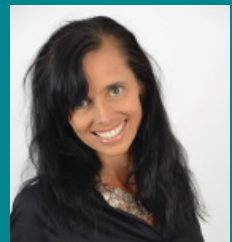


Religious Education with digital games?

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Abstract

Da viele digitale Spiele auch religiöse Elemente enthalten, stellt sich die Frage, ob diese sich für den Religionsunterricht eignen. Der vorliegende Beitrag stellt eine qualitativ empirische Studie von Lehramtsstudierenden vor, in denen digitale Spiele analysiert wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Wahrnehmung von religiösen Elementen durchaus hoch ist, diesen Spielen aber kaum Einfluss auf religiöse Einstellung bzw. Verhalten zugestanden wird. Auch das pädagogische Potential wird von den Studierenden als eher gering eingestuft.

Schlagworte

digitale Spiele – empirische Studie – Religionswahrnehmung – Menschenrechte

Religious Education with digital games?

Abstract

As many digital games also include religious elements, the question arises if these games are pedagogically worthwhile. This contribution presents a qualitative empirical study carried out with pre-service teachers who analyzed digital games. The results show that the perception of religious elements in digital games is rather high. However, they do not seem to have any influence on the religious attitude or behavioral disposition. Moreover, the students do not see much teaching potential in the games.

Keywords

digital games – empirical study – perception of religion – human rights

1. Theoretical background

The theoretical frame is based upon educational theory as the latter determines religious education studies as a pedagogical discipline. First, the question needs to be asked what can be defined as (religious) education and why it needs to be considered in pre-service teacher training. For answering this question regarding religious education, we need to turn to religious education studies. However, as religious education studies can be regarded as purely theological discipline, it might be suspect of indoctrination.¹ To find a way out, religious education studies must not be seen as purely theological discipline but need to turn to educational theory. Without being based on pedagogy, there is no future for religious education studies.² Religious education studies therefore need to be based on two fields of science: theological and pedagogical.³ The German-speaking field of religious education studies claims to have already taken into account the general pedagogical approach.⁴ Returning to this kind of educational thinking is also regarded as re-encountering the education within religious education studies of present times. Educational theory therefore can be regarded as important framework for religious education studies which is able to accept pluralism.⁵ Religious education therefore needs to be a separate and necessary part of comprehensive general education.⁶ Developing religious judgment with regards to reflective ability of judgement is part of general education.⁷

On the other hand, religious education studies expect to overcome marginalization of religion in education studies by reintroducing and rediscovering the educational concept. The religious dimension of education needs to be made aware of in order to prevent privatization of religion.⁸ Repressing religion from educational science seems to be overcome. Parallel to integrating and rediscovering the educational concept in religious education studies, religion has been rediscovered by pedagogy. There seems to be a new approach for integrating

1 Cf. GRÜMME, Bernhard: Menschen bilden? Eine religionspädagogische Anthropologie, Freiburg: Herder 2012, 135–145.

2 Cf. NIPKOW, Karl Ernst: Pädagogik und Religionspädagogik zum neuen Jahrhundert. 1, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2005, 13.

3 Cf. NIPKOW, Karl Ernst: Bildung in einer pluralen Welt. 2: Religionspädagogik im Pluralismus, Gütersloh: Kaiser 1998, 96.

4 Cf. SCHWEITZER, Friedrich: Rückkehr der Religionspädagogik zur Bildung. Eine Fallstudie zum Verhältnis zwischen Religion und Gesellschaft, in: NEMBACH, Ulrich (Ed.): *Informationes Theologiae Europae*. Internationales Jahrbuch für Theologie, Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang 1997, 241–225, 241f. and 245–251.

5 Cf. BIEHL, Peter: Die Wiederentdeckung der Bildung in der gegenwärtigen Religionspädagogik. Ein Literaturbericht, in: BIEHL, Peter / NIPKOW, Karl Ernst: *Bildung und Bildungspolitik in theologischer Perspektive*, Münster: LIT 2003, 111–152, 111–119.

6 Cf. ENGLERT, Rudolf: Religiöses Lernen und sein Beitrag zu einer umfassenden Bildung, in: *Kontexte. Bildung und Kirche* 2 (2002) 3–9.

7 Cf. PEUKERT, Helmut: Erziehungswissenschaft – Religionswissenschaft – Theologie – Religionspädagogik. Eine spannungsgeladene Konstellation unter den Herausforderungen einer geschichtlich neuartigen Situation, in: GROSS, Engelbert (Ed.): *Erziehungswissenschaft, Religion und Religionspädagogik*, Münster: LIT 2004, 53–91, 80-86.

8 Cf. SCHWEITZER 1997 [Ref. 4], 248–252.

the education-theoretical and hermeneutic role of religion.⁹ Since the publication of the great handbook of educational science¹⁰, religious education studies has had no reason to complain about the absence of dealing with religion and religions education in pedagogy. Religious educational task has become a goal dimension of general education.¹¹ Meanwhile, educational science has even carried out a substantial theoretic-empiric study of religious education as part of general education.¹²

It is more than recommendable to connect to the educational concept by H.-Chr. Koller.¹³ Koller's¹⁴ theory of transformational educational processes follows the classical educational concept by W. v. Humboldt and tries to develop the concept according to current changed framework conditions. Education is subsumed as process of transformation basic figures of world and self-relationships.¹⁵ The new concept of transformational educational processes does not only provide an up-dated education concept but also promises to be accessible for empirical research in education.¹⁶

2. Religion in video games

The reason, why religion in video games should be studied and regarded as important for religious education as well, is that digital games have become mainstream: In Austria, for example, six out of ten Austrians play at least once per month digital games, a third even daily.¹⁷

9 Cf. NIPKOW 1998 [Ref. 3], 97–106.

10 Cf. MERTENS, Gerhard u.a.: Handbuch der Erziehungswissenschaft. 1. Grundlagen. Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft, Paderborn: Schöningh 2008.

11 Cf. ENGLERT, Rudolf: Einführung, in: MERTENS, Gerhard u.a. (Ed.): Handbuch der Erziehungswissenschaft. Band I. Grundlagen. Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft, Paderborn: Schöningh 2008, 773–775.

12 Cf. BENNER, Dietrich et. al. (Ed.): Religiöse Kompetenz als Teil öffentlicher Bildung. Versuch einer empirisch, bildungstheoretisch und religionspädagogisch ausgewiesenen Konstruktion religiöser Dimensionen und Anspruchsniveaus, Paderborn: Schöningh 2011.

13 Cf. GÜNTHER, Ursula: Religiöse Bildung in der multikulturellen Gesellschaft, in: LIESNER, Andrea / LOHMANN, Ingrid (Ed.): Gesellschaftliche Bedingungen von Bildung und Erziehung. Eine Einführung, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2010, 126–138, 131–136.

14 Cf. KOLLER, Hans-Christoph: Grundzüge einer Theorie transformatorischer Bildungsprozesse, in: LIESNER, Andrea / LOHMANN, Ingrid (Ed.): Gesellschaftliche Bedingungen von Bildung und Erziehung. Eine Einführung, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2010, 288–300; KOLLER, Hans-Christoph: Anders werden. Zur Erforschung transformatorischer Bildungsprozesse, in: BREINBAUER, Ines / WEISS, Gabriele (Ed.): Orte des Empirischen in der Bildungstheorie. Einsätze theoretischer Erziehungswissenschaft II, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2011, 108–123; KOLLER, Hans-Christoph: Anders werden. Zur Erforschung transformatorischer Bildungsprozesse, in: MIETHE, Ingrid / MÜLLER, Hans-Rüdiger (Ed.): Qualitative Bildungsforschung und Bildungstheorie, Opladen: Budrich 2012, 19–33.

15 Cf. KOLLER 2011 [Ref. 14], 109.

16 Cf. KOLLER 2010 [Ref. 14], 288.

17 Cf. ÖVUS: Gaming in Austria 2019, in: <https://www.ovus.at/news/ueber-fuenf-millionen-oesterreicher-spielen-videospiele/> [viewed on 31.12.2019].

Researching religion in digital games, however, is a rather new discipline which means that methodology needs to be developed as well. Bosman¹⁸ suggests a multi-layered methodology as religion might be found in one of the following five levels: material, referential, reflexive, ritual and meta level. “These five levels run from explicitly religious to implicitly religious, from game-immanent to game-transcendent, and from a developer-intended to gamer experienced”¹⁹ which makes it quite hard for someone not being a researcher into religious studies and video games to discover all five levels. Steffen²⁰ defines religious games as those whose contents refer direct to real religious symbols which form the center of the action, narration or topic. Embedding religion in the game mechanics is another possibility which does not need to be fulfilled.

Religious elements are often used to involve the player better in the game, mostly as explicit or implicit narrative references. Ancient religions, events and places can be found in video games – sometimes even fictive religions are invented for the game. In implicit narrative references the protagonist of the game has to save the world by fulfilling a prophecy. Whereas in many commercial games, religion often serves as background story, there are other ways how religion and videogames go together. According to Anthony, digital games dealing with religion can be differentiated in seven categories, from didactic games wanting to educate players about religious ideas over praxis games which can be seen as a devotional practice to allomythic games (exploring nonexistent traditions), allo-political games (creating a community that only exists online) and theoptic games (players take on the role of a divine god).²¹

Game designers are responsible for explicitly integrating religious elements in videogames and thus they are able to influence players to a certain extent by depicting religion, religious elements and moral and ethical values. Piasecki²² understands game developers as creators as well as communicators.

18 Cf. BOSMAN, Frank G.: The Word Has Become Game: Researching Religion in Digital Games, in: Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet 11 (2016), 28–45.

19 BOSMAN 2016 [Ref. 18], 30

20 Cf. STEFFEN, Oliver: Level Up Religion. Einführung in die religionswissenschaftliche Digitalspielforschung, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2017.

21 Cf. ANTHONY, Jason: Dreidels to Dante’s Inferno. Toward a Typology of Religious Games, in: CAMPBELL, Heidi A. / GRIEVE, Gregory Price (Ed.): Playing with Religion in Digital Games, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2014, 25–46.

22 Cf. PIASECKI, Stefan: Redemption through Annihilation?! Game Designer’s views on religion, culture and society and its influences on digital games, in: Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet 10 (2016) 45.

3. Research design

This paper is based on a qualitative empirical study²³ which is also due to the small sample (N = 27). The evaluation was carried out within a seminar for pre-service teachers for comprehensive school at Kirchliche Pädagogische Hochschule Vienna/Krems (KPH) in summer term 2016. Students taking part in the study were asked to analyze a digital game which was chosen by themselves. To make the task easier, students got a list of digital games from which they could choose (however, they could also choose a game not being on the list). The games were either provided on DVD or were available online for free. All pre-chosen games had some features in common: They included a religious aspect, were quite easily available and most of them did not ask much experience in playing (like point and click adventures).

The students were additionally provided with a guideline to help them with analyzing the digital game. The guideline concentrates on a game-immanent analysis of religious topics, (re-)construction of religious elements, quotes, architectural styles and other religious objects.²⁴ Based on this guideline, students wrote an analysis each which was handed in as digital file. After having been anonymized, the files were the basis for this evaluation study. The coded passages will be cited by using the abbreviation ‚AL‘ plus a consecutive number. As all files were handed in in German, quotations have been translated into English for this paper.

The following games were chosen by students (quoted here with anonymized and numbered game-analysis):

- Age of Empires II²⁵: AL 1
- Paranormaler Wald (Paranormal Woods)²⁶: AL 2, 7, 12, 14
- Die Wiege Olympias (Heroes of Hellas)²⁷: AL 3, 10

²³ Cf. FLICK, Uwe: Qualitative Evaluationsforschung zwischen Methodik und Pragmatik – Einteilung und Überblick, in: FLICK, Uwe (Ed.): Qualitative Evaluationsforschung, Reinbek: Rowohlt 2006, 9–32; HEIDEGGER, Gerald: Evaluationsforschung, in: RAUNER, Felix (Ed.): Handbuch Berufsbildungsforschung, Bielefeld: Bertelsmann 2005, 412–420; KARDORFF, Ernst von: Qualitative Evaluationsforschung, in: FLICK, Uwe et al. (Ed.): Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch, Reinbek: Rowohlt 2017, 238–250; MAY, Michael: Evaluationsforschung, in: BOCK, Karin / MIETHE, Ingrid (Ed.): Handbuch Qualitative Methoden in der Sozialen Arbeit, Opladen: Budrich 2010, 305–313; SPANHEL, Dieter: Grundzüge der Evaluationsforschung, in: HUG, Theo (Ed.): Wie kommt Wissenschaft zu Wissen? 2: Einführung in die Forschungsmethodik und Forschungspraxis, Baltmannsweiler: Schneider 2001, 249–264; DÖRING, Nicola: Evaluationsforschung, in: BAUR, Nina / BLASIUS, Jörg (Ed.): Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung. 1, Wiesbaden: Springer 2019, 173–189.

²⁴ Cf. HEIDBRINK, Simone / KNOLL, Tobias / WYSOCKI, Jan: Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches, in: Online – Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet 5 (2014) 5–50.

²⁵ Ensemble Studios 1999.

²⁶ Hidden4Fun 2006.

²⁷ Jaibo Games 2007.

- Edna bricht aus (Edna & Harvey: The Breakout)²⁸: AL 4
- All my gods – die Götter Roms²⁹: AL 5, 20, 23, 24
- Heiliges Wasser (Sacred Elements: Water)³⁰: AL 6, 11, 27
- Mutiger Magier (Wonder Defender)³¹: AL 8, 9, 17, 18, 21
- Myths of the world: Die chinesische Heilerin (Chinese healer)³²: AL 13
- Last exit Flucht (Against all Odds)³³ AL 15, 16, 26
- Without quoting the title: AL 19
- Shadows of the Vatican: Act 1: Greed³⁴: AL 22
- The Legend of Zelda – Seeds of Darkness³⁵: AL 25

Except for one (*Against all Odds*), the games are commercial-off-the-shelf games, which means they were designed for pure entertainment and not for teaching about religion. *Against all Odds* is a serious game, which means that its primary focus is not on entertainment but on making people aware of a certain situation or changing their behavior.³⁶

By looking through the analysis carried out by the students, the authors found out that some games were taken by two or more students. This enables to compare the game assessment by different students.

The study presented here is not intended to give a substantial evaluation but concentrates on some aspects, due to the chosen focus of the topic of this contribution. The analyses of the games are based on the following questions of the guideline:

- Question 3: Is there a connection to the field of religion / interreligious aspects within the game? If yes, where? Try to describe these aspects as detailed as possible.

28 Daedalic Entertainment 2008.

29 Astragon 2012.

30 Hidden4Fun 2007.

31 Play! 2015.

32 Astragon 2014.

33 UNHCR 2006.

34 10th Art Studio 2014.

35 Zepher Entertainment 2006.

36 Cf. MICHAEL, David / CHEN, Sande: *Serious Games: Games That Educate, Train, and Inform*, Boston: Thomson 2006.

- Question 9: What are the objectives of the game? (for example, teaching facts; changing attitudes; making people aware of something; entertain; changing behavior). Please have a closer look at the following areas:
 - Perception: Does the game further perception of intercultural / interreligious issues?
 - Knowledge: Does the game teach in the aforementioned areas?
 - Does the game influence your attitudes towards religion and your behavior / acting?
- Question 10: Which age-group do you think the game is appropriate for? Is the game suitable for teaching? Please give reasons for your assessment.

These questions for analysis correspond to the following categories which were determined by deductive method:

- Perception of religious contents/reference: Questions 3 and 9
- Influence on religious attitude/behavior: Question 9
- Suitability for teaching: Question 10

The single categories were matched with an analytical research question:

- How can digital games offer perception of (inter-)religious contents?
- Do the analyzed games influence religious attitude and behavior?
- From a pedagogical point of view – are these digital games suitable for teaching?

The central question is as follows: Which potential do serious digital games provide for (inter-)religious education?

Game analyses can be seen analogue to learning journals as documents for research purposes.³⁷ Therefore, document analysis provides the methodological framework for this study.³⁸ As document analysis belongs to qualitative rese-

³⁷ Cf. FISCHER, Dietlind / BOSSE Dorit: Das Tagebuch als Lern- und Forschungsinstrument, in: FRIEBERTSHÄUSER, Barbara et. al. (Ed.): Handbuch qualitative Forschungsmethoden in der Erziehungswissenschaft, Weinheim: Juventa ⁴2013, 871–886; SALHEISER, Axel: Natürliche Daten: Dokumente, in: BAUR, Nina / BLASIUS, Jörg (Ed.): Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung, 2, Wiesbaden: Springer ²2019, 1119–1133.

³⁸ Cf. GLASER, Edith: Dokumentenanalyse und Quellenkritik, in: FRIEBERTSHÄUSER, Barbara et al. (Ed.): Handbuch qualitative Forschungsmethoden in der Erziehungswissenschaft, Weinheim: Beltz ⁴2013, 365–375; HOFFMANN, Nicole: „Dokumentenanalyse“, in: SCHÄFFER, Burkhard / DÖRNER, Olaf (Ed.): Handbuch qualitative Erwachsenen- und Weiterbildungsforschung, Opladen: Budrich 2012, 395–406; WOLFF, Stephan: Dokumenten- und Aktenanalyse, in: FLICK, Uwe et al. (Ed.): Qualitative Forschung: ein Handbuch, Reinbek: Rowohlt ¹²2017, 502–514.

arch methods, the game analysis are evaluated according to the method of structured qualitative content analysis.³⁹

4. Research results

The results will be presented according to the three categories and the matching analytical questions introduced before. Finally, there will be a summary of the research results which leads over to the discussion of the empirical results.

When presenting the research results, the analyses by the students will be quoted in italics with additional coding number according to the following pattern: The first number refers to the category which is associated with the quotation. The second number refers to the respective item of the question in the guideline, followed by the number of the game analysis. The final number is an ordinal number. As the analyses are originally written in German, an English translation will be provided.

4.1 Category 1: Perception of religious contents

Results show that perception of religious contents/references is perceived quite controversial. In some cases it seems to be very easy to perceive religious contents and references. The game *All my gods – Die Götter Roms* can be quoted as an example. Four students have chosen this game for analysis which enables the authors to compare the perceptions (AL 5; 20; 23; 24). The following statement shows how obvious it seems to find out about religious contents:

“It’s quite easy here as the classical Roman Gods are in the center of the game. Right from the beginning until the ending of the game the player gets to know new Gods” (1-3-AL5-1). The topic of belief in gods is easy to name (cf. 1-3-AL23-1) as *“even the title which includes the word ‘God’ refers to Roman religion.”*(1-3-AL24-1).

The player perspective of the game is quite interesting as it allows to relate to religion in a special way: *„There is a connection to religion. The game is played from the point of view of a god.”* (1-3-AL20-1). Even more: *„The player is a young god and watches over the inhabitants of a city.”* (1-3-AL24-2). Therefore, players have god-like skills: *„Being a god means you can interfere with the events within*

³⁹ Cf. MAYRING, Philipp: Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, in: FLICK, Uwe et al. (Ed.): Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch, Reinbek: Rowohlt ¹2017, 468–475; MAYRING, Philipp / BRUNNER, Eva: Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, in: FRIEBERTSHÄUSER, Barbara et al. (Ed.): Handbuch Qualitative Forschungsmethoden in der Erziehungswissenschaft, Weinheim: Beltz ⁴2013, 323–333; MAYRING, Philipp / GAHLEITNER, Silke Birgitta: Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, in: BOCK, Karin / MIETHE, Ingrid (Ed.): Handbuch Qualitative Methoden in der Sozialen Arbeit, Opladen: Budrich 2010, 295–304; MAYRING, Philipp / FENZL, Thomas: Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, in: BAUR Nina / BLASIUS, Jörg (Ed.): Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung. 1, Wiesbaden: Springer ²2019, 633–647.

the game, the hand of God." (1-3-AL20-3). As per Bosman "the god game genre represents not only a specific ludological game mode, but is also narratologically linked to religious and theological concepts as 'good versus evil' or the *imago Dei*".⁴⁰ Using the 'hand of God' the player can „do different things like extinguishing fire quickly" (1-3-AL24-3). However, the player is not the almighty god, as: *"The power of god which is quoted in Mana, is limited"* (1-3-AL20-4). *„Moreover, there are many different gods like Jupiter, Flora, Mercury or Venus."* (1-3-AL24-4). The player is one of many gods. *„Later on in the game priests are added who pray in a holy shrine or temple."* (1-3-AL20-5).

The game contains more topics and references apart from religion which also influence the player's perception of religion. *„As the game offers various aspects, religion is not the main focus. It is, for example, more important to gain knowledge."* (1-3-AL20-6). One of the given analysis states that the game is limited as it only concentrates on one religion: *"There are no interreligious aspects as there is only one religion depicted."* (1-3-AL20-7). Another analysis concludes the following: *„The game only focuses on Roman gods and on believing in multiple gods. It also deals with disagreement among the gods. The game is really good in showing that there are also religions where people believe in more than one god."* (1-9-AL24-1). In summary, the game is useful (apart from limitations and boundaries that are there) for showing the following: *„The game makes it really obvious that religion is about gods in heaven watching over humans."* (1-3-AL24-5).

Regarding the unique perception of religious contents and references, the game *„Die Wiege des Olymps"* is seen quite similarly. *„Even the title tells that the game is about Greek mythology."* (1-3-AL10-1). It therefore is clear: *„The game refers to Greek mythology and Greek heroes."* (1-3-AL3-1). This results in: *„The game surely increases the perception of Greek mythology"* (1-9-AL3-1). Apart from increasing the perception, the game is also seen as means to increase interest in this topic: *"It increases the interest in Greek mythology"* (1-9-AL10-1).

The gameplay allows players to transform into a hero/heroine or even a god/goddess: *"After each completed level you get new parts for building a temple which means that the game might end with the player being a hero of Greek mythology himself because he has helped Zeus (1-3-AL3-2). - "Therefore, one might assume that you become a god yourself by supporting the other gods" (1-3-AL10-2).*

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BOSMAN, Frank G.: "Playing God". On God & Game, in: Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet 7 (2015) 185–189.

Perceptions of religious contents and references have also been found in the analysis of the following games:

- Age of Empires II (Cf. AL 1)
- Myths of the world: The Chinese Healer (Cf. AL 13)
- Shadows of the Vatican (Cf. AL 22)

The game *Age of Empires II* includes religious references which are easily recognizable: „Each settlement needs to build its own monastery, educate a monk who subsequently has to go on a quest for the four relics” (1-3-AL1-1). Intercultural and interreligious aspects are included as well: „As different cultures meet in the game, there are also different religions presented” (1-3-AL1-2).

In a number of sequences, the game *Myths of the world: The Chinese Healer* refers to Buddhism (cf. 1-3-AL13-1). Moreover, the game enables a detailed confrontation with intercultural aspects: „Intercultural aspects are included because of different cultures that meet. The game deals with getting to know strange traditions as well as finding out about similarities and differences.” (1-3-AL13-8).

Regarding similarities the following elements are mentioned as examples:

- „Many medical therapies also used in our culture go back to Chinese origins” (1-3-AL13-9).
- „This game is about producing various healing potions, for example the wood rot essence” (1-3-AL13-10).

Regarding differences there are also two examples mentioned:

- „Chinese people talk to ghosts which have a special relationship to the gods. Therefore, they are able to help humans” (1-3-AL13-11).
- „In the game *Daiyu* calls *Fei Lian* to get the galleon moving again. To do so she needs the scroll of the flow, windflower essence and the magical air crystal” (1-3-AL13-12).

The following four elements are seen as strange:

- „In contrast to the Western dragon the Chinese dragon is not seen as a beast” (1-3-AL13-13).
- “The Chinese dragon is a symbol for luck, peace and long life. Most of the time it is male and therefore can be compared to Yang. He is the symbol for power,

strength and protection by god. Moreover, he is the symbol for the emperor and potency. He stands for wisdom and kindness” (1-3-AL13-14).

- *„The dragon stands for power, strength and wisdom. Only because of being helped by the dragon it is possible to fight the emperor’s brother and to save the emperor’s son” (1-3-AL13-15).*
- *„This is also confirmed by the old man who orders warm soup from Daiyu” (1-3-AL13-16).*

Religious references can also be found in the game *Against All Odds* (cf. AL 15; 16; 26). Religion is a central topic in two key scenes:

- *„First, religion is a topic in the interrogation scene at the station” (1-3-AL26-1).*
- *„Then in the new country visualized by a church that provides help and shelter” (1-3-AL16-2).*

The human right of freedom of religion plays an important role: *„Freedom of religion is a central topic in this game” (1-3-AL15/16-1).* However, there are other topics as well: *„Moreover, the game is full of instances of intercultural examples” (1-3-AL15/16-2),* so that the students having analysed the game conclude: *“This game explains in detail what it means to be open towards religions and cultures” (1-3-AL15/16-3).*

Not all analysis provide such a clear conclusion regarding the perception of religious contents and references. The following games are seen more negatively:

- Sacred Elements: Water (cf. AL 6; 11; 27)
- Paranormal Wood (cf. AL 2; 7; 12; 14)
- Wonder Defender (cf. AL 8; 9; 17; 18; 21)
- The legend of Zelda – Seeds of Darkness (cf. AL 25)

Promoting perception or religious topics and contents by using digital games in a pedagogically worthwhile way is not taken for granted. References to religion and religious topics are only evident when the games are based on history of religion or topics are taken from religious studies. Some analysis contain considerable warnings: *„I think that only grown-ups are able to understand most references” (1-3-AL4).* The complexity of some games is seen rather high: *„You need to think hard to solve the puzzles and need to combine objects. Dialogues are complex and the player is asked to remember most of them for later on” (1-9-AL4-1).* If

perception and understanding of religious contents challenge adults, it is no surprise that children and adolescents have even greater difficulties. Therefore, the basic question „*how much religion can be influenced*“ (1-3-AL17-6) can be asked.

4.2 Category 2: Religious attitude/behavioral disposition

Participating students are of the same opinion in their analysis regarding the effects the games have on their attitude towards religion: The analyzed games do not influence them at all. It is interesting to have a closer look at the reasons students give for not being influenced by the games at all. Basically, two types of reasons can be found: on the one hand, there is a complete lack of religious topics or not enough references to religion within the game:

- „*No, because there is no religion*“ (3-9-AL19-1).
- „*The game does not influence my attitude towards religion as there are no religious topics present*“ (3-9-AL21-1).
- „*The references to religion are not enough for influencing my attitude towards religion or my behavior*“ (3-9-AL13-1).

On the other hand, knowledge and interest in certain topics which were already there before playing the game, had the same effect:

„*The game had no influence on my religion as I had already known most background stories of the heroes*“ (3-9-AL3-1).

„*Influence: The game had no influence on my attitude towards religion as I had been interested in Greek and Roman mythology before and therefore I have already read books on that topic*“ (3-9-AL10-1).

However, certain games might influence other attitudes, for example towards asylum seekers: „*My own religious attitude was hardly influenced by the game. However, it influenced my opinion and attitude towards asylum seekers*“ (3-9-AL26-1). This game might have the following effects:

- „*By solving the quests within the game, pupils can better empathize with a refugee*“ (5-10-AL15/16-3).
- „*Therefore, pupils should show more tolerance towards these people*“ (5-10-AL15/16-4).

The reason might be found in the fact that such games may induce deep involvement: *„The game touched me deeply as it has a serious background and the situation in the game puts the player in a dark mood“* (3-9-AL19-3). Due to involving players deeply, there is another important effect connected: changing behavior thus changing behavior disposition: *„Behavior yes, as I feel empathetic“* (3-9-AL19-2). This effect can be seen in several serious games dealing with human rights.⁴¹

However, these effects on attitudes and behavior disposition are only exceptions and do not refer to religious attitudes or religious behavior in the narrow sense.

4.3 Category 3: Pedagogical point of view

When it comes to using the games for teaching, the students are really strict. There are many reasons given why the analyzed digital games are not suitable for being used in school lessons. Some analyses criticize that the game does not provide enough content and therefore is not suitable for teaching:

- *„However, I would not use it in school as it does not contain enough contents for lessons“* (5-10-AL2-2).
- *„I would not use it for teaching but maybe for relaxing in between. I think it does not provide enough contents for teaching“* (5-10-AL11-2).
- *„Due to missing pedagogical contents and a very simple storyline, I do not regard this game as useful for teaching!“* (5-10-AL21-3).

If there is relevance for teaching, students do not think that pupils might learn anything from the game: *„Basically, I would not use this game in my lessons as pupils do not learn anything from it“* (45-10-AL6-2). There is no knowledge transfer: *„There is no new knowledge presented or old knowledge repeated“* (5-10-AL18-2). Therefore, the games are seen as pure entertainment:

- *„Apart from using the computer, entertainment and distraction, there is no deeper sense to be found in the game“* (5-10-AL9-2).
- *„It is a game for pure entertainment and therefore not suitable for any subject“* (5-10-AL17-4).

⁴¹ Cf. GABRIEL, Sonja: Serious Games Teaching Values. Discussing Games Dealing with Human Rights Issues, in: VALENTINE, Keri Duncan / JENSEN, Lucas John (Ed.): Examining the Evolution of Gaming and its Impact on Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives, Hershey: IGI Global 2016, 195–218.

- „This game might be used in the first or second grade of secondary school and only provides pure entertainment“ (5-10-AL18-1).

The pedagogic value of entertainment seems to be strictly limited. Games not matching the curriculum are a reason for exclusion. Missing contents and lack of learning potential are the main reasons for rejecting some of the digital games. Apart from negative features of some games like dullness or playing time that is too long, another factor is mentioned as they “do not ask for critical thinking or questioning” (5-11-AL22-1).

Some of the analysis provided, however, see potential in the games for using them in lessons. An important factor seems to be an existing relevance to a certain subject or the curriculum. Using the game cross-curricular is another argument mentioned in favor of digital games. The subject ‚religious education‘ is also mentioned as one of the suitable subjects (Cf. 5-10-AL3-1; 5-11-AL23-1). The discourse regarding religion(s) is thus put in a wider range of subjects.

4.4 Summary of research results

There are big differences in assessing the given digital games regarding the perception of religious references/contents. In some cases, intercultural and (inter-)religious topics are evident by presenting similarities, differences and unusual things. Alternative, non-monotheistic religions are presented. The human right of freedom of religion is also regarded as important. Apart from perception, interest in the topics is raised and information given.

Even if some games provide the possibility to take on the role of a god, these games do not seem to influence religious attitudes or behavior dispositions. However, as one game has shown the attitude towards refugees can be changed: it enables more tolerance because of empathy that is created within the game.

The contents presented and the knowledge integrated in the game are important for assessing if a game is pedagogically worthwhile. Pure entertainment is not enough. The game needs to support critical thinking. Moreover, there needs to be a connection to the curriculum. A positive aspect is seen in cross-curricular activities around a game.

5. Discussion

The theoretical oriented research question asks for the potential of digital games for (inter-)religious education. To answer this question, analytical sub-questions were used.

The first requirement for religious education can be found in the perception of religious contents/references in such games. Here, we can state that a number of digital games enable perception of (inter-)religious contents and topics, even if not at first sight by presenting similarities, differences and unusual things. It is especially for the unusual things (for example drawing attention to non-monotheistic religions) that might irritate and therefore create learning opportunities. Drawing attention to the topic freedom of religion means that there is a connection given to human rights education. However, the perception of religious elements within a game always depends on the players and their relation to religion. As Steffen⁴² points out, the reception of religious contents in games depends also on the intercultural context. In his research he found out that players often reject games where religion is used to moralize or used as propaganda but would wish for serious encounter with religion within games. Also Shut⁴³ stresses that each player takes a (sometimes only slightly) different message from the same game and also impacts a game.

Despite the probability religious topics/references and behavior dispositions and despite the fact that players can play the role of a god in some of the games,⁴⁴ they do not seem to influence religious attitudes and behavior dispositions. There is only one instance of influencing the attitude towards refugees: Due to the empathy that is created within the game, players seem to be more tolerant after having played. The human right of freedom of religion and its violation as reason for having to flee play an important role. The lack of influence on religious attitudes and behavior dispositions can also be seen positively as digital games thus cannot be the reason for unreflected indoctrination.⁴⁵

Regarding the pedagogical point of view, a weakness regarding digital games needs to be pointed out: Knowledge transfer does not really work within digital games.⁴⁶ Pure entertainment is not enough for using such games in lessons. At

42 Cf. STEFFEN 2017 [Ref. 20].

43 Cf. SCHUT, Kevin: Of Games and God. A Christian Exploration of Video Games, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2013.

44 Cf. GABRIEL, Sonja: Religion in digitalen Games – ein Widerspruch? In: LINDNER, Doris / STADNIK, Elena (Ed.): Professionalisierung durch Forschung, Wien: LIT 2017, 159–173, 161–163.

45 Cf. GRÜMME 2012 [Ref. 1], 135–145.

46 Cf. BAYER, Monika / DANGL, Oskar: Wissen über Menschenrechte durch digitale Spiele? Eine Evaluierungsstudie, in: LINDNER, Doris / KROBATH, Thomas (Ed.): Vielfalt(en) erforschen, Wien: LIT 2015, 45–55.

least there needs to be a possibility to connect the game to the curriculum. If that is possible, religious topics and contents may be integrated into various subjects. One of the strengths of digital games is seen in cross curricular learning which also integrates religious education as subject. Confessional religious instruction cannot be the only subject responsible for religious education as this is the objective of various school subjects.⁴⁷ Therefore, being sensitive to religious education needs to be part of pedagogy⁴⁸ and needs to be a necessary pedagogical competence that pre-service teachers need to learn during their training.⁴⁹ Teachers of all subjects need to have religious pedagogical competence.⁵⁰ And that is exactly what digital games might be good at: Sensitizing players for religious topics/references. Games can help to empathize or identify with a game character as long as the player has enough agency: Players need to be able to take meaningful choice that influence the gameplay.⁵¹

From the point of view of the theory of education the call for enhancing critical thinking skills by digital games seems interesting. Transferred to religious education we can focus on criticism of religion which already is in the center of the wise and interreligious book of the bible Kohelet.⁵² Therefore criticism of religion needs to be part of religious education in 21st century as due to self-relativization religiously motivated violence might be prevented.⁵³

Such effects cannot be achieved by only playing a game. To put it in other words: Only playing is not enough! There would be too high a danger that it is only regarded as pure entertainment. Therefore, digital games need to be put in a didactic scenario.⁵⁴ Otherwise their learning potential cannot be used effectively. Dealing with contents and experience reflectively needs to be part of lessons in which

47 Cf. OELKERS, Jürgen: Bildung, Kultur und Religion, in: ENGLERT, Rudolf et. al. (Ed.): Was sollen Kinder und Jugendliche im Religionsunterricht lernen, Neukirchener: Neukirchen-Vluyn 2011 (= JRP 27), 115–124, 123.

48 Cf. MÖHRING-HESSE, Matthias: Religionen und Menschenrechte – Postsäkulare Herausforderungen für eine säkulare Pädagogik, in: Jahrbuch für Pädagogik 2011. Menschenrechte und Bildung. Redaktion: STEFFENS, GERD / WEISS, Edgar, Frankfurt: Lang 2011, 141–160, 154–157.

49 Cf. SCHLUSS, Henning: Religionssensibilität als pädagogische Kompetenz: in: GUTTENBERGER, Gudrun / SCHROETER-WITTKER, Harald (Ed.): Religionssensible Schulkultur, Jena: Garamond 2012, 211–229; LEONHARD, Silke: Religionssensibilität – Überlegungen zu einer religionspädagogischen Kategorie, in: HOFHEINZ, Marco / NOORMANN, Harry (Ed.): Was ist Bildung im Horizont von Religion? Festschrift für Friedrich Johansen zum 70. Geburtstag, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2014, 106–116, 11–114.

50 Cf. SCHLUSS, Henning: Weshalb Karl Liebknecht das Evangelium brauchte, in: DOMSGEN, Michael / SCHLUSS, Henning / SPENN, Matthias (Ed.): Was gehen uns die die anderen an? Schule und Religion in der Säkularität, Göttingen 2012, 65–81.

51 Cf. HERON, Michael / BEDFORD, Pauline: 'It's only a game' – ethics, empathy and identification in game morality systems, in: The Computer Games Journal 3/1 (2018) 34–52.

52 Cf. LOHFINK, Norbert: Kohelet, Würzburg: Echter ²1980, 10.

53 Cf. ZILLESSEN, Dietrich: Hat die Religionspädagogik theologische Disziplin?, in: SCHWEITZER, Friedrich / SCHLAG, Thomas (Ed.): Religionspädagogik im 21. Jahrhundert, Kaiser: Gütersloh 2004 (= RPG 4), 17–35, 35.

54 Cf. GABRIEL, Sonja: Spielend über Menschenrechte lernen, in: LINDNER, Doris / KROBATH, Thomas (Ed.): Vielfalt(en) erforschen, Wien: LIT 2015, 136–145, 141.

digital games are used. This way, they might become pedagogically worthwhile for (inter-)religious education.

As a starting point, a religion critical attitude can be recommended for specialized classes as well as religious education.⁵⁵ Finally, criticism of religion is an essential theological concern.⁵⁶ This way, a linking to the human right of freedom of religion can be made which also includes criticism of religion.⁵⁷

The connection between (inter-)religious education and human rights is also relevant from the educational theory's point of view. The concept of transformational education⁵⁸ which is recommended for religious pedagogy faces a number of critical questions. With regards to human rights, two have to be highlighted:⁵⁹

- Normative abstinence: Not each transformation can be regarded as education.
- World oblivion: Concentration on individual development processes disregarding society and world.

The educational process needs to be based on a morally and ethical orientation. A suggestion going beyond the individual level is grounded on socio-ethically considerations. The normative framework is formed by a value basis of modern societies which are based on recognizing freedom and dignity of human beings.⁶⁰ Thus, human rights offer themselves as individual and societal framework for (inter-)religious education. With reference to the general human rights and especially to the right of freedom of religion and ideology both problems, normative abstinence and world oblivion could be solved efficiently. However, the normative problem returns in a modified form – but that would spark a different discussion.

55 Cf. NIPKOW 1998 [Ref. 3], 131–133.

56 Cf. ENGLERT 2002 [Ref. 6], 44.

57 Cf. BIELEFELDT, Heiner: Das Friedenspotenzial der Religionsfreiheit: Menschenrechtliche Zivilisierung religionsbezogener Konflikte, in: RICCARDI, Andrea / ZEHETMAIR, Hans (Ed.): Bedrohtes Menschenrecht? Zur internationalen Lage der Religionsfreiheit heute, München: Olzog 2013, 21–57, 38–41; BIELEFELDT, Heiner: Testfall Religionsfreiheit, in: PIRNER, Manfred L. / LÄHNEMANN, Johannes / BIELEFELDT, Heiner (Ed.): Menschenrechte und inter-religiöse Bildung. Referate und Ergebnisse des Nürnberger Forums 2013, Berlin: EB-Verlag 2015, 44–60, 50–54.

58 Cf. GÜNTHER 2010 [Ref. 13], 131–136.

59 Cf. FUCHS, Thorsten: Vermitteln, Verknüpfen, Verbinden? Ein Beitrag zur Reformulierung der bildungstheoretisch orientierten Biographieforschung, in: BREINBAUER, Ines / WEISS, Gabriele (Ed.): Orte des Empirischen in der Bildungstheorie. Einsätze theoretischer Erziehungswissenschaft II, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2011, 124–139, 129–132; FUCHS, Thorsten: Bildungstheorie und Bildungsforschung – Die Etablierung von ‚Annäherungsarenen‘ im Kontext der qualitativen Forschung, in: MIETHE, Ingrid / MÜLLER, Hans-Rüdiger (Ed.): Qualitative Bildungsforschung und Bildungstheorie, Opladen: Budrich: 2012, 129–147, 140–142.

60 Cf. RUCKER, Thomas: Dynamik als Problem von Bildungstheorie und Bildungsforschung, in: MESETH, Wolfgang u.a. (Ed.): Empirie des Pädagogischen und Empirie der Erziehungswissenschaft. Beobachtungen erziehungswissenschaftlicher Forschung, Bad Heilbrunn: Julius Klinkhardt 2016, 125–133, 131.