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“Create Your Personal Saga”

The Spiritualization of Online Computer Games in Advertising

by Stef Aupers

doi: 10.2383/79478

Spiritual experiences are, in fact, our business.

Game designer Brian Moriarty at a conference [1993]

A world awaits [...] Descend into the World of Warcraft and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure [...] An infinity of experiences await. So what are you waiting for?

From the cover of *World of Warcraft* [2004]

In the field of new media entertainment, the computer gaming industry is booming. In the US alone, 9.4 billion dollars was spent on games in 2003 (topping the box office of Hollywood's movie industry by a billion dollars) while 60 percent of all Americans (about 145 million people) play console and computer games on a regular basis [Newman 2004]. Among the fastest growing genres are so-called “Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games” (MMORPGs) produced by companies like Sony, Microsoft, Sega and Blizzard Entertainment. What distinguishes this new generation of online games from “console games” is that they are shared (the game worlds are “inhabited” by millions of players at the same time), they are persistent (the three-dimensional environment is 24 hours a day online and continues to exist even when players are not interacting with it) and that they generate a unique culture, social structure, economy and ecology that changes over time. In the form of a chosen character one can wander endlessly through this three-dimensional space – interact with people, work and collectively kill monsters. Based on these features, online games are generally described as “virtual worlds” [Bartle 2004] or “synthetic worlds” [Castranova 2005].

Starting point for this article is the fact that these virtual worlds are generally designed, framed and marketed by their producers as otherworldly worlds of “myth, magic, and limitless adventure,” as the opening quote demonstrates. More than 95

percent is based on the fantasy genre [Woodcock 2009] and virtual worlds display Tolkienesque environments brimming with spirituality, legends, mythical creatures, mysterious forces, and magical opportunities. Players, who play on average more than 23 hours a week [Yee 2006], are totally immersed in this otherworldly environment. From a classical social-scientific perspective these commercial games can never belong to the realm of religion or spirituality. Since the seminal work of Emile Durkheim [(1912) 1995], it is generally argued that there is a sharp distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' whereas the world of man-made commodities, belongs to the latter. The domains of religion and commodities are hence mutually exclusive.

But are they? Religion, various academics comment, is not just a spiritual or otherworldly enterprise since it has always been embedded in and mediated by material culture – including commodities representing images of Jesus, Biblical scenes or vessels containing holy water [i.e., Meyer and Houtman 2012]. This argument of a commercialization or commodification of religion has been applied to traditional Christian religiosity, where images of Jesus, paintings, or vessels containing holy water are produced and sold on the market [Moore 1994], but particularly applies to post-Christian manifestations of spirituality. Already in the 1960s, Thomas Luckmann [(1963) 1967] famously argued that the erosion of the Christian monopoly in the West was accompanied by the rise of a veritable "market of ultimate significance" where religious consumers construct personal packages of meaning, based on individual taste and preference. Since then the social form of contemporary spirituality has been described as "religious consumption à la carte" [Possamai 2003] on a "spiritual supermarket" [Lyon 2000]. More recently, Carette and King [2005] stated that spirituality is nowadays veritably commodified – religious believers have become shoppers and spirituality is degraded to nothing more than a consumer item [e.g., Bruce 2002].

In this paper I aim to go beyond this relentless debate about the commercialization and *commodification of spirituality* and will instead focus on a by and large unacknowledged *spiritualization of commodities*. As Egon and Papson [2005, 11] state about religion in general: "Religion and its discursive structures have moved into the marketplace and are being subjected to and reinscribed within its logic." To study this development I will use online computer games as a case study. Based on an analysis of a randomly selected sample of (online) advertisements of 51 games (see Appendix A) and about 20 in-depth interviews with Dutch players of World of Warcraft, it will be shown how online computer games are imbued with spirituality and why this is appealing to the consumers of such games. Before turning to the analysis, however, I will first discuss what the core of contemporary spirituality is and how it has become part of mainstream marketing over the last decades.

Post-Christian Spirituality

Core Features

In most of the social-scientific literature, the terms 'New Age,' 'spirituality,' or 'New Age spirituality' are used to refer to an apparently incoherent collection of ideas and practices. Most participants in the spiritual milieu, it is generally argued, draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously. In their book *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, Sutcliffe and Bowman [2000] even go so far as to argue that "New Age turns out to be merely a particular code word in a larger field of modern religious experimentation."

These accounts of spirituality are certainly not wrong. Under the influence of 'bricolage' the theme's in the spiritual milieu range from holistic health, occultism, channeling and Wicca to chakra healing, zen meditation, Reiki and Yoga. Underneath this diversity, however, one can find commonly held assumptions that are all too often been neglected in the literature.

First of all, New Age is a secularized manifestation of the esoteric tradition that has existed as an undercurrent in Western culture at least since the Renaissance. In a fierce reaction to modern industrialism, scientific dualism and material reductionism, the esoteric tradition, in all its manifestations, underscored the importance of a holistic re-enchantment of nature [ibidem]. The sacred, from this perspective, is not so much located in a transcendent reality or Christian heaven but in our natural environment. In the words of Lynch [2007, 54]: "[...] spirituality sees our only hope in a re-enchantment of the world, a renewed vision of the divine presence within the natural order that can generate new respect for nature and new ways of harmonious living within the natural order." It is from this perspective that people in the spiritual milieu idealize and mimic "premodern" cultures and religions – i.e., those of native Americans, Celts, Cathars, Egyptians, Vikings, pagans, witches, shamans and the like. These "authentic" cultures, it is argued, were still untouched by the cold machineries of modernity and living in harmony with nature.

This brings us to a second feature of contemporary spirituality. Although nature is generally considered a sacred realm this is particularly applied to human nature. A basic assumption in the milieu is that the Self has been socialized in modern values, i.e., external perceptions of how to be, how to think, how to feel and how to act, which leads to feelings of alienation. Underneath these layers of socialization, however, one finds the "real," "authentic," "higher," "spiritual," or "divine" self that can and should be contacted by every individual. The self is, essentially, sacred and modern people are considered to be gods and goddesses in exile. "We are all gods!," one of

my respondents typically stated. And indeed, following Paul Heelas [1996, 18]: "The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated [...] by mainstream society and culture." "Self-spirituality," he argues, is the *lingua franca* of the spiritual seeker:

Perfection can be found only by moving beyond the socialized self – widely known as the "ego" but also as the "lower self," "intellect" or the "mind" – thereby encountering a new realm of being. It is what we are *by nature*. Indeed, the most pervasive and significant aspect of the *lingua franca* of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the "Self" itself is to experience [...] "inner spirituality." [...] The inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life. [ibidem, 19]

The main tenet of New Age spirituality is then that people have two selves: on the one hand a socialized, alienated or profane self and on the other a sacred self that is smouldering – waiting to be stirred up by its owner. Typically, New Agers will use different religious vocabularies to refer to this sacred self: they will talk about the "higher self" (theosophy), the "divine spark" (Gnosticism), the "Buddha nature" (Buddhism) or "the inner child" (humanistic psychology). Particularly the influence of humanistic psychology can be hardly overstated since, as Hanegraaff [1996, 183] notes, "New Age religion (tends) to blur the distinction between religion and psychology to an extent hardly found in other traditions," basically because "'personal growth' can be understood as the shape 'religious salvation' takes in the New Age movement" [ibidem, 46]. Expressing oneself thus attains a sacred status in the spiritual milieu. In the words of Emile Durkheim [(1898) 1975, 62] one may say that contemporary spirituality can be portrayed as a "religion of which man is, at the same time, both believer and God."

And yet there is a third, strongly related, feature. Although a *collective belief* in a sacred self paradoxically constitutes the core doctrine of the New Age from an etic perspective, this picture becomes problematic from the emic point of view because, epistemologically speaking, New Agers scrutinize belief [Aupers and Houtman 2010]. Instead, they consider the self the locus of *experience* and argue that no truth, beauty or reality exists independently of the self and that reality in all its forms can only be experienced. And vice versa: everything that is known through "unmediated" experience can not be false or falsified. Informed by an esoterical critique of western culture, then, New Agers radically problematize every belief in an external truth – indifferent whether this truth is formulated in a Christian or scientific context. Based on an analysis of the "narratives of experience" in the esoterical tradition and New Age, Hammer notes in *Claiming Knowledge: Epistemologies from Theosophy to the*

New Age: “There is no real need to believe in any particular doctrines, nor is one obliged to trust in their antiquity or their scientific basis. The ultimate litmus test is whether you can experience their veracity for yourself” [Hammer 2001, 331].

As such, post-Christian spirituality entails an epistemological third way of “gnosis,” rejecting both religious faith and scientific reason as vehicles of truth. Rather, it is held that one should be faithful to one’s “inner voice” and trust one’s “intuition:”

According to (gnosis) truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or “enlightenment.” Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of *reason* or *faith*, it is in principle not generally accessible. This “inner knowing” cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of *faith* [...] because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience. [Hanegraaff 1996, 519]

Gnosis, Hanegraaff states, retreats from the notion that such a thing as a truth that is independent from the individual exists, because “truth” can only be experienced subjectively. In various New Age courses, personal truth is even displaced by *experience for the sake of experience*. This epistemological variety of New Age spirituality coincides with Zygmunt Bauman’s work on the postmodern (pseudo) religious quest for “this-worldly ecstasy,” “peak experiences” and the “flow of sensations:” “Each new sensation must be ‘greater,’ more overpowering and exciting than the one before, with the vertigo of ‘total,’ peak experience looming always on the horizon” [Bauman 1997, 181].

From Counterculture to Mainstream Marketing

Having established the core features of the spiritual worldview, we can now turn to its proliferation in Western societies and influence on mainstream marketing. Given the fundamental spiritual critique on modernity – its core values and institutions – the latter is a veritably surprising development. Although New Age spirituality has been a part of Western culture in the form of esotericism since the Renaissance at least, it rapidly increased in popularity since the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The protest of the counterculture, mainly represented by young, white, middle class youngsters, was aimed both at the Christian tradition and the “technocratic” and “dehumanizing” machineries of modernity [Roszak 1969] that were understood as reducing people to “one-dimensional” men and women [Marcuse (1964) 1991]. Informed by this anti-modern stance, spiritual gurus like Ken Kesey and Timothy Leary advised their fellow hippies to “drop out,” go back to nature and experiment with

cocktails of LSD, spirituality and esoteric wisdom to get in contact with the deeper spiritual layers of the self. "Beat poets" such as Kerouac, Watts, and Ginsberg mixed esoteric and oriental religious worldviews and introduced Buddhism to a larger audience [Aupers and Houtman 2003]. Looking at this development in retrospective, the spiritual wing of the counterculture made way for a broad "cultic milieu" in the 1980s [Campbell 1972] – a milieu that, despite its heterogeneity, became "conscious of itself as constituting a more or less unified movement" [Hanegraaff 1996, 17].

This movement has generally been referred to as the New Age movement since the 1980s and has grown rapidly in the last decades under the label of "spirituality": while the decline of church membership and the belief in a Christian god, has steadily proceeded, these spiritualities have blossomed in north-western Europe – especially in those countries where traditional values have eroded most: France, Great Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands [Houtman and Aupers 2007; see also Heelas *et al.* 2005]. In the process, spirituality has lost much of its 'alternative' character over the last decades. As noted, it has become a commercial phenomenon since New Age trainers and therapists started to sell their spiritual services and 'alternative' healings to a growing public. Spiritual bestsellers like *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980), *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters* (1979), *You can Heal Your Life* (1984), *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993) as well as magazines like *Body Mind Spirit*, *Kindred Spirit* and *Insight Network* rapidly popularized New Age spirituality. In addition, television shows like *Char*, *Medium* and the talk show of Oprah Winfrey – who blends New Age with a Christian message claiming "God wants you to be yourself" [Hijmans 2000] – have propelled this mainstreaming of the New Age and as a result contributed to the loss of its countercultural potential.

Spirituality also found its way into the public realm and into the heart of modern institutions [Aupers and Houtman 2006]. Sutcliffe and Bowman [2000, 11] argue in this respect that "contrary to predictions that New Age would go mainstream, now it's as if the mainstream is going New Age." Medical experts, physicians and doctors, for instance, are increasingly interested in holistic approaches and meditation techniques [Campbell 2007]. Moreover, spirituality has found its way into the heart of modern capitalism: it plays a prominent role in countless bestsellers (i.e., *The Da Vinci Code*), major Hollywood blockbusters (i.e., *The Matrix*) and popular series (i.e., the *Xfiles*) [Possamai 2005; Partridge 2005] whereas in modern business organizations managers are sometimes encouraged to participate in spiritual courses to increase both wellbeing and profits [e.g., Grant *et al.* 2004; Mitroff and Denton 1999].

Most relevant for this article, however, is the fact that the countercultural promises of New Age spirituality are, paradoxically, incorporated by and institutionalized in mainstream marketing, branding and advertising [Frank 1998; Heath and

Potter 2004]. Frank recently argued that the search for self-expression and a rebellious escape from “the system,” as embraced by the critical counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s, has been appropriated and co-opted by business organizations ever since. Through commercials, advertising, marketing and branding, more and more companies ironically “promise to deliver the consumer from the dreary nightmare of square consumerism” [Frank 1998: 32]. Heath and Potter [2004, 98] even argue that “the critique of mass society has been one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism for the past forty years.” Countercultural spirituality, as described above, plays a prominent role in this: ordinary beauty products like shampoos, body lotions and perfumes nowadays promise to “heal” consumers’ personal lives, thanks to their “natural” ingredients that supposedly stem from ancient, long forgotten and above all “authentic” civilizations and cultures of the East [Lau 2000]. But even advertisements about technological devices tap into the spiritual worldview: we may think, for instance, about *Apple*’s computers (“Think Different” – featuring spiritual leaders like Ghandi and the Dalai Lama), *Nokia*’s mobile phones (“Connecting People”), or even car commercials referring to a holistic union of technology with nature [Aupers *et al.* 2012]. In addition, there are more and more commercials referring to Buddhism, “spiritual Enlightenment” and “zen-meditation” [Stein, 1999].

These examples constitute an emergent form of “New Age capitalism” [Lau 2000] – a trend where spiritual values are relocated from the counterculture to the market and are used as discursive strategies in advertising. In this article I will particularly discuss the case of online computer games. How are these virtual worlds imbued with spirituality in advertising?

The Spiritualization of Online Computer Games in Advertising

The Promise of Re-enchantment

In the spiritual milieu it is common to seek for a re-enchantment of the world by celebrating nature as a sacred force and embracing premodern cultures, mystic religions and ancient ways of thinking. This spiritual discourse strongly resonates with the narratives in the advertisements [Krzywinska 2008]. Almost all MMO advertisements articulate a rebellious escape from the alienating modern world and promise a world that is more enchanting – infused with myth, mysticism, paganism and magic. Implicitly or explicitly a typically spiritual moral dichotomy is constructed in such texts between a dull, prosaic and disenchanting real life and an adventurous, exciting life in the virtual world. It is, in other words, clearly described as a meaningful world

that proceeds the ails of modernity, modernization and, what Max Weber [(1919) 1946] called, a "disenchantment of the world."

Good examples are *Ultima Online* (launched in 1997 as the first three-dimensional Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) and *World of Warcraft* (launched in 2004 and 'inhabited' by over 10 million people between 2008 and 2011 [Woodcock 2008]).

If you've ever felt like you wanted to step out of yourself, your life, into one that was full of fantasy and adventure – virtual worlds offer you this opportunity [...] You choose your own virtual life and immerse yourself into the mystical, medieval world of Britannia [...] *Ultima Online* is the place where you can be whatever you want to be. (*Ultimate Online*)

A world awaits [...] Descend into the World of Warcraft and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure [...] An infinity of experiences await. So what are you waiting for? (*World of Warcraft*)

Dark Age of Camelot (DAoC) is another good example of a game that is framed as a veritable magical environment. Potential players are told they can choose to be part of one of three territories that each have their own culture, religion, and customs and are at war with each other: they can choose to inhabit Albion (portrayed as Medieval England and informed by "King Arthur legends"), Midgard (portrayed as ancient Scandinavia and informed by "Viking mythology") and Hibernia (portrayed as ancient Ireland and informed by "Celtic lore"). In the advertisement of DAoC, these three territories try to convince players to join them in their battle against the 'Dark forces of evil' by claiming that they are the purest and most spiritual land of all. As Albion argues: "We are the protectors of the land of Arthur, the greatest of Kings. Ours is the fair land of Albion, and none fairer doth grace this Earth." Midgard states: "Come to the land of the ancient gods and wield your sword and hammer with us." Hibernia, finally, strikes back by stating:

Others may tempt you with mighty deeds and fine words, but in Hibernia we keep closest to the oldest of the spirits of the Earth. Ours is the most mystical, imbued with the spirit of ancient days and long forgotten powers. If you desire to fight with us against the encroachment of evil and darkness, come to the most magical land of all, Hibernia.

Being "the most mystical" and "the most magical land of all," so it seems, is an important asset in rivalry in the game as well as in the competition between online game worlds competing on today's market. In recent applications of the DAoC, new territories are opened up based on popular myths and legends, like "highly advanced civilization" Atlantis (which is according to legend the pinnacle of spirituality), Stygia

(“a searing desert where adventurers will encounter creatures from Egyptian mythology”) and Volcanus (“Here you will encounter [...] the warlike Minotaurs”). *Dark Ages*, to mention another example, is framed as an “online role-playing game set in a fantasy world of faeries and magic” whereas *Realm Online* is considered “an exciting, adventurous land of monsters, magic, and medieval society.”

The examples make clear that the main goal of the advertisers is to frame the game as utterly enchanting by using medievalism as a powerful trope. Unencumbered by historical accuracy, they cut, paste and sample various popular myths from imagined premodern times and places and combine them to make these worlds as appealing as possible. Although this medievalism from an imagined past is the main frame of the game, there is a smaller proportion of futuristic science fiction worlds, like *Matrix Online*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Asheron's Call* or *Anarchy Online*, that also promise the players enchantment on different grounds. Paradoxically, future science and technology are framed here as magical means since, as science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke correctly stated “sufficiently advanced technology can no longer be distinguished from magic.” And indeed: mysterious events and magical transformations happen in the world of *Anarchy Online*:

Step almost 30,000 years into the future, to an age where common surgical implants and microscopic nano-bots can relieve most forms of human suffering... or transform any normal being into a weapon of destructive force.

The first strategy to spiritualize online computer games in advertising, then, is to frame it as utterly re-enchanted. Although this re-enchantment can be projected on a future world, the vast majority of the games hark back to an imagined medieval age brimming with magic and mysticism [Aupers 2007]. Such spiritual texts in advertisements, Kimberly Lau has generally argued, “circle back to an imagined past existing prior to industrialization, a past epitomized by references to more integrated relationships and the interconnectedness of all living things.” By incorporating these values and perspectives in advertising, she adds, companies “exploit [...] anxieties about risk society and the diseases of modernity” [Lau 2000, 9].

The Quest for Supernatural Agency

Having set the context of a re-enchanted world in an imagined past or future, the game companies promise consumers to express themselves and play out their deeper “inner selves” and otherworldly desires. Ultima Online, leading the way here, already stated that “If you’ve ever felt like you wanted to step out of yourself, your life [...] virtual worlds offer you this opportunity” since it “is the place where you

can be whatever you want to be." This rhetoric demonstrates a strong affinity with the spiritual milieu where "dropping out" and unleashing the "deeper," "higher," "inner" or "spiritual" self is basically connected to salvation [e.g., Hanegraaf 1996; Heelas 1996]. Once one is freed from the limitations and conventions of modern life, is the argument, everything becomes possible.

In the advertisements of the game this spiritual narrative about supernatural agency is reproduced to seduce potential consumers. Before the game starts, players construct an "avatar" or character and choose between various races, classes, professions and physical appearance. In doing so, players are encouraged to role-play an idealized "higher" version of themselves in the virtual world that is almost omnipotent. The limitless possibilities to become an "authentic" and extremely powerful individual in the game are illustrated by the following quotes:

Create a unique character: Adventure as a Man, Elf, Dwarf or Hobbit. After choosing where your character hails from, select region-appropriate colour palettes for skin, hair, eye color, and more. Equip yourself with items like sturdy Dwarven armor, intricate Elven mail, or weapons created with the knowledge of past Ages. (*Lord of the Rings Online*)

Players of Dark Age of Camelot are greeted with not only 15 races to choose from, but also 44 character classes providing players with numerous gameplay styles. This will give an immersive gameplay experience to the realms the players choose to play in. (*Dark Age of Camelot*)

The promise of supernatural agency, then, is an important selling issue in the gaming industry as the examples indicate. Moreover, it seems to be a theme that triggers competition on the market between companies since new games always promise more personal powers than older, competing games; more options in terms of race, class and customization than other companies. As the following example shows:

Enjoy *unparalleled* character customization, including 80 character skills, hundreds of special attacks, thousands of items and a wide range of clothes, weapons and armour. *No other online game* delivers more character customization and depth. (*Anarchy Online*)

Asheron's Call promises even choice from "millions of possible combinations [...] to make your character truly unique" and to "create your personal saga" while others companies add new dimensions in the competition and quest for supernatural agency. *Sword of the new world*, for instance, advertises on the opportunity to play with multiple personalities at the same time. The pinnacle of spiritual freedom, in this perspective, is not one single in-game identity but a "fragmented identity" or "distributed self" online [Turkle 1995]:

Sword of the New World gives players more options, variety [...] and challenges than any other MMORPG can by virtue of its unique design features. With multi-character control (MCC), players are able to command up to three characters simultaneously. No longer limited to playing one character at a time, players can instantly switch between their favourite character classes or control them all at once. [...] With an entire family of such characters to develop, players will finally get to experience the sort of MMORPG game play they have been craving for years. (*Sword of the new world*)

The *Era of Eidolon*, on the other hand, promises the opportunity to use one unique character in different games:

The Era of Eidolon game series is based on our unique game concept that allows you to use the same Hero in a whole range of different games and game types for your mobile phone. You can play the EoE games everywhere and you will get countless hours of game play against people from all over the world. (*Era of Eidolon*)

And finally, *Mankind* states that the player's "alter ego" will remain active in the world even when the player is not online:

Unlike most MMOGs, Mankind boasts a truly persistent universe. Things keep going even when you're offline. So, your forces keep doing what you've instructed them to do – guard a base, patrol a sector of space, or continue to mine resources to fuel your empire. (*Mankind*)

Online worlds are, in short, primarily worlds that aim to avoid structural limitations and provide as many "free" choices for an individual as possible. As *Runescape* advertises "What a player does in RuneScape is entirely their decision: nothing is predetermined." But the promise of agency is not only a matter of multiple-choice. Freely choosing an online identity is essentially a mean leading to the ultimate goal of self-expression in the game world. It is assumed to provide players with the possibility to become what they *really* want – a wizard, a warrior or a true hero. This message that one can become a hero with supernatural powers can be detected in *Asheron's Call* ("Enter the vast and magical world of Dereth, where a new and heroic identity awaits you!"), *World of Warcraft* where "players assume the roles of Warcraft heroes as they explore, adventure, and quest across a vast world" or – most typically – *City of Heroes* "where you and thousands of other players take on the roles of super powered heroes." Guild War is, finally, marketed in the following fashion:

In a world torn by conflict, where human kingdoms are all but destroyed and guilds sacrifice all for a chance to control the Hall of Heroes, a champion must rise from the ruins of a once-proud land to lead refugees from the ashes and fulfil an ancient prophecy. Will that hero be you? (*Guild war*)

Online games based on movies and TV-series, like *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Star Trek Online* and the *Matrix Online*, emphasize that the protagonists with supernatural powers can come alive in the game world. Instead of watching them at a distance in a pre-structured way, players can actually become them in the games. As the quotes from *Star Wars Galaxies* and *Matrix online* demonstrate:

You've enjoyed watching the Star Wars universe for years – now's your chance to live in it! Fight alongside Han Solo and Chewbacca, smuggle goods for Jabba the Hutt, defend Imperial stations from the ravages of the Rebels, and more. (*Star Wars Galaxies*)

The matrix online is the future of the Matrix, picking up right where the trilogy left off [...] Be ANYONE you want to be. Matrix online is a game that features a rich storyline that you can choose to become intimately involved with, and a deep, everchanging world in which you can create your own adventures and join with others as well. (*Matrix Online*)

These quotes, demonstrate then that self-expression is portrayed as almost unlimited in the online game worlds. Essentially people can do what they want and be what they want and let their imagination and creativity run loose. The producers of *Ultima Online* hold that "There are limitless possibilities with only your imagination to bridle them – so take hold of the reins and choose your own destiny!" *Mankind* explains that "You are the master of your fate and you alone will choose your inclinations, there's no limit except the one you'll have set" while *Dungeons and Dragons online* contends that "A character can try to do anything you can imagine." *Entropia* promises that "the universe is yours to enjoy as entertainment."

The emphasis on unleashing feelings of omnipotence is often supported by using the trope of magic. Magicians, in general, have supernatural powers and are skilled to perform rituals and cast spells to heal their alliances and attack their enemies. As in most aspects of the games, however, the possibilities to develop one's character as a magician are enormous. Magicians come in sub-classes. Without being conclusive: in *Everquest* one can for instance become a "sorcerer," "warlock," "wizard," "enchanter," "illusionist," "coercer," "summoner," "necromancer," "conjurer," "druid," "warden," "fury," "shaman," "defiler," or "mystic." In *DAoC* one can, for instance, become a "cabalist," "rune master," "bone dancer," "spirit master," "healer," "bard," "mentalists" or "animist." All these characters are represented as equipped with supernatural powers and techniques as the examples of the mage, the druid and the shaman in *World of Warcraft* demonstrate:

The mage is a master of powerful mystic energies, able to use magic in the most spectacular and destructive of ways. Mages are a fragile class, with little health and

poor fighting abilities. However, they make up for this physical weakness with their awesome spell casting.

The druid is a formidable class with good healing ability, potent offensive spells, excellent buffs, and the unique ability to shape change into different animal types. In its animal form, the druid can adopt new roles, such as that of a warrior or rogue [...].

The shaman is an effective spell caster, but can also fight extremely well with mace and staff. The shaman's line-of spirit spells enables it to perform a variety of useful non-combat actions. It can resurrect allies, turn into a ghost wolf for increased movements, or instantly teleport to town. The shamans unique power is totems. Totems are spiritual objects that a shaman must earn through questing.

The message of game companies like Blizzard Entertainment, Sony, Microsoft and many others is loud and clear: we facilitate unlimited forms of self-expression and supernatural agency that cannot be found in the real world. Spiritual salvation, they promise in the advertisements, is no longer the result of long-term ascetic trainings, rituals or spiritual exercises but just a few dollars and a mouse-click away. In other words: why bother wasting time in the spiritual milieu if one can have spiritual experience in commodified online games?

Entering the Spiritual Experience Economy

The core epistemological assumption in the spiritual milieu is that unmediated, personal experience is the royal road to truth. Instead of trusting in tradition, believing religious authorities or accepting scientific truths, participants are motivated to vividly experience the "inner" self, the other and the outer world. In a similar vein, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore [1999] claim that we are living nowadays in an "experience economy" [see also Rifkin, 2000]. Our economy has shifted from providing goods and services on the basis of user value to the provision of compelling experiences. Today's market is thus based on the very same epistemological premises as New Age. Completely in line with narratives of experience in the spiritual milieu, Pine and Gillmore [1999, 36] argue, that in the experience economy "there is no such thing as an artificial experience. Every experience created within the individual is real, whether the stimuli be natural or simulated." "Cyberspace," they add, "is a great place for such experiences" [Ibidem, 34].

Having assessed the spiritualization of online computer games in advertising we may now turn to the experiences of the consumers. Paradigmatic here is the quote from game designer Brian Moriarty that "spiritual experiences have, in fact, become our business." And indeed: books on game design definitely confirm that techniques

such as "emotioneering" [Freeman 2004] are actively used to create spiritual experiences [Aupers 2012]. In line with the advertisements, the game world is designed to enhance immersion, enchantment and personal growth. This raises the question: do players indeed experience the game world as re-enchanting and role-playing as a tool to contact higher dimensions of the self? To be sure: the motives to play differ between gamers and they can basically be reduced to the goals of "socializing," "achievement," "exploring" and "immersion" [e.g., Bartle 2004; Yee 2007]. Interviews with Dutch players of World of Warcraft, however, demonstrated that particularly gamers interested in immersion are indeed disenchanted with modern life and, motivated by this, embrace the medieval, "natural" and magical game environment because it is experienced as more meaningful. As Ronald and Hendrik typically argue:

In real [...] there are many things you have to do, like work, going to school, keeping contact with your friends, your relationships. You have to do it otherwise you will not achieve anything. [...] That's the main difference between real life and the game: in the game you can do what you want and there are no obligations. (Ronald)

In this [the real] world you have to work, you age, die and see suffering all around you. In the virtual world everything is perfect. You can do what you want. (Hendrik)

Talking about general developments in the fields of politics, science, technology, capitalism and the financial crisis, several of the respondents express that they feel quite alienated and powerless in the modern world. As Michael states: "I am just a tiny person in this world. It's a pity. In the game world you are not so powerless." Their fierce critique of the uncontrollable modern "system" generally goes hand in hand with a nostalgic longing for times and places untouched by modernization. Echoing the spiritual affinity with nature, Michael "prefer(s) running around naked through the fields." Mark makes the following claim:

In the old days everything was better, I think. I really like the country side, rural life and sunny summers; this makes everybody happy. When you walk through the world of World of Warcraft, these things are all just there. And...*you are not continuously confronted with high-tech.*

Ironically and paradoxically, then, commodified online computer games induce amnesia about the modern technological world. More than anything else, however, players emphasize the satisfaction of obtaining supernatural agency and powers within the game. As Hendrik typically states:

You are there – living the fantasy. [...] You are the wizard and can do extra-ordinary things. And you can actually do that together with other people. (Hendrik)

When gamers talk about role-playing they always emphasize that they identify strongly with their character. While playing they experience it no longer as an Other on the screen, but as an expression of the self. This is, the game designer Richard Bartle argues, the paradox of role-playing since “You’re not role-playing as a being, you are that being; you’re not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you’re not projecting a self; you are that self” [Bartle 2004, 155-156]. My respondents argue that this is indeed a unique and appealing feature of MMOs like *World of Warcraft*. As Ronald puts it: “Everybody can play Pac-Man [...] But in this game you make a unique choice about who you are. [...] And you are you, you are yourself in that world.” And yet, because the heroic roles they are playing – as a warrior, healer or magician – are not easily available in real life, they experience their in-game identities as a better version of themselves than in ordinary life. Through role-playing, in other words, they access different parts of their identities, idealized parts, that cannot come to the surface in real life (or so they argue).

This invokes opportunities for self-expression and experiences of supernatural agency. As Ronald puts it:

People choose a character because they like it and – in part – because they can express themselves through it. Like, this is who I am or this is how I really want to be. It says something about your dreams: you play the person that you cannot be in real life but would like to be.

Individual gamers thus construct a fitting character and, while playing, they project “dreams,” and ideal images of themselves on it. As one gamer summarizes this ideal of supernatural agency in the game world: “Everybody wants to be a superhero.” The online world, they feel, provides such opportunities. Brandon, Danny and Hendrik respectively, claim from this perspective:

When I look at myself – the way I am at the university, at work and at home – than I must say that I am very different compared with who I am in the game. [...] When I read fantasy books or watch movies, I can identify mostly with mysterious, dark and tough types. [...] I think I have chosen to become a ‘warlock’ in the game because these are a bit dark and mysterious characters – and that’s what I find most interesting.

What I would like most, of course, is for my character to be the greatest hero. A hero that follows his own path and does his own thing – that’s the way I have designed him. And I like playing with the idea that I am him. He is like a part of me, something that I would like to be.

You can be someone else. I think it is a beautiful world full of fantasy – a world that you encounter only in books. Unlike in real life, you can become a real hero.

The freedom of the in-game identity goes hand in hand with freedom in behaviour. In games one can act out private, violent and magical fantasies through the character in the game world [Jansz 2005; Turkle 1995]. Expressing those fantasies in real life, they argue, is impossible since they are physically impossible (e.g., flying, "transforming" or practicing magic) or considered "deviant" or "uncivilised." In the online world, they agree: "you can do what you want – without consequences" (Danny) and "in real life you can't practice magic or throw a fire ball" (Bram). As Richard states:

The impossible becomes possible. In *City of Heroes* you are a superhero with supernatural powers; you can do there what you cannot do in real life. I can't lift things with my thoughts, but I can do this in *City of heroes*. Just like *Spiderman* and the *X-Men*. And that is really cool!

The analysis reveals an elective affinity between spiritual experiences and gaming experiences. Like "soft" New Age techniques, such as re-birthing, aura reading, visualizations or neo-hypnotherapy, the activity of role-playing on the screen provides an opportunity to experience and access the "higher," "deeper" or "spiritual" Self. To be sure: players are completely aware of the fact that virtual worlds are fictitious and objectively 'not real' but, as one respondent typically argued, "it feels very real." The bigger question is then: do these game commodities exemplify a larger trend towards a spiritual experience economy?

Discussion and Conclusion

It is by now a mainstay in the sociology of religion that contemporary spirituality is not so much connected to a church but shaped and mediated by the market. Until now the discussion in the social sciences has focused mainly on this commercialization of spirituality – a development discussed over and over again since Thomas Luckmann [(1963) 1967] first wrote about an emerging "market of ultimate significance" on which New Age spirituality plays such an important role. In this discussion there's not so much disagreement about *whether* contemporary spirituality is commercialized – most authors agree that it is – but on whether or not this degrades spirituality to triviality, insignificance or even an irrelevant consumer item. The main question in this debate, then, is: does the commercialization of New Age indicate a proceeding process of secularization [e.g., Bruce 2002] or does it not? [Heelas 2008].

In this article, I have gone beyond this seemingly endless debate and moved into another relevant direction: the spiritualization of commodities, a development that remains by and large unnoticed in today's academic world. It was demonstrated that Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games, are marketed, framed and

designed by the gaming industry as an other-worldly world of re-enchantment that provides distinctly spiritual experiences for individual players. Players, in turn, argue that playing the game provides deep insights into their “higher selves” and generates feelings of supernatural agency – assumptions that are at the heart of the contemporary spiritual milieu. Based on this affinity between the “spiritual” milieu and the “secular” gaming industry, it is argued that both are not separate domains but rather converge in, what can be called, the spiritual experience economy.

How, then, should we sociologically explain and evaluate this development? On the one hand producers and marketers of online computer games are actively tapping into the widespread cultural desire for a more meaningful and spiritual life. It is by now empirically assessed that this spiritual longing is particularly prominent in Western countries – particularly in the US and the most secularized countries in northern Europe [Houtman and Aupers 2007; Heelas *et al.* 2005]. Whereas some of these ‘disenchanted’ people are hence motivated to actively join the spiritual milieu and fully embrace the spiritual worldview, others may like to immerse themselves in “spiritual” games. In these virtual environments, after all, youngsters can freely *play* with spirituality without actually believing in metaphysical or religious claims. From this cultural sociological perspective, the economic production of spirituality in games opens up a cultural space to experiment with “ultimate values” that, according to Max Weber [(1919) 1946], have retreated from modern life over the last century.

From a more critical neo-marxist perspective, however, we may argue that it is precisely this spiritual experience that literally mystifies the commodified character of the game and the bare economic interests of the game industry. It is, after all, a clear interest of the game industry to get people thinking of themselves as becoming more “who they really are” through online gaming while, in fact, they start to identify more and more with the commodified game world [e.g., Klein *et al.* 2003]. One may take this paradox even further: once gamers fully identify with their in-game character and experience spiritual freedom, they have actually come under the spell of the “culture industry” that can, according to Horkheimer and Adorno [(1944) 2002, 115], “do as it chooses with the needs of consumers – producing, controlling, disciplining them.” From this perspective, Robert Marks wonders: “But who owns a player’s creation inside a game? When a player spends months on end creating the perfect Everquest character, does the character belong to Sony or to the player? The short answer is, it belongs to Sony” [Marks 2003, 76; see also Taylor 2006].

The spiritualization of online computer games, from this perspective, is a form of “commodity fetishism new style” [Aupers 2012] since it actively veils how the game is produced and it enhances the enchanting appeal of the product by exploiting cultural longings for spiritual meaning. In addition, it constitutes a powerful mode

of social control because it seduces players to remain actively involved in the game world and, ultimately, in the game of capitalism. "More gaming by more people," McGonigal [2011, 43] has recently noted, "is the primary goal of the industry" and "the industry wants to create lifelong gamers." The spiritualization of online computer games, I hope to have demonstrated, will certainly contribute to this goal.

Appendix A

The advertisements are displayed on the websites of the following 51 games: *2moons*, *9Dragons*, *Active Worlds*, *Anarchy Online*, *Asheron's Call*, *Auto Assault*, *City of Heroes/Villains*, *Cybertown*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Dark Ages*, *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, *Entropia Universe*, *Era of Eidolon*, *Eve Online*, *Everquest*, *Everquest II*, *Final Fantasy XI*, *Fury*, *Guild Wars*, *Helbreath*, *Horizons*, *Kal Online*, *Knight Online World*, *Lineage*, *Lineage II*, *Lord of the Rings Online*, *Majestic*, *Mankind*, *Matrix Online*, *Mu Online*, *Perfect World*, *Planetside*, *Prison Tale*, *Ragnarok Online*, *Ran Online*, *Rappelz*, *Realm Online*, *RF Online*, *RunScape*, *Second life*, *Silkroad Online*, *Sims Online*, *Star Trek Online*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Supreme Destiny*, *Sword of the New World*, *Tale in the Desert*, *Tibia*, *Ultima Online*, *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* and *World of Warcraft*.

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“Create Your Personal Saga”

The Spiritualization of Online Computer Games in Advertising

Abstract: Since the growth of post-Christian spirituality in most Western countries, it is a mainstay in the sociology of religion that such spiritual beliefs, practices and experiences are not connected to a church but rather spread through market and media. Instead of focusing on the much debated commodification of spirituality, this paper explores an unacknowledged spiritualization of commodities by using a case study of online computer games. It is demonstrated that World of Warcraft, the most popular in the genre of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games, is marketed, framed and designed by the gaming industry as an other-worldly world of re-enchantment that provides distinctly spiritual experiences for individual players. Players, in turn, argue that playing the game provides deep insights into their “higher selves” and generates feelings of “supernatural agency”- assumptions that are at the heart of the contemporary spiritual milieu. Based on this affinity between the “spiritual” milieu and the “secular” gaming industry, it is argued that both are not separate domains but rather converge in, what can be called, the spiritual experience economy.

Keywords: Advertising; Religion; Spirituality; Online Computer Games; World of Warcraft; Secularization; Re-Enchantment.

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