

**Experience vs. Observation: The Pilgrimage Experience in Video Games and
Other Interactive Media**

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

I declare that the work described in this research Paper is, except where otherwise stated, entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

This paper has an aim to explore spiritual experience of pilgrimage in a range of interactive media. A particular focus is given to a question about video games, whether they as media can provide the user pilgrimage alike experience in comparison to pilgrimage described in other forms of media. The thesis starts with the analysis of travel themes in different media, beginning with photography in its early ages and going over to moving image, video games and virtual reality. Case studies for three games that are often associated with spirituality are being presented in this thesis. The pilgrimage journey as a specific quest is defined in a context of the greater human experience, applied onto user experience in a range of media.

Following that, the paper discusses European pilgrimage in films, analysing two examples, *The Milky Way* by Luis Buñuel from 1969 and the more recent film *The Way* by Emilio Estevez from 2010 - both about pilgrims on the road to Camino de Santiago in the North of Spain. The particular attention in this section of the work is given to the spectator's experience of pilgrimage in the moving image.

There have been some discussions among researchers and journalists, and more often among game reviewers, whether an interactive medium can provide a spiritual experience to the user or the participant. Therefore, the paper looks closer into other forms of media, such as interactive installations and virtual reality and offers a few case studies with particular examples of spiritual journeys.

New media give users new experiences, in video games players are not left with an option just to observe the travel on the road, they are invited or even forced to participate, in order to achieve the proper spiritual experience. Very much like in the critically acclaimed game *Journey* (2012) created by thatgamecompany for PlayStation 3, which in a very short time became one of the most downloadable PlayStation Network games of all times and is used as one of the case studies for this paper.

The journey of the character in this game is often described by reviewers as a religious, or even a pilgrimage travel. The game shows the balance between observation and participation for the user. A personal user experience by the author of this paper as well as a range of reviews of *Journey* are used in this thesis to describe and provide evidence for a particular unique spiritual journey that can be achieved by a video game.

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1. An Introduction - Pilgrimage and its representation in media in the context of the greater human experience

This chapter gives a brief introduction to travel and journey experience in a range of media, starting from the early photographic and cinematic travel experiences as well as describing later interactive digital media. In addition to that, the question of spirituality perceived by the user in different kinds of media is raised and a definition of pilgrimage as a form of a spiritual journey is discussed¹.

I. Travel / Journey and Spirituality portrayed in the contemporary media

Spirituality and “inner peace” are challenges to preserve and cultivate within globalised societies (Highland & Yu, 2008), and quests of pilgrims are one of the ways to achieve this. Using the term “spiritual”, the religion is not necessarily implied in the meaning of it. Spirituality for this thesis is a characteristic that brings the user, spectator or player towards greater objectivity, love and solidarity with others. Highland & Yu (2008, p. 268) believe that digital media technologies, specifically video games through their interactivity and emotional engagement of the users (Ibid., p. 279) are able to promote “inner peace” across countries and cultures in the modern world.

What about video games in comparison to e.g. films, photographic art or other media? How engaging pilgrimage travel experience of users playing or of spectators watching it can be? What are elements of Experience or those of pure Observation of pilgrimage among spectators? And how does the game user experience differ from experience in other media, what unique aspects it might have? This paper has an aim to explore and possibly find some clarifications for these questions.

Films in the early ages of establishing cinema culture were commonly compared to photographic art. Journeys portrayed in films were pictured in a different way and as a result offered a different spectator’s experience to the audiences from what the photography could achieve before that. Moving image appeared as a new medium in the

¹ **Note on the Referencing and Text:** For this paper Harvard Referencing Style has been used. A few foreign sources have been used, but only where the primary source existed in that language. The translations are provided by the author who is a native German and Russian speaker with proficient knowledge of French. Some citations of the material used include American spelling that has not been changed. The rest of the text is spelled in British English. For better text flow a range of terms for the receiver of the information are used: participant, user, spectator, reader, player, recipient etc. applied onto respective context. A research during this M.Sc. programme completed by the author in a range of modules led to this thesis, in particular research on video games, virtual reality and questions of interactivity and spirituality of moving image and interactive art.

early 20th century that unlike still images “invite(s) you to enter an experience that is occurring, that includes you...”(Rohdie 2001, p. 9). Whereas photographs are able to display moments of the journey in the past, film can provide an illusion to the audience to actually be present on the way that is displayed on the screen in “real” time: “The cinema’s tense is a present one, an illusionary being-there where truth (authenticity) is less a factor than it is in the photograph” (Ibid., p. 9).

According to Hoelzl (2012, p. 474) the development of digital technologies in photography and in the cinema changed the binding connection between the image and the screen. The screen became only a temporary interchangeable place for displaying images. This means that journeys on the temporary screens can be accessed from any laptop/projected screen anytime with no particular need to see, e.g. a cinematic journey scheduled on the TV or in the cinema.

Digital technologies opened a new room for development of other media to display travel experiences to the spectator or even give the audience a chance to participate in the journey and have an engaging experience². Video game industry, for instance, creates an experience where people can not only undertake a journey, but also choose a path in it, play with artificially created characters that can be their online friends on the other side of the globe (Haahr, 2014a). Virtual Reality as other interactive medium could allow audiences to travel to the places and fully immerse in a simulated environment, explore and perceive, even if the person has never moved away from his or her desk at home. A simulated world in a combination with motion tracking might make journeys on foot “physically” possible – so that the user undertaking it can move his or her own feet and can actually get tired after the day of walking.

Moreover, and as it is discussed later, travel can be portrayed in other forms of media, such as interactive installations that might give the participant a journey experience in a metaphoric but not less significant social way. This journey can be seen as a part of collective memory and is explored in the chapter 3.

In other words, if travel experiences become “authentic” and accessible in the new media without the physical presence of the participant, is a particular travel experience – spiritual travel or pilgrimage achievable through the media as well? This paper discusses user experience and possibility for this experience to be spiritual in a range of

² Interactive and engaging user experience and its definitions are discussed in the chapter 3 of this thesis.

media: films, interactive art, virtual reality and has a particular focus on pilgrimage in video games.

II. Pilgrimage: Definitions and social context

*Journey to the sacred is a physical but also
a symbolic, literary and spiritual image.
Pilgrimage as effect and pilgrimage as metaphor
cannot be clearly distinguished.*

(Morinis 1981, p. 282)

The definition of pilgrimage in a scholarly world does not seem to be simple and straight forward. Morinis (1981) after a 3 day meeting with 75 pilgrimage researchers stated that in their discussions about quests to sacred places one problem appeared repeatedly – the definition of the term “pilgrimage”. It has been agreed that pilgrimage is to be distinguished from the tourism, although pilgrims can behave as tourists, tourism places can be visited by pilgrims and the way around.

Dyas (2015) notes that pilgrimage can be an “image of life”, when the term is used to describe an individual journey through life without physical tourism involved. In this case it can be a quest of personal growth and exploration, in Christianity sometimes – growth with spiritual focus which it is believed will lead to an encounter with God. Moreover, the term can metaphorically imply an inner spiritual journey through prayer, meditation or mystical experience (Ibid.).

The sacred place is perceived to be somewhere else, and the pilgrim is situated in the middle of two oppositions: movement and stasis, of inner and outer, of centre and periphery (Morinis 1981, p. 282). In the journey pilgrim communicates with these two poles and at the same time interacts with mysterious Otherness. These processes would transform and empower the pilgrim and enrich his goals set at the start of the quest (Ibid., p. 283). Pilgrimage can have many more aspects and reasons than to reach the goals: Pilgrims seek to experience and for a release that brings something extraordinary into the ordinary and imperfect being of the individual human. Even if the spiritual journey is often happening in connection with others, one cannot forget the significance of the individual experience and self-transformation gained throughout the journey (Ibid., p. 285).

Social contact on a spiritual journey is needed to shape his or her own subjectivity since the religious experience is relational and can only last through the communal life (Lopez

2013, p. 6). Lopez (2013) analysed 63 online diaries of Italian pilgrims who made their journey to Santiago de Compostela (this place of pilgrimage will be described in the following chapter 2), the destination relevant for this thesis. One of the results has shown that the majority of pilgrims (40) was positively impressed with the experience of easily making friends on the way and pointed out the importance of social contacts on the way. Many of them emphasized the multicultural and multi-confessional “humanity” of the journey, tolerance and patience.

Pilgrims learned to have time for others and confirmed solidarity as the most relevant emotion of the quest. Solidarity supports helpfulness and encourages empathy, spontaneity and warm contact. Nevertheless, the pilgrim chooses his or her own rhythm of the travel and therefore can continuously meet new companions. Sense of loneliness define pilgrimage as well and make the experience different from the everyday routine. Pilgrims therefore compared their journey to a way of freedom that taught them how to live differently and how to generate a new system of values (Ibid., p. 7).

2. Pilgrimage in films: Observation

Budd (1989, p. 120) states that one of the common ideas associated with pilgrimage is the definable goal of it – enlightenment or “knowledge”. Moreover, pilgrimage as a term considered to be a search for one’s Self (Ibid., p. 123) and in order to do so, is often taken by a person on his or her own on foot. Modern tendencies describe a pilgrim as a person sharing the same desire for personal satisfaction as a tourist have, only finding it in the sacred, whereas tourist find it in the secular (Lopez, 2013).

Spirituality in the film is discussed by a number of scholars, such as Swanson (Smith, 2006), who, after teaching a range of courses of religion and film claims that some films she identified as “spiritual”, offer a special experience as well as move the spectator “to think and feel”. According to Swanson (Ibid.) there are probably as many spiritual experiences as there are people watching the films. Spectators bring different experiences, and some of them experience the same film spiritually different after a number of years have passed. The process of finding out how spirituality is displayed on the screen is different to how religion is displayed on the screen; spiritual films might not directly address the religion (Ibid.). Spirituality in films can be hard to articulate, the spectator might ask the question after watching – why was it “transcendent” or “spiritual” for me? (Parkin in Smith, 2006).

Lefler in Smith (2006) claims that spirituality in the moving image is not necessarily dependent on the technical development of the cinema or on the topic of the film, the spirituality of perception of the spectator is connected to what happens to the human being and around the human being on the screen.

Spiritual quest that is discussed in this chapter is the Route of Santiago de Compostela or the Route of St. James of Compostela, or often referred to a road of Camino de Santiago, is dated back in the 7th century and was particularly popular among pilgrims later during The Middle Ages (World Heritage Convention, 2007). It is said that Apostle St. James is buried in the Cathedral of Santiago and therefore this place is commonly marked as the end of the spiritual journey.

The Way to Camino de Santiago is portrayed in a number of cinematic pieces of art. *The Way* (2010) – a film, which will be looked at in closer details later - is one remarkable example of the religious journey in Spain. In addition, it is worth mentioning another film that represents a journey to the sacred through space as well as through time – Luis Buñuel's *The Milky Way* (1969). This film is important as an example, to emphasize, what observational experiences it offers to the spectator that differ from purely spiritual experiences discussed later in other media.

I. *The Milky Way*

The Milky Way is a film from 1969 that tells the story of pilgrims travelling on foot to the Cathedral of Santiago. In this moving image the spectator together with protagonists can drive a car or meet the Virgin Mary as well as discuss heretics' issues in several, as identified, in three time dimensions. *The Milky Way* stands apart from other films, documentaries or fiction films that tell the audiences stories about spirituality of a journey of this kind, encourage people to believe and possibly – to meet God on the way to Camino or just find their own selves.

On a contrary, Buñuel's piece of art is of a rather surrealistic nature as per Smith (2014), the characters start their journey without a clear goal identified at the beginning – and this is the reason why specifically this cinematic example is worth comparing to *The Way*, which will be given some extra attention in the next chapter. Buñuel opens the discussion about heresy which pilgrimage of the past had a common association with (Smith 2014, p. 4), especially among orthodox representatives of the church: pilgrimage was seen as rather a revolutionary movement. This recalls the late 1960s

student movements in France, which is the time period in the film when contemporary pilgrims travel to Santiago.

In *The Milky Way* two protagonists, Pierre and Jean left Paris and are on foot, taking a long pilgrimage journey to the North of Spain (Figure 1). Pilgrims do not necessarily behave well: they do not work, they beg for food; they project their bad thoughts onto people that did not help them in their journey and those people suffer. An example for this can be seen in one of the first scenes of the film, when Jean mumbled “I wish you broke your neck” (translation from French by Alina Ecke) into the direction of the car driver that did not stop upon request of pilgrims. In several seconds the car crashed on the side of the road and shortly after travellers discovered that the dead driver has a broken neck.

Characters in *The Milky Way* travel not only in space, but in time as well. The scenes seem to be discontinuous and in many of them spectator realised that the era changed – events “jump” from contemporary age to times when Jesus lived and taught, and suddenly – to The Middle Ages with discussions about betrayers of The Church and fighting heresy whereas the setting of the film and the places seem to remain similar.



Figure 1. *Pilgrims in The Milky Way* (1969). Screen shot from the film (Source: *The Milky Way*, 1969).

The film ends in front of the cathedral of Santiago whereas the spectator is free to decide whether it is the end of the spiritual journey or not: there is no “the end” credit to

appear. The spectator therefore becomes engaged in finding the meaning of the film, which can be seen as an interactive experience.

This film offers the spectator a cross-historical and moral story to observe, follows the choices of the characters, disturbs the audience through the jumps in time rather than giving a pure inclusive experience, typical for the examples of pilgrimage in media that will be discussed later.

II. Journey in *The Way* and spectator's experience

Parkin in Smith (2006) states that spiritual experience in the moving image is achievable through the authenticity of the image and the feel through it by the spectator. Some film critics argue that the film *The Way* (2010) offers a truly authentic experience to the audiences (Genzlinger, 2011).

Very unlike the protagonists in *The Milky Way* main character Thomas (Tom) in *The Way* (played by Martin Sheen) has his own and quite defined goal in going on a spiritual journey to Camino. His only son Daniel, whom he was not close to in the recent years, died by accident in a storm just at the beginning of his pilgrimage way in France. The father temporarily leaves his job as ophthalmologist in America and flies to France and instead of just coming back to the US with the body, takes the ashes of Daniel to make the way to the sacred his son never had made.

On the way Tom carries Daniel's backpack and has hallucinations about his son being close to him, he encounters challenges and meets plenty of people who started the same journey, having their own personal reasons for that. Tom seems to deny God but starts his way nevertheless, probably finding reasons for it beyond religion.

„Martin Sheen as the reluctant pilgrim in *The Way* moves us, and we want to believe in the Camino's ability to change one's life“ (Smith 2014, p. 5). Sheen's real son Emilio Estevez, who also directs the film, plays Daniel; Estevez wrote the script specifically for his father (Genzlinger, 2011) and tries to achieve the authenticity of the spectator's experience: most of pilgrims on the screen are real as well (Ibid.).

People who Tom meets on his way are from all over the world, they seem to agree on their goal to „find God“ – but as the film goes by, this aim becomes rather faded away, replaced by importance of human relationships and humanity. Tom travels and interacts with others (Figure 2), and learns something new from it for himself. This deeply emotional tragedy cannot leave the spectator unattended – many film critics reviewing

The Way speak of „heart breaking“, „uniquely memorable experience“ and „moving personal adventure“ (Travers, 2011) or similar description of this movie.

The spectator is given a story, a place and time, when this story happens, audiences can associate themselves with the places where they might have been or ever wanted to go. The pilgrimage to Satiago is a well-known route and villages on the way can be recalled in real life after watching the film. The tragedy of losing their family members can be a personal story that would possibly make the spectator feel the grief for Tom. The moving images move characters towards Santiago in a literal way, whereas the spectator is moved emotionally even only watching the journey on the screen of the movie theatre or even on a smaller screen at home.



Figure 2. *Pilgrims from all over the world on their quest in The Way (2010). Father of died son (Martin Sheen) second on the right. Screen shot from the film. (Source: The Way, 2010).*

Thus, while observing and perceiving the story, the audience is included into cinematic pilgrimage experience, if having a personal association or even being able to share the emotions for somebody else the spectator becomes a participant, he or she can go on this journey together with the protagonists, feel the authenticity and therefore the spirituality of the quest. This inclusive experience can nonetheless be hardly considered as an interactively immersive experience, typical for the newer media such as e.g. virtual reality or video games.

3. Spirituality in other forms of media

I. Framing interactivity and narrative in new media

In this chapter it is essential to frame the interactive from other forms of media, in order to proceed with further analysis.

With the development of digital technologies, there have been seen a tendency of blurring borders between traditional and new media: e.g. the Internet can be described as a mixture between television and text (Kioussis, 2002, p. 382). Art places new demands on audiences in the process of destruction of linear narrative (Barry 2014a). There are plenty of theories and arguments existing in contemporary academia that try to explain the nature of new media, its non-linear narratives and influences of new media on classical narrative as well as try to describe the behaviour of recipient in the new media.

One of the factors of influence that Buckland (2009) refers to when describing the age of new media is a new form of narrative, which is complex storytelling. Complex storytelling differs from the classical form in a variety of media and is characterised by new spectator's experiences that often appear as "disturbing and traumatic" (Buckland 2009, p. 2). Buckland gives puzzle films as an example of complex storytelling in moving image, where fragments of narrative have to be put together by the spectator, who does not mind to construct the puzzle. If needed, the spectator is ready to rewatch the image since this challenge is perceived to be highly enjoyable (Ibid.). Nonetheless, complex storytelling in films is not the only characteristic that was noticed in media of the last decades.

Many other forms of narratives were supported by recent technologies that allowed spectators to become rather participants or users than pure observers. Some of the new media, especially where the direct engagement of the user is required and "participatory technologies" (as per Brown, 2011) are created in order to allow this engagement, are referred to as interactive narratives. In the digital classical forms of narrative are often replaced or modified by technologies, giving innovative interactive pieces of art such as e.g. video games, interactive moving images, installations, visual design online, virtual reality etc.

Whereas a common understanding of interactivity includes collaboration of a human with a machine, technology changes over time and the definition of interactivity changes with it. Moreover, interactivity can be associated with blurring physical and

social and fading out the borders between real and virtual as well as between public and private. In the recent years the question what is interactivity is being dominated by the question why a narrative or a form of communication can be defined as an interactive (Barry 2014b, p. 2).

Lev Manovich in his book *The language of New Media* (2001) avoids using the term “interactivity” in a combination with the term “new media” since he sees it as a tautology with the definition of a computer anyway (Ibid., p. 71), but mentions it in context, when the user of the media can choose which path to follow and therefore a unique work will be generated, where the user becomes a co-creator (Ibid. p. 66). This definition of a co-authorship will be taken into account in this paper along with the framing by Kiouisis mentioned later in this chapter.

Speaking about how new media can tell their stories in a different way, Manovich (2001) applies the “new media” and “interactivity” definitions onto cinema. Being originally Russian he keeps referring to a particular example from his home country, an avant-garde film by Dziga Vertov *A Man With a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), innovative form of multimedia in 1920ties with experimental for its time montage techniques, but more importantly, without textual explanations. Although the interactive aspect of new media is commonly associated with the development of computers and the World Wide Web, Vertov’s example illustrates how in the pre-computer age the first form of communication between a medium and a spectator takes place, where the medium asks the viewer to identify with somebody else’s mental body image. Thus, the term “interactivity” has a much longer and broader history than a computer-related technology.

Kiouisis’ (2002) analysis of interactivity-related academic literature tends to lean toward the communication-based theory with its roots in Cybernetics back in the 1940s. He tries to operationally and conceptually define the term and gives three conditions for an interactive process to take place (Ibid., p. 370). First, it is necessary to have at least two participants to establish the communication process, either human or non-human. Second, some technology must be present to help this communication. Third, there might be given a possibility to modify the environment. Kiouisis (Ibid., p. 372) points out that most of the researchers on interactivity would agree on three basic dimensions in the concept: structure of technology, communication context and the perception of users. Therefore, he gives interactivity both, media and psychological characteristics.

Moreover, in order to measure the interactive experience of users the scholar suggests to add operators to each of the dimensions, as displayed in Figure 3.

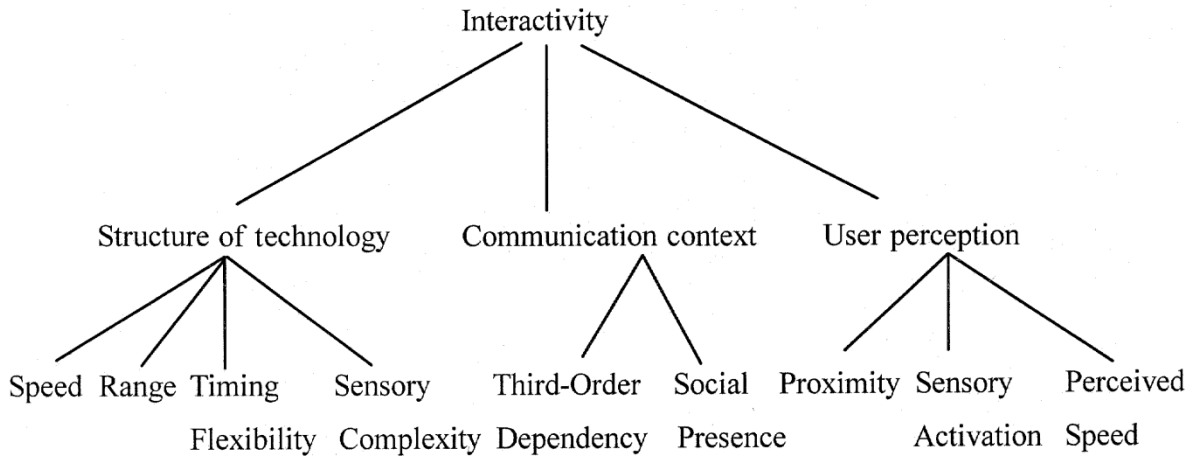


Figure 3. *Operationalization of interactivity* (Source: Kiouisis, 2002, p. 378).

If discussing more recent narrative theories, it is unavoidable to mention Russian structuralists and among them Vladimir Propp who analysed Russian folktales (Propp, 1928) and identified 31 functions of characters in folktales' narratives that always appear in the same order and end with the wedding as well as 7 character types. Critics argue that for contemporary media many more kinds of characters can be identified (Barry, 2014c). Nonetheless, Propp's basic principles can be applied to a range of video games, but it is worth taking a closer look at the journey and community aspect of the narrative and the interactivity of the journey as these will be discussed in particular examples later.

Journey's narrative has been also described by Joseph Campbell in his pattern *The Hero's Journey* (Vogler, 1985). Campbell defines several stages of the Hero's journey that takes place across an imaginative circle within the ordinary world and the special world. In addition to this an imaginative, inner journey of the hero takes place. The stages of the journey include the call to adventure, the refusal of the call, meeting with the mentor who is going to help the hero, crossing the threshold between the worlds, the reward, the trip back etc.

II. Interactive installations: Spiritual journey and collective memory

One of the new forms of media that can offer non-linear narrative are interactive installations that became increasingly popular in museums and galleries starting from the 1960s. Interactive installations can have an educational purpose and involve participant's experience, mental as well as behavioural control (Preminger 2012, p. 1). *Pulse Index* is discussed in this chapter as an example of a spiritual journey and collective memory experience by the participants. This installation has been presented in a number of locations worldwide, although this thesis refers to one particular exhibition - BLOOD exhibition in the Science Gallery of Trinity College Dublin that took place between 23/10/2014 and 25/01/2015. This particular installation is based on a collection of short cinematic images that make their journeys through the screens. Thus, if considering previously discussed cinematic spiritual experience, the user experience in an installation that contains moving images can be individual for every spectator and find new forms after the repetition of the experience.

Pulse Index by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer was presented as one of the 10 works with the *Pixelated Pavillion* show at Sundance Film Festival 2013, which has a reputation for being an active promoter of digital art. Curator Shari Frilot (Westwood, 2013) points out that while the digital revolution is being immensely popular, audiences mainly engage with digital realities visually, with pure Observation. In contrast to only visual interactivity the exhibited works (including *Pulse Index*) aimed to stimulate the whole body to engage with the cinematic storytelling (Ibid.). In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, the artist confirmed that audience participation is a key aspect of his works (Finkel, 2010).

Pulse Index records individuals' fingerprints and heart rates via a custom-made biometric reader. It then projects those fingerprints onto a screen with a pulsating, red-tinted background that mimics the tempo of the individual's pulse. The display of *Pulse Index* contained seven grids of cells, with each cell containing an individual's unique pulsating fingerprint. Left to right, each grid displayed an increasingly dense number of cells, giving a total of 6437 cells projected at any one time. When a visitor placed his or her finger on the reader, all 6437 cells displayed that person's fingerprint as shown in Figure 4. Once the person's pulse had been recorded, a numeric reading of the heart rate was immediately displayed on the grid containing the single cell, while all cells began to pulsate to the rhythm of his or her heart rate.

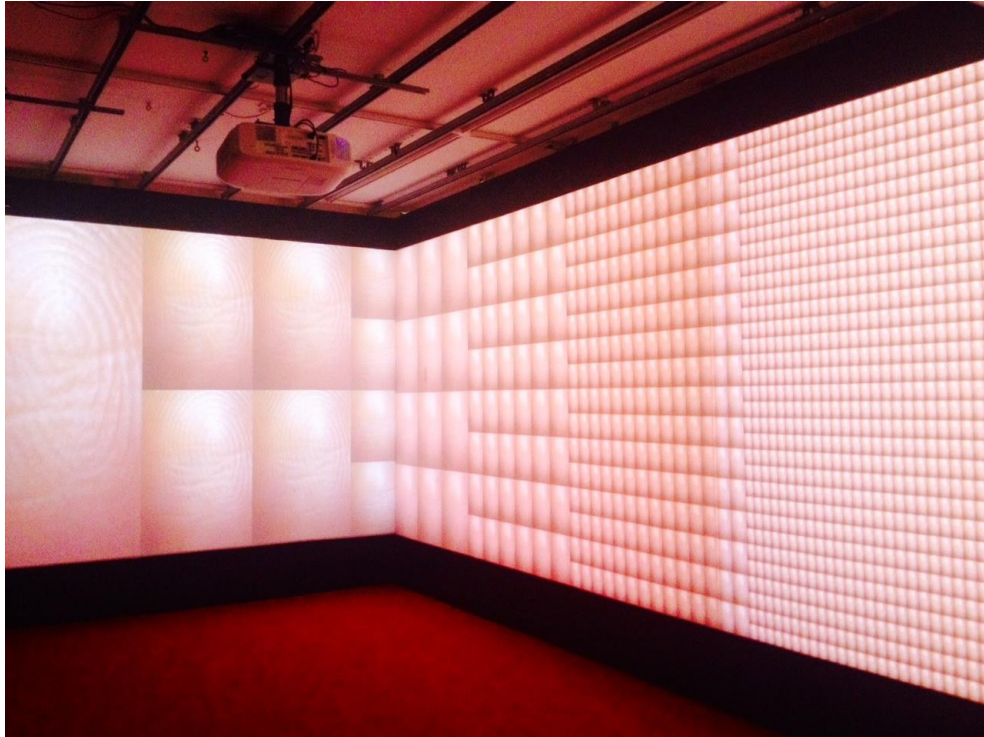


Figure 4. *One person's fingerprint displayed on all screens in Pulse Index within BLOOD exhibition* (Source: Photo by Alina Ecke).

As more people had their readings taken, a visitor's pulsating fingerprint travelled across the display until it disappeared from the display completely. Therefore, a symbolical "journey" of the participant (when the fingerprint travels across the screens) can be identified in this installation. On Rafarel Lozano-Hemmer's webpage when mentioning and explaining *Pulse Index* artist refers to "memento mori" idea (Pulse Index, 2010) or the idea of mortality:

"As more people try the piece one's own recording travels upwards until it disappears altogether — a kind of memento mori using fingerprints, the most commonly used biometric image for identification."

When the artist himself describes his works that involve participation of audiences, he prefers people to be directly able to change the artwork and feel some kind of entitlement, importance and allow the piece of art to "pulse" like a fountain, without having a beginning or an end (Zebrowki-Rubin, 2010).

The work invites the spectator to engage and immediately see the projected image in its journey, pulsating in time with the pulse on the heartbeat diagram. The spectator is "important" – appearing on the big screen – only for a limited period of time, until being replaced by another, more recent spectator's fingerprint.



Figure 5. *Fingerprints of other participants of Pulse Index within BLOOD exhibition* (Source: Photo by Alina Ecke).

The audiences create, act, observe as well as participate in establishing the kinetic force of collective, social memory. The aspect of collective memory and the idea of mortality, conducting a journey along with others before the end of a lifetime – can be seen as a form of pilgrimage on the screen of *Pulse Index*. Pilgrims (fingerprints) individually travel, making the way from the first until the last grid, meet others, more and more people that travelled before, and disappear, being replaced by other pilgrims. As discussed, this form of spiritual experience with active participation of the user in the “journey” is possible in a metaphoric way in interactive installation art.

III. Virtual Reality

Virtual Reality (VR), another innovative interactive medium that recently find particular attention among journalists and gamers, is considered to be a computer-generated 3D environment where the user/player interacts with artificially created (simulated) environment in real time. The nature of the environment is similar to the cinematic picture, but the difference is that the user can act and his or her acts might be able to influence the simulated environment (Harrison, Haruvy & Rutström 2011, p.87).

It is claimed that with better accessibility of VR for wider audiences the religious worships and Christian education can be ensured with the help of virtual worlds (Prisco,

2015). The fact that people like to involve themselves in their religious communities (Koltko-Rivera, 2005) gives Virtual Reality to further expand its possibilities in spiritual matter. In addition to that, according to Koltko-Rivera (2005), the simulated reality can heavily influence at least two factors out of five common aspects for religion and spirituality³: knowledge and ritual; first - through the full immersion in the holy language and traditions, second – through the opportunity to perform any spiritual ritual regardless of space or time.

There are two main characteristics associated with VR: temporal and spatial realism. The former refers to the events taking place in real time without interruptions, and the latter – that the participants who act in the virtual environment can move in it and see elements of it from different angles (Ibid. p.88). Moreover, it is said that Virtual Reality “absorbs” the user in it, so that the virtual events taking place are prioritised over the real events (Ibid. & analysis by the author of this paper using Google Cardboard, 2015).

In order to expand the journey experience and spiritual experience in Virtual Reality, it is essential to define its historical, sociological, practical and later – spiritual and travel context.

The first known computer game developments took place in the late 1950s, to be exact in 1958 at a research institute of the American government (Malliet & de Meyer 2005) and since then the popularity of the industry with its temporary ups and downs has been increasing. Virtual Reality was invented around the same time, by an electrical engineer and former US naval radar technician Douglas Engelbart, who considered computers as machines for more than just counting numbers - as tools that could also display information visually (The Board 1995).

In the early 1960s in fear of a nuclear attack the U.S. military developed a radar system that displayed data in a visual form understandable by a human, which became the first real time data simulation. Ivan Sutherland at Massachusetts Institute of Technology introduced the first room-size VR machine in 1968, with a helmet that needed to be supported by a mechanical arm from the ceiling (Heffernan 2014). One of the significant events in the history of Virtual Reality was the establishment of another military project – the flight simulator. This was operating in real time with head-mounted displays (HMDs) by 1979.

³ These factors are: knowledge, ideology, ritual, emotion and behaviour (Koltko-Rivera, 2005).

Virtual Reality became of an interest for film and the booming video games industry in the early 1980s (The Board 1995). A breakthrough in the implementation of this idea came in the early 1990s, when successful video game companies started to develop 3D consoles. One company well-known for its reputation in the market was Nintendo of Japan. According to Goldmeier (2009), in 1995 Nintendo spent \$25 million on advertisement activities for an innovative portable product known as Virtual Boy. Although Nintendo's Virtual Boy won a lot of public attention before release, the consumers' reaction was one of disappointment. It delivered red-tinged semi 3D picture with a headset that needed to stand to operate (Figure 6). Moreover, the games would be automatically paused every 15 minutes, which was not welcomed by gamers that aimed to achieve an immersive virtual reality experience (Goldmeier 2009).

The industry of Virtual Reality remained relatively quiet for almost two decades after the failure of the Virtual Boy, until in 2014 Facebook seemed to see the future of it by purchasing the company Oculus for \$2 billion (Heffernan 2014). More about Oculus and contemporary VR devices is discussed in the next chapter.



Figure 6. *Nintendo Virtual Boy. The headset needs to stand in order to operate.* (Source: Taringa!, 2013).

The research about why users would be interested in Virtual Reality has shown that one of the reasons could be the human fascination with being immersed in their task, and that because the task in simulated reality looks naturalistic unlike the one surrounded by reality, that's just being displayed on pictures or in a form of paper note or even on a screen in a "real context". Moreover, human beings are known for their preferences for taking risks and making dangerous decisions, which virtual reality allows them to do (Harrison, Haruvy & Rutström 2011, p. 88).

This paper takes Virtual Reality in video gaming as an example, considering a particular attention given to spirituality in video games. Advanced video games have reached a stage when they can attract players to a great extent, and make the flow of the game so immersive that the gamer stays in his or her chair until the game is completed.

“Dennoch ermöglichen aktuelle audiovisuelle Darstellungen auf PC oder Konsole nur eine Art Fenster, durch das der Spieler in die digitale Welt schaut” (Geiger & Drochert 2015, p. 62).

“Nonetheless, current technological developments of PCs or consoles would only allow the user an opportunity to look into some kind of window into the digital world” (trans. from German by Alina Ecke).

Since the current visual quality difference between the various game consoles is insignificant, developers and distributors hope that with the use of Head-Mounted Displays, Motion-Platforms and the integration of virtual elements into the real world, the experience will be completely new and fully immersive. A Head-Mounted Display is a piece of hardware with high definition displays that can be placed directly in front of users' eyes with suitable lenses and bound on his or her head, so that the person is situated in the simulated reality instead of only in front of it (Ibid., p. 63).

Wider audiences were introduced to HMDs through the project Oculus Rift in 2012 by company Oculus, founded by Palmer Luckey, a 19 year old staff member of the US University of Southern California. The first prototype had a resolution of 640x800 pixels per eye, whereas the device's latest iteration is available with the 960x1080 pixels per eye. Oculus presented its device in a range of conventions and trade shows, (Figure 7) although the technology is still mainly used for research purposes (Martin, 2013). Recent media discuss the availability of the Oculus Rift to the consumers starting from 2016. It is expected that pixels will not be visible to the eyes of users, and the hardware will support standing and sitting mode, have an industrial design as well as be more ergonomic than before (Kuchera, 2015).

Oculus Rift is not the only existing VR Head-Mounted Display. Alternatives are offered by Sony or even by other firms with devices that allow the use of a Smartphone for displaying of Virtual Reality, e.g. Google Cardboard. Moreover, for fulfilling the game experience in the virtual world numerous motion-tracking mechanisms are being developed. A range of sensors has been created in order for a gamer to experience movements in connection with Oculus Rift: of hands and fingers and even track eye

movements. Some full body tracking technologies being developed could put the user in a complete virtual reality, and offer him or her the chance to explore the Open World (Geiger & Drochtert 2015, p. 64).

The degree of immersion with the artificially created reality can lead to the feeling of presence, especially if the virtual reality setting is supported by additional effects: noises, wind, smells, etc. This feeling of complete integration within the simulated environment is nonetheless temporary since disruptions such as pauses or errors can cause a sudden break when the player realises that the reality is not real.



Figure 7. A visitor to a trade show tries out the Oculus Rift (Source: Martin, 2012).

One of the possible effects of these is the shock that the player can experience when brought back to reality. Additionally, the development of the content in games that involves virtual reality is only just beginning, so some elements such as a mouse or gamepad can still be used and would distract the user (Ibid., p. 65-67).

Can the fully immersive experience of Virtual Reality (without disruptions) be spiritual or more spiritual than in any other interactive medium? The answer to this question needs further research, information for which is not yet available to wider audiences. In addition to errors that might occur and extra controls that are needed, there are number of issues identified that currently limit the room for the further discussion about

spirituality of the VR, such as high costs of the technology, health issues for the users, need of extra sensors and imperfection of navigation.

Most of the devices that have been developed for creating Virtual Reality are not necessarily affordable for anyone: e.g. the current price for Oculus Rift which is currently sold as a “development kit” is \$350 (Oculus Rift, 2015) and is aimed at game developers, and not the ordinary consumer. Some low cost VR devices such as Google Cardboard are available for use on smartphones, but offer a very limited amount of apps / games to users. The author of this paper has tested the latter version of VR on an Android phone, which has significantly lowered the battery of the phone in just a few minutes and the experience, with only a few pictures to discover, was relatively poor. Moreover, Oculus Rift requires a full HD 3D capable computer with relatively current system requirements – e.g. Windows 7/8 or Mac OS 10.8 or higher. According to Oculus (2015) “any gaming computer” would be suitable. These requirements are hardly met by the average household PC.

Sensors, as well as other equipment that has been developed for HMDs, require a separate purchase and connection, e.g. the HMD produced by Valve and HTC – Vive can be delivered with motion tracking sensors that require a separate installation process (Orland, 2015).

Potential users with weak eyes or eye disabilities, as well as people that suffer from motion sicknesses would have difficulties perceiving the 3D image that is displayed in front of their eyes (Geiger & Drochtert 2015, p. 67).

Finally, the fidelity of the picture needs to be improved in order to achieve the full effect of immersion – the resolution needs to be higher since the eye can often see the pixels of the picture that is displayed close to it.

Thus, the idea of providing a spiritual experience in Virtual Reality is promising, which (the experience) might be even more immersive than what video games can offer. It is known that not everyone can enjoy watching a 3D film, but a 3D film would not give the spectator many choices and tasks within the narrative. Virtual Reality, on the contrary, would give these opportunities to the user and allow him or her to dissolve his or herself in simulated worlds. The quality of digital pictures is improving, and the price of computers is decreasing. As various researchers have shown, choosing a path, a risk or a task, plus immersion in virtual reality is what human beings wish for. Therefore, if Virtual Reality becomes more accessible to the wider audiences, the technology has

every opportunity to insure spiritual experience. For the moment it is unknown that audiences reported any kind of spiritual journey experienced with the VR, unlike with video games.

4. Video games as a new way of pilgrimage and spirituality

I. Spirituality in video games: Philosophical view

The quote from the first chapter of this paper (p. 4) by Rohdie (2001) that associates cinema with something “real” or “authentic” puts films in comparison to still images of photographic art. It is arguable how “real” the cinematic experience can be in the age of digital technologies, especially considering video games, interactive museums’ and exhibitions’ installations or the virtual reality. In the age of interactive art the spectator becomes a user or a player, or a participant who can choose his or her own path of the narrative journey. Video games are one of the examples for a medium, providing an arguably real and an interactive journey experience.

Video games are a comparably new form of medium and entertainment. They first became available to the public in the early 1970s (Haahr, 2014a) and reached their so-called Golden Age in the 1980s (BMI Gaming, 2014). Since that times games became more and more popular in private households. Analysing video gaming today, the everyday life is hardly imaginable without with games, either on a PC, on a console or while using a mobile device. Video games is therefore not only a new form of medium, but is also considered to be a new method of interaction and socializing.

Video games are able to captivate players, which as per Johnson (2005, p. 33) may have some neuroscientific explanations, but the fact of captivating might also be one of the reasons why they are extremely popular. It is arguable that among many characteristics, they are claimed to open new worlds of opportunities for all social groups and genders. Games can also be a form of fantasy fulfilment: players are given chances to explore, achieve goals, beat competitors, in short, to reach some level of satisfaction depending on the game topic, and in many cases achieve more than they can in their real lives. A player becomes part of the game experience, often identifying him- or herself with the heroes within the game world.

One of the important aspects in video game is the team play. In multiplayer games we are often given a choice to play as different characters with different abilities. For instance, in *Disney Infinity* (Avalanche Software Disney, 2014) users are encouraged to buy additional content in the form of figurines of animation and comic book (or Disney

films) protagonists that can be integrated as new characters in the game. It is possible to become e.g. Iron Man and fly as well as use superpowers or to look and act like Merida from a Disney film “Brave” and shoot arrows.

As described in the flow theory in gaming in Haahr (2014b), if the flow of the game is balanced, the player can forget about the actual life around him or her and fully immerse within the game. One of the necessary aspects that is needed in order to “flow” with a game and to enjoy it, is a “fun” game aspect, as Schell (2004, p. 56) calls it.

What do games have to do with spirituality? Spirituality in video games has been researched by scholars, analysing mainly religious experience of players within games. Philosophically, video games offer parallels to real life. In a video game the player controls a virtual character, which can resemble the spiritual, inner world of the individual, as the opposite to the material world (Highland & Yu 2008, p. 280). Therefore, the identification with a superhero mentioned earlier, is the spiritual transformation of one’s self representation: the mind of the player is linked to the virtual body of the character, and the real physical form is left behind. The inner spirit of the player is given a room to be explored in the game, to test the limitations, to become more social (e.g. in multiplayer games) (Ibid., p. 281). Games can have strong emotional impact as well, which is discussed on particular case studies later.

With new technologies, beautifully designed 2D or 3D environments, mystery and atmospheric aesthetics, dynamic soundtracks and easy to learn mechanics (core mechanics: going forward or jumping) spiritual journeys become possible for anyone within a video game, and the player can often feel as a pilgrim going to complete his or her – in the game often unrevealed until the end – goal.

II. *Limbo* and elements of pilgrimage in the game

The following case studies are to be discussed in this and in the following chapters: video games *Limbo*, *Never Alone* and *Journey* that according to a range of reviews and analysis by scholars as well as personal experience of the author of this paper have numerous aspects of spirituality. All of them are created for a few hours long gameplay and they all tell a story of a journey made by the main character. These journeys will be discussed in the context of providing spiritual experience and their pilgrimage relevance.

Limbo (2010) is a black-and-white 2D puzzle-platform video game, originally created by a Danish independent game company Playdead for Xbox Live Arcade and available on the PlayStation 3, Steam, Windows and Mac systems later (Playdead, 2014).

A little boy with shining eyes awakens in the forest without any indication of the background story or any information who the character is (Hatfield, 2011) and starts his journey first through the natural (Figure 8), later – through industrial landscapes, given a number of puzzles to solve and dangers to overcome. “From beginning to end, the game never stops surprising, delighting, and horrifying the player” (Ibid.). There are several environments in this game: forest, wasteland, caves, the hotel, the industrial mill and the secret underground level that can be accessed after completion of the game (Giantbomb, 2015).

2D monochrome aesthetics, typical for cinematic noir genre, are mainly accompanied by natural ambient sounds, puzzles get harder and harder closer to the end of the game. There is no dialog or map or even tiny clues, no loading screens or cinematic sequences between chapters, the only lines of story can be found on the game developers’ website. The player is therefore left to interpret the plot on his or her own. In order to fully understand the puzzles the game forces the player to die frequently (Giantbomb, 2015). The mechanics of the game are simple: running, jumping and grabbing.

Critics often mention their spiritual/religious feelings while playing this game, and it is often interpreted as a spiritual journey of a boy searching through the underworld for his lost sister (Jones, 2014) and cannot stop his quest until he found and rescued her (Figure 9).

Limbo as a term can be defined as an uncertain period of awaiting a decision or resolution, an intermediate state or condition and in Christianity is often associated with the state / border between life and death, where not baptised people go after their lives (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).

In the game limbo is suggested to imply the spiritual state of the boy whose pilgrimage is not peaceful, is it full of sudden and frightening encounters: huge spider, brain worms, mean children and industrial dangers – rolling and falling objects.

This game indeed can recall the pilgrimage elements defined earlier in this paper: individual journey, mystery and atmospheric environments involved, searching for

something or the inner self, completing the goal going through challenges in order to do so.



Figure 8. *Little boy on his journey in the first chapters of the game Limbo.* Screen shot from the game. (Source: Playdead, 2010).



Figure 9. *Final scene in Limbo: reunion.* Screen shot from the game. (Source: Playdead, 2010).

Limbo does not provide a social experience typical for pilgrims, no sharing, solidarity or help can be found in it until the very end when the boy finds his sister who seems to wait for him. The boy has to protect himself in order to complete the game, avoid mean

creatures and learn on his own how to overcome unexpected traps and dangers on the way.

III. *Never Alone*: Case study on spirituality and pilgrimage

Another game that is often associated with spirituality is *Never Alone* (2014), which was inspired by Alaska cultures and legends and created in cooperation with Alaskan native community (Neveralonedgame, 2015). The game was developed by Upper One Games as a puzzle-platform for one or two players. There are a number of videos to see while progressing through the game – interviews with Native Alaskan Iñupiaq that give some insight into the story background and honestly want the player to learn more about their culture and traditions (Hindes, 2014).

The narrative of the game is the journey of the girl Nuna together with an Arctic fox (Figure 10); they have to go through a number of challenges on the way. The journey begins when the little girl discovers that her village is destroyed by a powerful blizzard and she goes on a journey in Arctic to find the source of it. The journey is not about one person, the narrative is about the enigmatic nature of the Arctic, about folklore and traditions, about explanations of the world's nature, passing stories from old to young (Starkey, 2014). Fox helps Nuna on the quest and can see and influence spirits (Ibid.) One player can either control two characters or the game can be played by two players who would support each other.

The aesthetics and design resemble Northern nature; a major part of the game is played on the icy or snowy background. The sounds are minimal and mostly ambient. Mechanics of the game include running, jumping, climbing, swimming as well as floating (for the spirit later in the game). Unlike *Limbo*, *Never Alone* contains cinematic sequences between the chapters. When the companion of Nuna dies, the body of the Arctic fox evolves and becomes a spirit of a boy who, similar to fox, has some extra abilities to help Nuna on the way (Figure 11).

Never Alone was criticised for its imperfection and for the frequent irresponsiveness of the controls, especially on a PC version (Hindes, 2014). Nonetheless, the journey in the game was admitted to be peaceful, meditative, educational and atmospheric (Starkey, 2014).



Figure 10. *Never Alone: journey of Nuna with the Arctic fox.* Screen shot from the game. (Source: Upper One Games, 2014).



Figure 11. *Never Alone: spirit of the boy awakes from the fox's body.* Screen shot from the game. (Source: Upper One Games, 2014).

This journey, similar to *Limbo*, lasts within a few hours and can be described as a spiritual experience as well, with elements and encounters common for pilgrimage: having a companion, show solidarity and humanity to the companion, meeting others on the way and learn from them, while continuing the journey, mystery and atmosphere, the importance of the community and its culture and traditions as the purpose of the quest. *Never Alone* offers a mixture of Experience – the actual gameplay, and pure

cinematic Observation – when the user unlocked the videos on the way that will give insights and educate the world about native northern communities and their customs.

As analysed above, both video games can be seen as spiritual journeys made by the player and offer deep emotional experiences while controlling the virtual characters. Elements of pilgrimage are recognisable in both of them, although: in *Limbo* the character is a “lonely pilgrim” in the underworld, in *Never Alone* the pilgrim has a companion at all times.

IV. *Journey* by thatgamecompany

*Journey shows us not only that games can be an art form,
but that video game consumers have an appetite for
something more than just the next big first person shooter.*
(Kain, 2012)

The definition of pilgrimage framed for this paper implies an individual, but still a social journey with random and continuously changing encounters, therefore this chapter describes another video game that showed to offer the closest experience to real pilgrimage. The spiritual travel experience in this game is therefore discussed in more detail than in the previous case studies.

Journey (thatgamecompany, 2012) by thatgamecompany was created for PlayStation 3 console and became one of the fastest selling PlayStation Network games of all time (Borda, 2013). *Journey* is a 3D game that has some elements of platform game, but the actions – e.g. jump or float – do not necessarily work at all times as it would be applicable to any 3D platform. It has a story that is often associated with a pilgrimage journey, and a unique social aspect and goal structure which will be expanded later in this chapter.

Some game critics describe the game as “a beautiful, evocative and unequivocally transcendental experience“(Mallory, 2013). Moreover, the *Journey*’s effect is often described as “a changed perspective of gaming” (Borda, 2013). These reviews, as well as the personal experience of the author of this paper while playing *Journey* were the reasons it was chosen to closely observe the pilgrimage travel aspect of the user’s interaction in the game.

The creators of *Journey* meant to develop a game that would not allow conflict between characters. It is meant to be a cooperative “travel” experience with other people online,

without talking or competing with them (thatgamecompany, 2012). Players help each other on the way – very similar to the real pilgrimage experience observed in *The Way*.

As discussed by Borda (Borda, 2013), *Journey* is a game that is hard to describe even after completing it. The game is about reaching a far away mountain and going through the desert full with ruins and caves while passing seven levels. The game tells an emotional story without any guidance for the player, the narrative flows through the gameplay and visuals, giving the player an opportunity to discover the game world on his or her own.

The mechanics of the game include walking, singing, jumping, floating and gliding, surfing (on the sand), collecting and stealth. Another mechanic that can be discovered on the journey is a “coupling” mechanics, when the player can call another player and show him or her the way or call someone in case the character gets lost.

In order to jump or float the character needs to have charge in the scarf. The charge is achieved by touching a range of items – flying creatures, long scarfs growing from the sand or flying pieces of cloths. When getting charged the characters scarf and bottom of the robe starts lighting up.

In each of the seven levels the player can encounter other characters that can either just accompany him/her or help to pass the level. These companions (see Figure 12) are real people, but when first playing the game, the game player is not given any information about who or what they are until the game is finished. Characters cannot talk and the only form of verbal interaction between each other is singing which is associated with a white circle coming from the character (Figure 13). The player cannot choose who to play with, he or she randomly meets other players on the way.



Figure 12. *Journey with a companion*. Screen shot from the game. (Source: thatgamecompany 2012.)

As per Figure 12, robed characters can almost be described as pilgrims going on their spiritual journey.

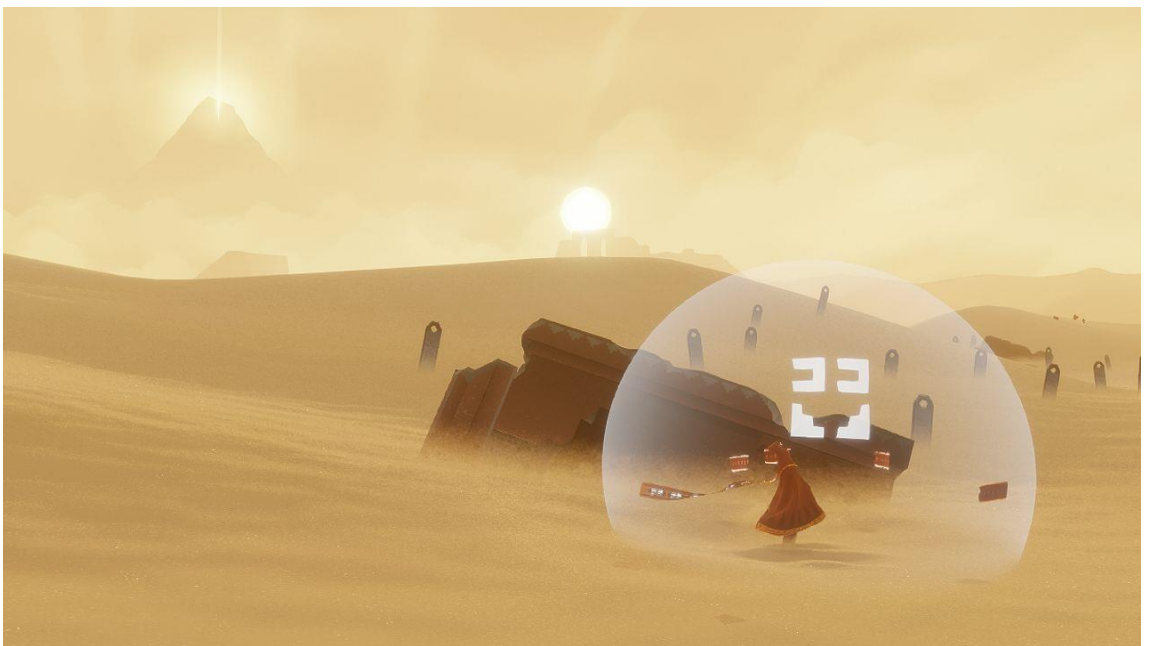


Figure 13. *Sound indication in Journey*. Screen shot from the game. (Source: thatgamecompany 2012.)

The beautifully designed setting of the game accompanies the “pilgrims” through their day in a windy desert to the sunset watched from the ruins (Figure 14) and later on – to the cold mountain.



Figure 14. *Sunset in Journey*. Screen shot from the game. (Source: thatgamecompany 2012.)

The player cannot hurt the other players, he or she can only help. This makes the social aspect of the game unique compared to others, e.g. bullying aspects that cyber space is often associated with. *Journey* is also described as a game that one begins on his or her own, but not the game one will finish alone (Kain, 2012). Proximity to another traveller can refill the power (energy) of the character, when the hearts of the characters are glowing, it indicates the energy exchange (Figure 15). If another player wears a white robe, it means that he or she has already completed the game once and collected all the items (rectangular symbols that appear throughout the journey, similar to the one displayed in Figure 13) on the way.

Warmly coloured aesthetics of the earlier levels are replaced by later, darker levels (as in Figure 16) that are still beautifully designed; light golden, pink and green colours become blue, grey and white. It gets colder and the character has to face the danger in a form of flying stony creatures, but cannot resist, the only option to survive is to hide.



Figure 15. *Glowing hearts as energy exchange between companions in Journey.* (Source: Borda, 2013.)

In the last, seventh level of *Journey*, the player reaches the mountain and inevitably has to freeze to death. Nonetheless, if he or she were making their way with a companion at this last stage, he/she can use music/sounds in order to communicate with the other and to help the other to survive a little longer by sharing energy. When the character dies in the snow and ice, a cinematic sequence follows: the pilgrim is alive again, surrounded by six creatures in white robes that make him immortal, so that he can travel through a tunnel despite flying dragons and finish his floating journey to the far away mountain that ends by walking into the light on top of it.

The soundtrack dynamically responds to the path of the character, accompanying the mood and supporting the sounds of e.g. sliding down the dune or floating along with other creatures and collecting energy or signalling to another traveller.

It is significant to mention the transition between the levels of *Journey* which has all indications of a spiritual quest. When coming to the end of a level the character reaches an open stage with – often – some stones with symbols on them. He kneels down and then a cinematic sequence starts. A bigger person in white, who could represent a mother character appears and shows the participant the story told on a tapestry.



Figure 16. *Closer to the end of Journey: trying not to freeze. The far away mountain is ahead.* Screen shot from the game. (Source: thatgamecompany 2012.)

This is the story of the journey, the journey of the past and story that uncovers some indications for the future. The person in white communicates with the character with sounds and seems to encourage continuing the journey and facing what comes next. Before the very last level the player is informed through the signs on the tapestry about the vital end of the journey before reaching the mysterious mountain.

The creator of *Journey*, Jenova Chen, said in an interview: "The plan was to create a game where people felt they are connected with each other, to show the positive side of humanity in them." (thatgamecompany, 2012). Moreover, social experience in *Journey* is compared to the crowded city (Skillman-Wilson, 2012) where the acquaintances meet occasionally, talk and separate again, participating in shared memory and companionship.

This might be a new form of pilgrimage – pilgrimage that is possible in a few hours and that allows the participant to directly "move forward" to the end goal and complete a spiritual journey using a video game console. The player is not told what he or she can expect when reaching the mountain (mystery aspect) but the shape of it throughout the game experience keeps reminding us about some importance of this last point.

The goals of this game as well as social experience while interacting with other participants on the way recalls the pilgrims' journey in film *The Way*, nonetheless there are less explanations why exactly this road has to be chosen, what to expect at the final

stage and how to communicate with others. The game includes Observation in a form of cinematically animated sequences that have informative and transitional purposes.

In terms of video gaming which in broad publicity is commonly associated with – fighting, pure surviving or e.g. solving puzzles, the kind of experience offered in *Journey* is truly unique and as been proven by the feedback given in the media - fairly immersive. The game seems to give players an opportunity to decide themselves why this Journey needs to be taken, and maybe – find their own goals, but on the way – to discover, flow and find out what this medium might have to offer. It is significant to mention that without a direct, active participation – Experience - of the player the journey cannot be continued or completed.

Spiritual travel experience in *Journey*

*The limits of pilgrimage are the limits
of the human imagination.*

(Prof. Richard Niebuhr, Harvard
University, in Morinis 1981, p. 282)

Plenty of reviews have been submitted to compliment the success and spiritual elements of *Journey* among players. Some of them refer to the game being “simple” and that the experience is hard to describe with words since the game itself has none (Kain, 2012). The same source calls the game one of the most “awe-inspiring”, “powerful” and “beautiful” art as well as emphasizes that *Journey* does not only contain extraordinary visuals, but tells a moving story to the player that is to be experienced just in a few hours. Sliding down the shining sand dunes and watching the sun go down makes the user relax, catch the breath and soak into the experience. Nonetheless, observation is an important, but according to Kain (2012) not the most important game experience; the game would not work as a silent film, the game has to be played and not just be watched, and it is the gameplay that makes *Journey* spiritually immersive, putting the player into a meditative state (Haske, 2012) and giving a room for own imagination.

Skillman-Wilson (2012) refers to the game as to pilgrimage experience in a direct sense: “...I know I am on a journey, the title has told me that much, and it is all I need to know. As the sand moves under my feet I set off on my pilgrimage, into the unknown of the undulating dunes.” Beginning the journey alone, and meeting an anonymous companion later, getting help from or assisting him or her, feeling the necessity of social experience (Kain, 2012) and then splitting again – these moments of *Journey* recall the definition of physical pilgrimage and its community aspect.

The close proximity of pilgrimage to tourism, as discussed in the Chapter 1 allow the pilgrim to see something physically new and previously undiscovered. Similarly to the experience in *Journey*, where the player is offered beautiful landscapes of a desert, a sunken city, caves and undersea world as sightseeing elements for the game tourist on the virtual pilgrim quest.

The definitions and explanations of pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Chapter 1 of this paper suggest the importance of community feeling and social contacts on a journey to the sacred. In this paper, it is insignificant whether a pilgrimage implies any religious aspects, as it is framed rather with the terms of inner peace, humanity, solidarity and tolerance with others. Players report that while playing *Journey* with an anonymous companion pilgrimage experience is shared (Haske, 2012).

The last chapter of the game is often described as particularly emotionally difficult which is caused by the departure of the companion whom the player became attached to (Borda, 2013) and was trying to save and guide in the earlier levels. The emotional impact of the game is clearly innovative (Ibid.) and is similar to the feelings for real people.

5. Conclusions: Pilgrimage in video games in context of other interactive media, Experience vs. Observation

Most journeys end where they begin, coming home.
(Rohdie 2001, p. 24)

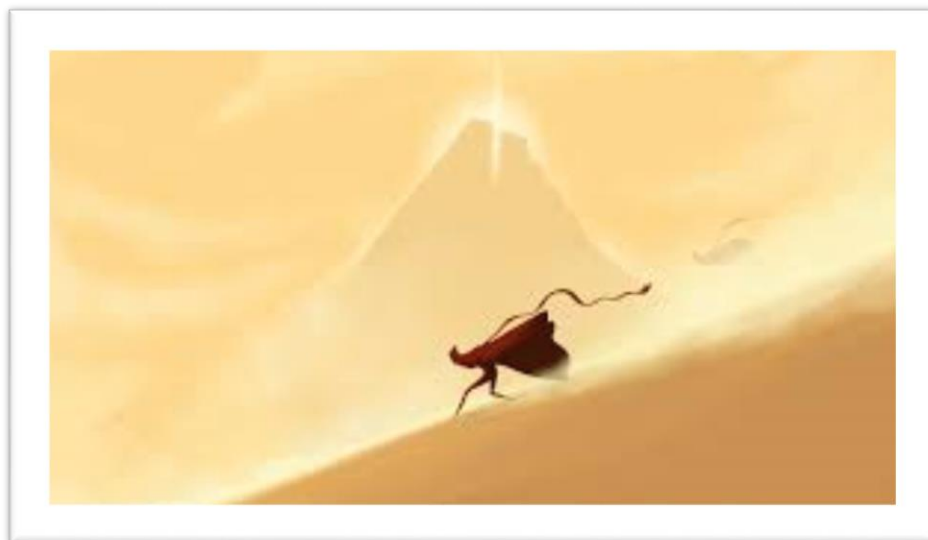


Figure 17. *Game pilgrim on his spiritual quest. Video game Journey (2012). Screen shot from the game. (Source: thatgamecompany, 2012).*

What happens to the typical traveller or the pilgrim after the goals of the quest have been achieved? The journey finishes by going home. In interactive media the physical trip home can be replaced with the spiritual evaluation of the way, goals achieved and experiences gained. It is believed that in the modern world with its globalisation and fading of individuality of nations and cultures, lack of promoting “inner peace” and humanity between people can be solved through digital media. Pilgrimage as a virtual spiritual experience, if achievable in new forms of media, can be a new step to uniting human beings in their search for good, for love and for solidarity. The most significant potential for these has been identified in video games. A virtual journey within a game to a real destination can easily be repeated anytime without the physical presence of the participant, the player can choose his or her narrative path and complete tasks as well as possibly change the outcome. How immersive can the experience of a spiritual quest made through virtual channels be?

Pilgrimage journey in a range of media has been analysed and a particular attention has been given to video games, through analysing several case studies.

Cinematic experience of pilgrimage differs from the virtual journey in simulated reality or in video games, but can nonetheless include the spectator in the emotional journey and can make the audience think and feel through the film. Among cinematic examples of pilgrimage a particular film was discussed – *The Way* (2010) about a father travelling on foot with the ashes of his only son to Camino de Santiago in the North of Spain. The spectator’s experience of that journey was discussed as well, compared to a directly interactive spiritual journey in the video game *Journey* (2012), which is considered to be one of the most popular and emotionally resonant games of all times.

Pilgrimage in other films, such as *The Milky Way* (1969) was analysed as well and although dealing with the same topic and goal – reaching Cathedral in Santiago, offers a quite different emotional experience in a surrealistic way than in the rather sensitive drama *The Way*. *The Way* is an “authentic” moving image, and the authenticity is considered to be one of the vital conditions of the spiritual feelings of the spectator.

New media, unlike films, can offer interactivity and participation – Experience – rather than only pure Observation, typical for the cinematic images or perhaps photographic art. Thus, interactive media offer new ways of storytelling; the spectator becomes the user or the participant, if options to participate, to choose and/ or to complete the task are given. The differences between traditional and innovative interactive media were

discussed and a definition was framed for new forms of narratives. Several case studies were taken as examples of spiritual journeys in interactive installations and Virtual Reality. The installation *Pulse Index* by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has proven to have indications of a spiritual journey by a participant, dealing with mortality aspects and collective memory. Virtual Reality analysis has shown that this new technology has huge potential to provide emotional and immersive journey experiences, although due to a number of issues this has not yet been achieved.

On a contrary, spirituality and emotions, social aspects and pilgrimage have shown evidence among video game players through their reviews. Three games that received emotional and spiritual characteristics were taken into consideration: *Limbo* (2010), *Never Alone* (2014) and *Journey* (2012). They are produced by independent studios within only a few years apart in different parts of the world, each of them lasts only a few hours and in all of them a journey with some mystery at the start takes place.

Limbo and *Never Alone* are both 2D puzzle-platform games. Danish developers in Playdead gave *Limbo* strong, mysterious monochrome aesthetics with some horror elements, and the character makes the spiritual journey on his own, whereas *Never Alone* offers a cooperative experience, although the goal of the journey is revealed at the start (lack of mystery) and the game has been criticised for its repetitive irresponsiveness. These two games have elements of pilgrimage and could be observed as spiritual game experiences; although *Journey* offers experience closer to what pilgrimage is defined as.

According to critics *Journey* offers a highly spiritual and immersive human experience to the player and it is a unique game which is often associated with pilgrimage, although not explicitly defined. The player can interact with others, but can also complete the journey on his or her own (see a lonely pilgrim in Figure 17), he or she does not have to be involved in stories/lives/dramas of others. Moreover, there is no defined place given to the player to start at and to associate with, with makes the experience rather abstract – the events could have happened anywhere, in Europe or beyond. In *Journey* a particular social aspect of players was discussed: users can play online from all over the world, they do not need to verbally communicate or exchange opinions, all they can do is help each other on the way to the far away mountain and they can warn/call each other using each other's energy. Significance of personal attachment to the other pilgrim was noted if the game is played with a random companion. Therefore, a direct participation in

virtual pilgrimage, sharing challenges with others makes the experience unique, emotional and immersive, some critics called it even “meditative”.

Observation vs. Experience

In the film *The Way* a vital aspect of the journey was social, similar to real pilgrimage and experience in the video game *Journey*. The pilgrimage goal of an individual, so important at the start, seemed to lose its significance as the days on the road went by. Pilgrims, very much like virtual players in *Journey*, represent different countries on Earth and it seems not to disturb their communication. The place and time are clear – unlike in *Journey*, so that the spectator observes “real” events within a possibly authentic story. *The Way* is also a personal story, directed by the son with the father in the leading role, with real pilgrims throughout the film.

Evaluating pilgrimage experience in films and in games as well as other forms of media there is no doubt that at the current state a bigger room for imagination, meditation and more control and self-identification as a pilgrim – or a pilgrimage Experience is given to players of video games than spectators/users/participants of any other media, especially in games that succeeded in providing immersive and spiritual experiences, taking people on a “real” virtual journey. In order to fully experience one needs to participate, not to just observe.

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