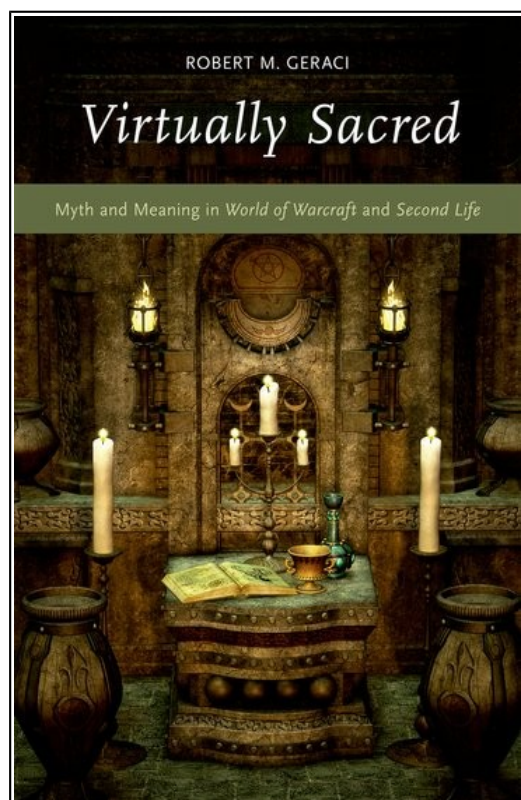# Reviews

Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life, by Robert M. Geraci. Oxford University Press, 2014, GBP £23.49, pp. 368; ISBN: 9780199344697. Language: English.

The second book by Robert M. Geraci, *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*, published by Oxford University Press in 2014, is devoted to studying the phenomenon of computer games and virtual reality from a religious perspective. The book's problematic belongs to the burgeoning field of 'digital religion' or, more narrowly, to what we may conditionally call 'religion in digital games'. The importance of the latter can be demonstrated, for example, by the publications that appeared during 2014 and 2015. These include the collection of papers *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (2014), edited by Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve; and two specialized volumes of *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (vol. 05/2014 and vol. 07/2015). One rather brief publication in the latter volume ('Beyond Belief – Playing with Pagan Spirituality in World of Warcraft by Stef Aupers and Julian Schaap') focuses on *World of Warcraft*, too. Geraci's contribution fits this trend.

In terms of structure, the book consists of seven chapters with respective conclusion sections, an introduction and a section on the methods used. The first three chapters are dedicated to *World of Warcraft* and the religious experience it might offer. The following two chapters explore Second Life (SL). Chapters six and seven focus more on general trans-human issues of virtual worlds and their religious bearing on modern life.

The author is an ardent gamer himself, which is an advantage, because he knows the subject both from within, as an actor, and from without, as a researcher. According to Geraci, his goal was to write about 'how video games and virtual worlds are rearranging or replacing religious practice' (p. 1). In other words, the focus of the book is not on religious narratives in the games, but rather on the religious experience that gamers might sense starting from the moment they log in. One of the reasons of the author's interest in this topic is that millions of people worldwide spend much of their time in virtual reality, playing the games. In so doing, they interact with other players in networks, follow certain rules, and 'overcome their daily limitations' (p. 85) through experiencing virtual immortality, the magic powers of their chosen avatars, etc.

In terms of the overall approach to the phenomenon, the key question is: How does the author deal with it on a theoretical level? To begin with, Geraci describes computer games as 'virtually sacred in a secular world' (p. 13). He builds on Emile Durkheim's concept of life 'divided into two distinct phases: the profane and the sacred', sacred time meaning 'one of passion and to which meaning is ascribed' (p. 71). The latter idea, 'meaning', serves as a basis for the author's approach: he calls gaming 'meaningful activity', and ostensibly uses this term as a synonym of 'sacred'. For instance, Geraci argues that 'virtual worlds, like World of Warcraft, can operate as sacred places, and the times spent within them can be sacred times' (p. 35). For him, logging in is similar to entering a sacred ('religious') time and space, in which gamers experience 'the same separation between economic and religious time as does the aboriginal in Durkheim's account' (p. 71). Indeed, the sacred-profane approach can be supported with regard to the special character of time and space in the virtual worlds: these can be called 'sacred' because they are opposed to the conventional offline mode of life, being 'special' in terms of both *where* and *when*.

On the other hand, Geraci adopts a definition of religion suggested by David Chidester, who argues that religion implies 'the negotiation of what it means to be human with respect to the superhuman and the subhuman' (p. 14). Geraci believes that social grouping and ethical reflection constitute religion not on their own, but only when pointing at transcendence (p. 64). Gamers are united by a common ethical reflection on what is 'good' and 'bad'. To this, the author adds gamers' experience of transcendence, whose definition in the book is not entirely clear. If I understand it correctly, the author sees transcendence in the 'virtual embodiment' of gamers (p. 68). Namely, in their 'close identification with their avatars' (p. 66), whom they create 'to represent themselves in the virtual world' (p. 69), 'synthesizing online and offline identity' (p. 68). As per Geraci, hence, in 'transcendent states in the game' (p. 69) gamers become 'transcendent versions of themselves' (p. 85). *World of Warcraft* 'does not allow players to become gods', as in some other games, but 'it does provide opportunities for gamers to exercise magical craftsmanship' (p. 86). Gamers virtually partake in 'the divine prerogative of creation' and achieve 'a limited kind of empowerment through the creation of magical items and by giving life to inanimate matter' (p. 85). *Second Life*, however, is 'not precisely a game' (p. 182), but rather a virtual simulator, which provides for a mutual learning process between representatives of different outlooks—as when, for instance, a virtual hajj 'tourist' experience can be more productive than more traditional ways of getting information on the subject.

That notwithstanding, a cockpit simulator can hardly replace a real flight, although it does contribute to mastering the job. The author's approach to religion leaves questions unanswered and calls for alternative solutions. For Durkheim, the fundamental division between the sacred and the profane in society suffices to be called religious. In line with it, Geraci argues that *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* are 'sacred', and that they 'do religious work.' However, what he describes as an amalgam of community, ethics, meaningful activity and virtual experience is, in my opinion, quasi-religious. Following the interpretation of the Latin verb *religare*, suggested by Lactantius in the early fourth century CE and popularized by St. Augustine, religion is traditionally understood as a connection to transcendent and intelligent forces, such as God or gods, on whom humans depend (or believe so). If humans could achieve their goals, e.g. immortality, outside this connection, such practice should be defined as non-religious. Transcending the limits of ordinary life experience (immanence) can take place without religion. For instance, *Superman* is definitely a rational superhuman hero, whose feedback can be negotiated. Yet, he is immanent and, therefore, non-religious. The famous Force in *Star Wars* that makes the Jedi superhuman represents a certain ability, and when the Jedi say 'May the Force be with you', they do not imply a religious dialogue with it. Ergo, it is misleading to refer to the digital games as 'do[ing] religious work' (p. 12). Circumstantial simulation of religious practices in the virtually sacred time-space would be more appropriate, I suppose.

In addition, as a researcher of the Orthodox Church, I want to point out that the Orthodox attitude to virtual reality can be negative. Ostensibly, simulation can be put up with, if it is taken as mere training. However, if virtual immersion is taken seriously, it could be categorized as *prelest'* in the traditional language of Orthodox ascetics. *Prelest'* means spiritual 'delusion', a 'false' and 'dangerous' state of mind. This state of mind is usually associated with sentimental emotions coming from the 'soul' (an ascetic notion *dushevnost'*, not to be confused with the standard meaning of the latter in modern Russian as 'sincere, cordial') as opposed to the non-emotional 'vision' rooted in the 'spirit' (*dukhovnost'*, not to be confused with 'spirituality'). For example, when Geraci argues that 'logging in [SL] is, for many users, a sacred opportunity to experience what they see as a tiny fraction of the heavenly world to come' (p. 200), I see it as problematic: in the Orthodox tradition, it can be interpreted as a typical case of 'delusion'.

To sum up, despite my impression that the book should be less generalized and contain more examples corroborating the main thesis, Geraci has made an important contribution to research. The generalizations are probably based on the felicitous phrase 'virtually sacred' that the author has coined, which he equates and, at the same time, opposes to Chidester's 'authentically fake'. Indeed, even if *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* appear 'transcendent' and 'sacral' for some gamers, they nevertheless remain 'authentically fake', or quasi-religious. Despite these issues, I do recommend this book for a keen reader, who will find in it both food for thought and literary pleasure.

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