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**Value Formations through Digital Gaming**



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# Value Formations through Digital Gaming

## 1 Introduction

Many video games have explicit reference to religion both as narrative and symbolic content. Take, for instance, the *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft 2008), where the player must defeat an evil Zoroastrian deity, and *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix 2013) whose final boss is a shamanistic Sun Queen. Other games, such as *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007), which is set in the Third Crusade, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), which centers around a civil war sparked by the worship of the god Talos, use both real and fictive religious events and places. It is interesting, however, that while game designers place religious elements in games, which are easy for researchers to excavate and speculate about, players themselves seem least interested in the religious aspects of games (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2020). How should scholars of religion deal with the fact that player discussions of religion and engagement with religion are avoided, forbidden, and most of the time simply ignored? If not the category of religion, how should scholars of digital media theorize such religious elements? We argue that a more accurate concept would be the analytic category of value formations (see Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2020). Using the performance of music in *Lord of the Rings Online* (LOTRO) as a touchstone, the authors define *value* as a second-order category used to theorize what actors find worthy or unworthy, and *value formations* as the collections and systematization of interdependent and entangled values. To be clear, we are not arguing for any type of preexisting good, beautiful, or typical (or bad, ugly, or deviant) values. Instead, we view value formations from a social-constructivist approach (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2020).

## 2 Studying Religion and Digital Gaming

Obviously Religious Studies plays a role in the study of religion and digital gaming, but one also cannot overlook Game Studies. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when game studies began an academic discipline (e.g., Mäyrä 2008). Two early texts, however, conceptually found the field. First is the Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga's groundbreaking book *Homo Ludens* (1950) takes a cultural studies perspective on gaming and argues that play is a necessary element in the generation of human culture. He analyzes games through the concept of the "magic circle," in which the rules and role of everyday practices are suspended and replaced with game-like activities and significances (Salen & Zimmerman 2003). The concept of the magic circle is important for the intersection of religion and gaming because a game's magic circle can be compared to that of a ritual space (Wagner 2012). Another major early contribution is the French sociologist Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* (1958), in which he divides play into two broad conceptual categories: a more structured "game" according to explicit rules ('ludus') and a free, associative form of 'play' ('paidea') (Frasca 1999). Again, this distinction has been used by scholars to reflect on the nature of religion.

Starting in the 1970s, the emerging field of Game Studies began to critically reflect on digital gaming rather than just games and play in general. These early studies focused on economics, game design, and a growing fandom (Wolf and Perron 2003). Many of these early studies borrowed narratological concepts from the study of film and literature (Laurel 1991; Ryan 2001). A game changer for the discipline was the Norwegian scholar, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). He argued that video games are a unique medium because they are non-linear textual forms that need non-trivial work (not just turning the page or passively viewing an image) from the player.

In Aarseth’s view, a game is a labyrinth of forking paths that need to be navigated by the user via non-trivial work. This insight led to a decades-long debate between those who thought games should be studied from a narrative perspective, and those who thought it should be studied ludologically; that is, using the concept of play as a theoretical lens (Frasca 1999). Key elements in this debate were the concepts of immersion, the experience of being in another world, interactivity, and the experience of being a participant in the production of gameplay.

It was only in the first decade of the 21st century that Religious Studies began to engage with digital gaming (Campbell and Grieve 2014). In 2007, in a panel held at the American Academy of Religion convention titled “Born Digital and Born-Again Digital: Religion in Virtual Gaming Worlds,” scholars for the first time presented work on religion and digital gaming. This was followed in 2008 by a panel titled “Just Gaming? Virtual Worlds and Religious Studies.” Early key texts include *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* (Detweiler 2010), *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Games* (Bainbridge 2013), and *Playing with Religion and Digital Games* (Campbell and Grieve 2014).

Two key events that occurred in the second decade of the 21st century have moved the field forward. First, in March 2015, at the University of Helsinki, Finland, the International Academy for the Study of Gaming and Religion (IASGAR) was founded (Zeiler 2015). IASGAR aims to bring together scholars working in the field and provide them with a space for exchange. It also aims to advance scholarly research on the interrelation of video gaming and religion. To this end, the network is an international and multidisciplinary forum that aims to collect, systematize, and develop the various recent multidisciplinary approaches to research and teaching about the topic. Second was the creation of the journal, *gamevironments*, hosted by the University of Bremen, Germany, which was inaugurated in 2014. As Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Michael Waltmathe, and Xenia Zeiler write, “*Gameenvironments* is an analytical concept based on the actor-centered approach, which integrates the analysis of the game narratives with a view to combining the narrative and the ludic approaches. Thus, ‘games/gaming’–‘environments’–in short *gameenvironments*” (2014, 14). Keeping this key insight in mind, the journal *gameenvironments*’ takes an actor-centered approach, which does not merely concentrate on deciphering and interpreting video gaming and religion but also widens the perspective to research gaming as a social and cultural practice in diverse global cultural contexts, which especially includes the players’ perspective.

### 3 Value Formations in Relation to the Analytic Category of Religion

Keeping the concept of *gameenvironments* and an actor-centered approach in mind, the chief significance of our argument is that value formations, rather than religion, is often a better theory for understanding how religion works in digital media ecologies. In recent years, much research has been done on the relation between digital religion and video gaming (Campbell and Grieve 2014; Geraci 2014; Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014; Radde-Antweiler, Waltmathe and Zeiler 2014; Šisler 2009; Šisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2018; Wagner 2012; Zeiler 2014). The relation between religion and values, however, brings up the question of defining religion. Scientists have provided numerous definitions, some of which refer to discourses, institutions, and practices that make claims about supernatural realities, while others such as Jonathan Z. Smith stress: “there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (1982, xxii).

The question then is: what are religious studies scholars investigating? From our perspective (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2020, 87-88): “Today’s research takes three main approaches: the first one ignores a definition of religion as such. It operates with the

notion that religion is an obvious phenomenon, which we all know when we see it. In contrast to that, there are other researchers who presuppose religion as a universal phenomenon or a *conditio humana* that is in its basic structure the same worldwide and part of every human life. The third one derives from a socio-constructivist perspective and doesn't presuppose a given entity or concept, but reverses the perspective: religious studies in this sense addresses phenomena declared as 'religion' or 'religious', whether by the religious actors themselves, by religious organizations, or by academics. Religious social realities are seen to be communicatively constructed, and the categories 'religious' - 'non-religious/secular' are ascribed to them under certain pre-conditions—they are not religious as such. From this point of view, religions are no longer seen as a clearly delimitable, consistent, and homogeneous symbol system. Instead, the entire spectrum of possible meanings, as well as their contexts and intentions, are taken into account.”

In short, research on religion and video gaming faces one problem: most studies focus on in-game narratives, symbols, events, or places, rather than on how games are recognized and used as religion or seen as religious by gamers (e.g., Zeiler 2018 and Radde-Antweiler 2018a). We argue that *value formations* as a broader analytical concept offers us then the ability to have a broader perspective, to include at first sight 'hidden' content related to religion and look at how religion implicitly is connected to certain values and gameplay.

#### 4 Value Formations in Digital Gaming

While a dominant form of popular media, the consideration of ethics or morality in video games at times does not go beyond superficial accounts that pose gaming as best as frivolous entertainment, and at worst as training devices for molding teenage serial killers (Grossman 1995). A closer look, however, shows that in gaming players become ethical agents and that the ethics of gaming should be seen as a complex network of responsibilities and moral duties that are part of larger gameenvironments (Sicart 2009).

Gamers then are not passive or amoral but rather reflect upon and create ethical stances that can be viewed, then, in the play of value formations. We (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2020, 80-81) understand and define *value formations* in the following way : “Values are closely connected with worthwhileness (and unworthiness), with what is regarded as good (or bad), beautiful (or ugly), right (and wrong), and typical (or deviant). We approach the concept of value as a second order analytic term which researchers bring to their study of *gameenvironments* as a way to investigate what actors judge worthy or unworthy and to analyze how such judgments operate as social ordering tools for individuals and groups. One might ask: Are values objective universal concepts or are they simple relativistic individual preferences? Are values bare ideological expressions of power, or are they neutral transcultural distinctions that emerge from being human? Our approach is to jump these dilemmas by theorizing values from a cultural studies perspective as socially constructed practices embedded in *value formations*. We theorize *value formations* as those collections of interrelated and interdependent transmedial values understood as both the signifying processes as well as their outcomes. *Value formations* are socially constructed, in a discursive way. They are not stable concepts but ever changing as they are constantly reconstructed on both the individual, community, social levels. Still, while a social construct, value formations can be voluntary but are often unnoticed hegemonic commonsense, which can be strategically employed, and for better or worse, often needs to be defended.”

In line with that, we stress that value formations offer us a perspective on how cultural meanings as such are communicated and negotiated in *gameenvironments*. Whereas the analytical category of religion is too narrow and does not fit how gamers are engaging with religion in video gaming, the analytical concept of value formations encompasses a broader perspective, where religion can be one more implicit element, which otherwise has been overlooked.

## 5 A Case Study in Studying Value Formation in Digital Gaming

This section uses the video game *Lord of the Rings Online* (LOTRO) and the concept of “Middle-Earth Values” to demonstrate how value formations emerge from a specific massively online multiuser *gameenvironment*.

### *An Introduction to Lord of the Rings Online (LOTRO)*

Turbine Incorporated was developed by an American game studio and launched in April 2007. *The Lord of the Rings Online* (LOTRO) is the 27th-largest massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). LOTRO takes place in the high-fantasy universe of Middle-earth created by the English author J. R. R. Tolkien and was greatly expanded by the New Zealand film director Peter Jackson (Jackson 2001, 2002, 2003; Tolkien 1954a, 1954b, and 1955). The Middle-earth fantasyscape has had considerable influence on forming concepts of fantasy worlds and, beyond the digital, has extended its reach into such things as tabletop gaming, cosplay, and even pinball machines (Alberto 2016, Atari 1978). Middle-earth is a land set in the distant past that is populated with a host of fantastic beings, such as Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, other Humanoid races such as Ents, Orcs, and Trolls, as well as mythical beings such as dragons and talking spiders (Drout 2006). The main narrative structure of Tolkien’s work is a Manichean battle between the antagonist, The Dark Lord Sauron, and his army of evil, and the united free peoples of Middle-earth. In the fiction, Sauron has forged the One Ring to rule over all others as his ultimate weapon to conquer Middle-earth but is thwarted by a Fellowship that includes the story’s protagonist, the humble Hobbit Frodo (Wayneand Scull 2005). Set as a reverse quest, Tolkien’s narrative is a complex *entrelacement* that allows for digression and presents opportunities for the characters to have moral doubt and ironic commentary while not disturbing the unity of the main plot line (Campbell 2010: 161, Flieger 2002:2, Kerry 2010: 32 3-4). Value formations in Tolkien’s work include the struggle between good and evil, death and immortality, and redemptive suffering.

The chief challenge for the designers of LOTRO was how to translate Middle-earth values into a massively multiplayer roleplaying game. As Lisbeth Klastrup and Susan Tosca ask in “When Fans Become Players,” “What happens when a popular universe, such as that of Middle-earth, takes the form of a massively multiplayer online game?” (2011, 46). All players cannot be the main protagonists in the story, and only Frodo can carry the Ring to Mordor. However, within the game narrative, all practices in the form of quests are part of supporting the ring group. What does that mean for the narrative in contrast to the traditional Tolkien narrative? Whereas in the book or film, the reader or the audience is a more passive observer of Frodo fighting against evil, within the game the gamer becomes part of the redemption team as such, even if only in a supporting role. By integrating gamers into this group, they become part of this community and gain an agency to influence the story.

*LOTRO's Gamevironments*

Gaming does not stop at the edge of a digital game's "magic circle" (Huizinga 1950) but flows back and forth between a game and its online and offline social settings. As described above, gameenvironments describe the larger media ecology in which a game is contextualized. The concept of the magic circle describes a cultural space formed by a socially defined boundary between a game and everyday life. As the American scholar of media Edward Castronova notes in *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, that the boundary delineating this space "can be considered a shield of sorts, protecting the fantasy world from the outside world" (2005: 147). This means that players engaging in LOTRO's value formations are not just isolated in its game world but are part of a larger, non-linear, hyper-mediated digital media ecology. Within Game Studies, there is a general need to situate games and game worlds within the broader cultural context of both fan culture as well as literary and cinematic predecessors (Klastrup and Tosca 2011; Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). For LOTRO, this means looking at gameplay on the actual platform, reception, and discussions of that play, as well as the greater mediascape. In the understanding of the gameenvironments approach, this is one part of it focusing on gamers' practices in and through digital media. This can be theorized as "transmedial worlds," as "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 409).

LOTRO's gameenvironments are part of a larger hypertransmediated "*media ecology*", a term that describes a specific media environment in which people use particular constellations of communication technologies and media practices (Grieve 2017, McLuhan 1964). The American media theorist Neil Postman, argues that similarly to how bacterial cultures grow differently in the different medium of Petri dishes, human cultures, even digital cultures, grow differently depending on their different media ecologies (2006). That is, media ecologies theorize how communication affects perception, understanding, feeling, and value (Postman 1970, Postman 2006). For instance, one could make the argument that values and their formations differ in our current digital media ecology from early print and broadcast constellations, which in turn differ from an oral media ecology (Ong 1967, Ong 1985). This occurs because media ecologies do not merely passively transmit information but also play a part in constituting human perception and lived reality (Grieve, Helland, and Singh 2019). Media ecologies both mediate the communication of value formations, that is, play a part in constituting a values message, as well as mediatize society, that is, afford ways of structuring social reality (Grieve 1995).

An important aspect of current gameenvironments are fantasyscapes. In their pioneering article, Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, and Zeiler (2014, 25) stress that even in case religion is missing as a topic is missing in gamers' discussions, "game-immanent topoi directly touch the recipients' life-worlds" and "are very likely to be taken up in the *gamevironments*, as in the Let's Play comments: emotional sequences obviously trigger debate. Here, the game intensively stimulates the discussion of ethical and moral behavior and, as such, of value formations. These discussions then very often broach the issue of religious value formations and religious motivations for moral norms, both in and beyond the game narrative."

Therefore, as Zeiler writes in line with the *gameenvironments* approach, we "need to widen the lens in looking at games and gaming, from studying only game-inherent content and/or persons playing games to encompass persons more broadly in touch with games who may or may not play games themselves, that is, persons within the (cultural and social) environment of games" (Zeiler 2018, 18).

### *MMORPGs and value formations*

A good deal of research has been done on religion and digital gaming (for summaries, see Campbell and Grieve 2014, Radde-Antweiler 2008), and a smaller amount of studies have been completed on religion in MMORPGs, particularly Blizzard Entertainment’s World of Warcraft (WoW) (2004-) (Casvean 2020, Feltmate 2010, Luck 2009; Schaep and Aupers 2016, Vallikatt 2014). Yet, little to no work analyzed how values operate in MMORPGs, or how such values differ from single-player games. In MMORPGs, like in single role-player games, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studio, 2011), players assume the role of a character; yet they differ from single-player games in two major ways. First, MMORPGs differ from single player games in that their worlds are persistent. Unlike a single-player video game that revolves around the player, whose world is shut off and re-started with each game play, MMORPGs’ worlds continue to go on without individual players (Grieve 2016, 47-53). Like other MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* (WoW)(Blizzard Entertainment 2004-), LOTRO is an interactive public space in which players can embark on quests and advance in level, skills, and reputation (Castronova 2008; Grieve 2016; Krywinska 2011, 3; Taylor 2006; Nardi 2010). Second, unlike single-player games, the player is in the game with other people—LOTRO has around 2.5 million players subscribed, and 60.000 users at any one time, who are spread over an average of thirty servers in North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan. In the game, players use avatars to interact with the game’s interface, as well as instant message, private voice-chat, and character emotes to role-play with each other. Because of this interaction, besides engaging with the game’s mechanics and narrative, players also create community events such as birthday parties, weddings, barter fairs, horse races, and even funerals (Cheng 2011)

How do value formations fit in? Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic his entire life, and his fiction blends Catholic influences with Celtic, Anglo, and Old Norse Mythology. In his book *The Christian World of The Hobbit* (2012), the American scholar of English literature Devin Brown argues that while Tolkien’s novels are not an allegory for a Christian worldview, they nevertheless possess values of providence, purpose, and morality. As Brown writes, “a reverence, celebration, and love of the everyday is an essential part of Tolkien’s moral vision” (149). However, even if these topics and the overall structure of Tolkien’s novel were transferred into the gameplay, the players seem to be reluctant to spend so much time on religion. Even if religion is part of the self-chosen fictional background of their gaming figures—especially on the role-playing servers—it seems that it serves only as an element of the fictional identity. Discussions on religion and LOTRO seem to be the exception in the forum threads on Reddit or in Let’s Plays. In some cases, discussion on religion is even forbidden by the community rules. For example, the LOTRO homepage itself mentions that discussion about religion as well as on politics is forbidden within the game: “We don’t talk about politics or religion. This also introduces political language and rights that can be considered political or political interests” (Standing Stone Gamew, “Community Regeln”).

While religious elements may be hard to locate, value formations play a pivotal part of gaming in LOTRO. These value formations occur through the “Tolkienization” of the MMORPG and become especially apparent when analyzing how Middle-earth has been transformed and re-transmediated from novels and films (Brown and Krywinska 2011).

### *Middle-earth value formations*

What makes Hobbits morally better than Orks? How is Gandalf good, while Sauron is evil? Even if religious elements of Tolkien’s Middle-earth gameenvironments are not prominent in the gamers’ practices, we can deeply observe the ethical, aesthetic, and normative



dimensions. The first way a value can be analyzed as worthy is through it being ethically right or wrong. *Ethics* is derived from the Greek word “*ēthikós*”, which means “relating to one’s character.” As Antes (2007, 624) puts it, ethics as a philosophical concept has the underlying “thought that the content of good can be specified in such a way as to constitute an adequate premise of the ideal behavior of the good human being.”

“The “good” or the principles of the true or the beautiful is understood as something (pre) existing, that can be evaluated or achieved. . . . Ethics as moral philosophy defines a specific philosophical tradition that aims at systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong. It thereby defines concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, etc. Today, we have three major areas of study within ethics: (1) meta-ethics, concerning the theoretical meaning and reference of moral propositions, and how their truth values (if any) can be determined, (2) normative ethics, concerning the practical means of determining a moral course of action and (3) applied ethics, concerning what a person is obligated (or permitted) to do in a specific situation or a particular domain of action. Values play an integral part in ethics because they can be understood as the goal as well as outcomes of norms that are given to reach the “good.” (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2020, 84)

The ethics can be seen in how the values of hope and terror, as well as that of medievalism, have been translated into LOTRO’s gameenvironments. These values are expressed through the map interfaces, visual images, character qualities and creations, narrative, and are especially apparent in the game mechanics employed for level progression and competition. Values of hope, as opposed to fear, can be seen in the game’s colors, in the rhetoric of hope and terror as displayed in Gandalf’s light-bringing inspiration, and Sauron’s darkness, and even in the way that one’s hit points are handled not as health but as moral quantities (Brown and Krywinska 2011, 35). Ethics as part of value formation is also evident in medievalism, a system of belief and practice inspired by the Middle Ages of Europe, or valuing elements of that period, which is clear in the importance of crafting in the game. Notions of the value of handmade objects over machine-manufactured are clear in the novels, as well as the content and the rhetoric surrounding the film series (Cubbit 2006). Crafting also plays a major role both in gameplay and in fellowship and role play in LOTRO (Parsler :136). The subtle and muted use of colors in the game also express the value of the handmade (Brown and Krywinska 2011).

The second way we can investigate value formations in digital media such as LOTRO is through aesthetics, understood as judging what is beautiful and what is ugly. In gaming, beyond the audiovisual and narrative levels, this also includes gameplay. As can be seen in the *Hobbit*’s visual and cultural aesthetic, LOTRO’s aesthetics are taken from both the novels and the films. For instance, in the game, as with the books and films, the Hobbits dwell in the Shire, which “is a land of peace and pastoral beauty, where hobbits dwell in seclusion from the world at large” ([https://lotro-wiki/index.php/The\\_Shire](https://lotro-wiki/index.php/The_Shire)). The novels describe hobbits as “inclined to be fat in the stomach . . . to wear no shoes . . . [have] good-natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs (especially after dinner, which they have twice a day when they can get it)” (Tolkien 1937, 16). Tolkien’s hobbit values can be seen in LOTRO in quests such as “Lobelia’s Pie,” where the player must pick up a pie and deliver it to Opal Goodbody while avoiding hungry hobbits. When the films translated Middle-earth onto the big screen, Peter Jackson had to craft many new visual images. These cinematic visualizations are used extensively in LOTRO. For instance, in the game Brandy Hall, Brandybuck closely resembles Bag End from Jackson’s films. The hobbit values can also be seen in gameplay. For instance, when a human character uses the emote “/laugh,” they throw back their arms and chuckle, when a hobbit character uses the same emote, they fall to the ground giggling and giggling.

The third way to analyze value formations in LOTRO’s gameenvironments is to identify what is presented as normal or deviant within the gameplay and in the gamers’ perception. Norms are mainly considered as widely accepted and expected rules. Communities have often negotiated their norms over long periods of time “to become standardized expectations of social behavior. Not following social norms usually results in disapproval, or even sanctions” (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2020, 85). It is also important to note that norms are related to social hierarchies. In summary: “If ethics is the purposive frame to conceptualize the good or bad doing of humans, norms can be seen as guidelines for humans to be able to have good behavior. Values are then the positive guiding principles, based on these norms” (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2020, 85). Norms play a crucial role in LOTRO. More than other MMORPGs, LOTRO is, especially on the role-playing servers, designed to be a roleplaying game (MacMallum Stewart 2011), also because of the literature adaption. While players are interested in traditional ludic elements, such as leveling their characters and equipping them with power objects and questing and dungeon crawling, LOTRO affords a certain rule-based role play. In contrast to other role-playing games such as *Ultima Online*, LOTRO provides certain rules and motives that the player must follow and are based on Tolkien’s fantasyscape. So, this role-play must be always within the norms of the platform. For instance, when creating a character, you must choose a name, which according to the LOTRO Naming Policy “should try to reflect the adventurous and heroic spirit of The Lord of the Rings.”<sup>1</sup> Each race—Human, Elf, High-elf, Dwarf, Hobbit, or Beorning—has its own naming norms, and the players are encouraged to pick names that reflect the proper “race and spirit” so as “to shape a fun, engaging, and immersive world for everyone.” Character names must also not violate a host of other norms that run the gamut from names from Tolkien novels or films (e.g., Frodo, Gandalf), names of trademarked products, sexually explicit names, names of historical or religious significance, to misspelled variations or homonyms of any of the others.

### *Music Performance in Lord of The Rings Online*

Now that we’ve traveled there and back again, let us end with the example with which we began and drill down on one specific value formation. On Monday, April 5th, 2021, just after 3 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, two of the authors along with four others played the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *Lord of the Rings Online* (LOTRO). Our fellowship was composed of individuals from Austria, Canada, Germany, and the United States, and all of us happened to be researchers of digital religion, specializing in video games. For over a decade, we have been working closely together on various projects, but our in-person travel had been curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, so we had begun to play LOTRO as an informal way to stay in touch and maintain our “soft” social ties. We had logged in to explore the world of Middle-earth and, as one of our fellowship said, “to fight monsters,” but we had discovered to our surprise the pleasure of playing music together as a group. None of us are experienced musicians, but we are using the ABC notation and the plugin Songbookbb to play pre-notated musical scores.

In discussing LOTRO, one of the elements that we found curious was that in all the discussions and content produced by the gamers, such as fan fiction and discussion threads, religion did not play as central a role as we had expected. Of course, Tolkien’s vision of Middle-earth is a moral battle that brings alive difficult moral choices and figures based on Christian and Manichean concepts such as apocalypse, Satan against God, or the Messiah, J.R.R. Tolkien’s fiction is thereby full of values of good and evil, and of what makes for a good life. Also, Tolkien does not shy from moral issues. How does the Ring of Power affect

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<sup>1</sup> <https://help.standingstonegames.com/hc/en-us/articles/115002544087-LOTRO-Naming-Policy>.

the ordinary people of the world? Should Frodo spare Gollum's life? What is the connection between Bilbo's call to treasure and the dark lord Sauron's return?

Usually before and after each of our weekly sessions, our fellowship would play a few songs together. On this Monday, before we headed out on our ponies to fight the Orcs on Weathertop Mountain in the Lonely-Lands, we played "Lothlorien," the motion picture soundtrack from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of The Ring* (Shore 2001). We also discovered that we were not the only ones playing music. LOTRO has one of the most developed in-game music systems of any MMORPG, and music plays a large part of socializing and role-playing. Usually before and after our weekly sessions, our fellowship would play a few songs together, though none of us are experienced musicians. As explained below, we are using the ABC notation and the plugin Songbookbb to play prenotated musical scores. Normally when we performed, it was just our group. But this Monday afternoon, we had attracted an audience, and one could feel the tension of wanting to perform well. As we played, however, another player, not from our fellowship, joined us by manually beating out notes on a cowbell. At first, we were a little annoyed. Was the person grieving us? In video gaming, a griefer is a player who deliberately irritates and harasses other players within the How dare they play with us uninvited?! But soon we all seemed to relax and began to laugh out loud.

Because Tolkien begins the *Simarillion*, a book which spells the mythic universe behind his novels, with a creation myth based on music, one might be tempted to use religion as a category to interpret in LOTRO (Tolkien and Tolkin 1977). And there is no doubt that music has much value in the mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien's novels and the fantasyscape that has grown out of them, and all his stories contain many songs as well as mentions of musicians and unique instruments (Eden 2010, Eilman and Scheidewind 2019, Napier 2007). As Tolkien's fantasyscape has spread to other media, particularly film, music has become even more prominent (Adams, Shore, and Walsh 2016). For instance, while Tolkien's novels play a crucial role in players' attachment to the game, the musical score composed by Howard Shore for Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* film series seems to be even more emotionally enthralling (Adams 2016, Jackson 2001; 2002; 2003; 2012; 2013; 2014; Shore 2001, 2006).

To honor the rich musical lore of Tolkien's Middle-earth, LOTRO has one of the most elaborate player-music systems of any MMORPG (Cheng 2012). The music system allows players to perform both live and prerecorded songs which can be heard by other players in the game. Simulated instruments include bagpipes, clarinet, drums, flute, harp, lute, and even a cowbell. Each instrument differs in timbre and has a range of three octaves along the Western twelve-tone chromatic scale. Playing music is also visual; when playing, a player's character also simulates the actions of playing music (not necessarily in sync with the music), and a string of large, puffy, colorful notes float out of their instruments. While the minstrel class can play all instruments, every class can play some instrument, if only the lute. For most players, music offers a break from adventuring and quests, and offers a chance for socializing and role-playing outside of one's usual fellowship. The most popular and regular place to play music is by the rock in front of the Prancing Pony Inn, which is in Bree, the game's largest settlement.

While a scholar might point to the *Simarillion* to interpret the music in the game as religious, players tend to see its value differently. As we have mentioned, one can play music in LOTRO either manually or by using prerecorded ABC notations (Cheng 2012; Steam Community 2021). Manual, or freestyle consists of striking keys on the computer keyboard to produce corresponding tones in the game. After going in the music mode (/music), players can use their "quick slots," number keys 1-8, to play notes, and they can also utilize the control or alternative keys and shift to increase the octave or flatten a note. It is also

possible to remap the keys on the keyboard using the music section of options, and as Iralith wrote in a comment form on Steam Community discussion board on July 22, 2020, “absolutely possible through some trickery to convince LOTRO that [a] MIDI keyboard is a normal keyboard (Steam Community 2021). Prerecorded or canned music, such as our performance of “Lothlorien,” consists of using ABC files, which are a musical notation system, to play songs in the game world. Rather than striking the tones on the keyboard, one just needs one keystroke to play a precomposed song. These ABC files can be created or downloaded. You can play songs with the command, “/play <songname>” or use the Songbook plugin. The Songbook enables players to browse ABC files during a game and play in sync with one’s fellowship. One can also download the plugin Lyrical, which allows players to sing along in the text chat with the music. It takes some time and patience to master the ABC system, but it allows players to play in groups and execute intricate polyphonic pieces with multiple tracks for separate parts for different instruments.

Like the player who beat on the cowbell, the value between “live” and “canned” music shows how, beyond the game mechanics, in-game narratives, or even the fantasyscape as part of gameenvironments is crucial for understanding values (Cheng 2012). On the one side were the egalitarians who felt it was just fine to use the ABC notation. Many players noted that the ABC notation was more effective than manual in bringing together groups of players. It allowed for bands of characters playing intricate polyphonic pieces, which are difficult to achieve manually because of lag. Many who valued the ABC notation saw playing music online as an extension of role-playing. Just like most players would have a difficult time defeating an Orc with a sword, many saw no need to be able to play music to enjoy it as part of a fantasy world. The ABC notation side appealed to the egalitarian principles of fantasy worlds and upheld LOTRO as a musical democracy in which anyone can play. On the other side was a more vocal minority that argued for the greater value of manual input. They tended to regard music making as a privilege that one gains through discipline and hard work and policed both the discussion boards and in-game, arguing that manual input was the only real musical performance.

## 6 Conclusion

We have argued that the analytic category of value formations, rather than religion, is a better way to understand how gameenvironments generate meaning and how this is then connected to religious content in digital games and digital media more generally. In our analysis, *Lord of the Rings Online* (LOTRO) has been approached from the Game Studies and Ethnomusicology perspectives. Specifically, we used the playing of music in LOTRO to explore the topic of value formations in gameenvironments. While a debate about the value of music in a MMORPG might not seem significant for the study of religion, it is the evidence of how discourses of values has assumed fundamental importance in gaming today and actually subsumed what scholars might interpret as explicitly religious content. At this very moment, players all over the globe are engaging in serious discussions about the shift in, or loss of, values. Applying the concept of value formations enables researchers to analyze how actors define something as worthy or unworthy, for what reasons, and furthermore how these definitions are negotiated among several actors, groups, or organizations.

How does a focus on value formations change the study of digital religion in general, and video gaming in particular? We have theorized value as a second-order category and an etic term that researchers bring to the material. Values are not always freely chosen but can be forced on people and communities and also can be strategically employed as weapons of the weak. Values are not static. They are discourses and practices that are constantly (re)defined and (re)negotiated by individual persons, groups, and organizations, according to time, context, and skill. As can be seen in LOTRO’s musical performances, we

can observe value formations within a larger media ecology when players discuss, for example, aesthetics and their criteria within the game. Our goal has not been to determine what is universally good, ethical, or beautiful, but rather to investigate within particular media ecologies how value formations exert social force and are constituted by actors. A value's influence is defined by its perceived ethical, aesthetic, and normative worthiness within a particular social field.

We have argued that it is time for researchers of digital media to broaden their initial use of the category of religion by expanding it through the category of value. A question still lingers. Why value formations now? Religion might work for interpreting explicit religious elements but often misses the underlying or implicit religious topics. We maintain that many of these topics are connected to value formations. This is necessary for the simple reason that while researchers focus on religious content, players usually do not. One could argue that rather than abandoning the category of religion, we just need to redefine it. Our goal, however, is to illuminate a shift that better reflects what actors themselves deem important. We do not want to abandon the study of digital religion but rather expand it by making evident that religion in *gameenvironments* is better described and analyzed as part of larger value formations. Moreover, because religion as such is often received as a taboo topic by players to discuss in public media, value formations can be a fruitful category not only in relation to religion and video gaming but to religion and digital media as such.

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