game environments

Special Issue

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

by
Gregory Grieve,
Kerstin Radde-Antweiler,
and Xenia Zeiler

Issue 03 (2015)

articles

Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Michael Waltemathe

Michael Waltemathe

How should religious study concern itself with video games?

Video Games can be understood as symbolic universes that also encompass religious symbolism. Thus Religious studies could analyze religious content. Religious studies could also take a comparative approach to different perspectives on religious symbols from within video games and from without, for instance transformations of religious symbols, ritual and content within video-game-worlds.

But there is another approach I would favour. Video Games should be used as tools and media for religious education. Video-Games are worlds that enable the player to bring his or her personal convictions and world-views into contact with the symbolic reality of the game world. Gamers will react to the game world, play within the game world, but also play with the game world itself. By playing with the game world, they will try to push the outside of the envelope of the game-immanent content and possibilities. They will try to play with the game world in a way that is structurally comparable to attaining a religious world-view. I am not trying to say that video-games should be used in religious education to bring religious world-view to gamers. I rather want to see them understood as a testing-ground of religious ideas and convictions. In light of the ideas of Peter Berger's idea of the parallels between religion and humour, one could argue that a religious person approaches the world he or she lives in as a sub-world of the higher religious sphere and thus questions all the rules of the life-world from the perspective of the higher sphere. Playing a game not within the scope of its intended

rules but rather by trying to break the rules of the game world is comparable to this. This can be done in a constructive way or in a destructive way. Religious education can use both approaches to enable the players to learn about the consequences of religious convictions and ideas in a virtual (non-consequential) setting.

Especially world-building games like *Minecraft* but also certain so called open game worlds are settings for this approach. Players construct religious spaces and thus define their vision of religious content and rules for such spaces. For example, Christian players try to push the rule-set of commercial games to the limits by trying to find out if it is possible to play like Jesus would. In other words, they analyze the content and ethical and religious framing of the rules of the game world within the scope of religious conviction and thus gain higher insight into the religious cosmos that defines this conviction. Playing a game like Jesus would does not only question the ethics of the game, it changes the gamers perspective on both sides. Also, as it is not limited to only Christian players, sometimes it enables new perspectives on ones own and other peoples convictions of what Jesus would like or not!

51

What methods and research questions do you recommend?
The research questions I would recommend stem from the educational perspective I have tried to sketch above. The perspective of the player is paramount but can only be understood within the framework of the representation of religious and ethical values/rules/symbols within the game world. This framework encompasses the transformation of religion in a video-game, the religious interpretation of a game by religious entities/persons and so on. Research would focus on the player perspective and possible constructions of players within the game world. These constructions could

be virtual buildings and spaces but also player analysis of rules and ethics encountered within the game.

Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?

No. As I do not advocate analyzing the game as a game but rather the players constructions within the framework of the game I do not think it is necessary to play the game. It does not really matter if the players analysis is correct or false with regard to the content of the game. The players conviction of his or her analysis should suffice. Also I would argue that a players construction of religious rules and content within a game setting naturally needs to be analyzed by the researcher. This does not make playing the game necessary but rather analyzing the specific setting the player mentions/constructed. An educational perspective can restrict itself to this narrow band of researching interactions of game and player. A holistic approach that wants to analyze the religious perspective of a whole game (as intended by the authors) needs to look at the playing experience. Even in this case one could argue that analyzing player experiences is sufficient although some games allow so many paths to play a game that the researcher playing could become inevitable.