game environments

Special Issue

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

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Issue 03 (2015)

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Introduction

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A majestic Hindu style temple rises from the ground, its tower and peak block out the cloudless blue sky. Walking up the steep stairs leads through the *mandapa*, or ritual pavilion, around the circumambulatory, and ultimately to the *garbhagriha,* or *sanctum sanctorum* where one finds two massive golden statues. Craning one's head back and looking straight up, one can see the inside of the central tower where rays shine down through a hole at the *shikhara* or temple's peak. Glancing down, one notices a missing block of gray granite. Jumping through the opening plunges one down a seemingly endless shaft where in the darkness one catches glimpses of a steady stream of deep blue waterfalls. Finally, one reaches the bottom and lands in a dark cavern with more golden images, and where a single worker – whose name happens to be Steve – swings a glowing blue diamond pickaxe. Of course, this is not happening in the actual world, but rather on the NovaUK.net *Minecraft* server.[i] Initially released in 2009 by the Swedish programmer Mojang, *Minecraft* is an open world video game that operates as a 'sandbox,' a virtual digital environment in which users employ the program to experiment and build just about everything they can imagine.[ii]

Wherever people go, religion seems to follow. As the Hindu style temple illustrates, even on *Minecraft*, which is often dismissed as merely children's entertainment, religion plays a part in user's practices. How does studying phenomena such as religion on *Minecraft* further religious studies? 'Video games' describes electronic forms of play across all platforms, from personal computers and desktop consoles to mobile digital devices. Although people spend over three billion hours a week playing digital games, when it comes to their critical study, the study of religion and gaming has scant attention in the

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study of religion.[iii] For many, video games are seen as artificial forms of expression incapable of communicating important ideas, let alone the deep meaning of religion and spirituality. Even a cursory look at *Minecraft*, however, illustrates that video games are not a superficial phenomenon peculiar to uncharacteristic activity, but rather a key location to understand what religion, is, does, and means in our contemporary culture.

This special issue, "Crafting the Study of Religion and Video Games: A Roundtable Discussion of Key Perspectives" takes up these themes, and is based on a panel which took place at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in November, 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia (USA). The goal of the panel was not to study *Minecraft per se*, but to use the video game as a touchstone to illustrate the current state of the field. When brainstorming in the steering committee and asking colleagues and students what kind of panel to organize and what theme to choose for this groundbreaking event in the young subfield of the study of Video Gaming and Religion, it soon became clear that an initial, introductory roundtable mapping the new field was necessary to see where we stood, and to present the current trends in a structured manner. To offer a forum for the panelists, all leading experts in video gaming and religion, to articulate future directions for the field, each participant was given a series of questions to answer.

figure 1: https://papers.aarweb.org/program_book?keys=A23-143&field_session_slot_nid=All

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The core of the discussion centered around three questions:

1. How should religious study concern itself with video games?

2. What methods and research questions do you recommend?

3. Do scholars have to play the game to analyze it?

The scholars' responses show that video games both reflect and shape contemporary religiosity, creating a fertile ground for research into what it means to be human in the fullest sense. As the voices in this special issue show, the study of video games and religion is an emerging field filled with potential for new insights into the place, presentation, and impact of religion in contemporary culture. Just as films helped to illuminate and expose the religiosity of the twentieth century, video games now depict the religiosity within the twenty-first.

figure 2: photo of the panel by Michael Waltemathe

The session was the first event held by the AAR's Video Gaming and Religion Seminar. The Seminar was accepted in 2015 by the AAR as a new program unit and aims to establish and maintain a multidisciplinary network for the discussion of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of religion and video gaming. Over the next five years, the Seminar will establish and maintain a dialogue among colleagues, students, journalists, developers, and in general all of those interested in advancing the field. The Seminar's roundtable panel is only one major step in the ongoing international and multidisciplinary efforts to tackle issues and questions related to the study of video gaming and religion. The seminar is linked to two other major events. First, the founding of IASGAR (International Academy for the Study of Religion and Gaming); and second, the launching of our online journal gamevironments, which now also serves as the official publication organ of IASGAR.

For all these reasons, and in order to facilitate open access to what has been said and discussed in Atlanta, *gamevironments* has decided to publish the complete roundtable. This special issue consists of two parts: First, the panelists' written responses to the core questions on the future direction of the field; and second, an audio file of the discussion, supplemented by a written transcript. Besides marking an historic moment in the emerging field of the study of religion and video gaming, we hope you find the roundtable as enjoyable and informative as we did.

Enjoy!

[i] NovaUK creative Server V5.3 IP:mc.novaku.net [accessed October 31, 2012].

[ii] https://minecraft.net/ [Accessed Dec. 21, 2015].

[iii] For further discussion see: Campbell, H. and Grieve, G. P. eds., 2 0 1 4 . *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.