gaming cultures

global network player authority PewDiePie guild god Let's Play angel undead wtf authentic mediatization Skill PvP contest dungeon
game rule system gameplay avatar WoW blessing noob kills demon race body fight hope spelling games FPS discussion digital wedding
religion gamer analysis representation healing lore religio-scape Soul diablo class tradition experience Twitch rebirth witch priest genesis clan gamer
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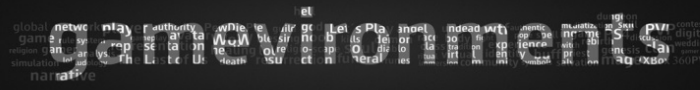
Special Issue

**Current Key Perspectives
in Video Gaming and Religion.**

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articles

Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Xenia Zeiler.

Xenia Zeiler

How should religious study concern itself with video games?

Gaming actively contributes to the shaping of culture and society, in general, and religion, in particular. This simple fact has brought about studies on gaming and religion coming from a variety of academic disciplines. Also Religious Studies oriented approaches and perspectives, often intertwined with interdisciplinary approaches, have been used for studies so far (f.e. Šisler 2009, Wagner 2013, Zeiler 2014). Though also conscious and active effort has been made to start reflections on precisely *how* Religious Studies should deal with games (so far, less with gaming), these reflections are just beginning (Campbell and Grieve 2014, Campbell et al. 2015, Heidbrink and Knoll 2014). Speaking about games respectively gaming, I strongly argue to consciously and generally broaden the lens of studying video games and religion from looking at games only – i.e. at game immanent narratives, symbols, etc. – to also include the study of the impact of the games on the people playing them. This means additionally introducing and making use of more actor-centered research, in order to complement the media-centered studies which actually dominated the study of games and religion for a while. And by the way: Our new online journal *gamevironments* (http://www.gamevironments.org/) highlights precisely this need – and invites contributions!

A distinctive sub-discipline of gaming and religion now fortunately seems to surface, and at the moment we can observe a turning point from researchers producing and

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publishing papers, articles, book chapters, etc., including various case studies but also some reflections on approaches and discussions on how to best research video games and religion, to publications which now begin to very consciously deal with more overarching topics and specifically base on and propose more systematizing or structuring notions (f.e. Šisler, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler forthc., on methods for researching video gaming and religion), and generally, to an increasing dialogue within the sub-discipline.

The aim now is to systematize and organize the emerging field of research on video games / gaming and religion. Considering the broadness of the field, we should obviously make intensive use of interdisciplinary approaches, which then must be defined in detail from case to case, depending on the precise research question(s).

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What methods and research questions do you recommend?

I would like to differentiate here, between the methods, and the research questions parts in this question. As the methods which one might or should use (among other things) strongly depend on the research question(s) asked, let me start with the latter. I think it is of course difficult, if not presumptuous, to recommend research questions generally for a whole discipline or sub-discipline. While I understand the need and also the advantage of critically reflecting and discussing general applicable research questions which would benefit the organized development of our academic subfield (gaming and religion), and thus in the best case would contribute to rethink approaches and key perspectives in the whole discipline (Religious Studies), I also absolutely see the benefit of more broadly encouraging a wide array of possible research questions. This is all the more true for a subfield as new (and as quickly and constantly changing) as ours,

with not too much research done so far. We would obviously profit from looking at our common broad research objects, games and gaming, from a variety of angles. Even in cases where it might turn out that a certain research question is not very useful, this information might be of value.

This said, I also want to stress that, of course, personally I would love to encourage certain questions applied in the games / gaming and religion field – questions which I feel are still underrepresented. I have argued elsewhere before (f.e. Campbell et al. 2015) that gaming is a highly global phenomenon. But it is highly important not to mistake this argument as meaning to say that gaming, in whatsoever way, is uniform or standardized across the globe. Gaming as global phenomenon does *not* mean that f.e. people in the USA, in Europe, and in India play the same or even similar games, have access to the same or even similar technical facilities, produce the same or even similar kind of games, or interpret game narratives in the same or even similar ways. Rather, the information I get from my research, fieldwork and experiences on games / gaming in the USA, Europe, and Asia (especially India) points at massive differences in all these and more points. I actually flew into Atlanta directly from India, and never before was so aware of how diverse gaming landscapes worldwide are. In the case of f.e. India, any research would need to take (at least) two major gaming settings in society into account: While there certainly is a number of (mostly young) people from affluent levels of society (urban upper middle and upper classes), having access and playing the usual international triple A games, there is an estimated much higher number of people *not* having access to these but nevertheless (at times frenetic) interested in and playing games – but these are very different games, and they need to use massively simpler technical facilities. Such microcosms (which are actually not so micro in terms of numbers, i.e. in terms of people to be counted here!) of gaming universes and

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communities could be termed subaltern, low profile, etc. – we will yet have to find a terminology in researching them. But certainly they do not only exist in India, but most probably constitute a very large number of gamers worldwide. To the best of my knowledge, no work has been done on these aspects of gaming and religion so far, and we lack even basic information to build on. In my understanding, research questions highlighting precisely this diverse and complex face of gaming worldwide absolutely need to be encouraged.

One of the reasons that this huge and important area of research on gaming and religion beyond the dominant geographical regions has remained little noticed so far surely is that the globally actually highly diverse and complex gaming sector of society is undoubtedly still dominated by 'Western' and Christocentric designed and produced games. Even in a seemingly not very religion affine game as Minecraft, this becomes visible quite immediately. When first playing Minecraft in survival mode myself, I literally paused when realizing that I'd need to kill animals to feed myself and survive the night. Now, this basically rules out to acquire Hindu fans for Minecraft (and vegetarians in general, as a number of blog posts and forum threads account for, f.e. http://kotaku.com/taking-the-minecraft-vegetarian-challenge-1678826689 or http://www.minecraftforum.net/forums/minecraft-discussion/survival-mode/294252-vegetarian-challenge), and with this actually very likely prevents the game to be a great hit in large parts of India.

When it comes to methods, it goes without saying that we need to take the precise material researched, that is the research object, and of course the research question(s) into consideration. Studying games does not only mean to study games in the literal sense, as said above. Of course, the methodological spectrum needs to be much

broader than just offering or suggesting methods for game immanent research, f.e. on game narratives. Rather, studying games must also include studying the people playing the games, and, in general, gamevironments (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). This calls for new, even innovative methods, which will probably feed from a wide variety of disciplines. The methods you apply must naturally differ according to your precise research object, depending on whether you are interested f.e. in a game itself, in a Let's Play, or in comments on a Let's Play. All these levels require own methodical approaches, including even individual context analysis (Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2015).

Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?

We had a number of discussions on this topic with almost all of the people participating in this roundtable discussion over the years. Personally, I have also discussed this very question with people not working in any academic subject and not particularly familiar with academic practice, with students who asked the very same question in and beyond classes, and, of course, with colleagues.

Especially among colleagues, not surprisingly, I often found the opinion that we should play the game in order to analyze it – just as much as we need to read a text we want to analyze. The topic by the way came up with scholars from various disciplines, including not only Religious Studies but also Theology, Game Studies, and Literature Studies. The one quiet hesitant voice in this chorus which I came across so far, which somewhat critically reflected about the need to play a game before analysis, also not surprisingly, came from Literature Studies.

One point often taken up as an argument pro the necessity to play a game to analyze it, is that playing the game also helps contextualizing it. It gives the scholar necessary background information and practically helps him/her in the following analysis.

But in any case, even if propagating the need to play the research object before analyzing it, in my opinion the question remains: How rigorous do we need to demand this? For example, what does 'play a game' actually and practically mean? Are we talking about a complete playthrough, or do we need to play (only) a part of the game? If so, which part (obviously other than the part chosen for analysis)? Is it enough to play the level in question, the narrative sequence in question, etc.? When speaking about game genres like MMOPRG's, or open worlds like Minecraft, we would also need to ask: How *often* do we need to play the game, in order to validate our research?

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Such questions get even trickier and still need to be modified when it comes to research highlighting not a game per se, f.e. in the analysis of a game's narrative, but to the cultural, social, or technical environment of a game. When a scholar is interested in, let's say, comments on a Let's Play gaming video, or in the social impact of a game's (religious or otherwise) narrative on a (religious or otherwise) person, group, or community, is it then necessary to play the game, or is it 'enough' to read up on the aspects one is interested in, thus basically relying on second hand information? Despite and to some extend even precisely because of all these (in my understanding legitimate) questions I think the answer to whether scholars need to play (at least a substantial part of) a game to analyze it, remains simple. Yes, they do. We need to know our research object as much and deep as possible, in order to properly analyze it.

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