

Workshop and Lectures

# Religion, Video Games, and Simulated Worlds

Trento | 5-6.02.2018





# Programme

## Monday, 5th February

### OPEN WORKSHOP (Aula Piccola)

**15.00 - 15.30** **Religion & Innovation: Our Mission and the Workshop Series**

*Marco Ventura*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

**15.30 - 16.30** **Institution of Belief: *Religio* and Faith in Simulated Worlds**

*Vincenzo Idone Cassone*, University of Turin

*Mattia Thibault*, University of Turin

16.30 - 17.00 Break

### PUBLIC LECTURE (Aula grande)

**17.00 - 19.00** **Gamevironments as a Communicative Figuration. An Introduction to a Heuristic Concept for Analyzing Religion and Video Gaming**

*Kerstin Radde-Antweiler*, University of Bremen

19.30 Dinner

## Tuesday, 6th February

### OPEN WORKSHOP (Aula Piccola)

**09.00 - 10.30** **God, Karma & Video Games: An Evolving Relationship**

*Marco Mazzaglia*, Synesthesia and MixedBag, Turin

10.30 - 11.00 Break

**CLOSED WORKSHOP (Aula Piccola)**

**FBK researchers and invited speakers only**

**11.00 - 13.00**    **Exploration of Project Ideas and Funding Schemes**

13.00 - 14.15    Lunch Buffet

**OPEN WORKSHOP (Aula Piccola)**

**14.15 - 15.00**    **Virtualising Religious Objects**

*Paul Chippendale, Fondazione Bruno Kessler, ICT-TeV*

*Fabio Poiesi, Fondazione Bruno Kessler, ICT-TeV*

**15.00 - 16.15**    **Religion as Game Mechanic**

*Tobias Knoll (University of Heidelberg)*

16.15 - 17.00    Break

**PUBLIC LECTURE (Aula grande)**

**17.00 – 19.00**    **In principio erano i bit: genesi e fede dei mondi videoludici**

*Vincenzo Idone Cassone, University of Turin*

*Mattia Thibault, University of Turin*

19.30    Dinner

# Short Bios

**PAUL IAN CHIPPENDALE** has a PhD in Telecommunication and a degree in Information Technology from Lancaster University (UK). He is currently a Senior Researcher in the ICT Centre of Fondazione Bruno Kessler. His research interests revolve around Computer Vision, Augmented and Virtual Reality, spanning the digital preservation of Cultural Heritage to the stimulation of the creativity inside us all by enable us all collaborate and create through mobile technology.

**VINCENZO IDONE CASSONE** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Turin, member of Circe (Interdepartmental Centre of Research on Communication) and Gamification Lab (Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg). His main research topics include gamification and game studies, analysed through a Semiotics perspective. His main publications include *Through the ludic glass. A cultural genealogy of gamification* (Mindtrek'17 proceedings), *Lude et labora. Notes on gamification at work* (Performance Studies), *Mimicking Gamers. Understanding gamification through Roger Caillois* (Games and Cultures). He organised the conference *Katastrophé. Reflections on catastrophic discourses* (Torino 2016) and assisted in the organisation of conferences dedicated to urban playfulness (*Mettiamo in gioco la città*, Torino 2015) and design fiction projects (with *Fast Forward* and *Mufant*, Museum of Science Fiction of Turin). He teaches sociosemiotics of design at the IAAD (Istituto d'arte applicata e design) in Turin.

**TOBIAS KNOLL**, M.A., studied Religious Studies, Political Science of South Asia and Modern Indology in Heidelberg. His general focus of study is the relationship between religion and digital games, especially religion as game mechanic, as well as religion in gaming- and popular culture. At the moment, he manages the online journal "Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet" at the Institute for Religious studies in Heidelberg and works on his dissertation on moral decision making systems in computer games.

**MARCO MAZZAGLIA** was born in Turin, where he got his degree in Computer Science, writing a master thesis about the Artificial Intelligence. In 1996 he established "La Bussola", a cooperative that provided web services and taught about the usage of Internet for no-profit organizations. In his first job he designed web architectures, localizations and fleet management services for a company that worked for Italian

Interior Ministry and State Police. In 2008 he started working for Milestone as IT Manager and Video Game Evangelist; he managed the production systems and designed online game architectures, releasing more than 15 video games. In November 2013 established T-Union, an association that promotes the video game culture in Italy. In 2015, he was hired by Ovosonico as IT Manager, developing "Last Day of June". Since 2016 he works in Turin as Business Developer and Video Game Evangelist for Synesthesia and MixedBag.

**FABIO POIESI** received BSc and MSc degrees in Telecommunication Engineering from the University of Brescia (Italy) in 2007 and 2010, respectively. He received his Ph.D. degree in Electronic Engineering and Computer Science from Queen Mary University of London (UK) in March 2014. He joined FBK-TEV in 2016 to conduct research and development activities in the context of visual scene understand under the European project REPLICATE (H2020). His research activities include topics such as detection and tracking, 3D reconstruction, deep learning, Virtual and Augmented Reality.

**KERSTIN RADDE-ANTWEILER** is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her research focuses on mediatized religion, video gaming in Europe and Southeast Asia and the interrelation of digital media and Catholicism in the Philippines. She is co-chair of the Video Gaming and Religion Seminar (American Academy of Religion), head of the LAB "Religion and Media" at the Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research, University of Bremen, Germany, member of the Research Group "Communicative Figurations", in the steering committee of the Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research, University of Bremen, Germany. Together with Xenia Zeiler she is co-founder and co-editor-in-chief of the journal *gamevironments. games, religion, and stuff*. She is member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*. She published special issues on the interrelation of culture and digital media. Just recently, she co-edited a volume on *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (Routledge).

**MATTIA THIBAUT** has a Ph.D. in Semiotics and Media from Turin University (Italy) and is currently a research fellow of the same institution. He is the first graduate from SEMKNOW, a pan-European doctoral programme on semiotics, and has been visiting researcher at Tartu University (Estonia), The Strong Museum of Play (Rochester,

NY, US) and Helsinki University (Finland). His research interests revolve around the semiotics of play, ranging from toys to digital games and from the ludicisation of culture to the playful practices of the peripheries of the Web. He has presented and organized numerous talks, conferences, and activities dedicated to these topics and he has published several peer-reviewed articles and several volumes, among which: *Gamification urbana: letture e riscritture ludiche degli spazi cittadini* (Aracne, 2016) and *Virality, for an Epidemiology of Meaning* (with Gabriele Marino, forthcoming multilingual monographic issue of the journal *Lexia*).

**MARCO VENTURA** is a full professor with tenure at the Department of Law of the University of Siena. After a PhD at the University of Strasbourg he has visited the universities of London (UCL), Oxford, Strasbourg, Brussels (ULB), the Centro de Formação Jurídica e Judiciária of Macau, the Indian Law Institute in Delhi, the University of Cape Town, Al-Akhawayn University in Morocco and the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University. He was a professor (hoogleraar) at the Faculty of Canon Law of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from October 2012 to September 2015. From 2013 to 2015 he visited Vietnam as an expert in the dialogue between the European Union and the Vietnamese Committee on Religious Affairs. He is a member of the European Consortium for Church and State Research and of the Centre for Droit, Religion, Entreprise et Société at the University of Strasbourg and CNRS, and of the Editorial Board of the *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* (Cambridge University Press)

# Abstracts

## Virtualising Religious Objects

*Paul Ian Chippendale, FBK*

*Fabio Poiesi, FBK*

In a world where digital natives do not need to embrace technology, but grow up and evolve with it, do physical religious artefacts/objects still hold the same emotional attachment as their virtual copies? We are spending ever more time escaping from the real-world, seeking engagement in shared digital environments, e.g. Video Games, Social Channels, Virtual Reality. But, how can we populate these virtual worlds with content that carries personal meaning? Computer Generated Synthetic models are one solution, but they are artificial and sterile. In this talk we will explore emerging technologies that will enable anyone to 'teleport' their real-world objects into non-real environment. As these tools become mainstream, i.e. running on standard smartphones, what implication could there be for religion and beliefs? For example if someone were to create a virtual copy of a cross, or a holy book, or an entire church, and then use this in a virtual environment, will also its spiritual meaning become virtual? Will this virtual copy be given the same spiritual importance as the original?

## Institution of Belief: *Religio* and Faith in Simulated Worlds

*Vincenzo Idone Cassone, University of Turin*

*Mattia Thibault, University of Turin*

The topic of religion is increasingly common in video games. Concurrently with the advancing maturity of the medium and the technological and digital development of simulations, it has become more and more frequent to find fundamental issues about spirituality and transcendence involved in digital games. For both mainstream and indie games, these themes are often the pivot around which revolves their gameplay or their narratives. This process, however, is only the surface of a deeper and more complex phenomenon, deeply tied to religious experience and to *religio* in face of today's technological and social innovations. In our talk, we will analyse this phenomenon, focusing on how the institution of belief can be realised through gameplay, and on contextualising this trend within the cultural and media landscape in which it emerged. This will pave the way for a broader reflection on the evolution of contemporary religious discourses and their interaction with technological and digital innovation.



## **In principio erano i bit: genesi e fede dei mondi videoludici**

**Vincenzo Idone Cassone, University of Turin**

**Mattia Thibault, University of Turin**

La religione è un tema ricorrente nei videogiochi. La ludicità digitale, in virtù della sua natura interattiva ma rigidamente regolata, permette di esplorare temi legati alla trascendenza, al libero arbitrio e alla spiritualità in modi che sarebbero impossibili per altri media. Le potenzialità tecnologiche e tecniche dei videogiochi, siano essi costose produzioni Tripla A o giochi Indie realizzati da una manciata di sviluppatori, permettono infatti di sondare le infinite possibili relazioni tra le azioni del giocatore (mediate da un avatar) e un ambiente (virtuale) la cui stessa esistenza è oggetto di negoziazioni narrative. In questa presentazione illustreremo alcuni degli esempi più interessanti di videogiochi che rappresentano, problematizzano e ripropongono il tema religioso della creazione e della natura dei mondi videoludici, e la fede nella loro esistenza digitale.

## **Religion as Game Mechanic**

**Tobias Knoll, University of Heidelberg**

The paper will deal with the function of religiously charged symbolism, aesthetics and narratives in the context of computer games. The term “Game Mechanic” from the title refers in this case not only to the possibilities of interaction within the game, but also to the role religion plays in creating narrative coherence and consistency, recognition value and exoticization of game content. In addition to purely content-based analysis, the paper intends to provide an (external) view of the design and production process as well as the motivations and interests of the designers, authors and producers involved. Concrete case studies from popular games (AAA and independent productions) will be presented and discussed.

## **God, Karma & Video Games: An Evolving Relationship**

**Marco Mazzaglia, Synesthesia and MixedBag, Turin**

Which are the different approaches, regarding the religious and divine topic? Game designers reveal several ways of talking about divinity, using a new media like the Video Game. The same idea behind the video game can be a “religious concept”: the

authors as deus ex machina of the experience and on the other side the Player, both subject and victim. Other times, as you can find in “Minecraft” and “The Sims”, the player becomes the Creator. Direct or metaphorical approaches, discovering how the religion is able to express itself using this new, interactive tool.

## **Gamevironments as a Communicative Figuration. An Introduction to a Heuristic Concept for Analyzing Religion and Video Gaming**

***Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, University of Bremen***

In recent years, a lot of research has been done on the relation between religion and video gaming. However, most of previous analyses focused on game-immanent religious narratives and applied respective methods. Gameenvironments as a systematization therefore aims at transcending this media-centered logic and includes methods for research that focus on the gamer in his/her gametized worlds. It integrates the analysis of video games as digital artifacts with the broader cultural and social context in which these games are consumed and produced. The benefit is a changing, broader perspective on phenomena like religion and video games; one that puts the focus on actors and their gaming processes. It offers a new theoretical lens or a kind of paradigm shift. However, the open question remains: How exactly can we analyze the relation between religion and video gaming in such an actor-centered perspective? It is clear that there is not one single method that can be applied. We therefore need research that is heuristic for this comprehensive mediatized and gametized life-world, research that takes into account transmedia and cross-media aspects. The paper introduce a theoretical approach to communicative figurations as a heuristic concept by which gameenvironments can be analyzed in a more differentiated way. The paper discusses this concept on the base of two case studies: the AAA-video game BioShock Infinite in Europe and Indie smartphone games in the Philippines.





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