Jewish religious leader Israeli rabbi Eliyahu Essas claims that “so-called “role-playing games” that move a person into a virtual fantasy world, where he ostensibly fights monsters do not carry anything but the destruction of the human personality” (Essas, 2013, <https://www.evrey.com/sitep/askrabbi1/q.php?q=otvet/q4299.htm>). Eliyahu Essas explains, that the development of computer games is a very lucrative business that “affects people’s consciousness” (Ibid.) by means of the awakening of negative emotions. He says that destroying and humiliating of virtual enemies and the use of various methods of violence (permitted by the game) “only reinforces negative inclinations” (Ibid.). Essas claims that gamers may sometimes use these methods of violence in a real life. Miriam Klimovskaya from the internet portal “Judaism and the Jews” asserts, that emotions initially required for real life “are wasting on the virtual life and not leaving a person mental strength to solve real life problems” (Klimovskaya. 2014, https://toldot.ru/ifamily/children/children-ask_7884.html).

3.2 Contemporary Christianity

3.2.1 Contemporary Orthodox Christianity

Contemporary Orthodox Christianity, for the most part, defines playing computer games also as a harmful pastime. Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II said, “computer games promote the cult of violence, convince us that human life is worth nothing” (Lipich, 2004, <https://ria.ru/society/20040421/574130.html>). Archbishop Vikentiy in 2004 considered turn-based strategy game “Heroes of Might & Magic” as a sin. This orthodox attitude to the games psychotherapist and priest Gregory Grigoriev explains by the fact, that “the player digs his talent into the ground and runs away from the God” (Milovidov, 2013, <http://www.nsad.ru/articles/mozg-ne-rasschitan-na-kompyuternye-igrы>). While the “whole life should be useful and busy with good works, should be joyful and active movement to the Kingdom of Heaven, to the loving Father, God. The game is a passive withdrawal from this movement. Moreover, there is a departure from the God” (Ibid.). At the time of the game, we do not deal with “acquisition of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (Motovilov, 2010, <http://lib.pravmir.ru/library/readbook/1448>). This is according to saint Seraphim of Sarov is the goal of the Christian life. In other words, “computer games activate earth “passions” instead of human movement to the Kingdom of Heaven (Sukhov, 2016, p.664).

3.2.2 Modern Catholicism

The same logic (despite all the dogmatic differences between Eastern and Western Christianity) is presented in modern *Catholicism*. Pope Benedict XVI directly blamed video games “which in the name of entertainment exalt violence and portray anti-social behaviour or the trivialization of human sexuality is a perversion, all the more repulsive when these programmes are directed at children and adolescents” (Benedict XVI, 2007, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20070124_41st-world-communications-day.html). His successor, Pope Francis compares gamers to “vegetables” and consistently criticizes modern technologies, which deprive too much time. Pope Francis “challenges young people to reject video games and engage in social activism instead” (Scislowska, d’Emilio, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pope-francis-urges-young-people-to-reject-video-games-and-engage-in-activism-instead-a7164376.html>).

3.2.3 Canonical Basis

The basis of mostly cautious attitude of contemporary Christianity to virtual entertainment can be deduced from the canonical sources. Saint apostle Paul writes, “Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Although in the authoritative interpretation of the Apostle Paul, St. John Chrysostom means gluttons, it is quite possible to shift it to the electronic entertainment of modern computer games. In this regard it is relevant to quote saint Clement of Alexandria who said that “If it is permissible to choose any life, it is

obvious (to select) a life in the abstinence” (Clement of Alexandria, 2017, <http://bible.optina.ru/new:1kor:06:12>).

3.3 Contemporary Islam

3.3.1 Modern Islamic Attitude to Computer Games

The point of view of contemporary *Islam* on the discourse of computer games is more complicated. Khatib and Imam Sheikh Muhammad Saal al-Munadzhid from Saudi Arabia claims that computer games “are allowed as long as they do not distract man from his duties such as correct prayer or duty to the parents and do not contain anything forbidden” (Muhammad Saal al-Munadzhid, 2014, <http://islam.com.ua/obschestvo-i-kulytura/drugoe-chast-2/10281-kompyuternye-igry>). For example, the mention of so-called pagan “gods” in computer games, because this mention can be regarded as a violation of the monotheistic principle. In addition, other types of “forbidden” may be different game situations, when a player can fight against Muslims in the troops of “unbelievers” or “images of open women, illegal foods and drinks, gambling and any kinds of perversions” (Islam-Today, 2016, <http://islam-today.ru/veroucenie/vopros-otvet/mozno-li-musulmaninu-igrat-v-komputernye-igry/>).

3.3.2 Canonical Basis

In the Hadiths (containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad) it is possible to find the historical roots of the attitude of contemporary Islam to computer games. Abu Berza al-Aslami reports that the Messenger of Allah said "on the day of judgment, a single slave will not move from his place until he answers the following questions: how he spent his life and what he spent it on; what he did with the knowledge; how he acquired property and what he spent on" (Tirmizi, Kyyama, 2417). Based on this hadith, computer games as a kind of virtual entertainment can be regarded as pointless activity and wasting of time.

3.4 Modern Buddhism

Unlike the Abrahamic religions, modern *Buddhism* refers to computer games more tolerantly and, on the contrary, emphasizes their value in the sense of psychotherapy. Karmapa Lama (head of the Karma Kagyu line of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism) Urgyen Trinley Dorje said, “the aggression that comes out in the video game satiates whatever desire I might have to express that feeling. For me, that's very skilful because when I do that I don't have to go and hit anyone over the head” (Rashmee, 2009, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/Video-war-games-satiate-my-feelings-of-aggression/articleshow/5032672.cms>). In fact, he equates modern computer games to traditional Buddhist meditation. Urgyen Trinley Dorje named computer games “emotional therapy”, which can reduce stress by dissolving feelings of aggression in the virtual worlds.

3.5 Neo-Pagan Cults

Various modern forms of neo-paganism usually do not directly actualize the discourse of computer games. However, pseudo-pagan cults are widely represented in the virtual worlds of modern computer games in the genres of action games and role-playing games.

3.6 Conclusions

In general, although there are examples of a positive attitude to computer games, in religious consciousness prevails mostly negative attitude to computer games. This can be explained by the actual reduction of the whole variety of games to some problem genres (“shooters” or neo-pagan role-playing games) which explicitly represent the virtual violation of main commandments (for example, the first commandment of monotheism or the commandment “do not kill”). In addition, negative attitude can be explained by insufficient acquaintance with the products of the modern game industry, ignoring the practical value of computer games, their aesthetic, ethical and, in particular, innovative educational resources (for example, simulators of the surgeon, helping to rehearse medical operations, flight simulators for training pilots of civil airlines and planning their actions in emergencies, etc.).

4 “INTERNAL” ASPECTS OF THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF COMPUTER GAMES

Second, the *inner* aspect of religious dimension of computer games methodologically more linked with the phenomenology of games. Here, in the view of heterogeneity and genre differentiation of modern computer games we will analyze how religions represent and transform *within* the virtual worlds of computer games.

4.1 Arcades

In the simple *arcade* games the philosophical questions of religion are not the center of attention in the gameplay, because the main task of the player is to perform a specific mission and go to the next level. Nevertheless, religious elements use in game design. For example, a representation of the ancient Egyptian cult in shareware games or the ghost characters in discrete levels of legendary "Pac-Man" arcade game (1980).

4.2 Action Games

The *action* genres of computer games (including "shooters", "slashers", "fightings" or different action-adventures) usually do not raise complex religious issues, because the main task of the player in these games as well as in arcades is also to quickly perform a specific mission. However, in some action games it is possible to find a number of characters from the pantheon of *polytheistic* religions. For example, the battle with Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) in the action-adventure game "Prince of Persia" (2008), ancient Egyptian deities in the series of shooters "Serious Sam" (2001-2017), followers of pagan voodoo cult in a third person action game "Shadow Man" (1999), pseudo-pagan practices and supernatural essences in the series of "Wolfenstein" shooters (1981-2015). We also should note that visually and audially appalling images of some creatures from pagan culture (different monsters and "zombies") shows "not only an ethical but also the aesthetic polarization" (Sukhov, 2016, p. 667) of computer characters. Less often, it is possible to find the elements of traditional *monotheistic* religions, for example, a representation of historical religious contradictions of Sunnis, Shiites, Orthodox and Catholics during the Third Crusade in "Assassin's Creed" (2007) action-adventure game. In an applied context in some action games (usually in shooters) players may use so called "god mode" which usually means an invulnerability to any damage (without obvious reference to any existing religious tradition).

4.3 Role-Playing Games

Multidimensional virtual worlds of nonlinear role-playing games (RPG) represent not only material, but also spiritual culture. That is why RPG often raise religious topics. Due to the fact that most of RPG are not strictly historical, but represent fiction fantasy world ("The Elder Scrolls" series (1994-2014), "Dragon Age" series (2009-2014) or a fantastic world of the future ("Mass Effect" series (2007-2017), religions more often represented by a variety of *polytheistic* pseudo-pagan cults. In a famous RPG "The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind" (2002) it is possible to find a multi-page virtual book "Cults of Tamriel" with a detailed description of this religious system. Although in the virtual worlds of RPG prevails a variety of previously mentioned fantastic pseudo-pagan cults, sometimes it is also possible to find the representation of *historical* polytheistic pagan cults, mostly in a more simple type of role-playing games, so-called "ARPG" (action role-playing games). For example, Greek Olympic cult in "Titan Quest" (2006) or Scandinavian pantheon in the newest game "Vikings: Wolves of Midgard (2017). There are few analogues of world monotheistic religions. We can remember pseudo-Catholicism in "Divinity 2" (2009) or, on the contrary, canonically true Judaism in "FIVE: Guardians of David" (2015) based on the Old Testament. At the conceptual level, role-playing games also use some famous notions from religious discourse. For example, the concept of "karma" in the post-apocalyptic virtual world of "Fallout" series (1997-2015). However, despite the obvious connotations with the Indian spiritual culture, this "karma" does not focus on next incarnations in the wheel of Samsara, but strictly determines the current gameplay. In fact, such "karma" is just the sum of points "of good and bad behavior in the form of ranking that determine the basic attitude of non-player characters (unplayable computer characters) to the player" (Sukhov, 2016, p. 667).

4.4 Strategies

In the genre of pseudo-historic *strategies* all types of religions presented mostly neutral and tolerant. In "Civilization 4" (2005, one of the games of the world famous "Civilization" series) all religions are equal by parameters. This fact can be explained by the principles of political correctness and tolerance, which are dominated in contemporary Western culture. The historical strategies like "Total War: Medieval 2" (2006) represent specific historical religious elements, for example, Crusades, auto de fe, jihad, the spread of Islam. Recently released hybrid of role-playing game and turn-based strategy "Legends of Eisenwald" (2013) directly represents the medieval Catholic Church, priests, and constantly mentions the real Christian saints. This is extremely rare for modern computer games in general.

4.5 Simulators

The majority of transport *simulators* are religiously neutral (paradoxically as their opposite, arcade games),

because most often they represent the possibility to control a wide range of various modes of transport, from a motorcycle to a spaceship. Complex hybrid *economic simulators* ("SimCity" series, 1989-2013) represent religious organizations and actualize moral dilemmas in the city management, which player may solve even by the creation of virtual Armageddon. One of the interesting types of hybrid simulator/strategy games which are directly connect with religious discourse is so called "god game". In "god game" a player may have supernatural powers, can create "miracles" and rule his own tribe of people (for example in the famous "Black & White" game, 2001). The gameplay of "Black and White" raises complex ethical issues and actualize the dialectics of good and evil in decision-making. Almost every task in the game has "good" and "evil" solutions. A player has a choice to achieve the desired by brute force or by good deeds.

5 CONCLUSIONS

There are two main problematic aspects in the study of the religious dimension of computer games: external and internal. The *external* aspect focuses on the problem of the relation of world religions to computer games (as to «external» object for them). Most of traditional religions refer to computer games quite cautiously. The existing religious assessment of computer games concerns the problems of virtual violence and game addiction. Contemporary *Judaism* marked immersion to the virtual worlds mostly negative (games distract from the spiritual life and cultivate violence). Orthodox *Christianity* defines computer games as a "sin" and promotion of the "cult of violence". Computer games activate earth "passions" instead of the movement to the Kingdom of Heaven. Modern Catholicism in the same logic blame violent computer games, which deprive too much time. Contemporary *Islam* considers that computer games are allowed as long as they do not distract man from his duties (such as correct prayer or duty to the parents) and do not contain anything forbidden (violation of the monotheistic principle). Unlike the Abrahamic religions, modern *Buddhism* refers to computer games more tolerantly and, on the contrary, emphasizes their value in the sense of psychotherapy and equates computer games to traditional meditation. In general, prevailing in religious consciousness negative attitude to computer games can be explained by: 1) the reduction of the whole variety of games to some problem genres ("shooters" or neo-pagan RPG) which explicitly represent the virtual violation of main commandments; 2) insufficient acquaintance with practical value of computer games (innovative educational resource). The *inner* aspect of the religious dimension of computer games represents transformation of monotheistic and polytheistic religions within the virtual worlds in the view of heterogeneity and genre differentiation of computer games. In simple *arcade* genres of computer games religious issues are not the in the center of attention in the gameplay, because the main task of the player is to perform a specific mission and go to the next level. In *action* genres ("shooters", "slashers", "fightings", action-adventures) prevail a set of characters from polytheistic pagan religions (Angra Mainyu in "Prince of Persia", ancient Egyptian deities in "Serious Sam", followers of pagan voodoo cult in "Shadow Man", pseudo-pagan essences in "Wolfenstein"). Multidimensional nonlinear *role-playing games* (RPG) often raise religious topics. Due to the fact that most RPG are not historical, but represent fiction fantasy world ("The Elder Scrolls", "Dragon Age") or fantastic world of the future ("Mass Effect"), religions usually represent by a variety of pseudo-pagan polytheistic cults. There are few analogues of world monotheistic religions (pseudo-Catholicism in "Divinity 2", Judaism in "FIVE: Guardians of David"). In pseudo-historic *strategies* world religions are neutral and equal ("Civilization 4"). The historical strategies ("Total War: Medieval 2") represent specific historical religious elements (Crusades, auto de fe, jihad, the spread of Islam). If the majority of transport *simulators* are religiously neutral (paradoxically as their opposite, arcade games), complex economic simulators and hybrid strategy/simulator games actualize the dialectics of good and evil ("Black & White") and moral dilemmas which player may solve even by the creation of the virtual Armageddon ("SimCity").

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