

Slavomír GálikUniversity of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
s_galik@yahoo.com

World of Warcraft as a New Form of Religion?

ABSTRACT

In the paper, the author is studying religious phenomena in the videogame called *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and compares them with traditional religions such as Christian religion and Buddhism. According to author, religious phenomena exist in WoW in the form of myths, rituals and in the creation of communities. This religious phenomena are not completely fictional, because the players are influenced by the virtual (there are cognitive changes), and then we have to accept some degree of the reality here. The author claims that WoW can partially saturate spiritual needs of the contemporary hypermodern man. However, the author states that it cannot replace traditional religion since it lacks its main part – salvation of the man in Christianity (or freeing in Buddhism), which is achieved through self-knowledge, eliminating bad inclinations, prayers or meditation. Traditional religions have a basic structure of religion expressed by the matrix “life – death – resurrection” which is directly connected with the human body. Human body still constitutes an important part for salvation (or freedom), introducing thus a boundary between the real and virtual. According to author, WoW is similar to theatre in the Ancient Greece, the game of WoW can have cathartic effects on the player, but cannot replace traditional religion.

KEYWORDS: religion, digital media, *World of Warcraft*

STRESZCZENIE

World of Warcraft – nową formą religii?

Autor artykułu bada religijne zjawiska w grze komputerowej *World of Warcraft* (WoW) i porównuje je z tradycyjnymi religiami, takimi jak chrześcijaństwo czy buddyzm. Według autora, fenomeny religijne występują w WoW w formie mitów, rytuałów, a także w tworzeniu wspólnot. Te zjawiska nie są zupełnie fikcyjne, ponieważ świat wirtualny wpływa na graczy, w związku z czym należy przyjąć pewien poziom realności fenomenów. Autor uważa, że WoW może częściowo zaspokoić duchowe potrzeby współczesnego ultranowoczesnego człowieka. Gra nie może jednak w żadnym razie zastąpić tradycyjnej religii, ponieważ brak jej kluczowego elementu – zbawienia czy też uwolnienia człowieka (odpowiednio dla chrześcijaństwa i buddyzmu) osiągniętych poprzez samopoznanie, eliminowanie złych skłonności, modlitwę czy medytację. Podstawowa struktura tradycyjnych religii zamyka się we wzorze: życie-śmierć-zmartwychwstanie. Wskazuje ona bezpośrednio na ludzkie ciało jako wciąż ważne dla zbawienia (lub uzyskania wolności) i wprowadzające zarazem granicę pomiędzy światem realnym a wirtualnym. Według autora, gra wykazuje podobieństwo do teatru starożytnej Grecji. WoW może wywołać *katharsis* u gracza, nie może jednak zastąpić tradycyjnej religii.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: religia, media cyfrowe, World of Warcraft

Introduction

We witness some unprecedented changes in the modern society, changes that are defined mainly by new information technology, especially by the digital media. These changes reshape all aspects of our life, including religion. Religious communities use digital media for spreading information, communicating, online broadcasting spiritual ceremonies, online conferences and similar. This sort of using religion in the media is called *religion online*.¹ Another way of using the digital media is *online religion*, in which the digital media themselves either carry or even create spiritual content such as myths and rituals. These new forms of religion may be similar to

1 Gálik, S., Cenká, R., *Twilight of Christianity in Tele-view of the World: from Homo religiosus to Homo videns*. European Journal of Science and Theology. Vol. 9, No. 5 (2013), p. 232.

traditional religions, but can also be very different, as for example in the case of the sect called *Heaven’s Gate*, in which people believed that human body is merely a temporary vessel that would carry them into the virtual space.² A special way of creating religion in the cyberspace of digital media is presented by videogames. Some videogames, for example *Left Behind – Eternal Forces*, *Bible Adventures* are explicitly targeted to elaborate and intensify religious ideas,³ others, for example *World of Warcraft*, are religious only implicitly. Despite this, as various authors express, also the videogame of *World of Warcraft* represents an important phenomenon. Robert M. Geraci says “World of Warcraft offers its players many traditionally religious opportunities, including a community, a moral compass, a sense of identity and meaningful purpose, and transcendent experiences. With millions of users receiving these sacraments from *World of Warcraft* rather than a traditional religious institution, there can be doubt about the seriousness of the game’s religious implications.”⁴ J. Vallikatt similarly notices “*World of Warcraft* might fulfil the religious functions of creating world-views, finding meaning, and exploring identity through an analysis of the game’s mythic content, ritual practices and online communities... WoW could be called ‘extraordinary religion,’ because it helps people to move beyond their everyday culture and concerns.”⁵

Is, therefore, the present and phenomenal MMORPG game (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) *World of Warcraft* a new form of religion? If it is so, how is this phenomenon religious and how does it differ from the traditional religion? Consequently, can this new religious form fully replace the traditional one? These are the questions that we are asking and trying to answer in this paper. To study them in detail, we first need to explain the term of religion – and compare it with religious phenomena in *World of Warcraft*. Then we can identify similarities and differences between the game and traditional religion and finally recognize its possibilities and limits.

2 Ibidem, p. 233.

3 Wiemker, M., Wysocki, J., „When people pray, a god is born... This god is you!“ *Introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games*. In Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll (eds.): *Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Online –Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet. Vol. 5 (2014), p. 207.

4 Geraci, R.M., *Virtually Sacred. Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. New York 2014, p. 32.

5 Vallikatt, J., *Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft*. Melbourne 2014, pp. 194, 200.

What is religion?

The Latin origin of the word *religio* has more meanings. One of them is derived from the verb *religare*, which means bind back with gods.⁶ This meaning is very apposite since it takes in account the analysis of the basic existential situation of a human. On one hand, human is a being that is limited in his ways and mortal, on the other hand, in contrast with other creatures, he realises his own limits and mortality. This constitutes the elementary existential uncertainty that urges people to find security in God, transcendence or existence. Henri Bergson's approach to religion is similar. Along with other definitions he claims that "religion is a defence mechanism that mother nature applies against the idea produced by intelligent brain that death is unavoidable."⁷ Religion tries to solve the central problem of people – death. The accompanying phenomena, such as myths, rituals or religious society are mere subsidiary occurrences that may help people come with a meaningful opinion about world and themselves, and become part of society. In other words, as M. Eliade comments, religion reflects the basic existential matrix: life, death and rebirth.⁸ The key word in this matrix is rebirth, which we know in Christian religion as resurrection⁹ or, in a broader sense of meaning, also as salvation. In Christian religion resurrection or salvation is understood as being born again of the water and the Spirit (Jn 3, 3-7). This happens during the ceremony of baptism, which cleanses the person from sins and brings eternal life. In Buddhism, the goal of spiritual path is to reach the state of nirvana, which is also called awakening, or freedom. Nirvana transcends such polarities as life and death. We can therefore come to the conclusion that religion aims mainly at transcendence of human's fate, its limitation, sinfulness and mortality.

We can come to a different conclusion when we apply a phenomenological method that aims at finding the *essence* or basic *eidos* of the given situation or occurrence. According to the founders of phenomenology of religion such as R. Otto and M. Eliade, we talk about the sense of something mystical, divine (*numinosum*) with the basic category of the sacred (*sacrum*). Awareness

6 This is what he understood by the word *religio* Lactantius in his work *Institutiones divinae*. In Komorovský, J., *Religionistika. Veda o náboženstvách sveta a jej pomocné disciplíny*. Bratislava 2000, p. 5.

7 Bergson, H., *Filozofické eseje*. Bratislava 1970, p. 283.

8 Eliade, M., *Dejiny náboženských predstáv a ideí II. Od Gautamu Buddhu po víťazstvo kresťanstva*. Bratislava, 1997, p. 216.

9 We understand the term resurrection as spiritual resurrection or re-birth. There is also an eschatological meaning, which speaks about resurrection of the body at the end of the age.

of sacred is, according to Eliade a component in the basic frame of consciousness. It is something natural for a man, yet also extraordinary and as unreachable as for example dreams, visions, voices and so forth. An important component in the structure of sacred is the idea of fascination or perhaps even horrification brought by the extraordinary experience. Equally important in life is the permanent trace in consciousness and also change in life. A classic example is patriarch Jacob’s dream [Gen 28, 10-22], in which he saw a ladder reaching the skies that angles were ascending and descending. On the top of it was God, he gave Jacob and his descendants a promise. When Jacob woke up, he marked this “horrible” place and made an altar from the rock on which he had been sleeping. We can say that Jacob’s dream changed the once profane place into a place that was sacral. Despite the fact that Jacob never had this dream again, it considerably changed his spiritual thinking. Among this classic example that talks about the idea of sacral, also our everyday life offers a number of experiences that can share a similar idea of the sacred – we can for example speak of a deep experience of visiting a gothic cathedral, meeting a great person, having an important dream and so on.

Another question is how to connect the basic structure of religion expressed by “life – death – resurrection” with the phenomenological understanding of sacral? We start with an assumption that not every single experience of the sacred must undisputedly represent the great phenomenon of rebirth, it more probably means experience that varies in depth and strength. Therefore we can say that every spiritual transformation brings an experience of the sacred, but not every experience of the sacred brings the elementary transformation that we call resurrection.

We can conclude here that the matrix “life – death – resurrection” together with experience of the sacred constitute the basic structure of religion.

Religious phenomena in *World of Warcraft*

World of Warcraft (WoW) was released by *Blizzard Entertainment*, a videogame developer and publisher, in 2004. Later came 6 more expansions: *The Burning Crusade* (2007), *Wrath of the Lich King* (2008), *Cataclysm* (2010), *Mists of Pandaria* (2012), *Warlords of Draenor* (2014) and *Legion* (2016). The videogame holds the Guinness World Record for the most popular MMORPG game. In 2014 there were more than 100 million subscriptions to the game.¹⁰

¹⁰ source: <http://www.polygon.com/2014/1/28/5354856/world-of-warcraft-100m-accounts-lifetime>.

The gameplay takes place in two fictive worlds called Azeroth and Outland/Draenor. Two fractions, Alliance and Horde, fight each other in Azeroth. Each of the fractions has their own lands and capital. In the game the player's goal is to reach higher levels through gaining experience, winning over monsters and starting communities (*group, guild*). The game starts by choosing the race, class and possibly profession and fulfilling the quests. The goal of the game is to get to the highest levels and earn as high respect in the communities (the so-called *guilds*) as possible.

Jose Vallikatt, the author of *Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft*, studied the phenomenon of religion in this videogame for several years. Beside this, for several months he spent three hours a day playing WoW and also dedicated several more months researching the game among players in India. Basing on these theoretical and practical researches, he came to a conclusion that WoW offers a meaningful spiritual life for many players. He saw spiritual life in myths, rituals and player communities. J. Vallikatt states: "*World of Warcraft* is a space that offers immense opportunity for players to transcend the ordinary in their lives through the myths, ritual and community it offers. ... It is through *WoW*, in many cases that players discover part of their authentic selves, through the exploration of their identity and the meaning of life. We can argue that this exploration of their identity is related to what has previously been described as a religious life."¹¹

Myths, according to Vallikatt, are very important in WoW since they constitute stories that not only make the game interesting, but also create a purposeful world in which the players can realise themselves and recognise themselves as though they were in a mirror. For example, Vallikatt notices: "The myths in *WoW* not only provide a back-story to set a context, they also deliver powerful messages and motifs for players to live by. What has become apparent through this research is that the mythic themes in the game significantly affect players' outlooks on their own lives and the world. ... Myths and mythic participation in *WoW* thus become explanations that mirror player's own exigencies of life, and myths of this sort will continue to influence the world and our civilisation as inspiring realities."¹²

Ritual, according to Vallikatt, is a frequent religious phenomenon in the videogame of WoW. It is rituals where myths, that offer theoretical background, are actualised: "The mythic background to the game quests intensifies the activities associated with it into a thick ritual text where

11 Vallikatt, J., *Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft*, p. 193.

12 Ibidem, p. 194.

myths and rituals are inseparably connected.¹³ A number of rituals relate to the recovery of the World Tree, avatar’s healing, acquiring new skills for the player and so on.

Vallikatt sees the third spiritual phenomenon in the communities that are created in WoW. These are necessary for the players to reach higher levels in the game. However, they require cooperation between players, which is based on certain ethical standard. Vallikatt explains:

WoW is not merely a structured game, it is an integrated and independent social system.... that meaningful communities with a religious perspective can be formed around technologically mediated phenomena such as *WoW*, and can be seen as a manifestation of a longing for lost community.¹⁴

Vallikatt claims that in the modern secular world, religion can be re-awakened by the means of technologies, as we see for example in the WoW videogame. This new form of religion can satisfy spiritual needs of its players by exceeding everyday way of life and finding new forms of the sacred in myths, rituals and communities in WoW. Vallikatt says:

WoW is a context in which players are elevated to levels where they transcend their lives by participating in a mythic fantasy world, which provides them with meaningful texts, and in social settings where they build meaningful relationships.¹⁵

WoW is therefore, according to Vallikatt, a religion in a new sense of the word: “It may not be religious in traditional sense, but is effervescent and meaningful and numinous.”¹⁶

Robert M. Geraci (the author of monograph *Virtually Sacred. Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*), is another author who has studied the videogame of WoW. He states that WoW “is active constituent of modern religious life, and it helps shape, authorize, and rewrite our religious practices.”¹⁷ He relies on the assumption that new technologies, including videogames, can induce new religious experiences. Similarly to Vallikatt, also he thinks that religious dimensions such as teaching, myth, ritual, experience and institutions, can also be applied to WoW. Geraci believes that new technologies and new videogames can saturate religious

13 Ibidem, p. 195.

14 Ibidem, p. 195.

15 Ibidem, p. 201.

16 Ibidem, p. 201.

17 Geraci, R.M., *Virtually Sacred. Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*, p. 9.

needs of a present postmodern and secularised man. WoW can, he says, offer many traditional religious features such as community, moral standards, orientation towards transcendent meaning and experience.¹⁸ Geraci even claims that, taking in account the number of users:

World of Warcraft can compete with traditional religions for adherents. ... With millions of users receiving these sacraments from WoW rather than a traditional religious institution.¹⁹

Geraci does not agree with the usual arguments expressed by opponents, who claim that WoW is virtual reality, unreal and therefore false reality. According to him, virtual reality in WoW is not false, because it offers the virtually sacred and spiritual practice for a secular man. Geraci's opinion is that the character of the videogame is not "less real than an angelic resurrection or a parted sea that can be neither seen nor felt in the here and now."²⁰ Geraci even thinks that after "god's death" people will find god or spiritual practice chiefly in virtual worlds. Or, as he says, virtual worlds will growingly interact with physical worlds:

Virtual worlds enable new ways of being oneself and of interacting with others that affect the users of that world and the physical world. The interconnections between conventional and virtual life mean that religious practice and thought developed in, emergent from, and objectified by virtual worlds will help shape everyone's life in the years to come.²¹

World of Warcraft as a new form of religion?

Various authors, including the already mentioned Geraci and Vallikatt, claim that religious phenomena in videogames and especially in WoW really exist. In contrast with traditional religions though, they take a different form. The basic contrast is given by the difference between real and virtual. Yet the virtual should not be understood as unreal or totally fictitious. If a man is influenced by the virtual, then we must accept some degree of reality here. J.D.F. Tuckett and David G. Robertson, in reference to ideas expressed by W.I. Thomas and A. Schutz, state that "if men define

18 Ibidem, p. 32.

19 Ibidem, p. 32.

20 Ibidem, p. 99.

21 Ibidem, p. 213.

situations as real, they are real in their consequences.²² They based this on W. James’s concept; he notices that “real is the state that it exists in a certain relation to ourselves.”²³ This means that meaningful relations to players exist also in videogames, this also applies to religion – which will be considered as real too.²⁴

On the other hand, the difference between real and virtual does not cease; it is defined by human body. Though the cyberspace of digital media can penetrate into our mind and senses, it will never take over our body. It is similar in our communication with other people. Communication “face to face” differs from communication through digital media. In the first case we can sense the aura of our partner in communication, something that digital media cannot do in the second case.²⁵ The difference between traditional and virtual religion is similar. Virtual religion still misses human’s physical characteristics and physical community of people. If we suppose that religion depends on the matrix life – death – resurrection, then human body is a key, unique and irreplaceable requirement. Rebirth of a man is not only a matter of his mind and soul, but also body. In Christian religion, salvation is a matter of internal transformation, achieved through the act of baptism. Apostle Paul speaks of death of the old man and birth of a new man:

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ... Because we know our old human was crucified along with him to have the sinful body destroyed, to stop being slave to sin. (Rom 6, 4-6).

Consequently, salvation in Christian religion is accomplished in lively and real community that we call the institution of the Church. One can never baptise himself, this act can only be performed by priests.

In Buddhism, freeing, also described as awakening or enlightenment, represents a new existence of man, and is inevitably bound to human body. The body is irreplaceable on the journey towards freeing, but also in its final stage – Nirvana. There are various paths that lead to freeing and

22 Tuckett, J.D.F., Robertson, David G., *Locating the Locus of Study on „Religion“ in Video Games*. In Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll (eds.): *Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, Vol. 5 (2014), p. 99.

23 Ibidem, p. 88.

24 Ibidem, p. 100.

25 Gálik, S., *Cyber-spirituality as a new form of religion?* European Journal of Science and Theology. Vol. 11, No. 6 (2015), p. 10.

that require connection with human body, these include meditation techniques such as mindful breathing or mindful walking. On one hand freeing or Nirvana transcends the mind and body, on the other hand it also changes the body, which again resembles the matrix life – death – resurrection. M. Eliade comments on this:

Symbols of death, rebirth and initiation still persist in Buddhist text. A monk must create a “new body” for himself, be “reborn,” as in other initiations, after being “dead.”²⁶

Human body, or more precisely the body and mind together, is the key to gain the goal (for example salvation or freedom) in various religions. Salvation is usually achieved within a community whose members are physically present. This is the reason why virtual reality, including World of Warcraft, will never be a place for real religion. R. Geraci however, referring to recent researches, understands that in the future human body could be fully connected to digital technology and thus the difference between what is real and what is virtual could completely disappear:

Researches at the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) at the University of Southern California, for example, have used Microsoft’s Kinect to control *World of Warcraft* using body motions.²⁷

Despite this we believe that such an idea is too optimistic, because technology or even activation of certain centres in the nervous system cannot replace conscious and systematic work on oneself. It could, at most, be mere impulse that could encourage or startle a spiritual journey. Religion needs consciousness and elimination of bad inclinations, orientation towards the good, ability to meditate or pray, learn about oneself and similar aspects. Technology, interconnected with human’s body in whichever way, cannot replace this.

What religious phenomenon is WoW then? We agree with J. Vallikatt and R. Geraci that WoW is a religion for secularised people who live in the present, hypermodern time. The videogame of WoW draws its players massively into the game, offers myths and rituals, promotes building communities with rules and moral standards and, with its graphical fidelity and quality, ensures fascinating experience. This all makes players drop out of everyday reality and shifts their way of experiencing themselves and the world as well. For some players the videogame’s world is better and

26 Eliade, M., *Jóga. Nesmrtelnost a svoboda*. Praha 1999, p. 132.

27 Geraci, R.M., *Virtually Sacred. Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*, p. 213.

more intense than everyday reality. The game’s capability of offering its players fascinating experiences, story and meaning, is positive and can, in some players, also saturate traditional religion. On the other hand however, there are some limits within this “new religion,” – the body that participates in the game only partially and absence of religious methods to reach salvation in the broadest sense of the word – methods that have been tested for centuries. In this context, WoW offers something similar to catharsis, enjoyed by the old Greeks when they watched a play.

Conclusion

Media greatly influence not just thinking, culture and society, but also religion. Walter Ong comments on this influence:

religion began in an era of orality, was transmitted into visual form through manuscript writing as well as print, and has now entered the world in a new way via electronic media.²⁸

Each form of media influences religion in its own way. The spoken world favours global structures by the means of its harmony, while the written word differentiates and poses precision in thinking. It was the medium of spoken world that originally initiated rise of religions, while the written word has always preferred exact or scientific thinking, which brings more rationalisation into religions. For example Christian religion, which has grown on oral tradition as well as written word has, for a long time, experienced certain degree of tension between faith and logical mind, or theology and philosophy. It is for this reason that we can expect the fact that new forms of media, such as the Internet, social networks but also videogames, will once again somehow change forms of religion.

In this paper we studied the videogame of *World of Warcraft* and raised a question whether the game constitutes a new form of religion. We found certain religious aspects in the virtual form here; these do not cover the whole of the human body and as such do not offer salvation or resurrection that is found in traditional religion. Human body still constitutes a boundary between virtual religion in WoW and traditional religion. The visual and acoustic experience of the videogame and possible kinetic

28 Grieve, G.P., Campbell, H.A., *Studying Religion in Digital Gaming. A Critical Review of an Emerging Field*. In Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll (eds.): Religion in Digital Games. Multi-perspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches. Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, Vol. 5 (2014), p. 53.

interconnection between the player and the game cannot replace systematic work on oneself, such as learning about oneself, eliminating bad inclinations and concentrated prayer or meditation.

Finally, we can state that the videogame of WoW can have some religious or cathartic effects on man, but still cannot replace traditional religion. At most, it can partially saturate the spiritual needs of the present hypermodern man.

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Slavomír Gálik has worked at the Faculty of Mass Media Communications since 2004 and on a continual basis since 2007. Currently he is the Head of the Department of Mass Media Communication at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication. Professionally he focuses on the philosophy of media, in particular on the influence of media on man and questions related to information and knowledge society. He is the lead researcher for the VEGA project titled *Kyberpriestor ako nová existenciálna dimenzia človeka* (Cyberspace as a new existential dimension of man) and the author of several monographs and journal publications involving the themes of philosophy of media and communication.

