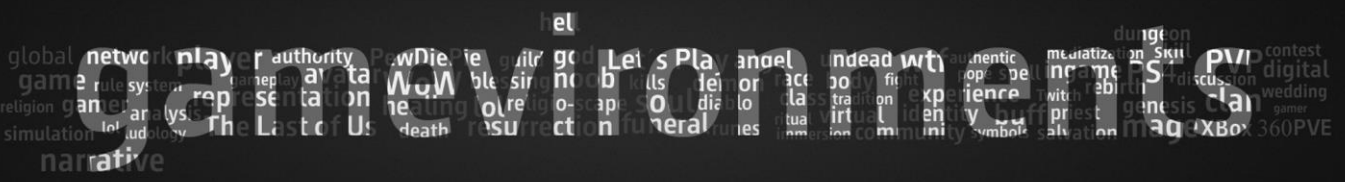
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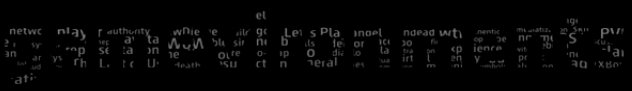

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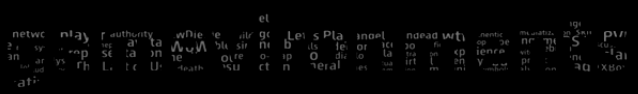

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Report

# No One Tells You How to Build a Holy Game. An Effort to Build Readings in Theory and Praxis

Jason Anthony

**Abstract**
Game design courses and programs have gained considerable ground on university campuses in recent decades, spurred by a cultural swerve toward digital gaming. Are there ways for these curricula, with their focus on practical experience and production, to discover an overlap with an existing body of scholarship that looks at games within religious contexts? One intriguing, if highly hypothetical, arrangement: a university design program focused on the creation of *holy games*, the subset of rite found, in one form or another, across traditions and in both historical and current practice. Examples of games that might fit this definition include the Mesoamerican ball game, sumo, the ancient Olympics and the hiding of the afikomen during the Seder. Because such games exist, it stands to reason that they were shaped by human hands. As religious traditions evolve, and new offerings and forms of practice are made continuously available, especially in digital contexts, is there value in having trained craftspeople who can deliver modern versions of holy games that are satisfying and fit for purpose? The paper looks at a syllabus of readings for such a program, in the unlikely event it should ever exist, drawing on an interdisciplinary coursework that includes ritual criticism, literature studies and ludic archeology.

**Keywords:** Holy Games, Game Syllabus, Game Design, Rites, gamevironments

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In what ways can academia encounter a legacy of games that have been intended or used as religious praxis? One approach, around since at least Pausanias's second

century writings on the Olympics (1933), is to dissect them on the page. Another road, much less traveled, is to explore them as a very specific challenge in game design.

Ludology has come into its own as a field in the 21st century, building on the spare foundations of theorists like Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (1961), and its current richness could afford maps for both these efforts. Certainly, the academic study of these games with religious intersections can boast a growing library, to which *gamevironments* is a contributor. Yet while university training programs for game design, focusing particularly on the development of new digital games, have proliferated to an even greater degree, the number of applied design programs that focus entirely or in part on the construction of *holy games* is currently zero. The following explores some of the waypoints in developing theory and a body of readings to fill this gap.



## Where History Fails. Holy Games in Fiction

The lack of practical interest in holy games should surprise no one. Gone are the sacred Dionysiac contests that gave birth to the European theater in Greece, and while a fencer may offer up a prayer on the Olympic piste, both the ancient cultic honors (Rassia 2014) given to such athletes and the later, medieval spectacles of trial by combat – a sparring match through which the Christian God once spoke – are only distantly remembered. Holy games, which have held a lively and sometimes central place the practice of religion, are at low ebb in the modern West.

Examples in literature still arise here, however, as the idea resurfaces in fiction. One notable case is the glass bead game, the towering backdrop of the 1943 Hermann

Hesse (1990) novel of the same name. In the book's vision of the future, European academia has gradually peeled off from the rest of society to establish Castalia, an independent city state. Here, scholars live a protracted idyll of universal tenure, studying Chinese mathematics or 13th century Bavarian folk music as their curiosity takes them. The apex of their communal life is the glass bead game, which offers a meeting ground for these pursuits and celebrates their life of the mind.

The glass bead game both is and is not Castalia's religion. It is "a sublime art and science," "an aristocracy of the spirit" (Hesse 1990, 143). Play is overseen by the Magister Ludi, the Master of Games, the region's *high priest* and most respected academic. To join in play calls not only for deep scholarship but also meditation and ritual practice, most notably on display in the year's high holiday, the Ludus Solemnis: "The sense of ceremony and sacrifice, of mystic union of the congregation at the feet of the divine" (Hesse 1990, 145) which permeates this annual performance of the game, Hesse (ibid.) writes, is dwarfed only by the experience of the players themselves who obey



> "precepts which even govern the length of time they are allowed to sleep—[and] live an ascetic and selfless life of absolute absorption, comparable to the strictly regulated penitence required of the participants in one of St. Ignatius Loyola's exercises."

For the purposes of a holy game designer in training, the game's descriptions are both rich and troublingly incomplete. Scholars of his work have noted a "considerable ambiguity" (Roberts 2009, 68) in the author's descriptions of how it would work in practice.[i] We gather that the glass bead game is, in some sense, the evolutionary child of the academic paper. A player must be athletically well-read across the sciences and humanities and wins, in a sense, by exposition and annotation – developing a single idea across many specialties and meticulously tracing points of

connection and disjuncture between them. This can be accomplished because Castalia's game has driven, through the centuries, a kind of academic universal field theory, a Liebnitzian key (Stanley 1992) that relates concepts across fields of study, allowing players to engage in a process that Harold Bloom likens to "the jazz of Louis Armstrong" (Bloom 2003, 2). Per Hesse (1990, 97)

> "a Game…might start from a given astronomical configuration, or from the actual theme of a Bach fugue, or from a sentence out of Leibniz or the Upanishads, and from this theme, depending on the intentions and talents of the player, it could either further explore and elaborate the initial motif or else enrich its expressiveness by allusions to kindred concepts."

Like glass beads on a wire, a deft player may string together meaning from the mess of human experience. Self-realization and enlightenment are motifs that reliably appear in Hesse's works, and in this novel (1990), the game serves as a principal device through which those experiences may unfold. Played well, the glass bead game affords the possibility of "a direct route into the interior of the cosmic mystery, where in the alternation between inhaling and exhaling, between heaven and earth, between Yin and Yang, holiness is forever being created" (Hesse 1990, 103).



Before writing this novel, Hesse had been no special evangelist of games. The glass bead game holds little outwardly in common with the transformative settings of the serene riverside in *Siddhartha* (Hesse 1922) or the Magic Theater of *Steppenwolf* (Hesse 1927). I choose to believe that the choice of a game as a vehicle of enlightenment represents a kind of evolution in Hesse's thinking. The book is the last of the author's major works, the only novel he had written in 14 years, and the one that most closely prefigured his award of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946. In this time, perhaps he had warmed to the affordances that make a game philosophically intriguing – the foremost of which is its dependence on a collision that had been

foregrounded heavily in Hesse's previous novels as enlightenment's necessary precursor: the clash of absolute opposites.

In Hesse's worlds, human existence is inherently divided, the lamb and the wolf living in the same heart, a standoff between the sybaritic body and the ascetic mind. This same Weltanschauung is again a theme in *The Glass Bead Game* (Hesse 1990), and Hesse scholar Peter Roberts (2009) maps the many oppositional ideas and philosophies present in characters and themes, noting as well the author's frequent references to Hegel and the dialectical process. Games fit such a divided view of the spirit neatly. Games take opposition as their absolutely necessary starting point, something Hesse himself underscores in describing the actions of his virtuoso players:

> "Combining two hostile themes or ideas, such as law and freedom, individual and community… the goal was to develop both themes or theses with complete equality and impartiality, to evolve out of thesis and antithesis the purest possible synthesis…. our mission is to recognize contraries for what they are: first of all as contraries, but then as opposite poles of a unity. Such is the nature of the Glass Bead Game." (Hesse 1990, 101)



When we look at the wide number of eras and contexts in which games have cropped up as religious praxis, this passage hints, perhaps, at why structurally games have ritual staying power. Games are principally an encounter of agonistic forces – and what is more, an ontological statement that agonistic forces not only exist but, through the ritualistic field upon which pieces or players meet, both retain their opposition and achieve a kind of oneness in play. That harmonizing of opposition as a definitional quality of games is both delight and paradox, an uncanny transformation that makes them formally an intriguing ritual space. Such a reading, I think, also hints at the decline of holy games in the West. Monotheism argues for only one supreme truth, as does the scientism that followed it – both one-sided

worldviews that make for terribly lopsided games. There is one *game* in the Bible, the Book of Job, and there is never any question who will win.

What is possible after such a transformation, when the glass beads of yin and yang are shown "first of all as contraries, but then as opposite poles of a unity" (Hesse 1990, 101)? For the ritual to be complete, introduced disharmony must become harmony. In writing about the games of the Romans – a civilization that put great store in the ritual value of games, after the Greeks – historian Monique Clavel-Lévêque (1984, 84) has called the spectacle of circuses a scale model of the "renewal of the world." Passions run hot on the field and in the stands. By the end, both sides and the spectators become one thing – an afternoon at the game, a diverse and antagonistic mob made one. By the time they are filing out through the vomitoria, the inherent contradictions of the cosmos and polis have been met and are receding. That renewal is also a definitional quality of any game; Once a winner is declared, the field is swept clean, the pieces are reset and equilibrium is perfectly restored.



Hesse's work (1990) also offers a particular window into digital gaming. Timothy Leary and Eric Gullichsen (1987, 200) wrote that Hesse's glass bead game, with its wires and beads representing thoughts and ideas, was the most clear-eyed imaginative anticipation of the computer, a conversion of "thoughts to digital elements" for which they dubbed Hesse the "Patron Saint of Cyberpunk." Certainly, Hesse hit on the prescient idea that the *glass beading* of our interactions – what Leary would consider digitization – *must be* and *has been* fertile with play and gaming.

Indeed, digital environments have been loci of meaningful play since the earliest days of computers. The very first servers to form the backbone of the internet were used, after hours, to create shared fantasy worlds (MUDs) and complex games (Anthony

2014a). With each incarnation of hardware the story is repeated; today, a third of downloaded applications on the most modern mobile devices are games, and the numbers are much higher for virtual reality (Baker 2020) and next-gen equipment making its way to market.

So, if we are imagining a syllabus for a hypothetical course in building holy games, texts like *The Glass Bead Game* offer a picture of both their potential and their emotional resonance, if not the particulars of their play. Many other writers have swum in these waters. The game of Azad in *The Player of Games* by Iain Banks (1988), for instance, offers play as the central political and religious activity of a galactic empire. The grand tournament of their game – in which, in the mold of Hesse (1990), elements of science, philosophy and gamesmanship fuse, creating a battle of ideas – is timed to finish with a conflagration on the fire planet Echronedal that symbolically destroys and renews. Texts such as *The Dice Man* (Rhinehart 1971)*, The Game-Players of Titan* (Dick 1963) or many others explore the symbolic and philosophical importance of such games, a cultural context which is impossible to convey in a rule book. If Hesse (1990) is far from delivering the needed enchiridion even for his own game, however, and other fiction writers similarly skimp on details of real-world play, that lack must be made up in readings from other disciplines.



## Where Imagination Fails. Historical Records as Game Design Resource

A second set of readings might skip from literature to history. In every continent, examples of holy games can be excavated, described and in many cases decoded for a concrete set of rules and critical social context. Prime examples covered in the contributions of holy game studies include, for instance, the Orongo birdman rituals

of the Rapa Nui (Edwards and Edwards 2013), which are preserved both in oral histories and outsider accounts. In these games, rival clans competed in a race that decided which leader might attain a yearlong sacred and untouchable status. Accounts are rich in specifics of both the import and ritual context of such games as well as their specifics. We know, for instance, that each clan sent a representative to compete in an endurance race that began with descending a 200-meter cliff face and swimming through shark-infested waters to the islet of Motu Nui, where the players vied to capture the first-laid egg of the season.

But such games are only as good as the historical records that take account of them, and games are notably ephemeral in this regard. Much more difficult to reconstruct, for instance, are the brahmodya, a more bookish but no less hard-fought affair in ancient India that is documented in the Bramanas and Upanishads. Brahmins congregated for a verbal sparring over riddles of a religious and philosophical nature with prizes and "reputations, and perhaps even the heads of the participants… very much at stake" (Thompson 1997, 13). While written accounts of these exist, with many reconstructions of the debates and their laurels, the correspondence to real events may only be guessed at.



The most widely studied and perhaps best known are the games of Greece in the classical age, which feted the many gods in games that suited their sphere of influence. For the goddess of love, the kallisteia, we have accounts of contests of beauty both male and female (Crowther 1985) with subcategories for parts of the body; for the god of wine and the arts, we have a relative wealth of scholarship, both ancient and modern, on the contest of choral pieces at the Great Dionysia that served as an incubator to the western tradition of drama; and even more historical record

exists for the holy games belonging to the father of the gods, the Olympics, a ritual event that literally set the clock of the ancient world and occasionally minted new demigods (Burkert 2006) on its tracks, sand and courses.

Many preserved accounts of the games were carried forward in epic poetry which, insofar as they often describe wars, feature the funerary rites for fallen soldiers as a trope. These include games in which mourners compete in the skills of discus and shooting arrows but also in bloodier sports, such as the fight of the caestus (a breed of wrestling with augmented handwear) or mock battles. Helen Lovatt (2005) in her study of the games in Statius' *Thebiad* explores these games and notes the particular role they play, just shy of war and at its doorstep. For her, the *naked* wars of ritual contest not only echo the battlefield, but "represent and articulate the realities from which they are marked off" (Lovatt 2005, 45). They become a perfect microcosm of human existence, as "the circus becomes the cosmos" (ibid.).



While much has been kept, more has been lost. The particular details of a game, at a resolution useful to a game designer, are often still frustratingly vague. Reconstructing the rules of these and other ancient games in detail, however, is painstaking work that has, very recently, been attempted in earnest. The *Locus Ludi* project (2017-2023) out of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland is an ambitious effort to excavate games, recreating and contextualizing them from across Greco-Roman culture, including their religious dimensions. Another project funded by the European Research Council, the *Digital Ludeme Project* (Soemers 2019), is using AI to revivify lost board games, reconstructing the rules in part by looking at the phylogeny of related regional games and, with a digital boost, also by testing thousands of plausible rulesets for extant ludic artifacts and seeing which yield the most *playable* results.

These approaches may yield a high-resolution take on the gameplay. Other historians are looking to do the same through observation of the living descendants of these ritually significant games. It is eminently possible, for instance, to watch a game of lacrosse, and through that get some sense of the *little brother of war* as it was played by the Mohawk and other indigenous North American peoples. Oral histories and scholarship can help populate lost sacred context and layered meanings: how the game once held parallels between play and the creation story, how performance of a game was used to supplicate to divine forces, so that a well-played match might cure, say, the spread of influenza and how older ornately carved balls and other artifacts from the game exist as ritual objects. An even greater distance must be bridged, perhaps, in ulama, the living descendant of the widespread mesoamerican ball game that went by many names and left its monumental courts throughout the coastal lowlands of central America. These courts were places not only of civic spectacle but, according to the work of Michael Cohodas (1975) and others, highly orchestrated ritual events played on key astrological dates which set the living and the underworld against one another on the court, echoing at each of these sacramental occasions the archetypical ball game in which the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque played against the lords of death.



In short, engagements with holy games in history can give valuable insight about the deep social reach of games as well as raise practical considerations about how such games might be designed, played and refereed. Yet even with the imaginative reach of literature and the facts of history, questions remain. How does sacred architecture, for instance, affect how one plays a game and how one watches it? When the stakes are ritually profound, and a fumbled ball might mean the life of a player, are there mechanisms for making favorable calls that bend the rules? When things go wrong –

equipment breaking, weather delays – how can the sacramental aspect of a holy game mesh with the practical uncertainties inherent to play? For these and other answers, aspiring creators of holy games might look to readings in the social sciences.

## Holy Games and Playful Rites. Sociological and Anthropological Texts

A number of scholars have done field work on holy games, and their work is invaluable to our hypothetical syllabus. Clifford Geertz (1973) and his work on the Balinese Cockfight fits here, as does the work of Bruce Kapferer (1997), who examines the gammaduva rites of Sri Lanka in which two teams, each containing a priest, compete in the name of deities Pattini or Palanga. Kapferer's research and others that look at games overlapping with religion are featured in the anthology *The Games of Gods and Man* (Köpping 1997). Another option for would-be designers would be first-hand observation. My Japanese husband has patiently endured our attendance at sumo matches, conducted as ever in a shrine and presided over by a Shinto priest. I can confirm to any student of holy games that it is possible to join the Greek Orthodox men who plunge into the icy January waters after the epiphany cross, hunt after the afikomen during a Jewish Seder, or with the right stroke of luck, play *khuru* with a group of Bhutanese monks in the Himalayan fields.



Such an engagement with living holy games may in fact profoundly change their views on western traditions of play and its role in the sacred. In her 2016 book *Why We Play*, anthropologist Roberte Hamayon (2016) reflects on decades spent with Siberian and Mongolian tribes, whose chief annual holiday is a series of games steeped in history and ritual. She explores why, in the West, games and play have fallen from favor, especially in religious contexts. "When Christian prohibitions but an

end to Circus Games in ancient Rome, it took much longer to fully discredit play in the West" (Haymayon 2016, 99), she says, arguing that these ritually important games were either domesticated into sports (useful for military training), or mentally sophisticated games (whose aim was classist or pedagogical). "This separation deprived these games, if not of all sacrality and rituality, then at least of any acknowledged sacrality and rituality," (ibid.) she writes. Against the backdrop of civilizations where this did not happen, the discontinuation of holy games seems more aberration than inevitability.

In current syllabi of game studies programs, anthropological and sociological examinations of play are mainstays. Perhaps this is because some of the first scholars to look seriously at games and play came from this quarter of academia. For those who would narrow their focus further to holy games, these core texts might be supplemented with readings from the closely related field of ritual studies. Ritual exists within fixed spaces and times and operates under strict rules – a definition that immediately suggests a kinship with game design.



The question of where rituals and games overlap – or whether they are *allowed* to overlap – is storied. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) drew a firm line separating the two, considering games and rituals incompatible because the first ends with a *disjunctive* separation of winners and losers and the second with a *conjunctive* sense of union among participants. In counterpoint, Gregory Bateson (1955), who studied rituals in Papua New Guinea in the 1920s and 1930s and whose notion of *framing* is useful in talking about boundaries both in rituals and in games, sees the act of play as paradigmatic for understanding ritual, a kind of genus under which the species of ritual falls. Or as Michael Houseman (2012, 1) puts it, "ritual is seen as a kind of flattened or smoothed out version of play, in which uncertainty has

been more or less eliminated." Games are another such subset of play under the strictures of rules, according to Bateson (1955), and in this way ritual and games are cousins of a sort. Other relationships also exist. Victor Turner (1980) informed by his work in Rhodesia with ritual in the 1940s, offers a rubric that in some sense elides games and ritual, forwarding the notion that some events are social dramas through which a culture negotiates conflicts, and, under this umbrella, sports – the Roman Games, for instance – scratches a similar itch to the ways that conflict is engaged in other ritualized ways.

This general avenue of inquiry leads to more parsing of terms and, quite apart from ritual, the question of what separates play from games and how sports relate to both. This is the heart of the tricky triad problem posed in 1988 by philosopher Bernard Suits (1988), who offers an influential delineation between the three. For Suits, the event's outcome – disruptive or reparative to the social fabric, in the sense that Turner or Lévi-Strauss seem to mean it – is immaterial, but instead the scholar ought to look to the individual player, whether she employs skills (games) or not (play), and whether or not others are called in to judge how well the skills are exhibited (sports).



Engaging with formal definitions and the generations of debate around them is, of course, tangential to the task of actually creating a game. I will hazard further that these arguments represent one way in which academic study can be particularly frustrating to builders, designers and performers of all types, creating an impish map that promises clarity but traces, instead, a labyrinth that occasionally dumps the reader back where they began. Or indeed farther back. Suits (1978) pursues the refinement of terms further in *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, coming to the absurd idea that drawing any definition that puts games and everyday life on opposite sides of a line might be a categorical mistake. Johan Huizinga (1955), the

noted Dutch theorist of games, comes to a similar conclusion at one point. Suits (1978) delivers this verdict in the voice of his titular grasshopper, the goldbricker of Aesop's fable turned into a Socratic mouthpiece. "Everyone alive is in fact engaged in playing elaborate games" (Suits 1978, 28), says the grasshopper, suggesting that when any person (or in this context, any ant) realizes this non-distinction between life and play, "each ceases to exist" (ibid.). It is a curious conclusion, but one with echoes in a reading of *God Inside Out* (Handelman and Shulman 1997), an examination of Siva's dice playing within Indic faiths by Bateson scholar Don Handelman. Handelman and Shulman (1997, 43-44) look at the games eternally played between Siva and consort Pavarti and show how they represent and intertwine with a cosmology in which "qualities of play are embedded and legitimated" within core narratives and "fluid and transformational qualities are manifest at all levels."

If everything is a game, then nothing is a game. How can that be of any practical help? Such readings and discussions might help spark an understanding of the unique place of holy games, and their continuity/discontinuity with everyday life. Handelman, in another work (Handelman 2012), puts forward the idea that the distinct frames that border a ritual in fact behave in strange ways, sometimes resembling a Möbius strip, a space in which participants are both in and out of the ritual reality. Exploring ways to do the same with a game – as the genre of alternative reality games does to great effect – or to look at other ways in which not all play is delineated by the chalk line or starting pistol can, perhaps, inspire ludic experiences that retain something of the holy game, which both exists within ritual space and extends beyond it.



Other texts within ritual studies yield more juice for the squeeze. Designers might look in particular at the subfield of ritual failure, the study of what happens when

ritual goes wrong. This offers a refreshing optic on the bottom-up, reparative forces at play in rituals and, I think, most games. A lost tool or forgotten speech in a ritual often leads to fruitful improvisation, showing that "breaches of rules can – and frequently do – instantiate the creation of new ritual rules" (Hüsken 2007, 346). This is a welcome corrective to digital game design, which can fall into the trap of becoming legalistic, devolving into subrules for every contingency or requiring constant updates or the heavy hands of online moderators. But designers can also be encouraged to remember and embrace this player inventiveness where lacunae in the rules become evident. Essays on ritual failure are a reminder of the reflexivity present in both games and rituals, that as much as people are "doing ritual while thinking about it" (Gobin 2018, 103) they do the same for games and are creating and policing[ii] local norms while they do.

Research on ritual failure is in turn an outgrowth of the idea of ritual criticism, an idea that took shape in the late 1980s and turns on the idea that, within ritual, design is not only present but possible. "Ritual criticism is the act of making judgments about rites," notes Ron Grimes (1990, 218), and "part of the work of ritual criticism is reflecting on the ways both participants and observers decide that one way of doing a rite is more affective or appropriate than some other way" (ibid.). As opposed to exploring ritual as a fixed text, Grimes championed an approach closer to one that we take with performance or literature – that it was a topic appropriate to both a PhD and an MFA, that it might be studied from a distance and, despite its aura of divine stricture, could be (and almost always was) shaped to present needs. Furthermore, that ritual construction was accomplished by means of skills that might be learned and refined.

This stems in no short part because, for Grimes (1990, 4), ritual was "not just theoretical." He himself is an active creator and participant in ritual events, something I experienced first-hand around 2011 when the two of us were invited to work with ritual workshop students at Union Theological Seminary. Grimes (1990) presented *Passage*, a modern transformational rite he created and led the seminarians through. I presented *Passage*, a 2007 digital *game* ritual from Jason Rohrer. Rohrer is perhaps best known for *Chain World* (2011), the game that was "supposed to be a religion" and caused a "holy war" at the 2011 Game Developers Conference (Fagone 2011). Grimes also documented the gamed chapel service I designed for the seminary, based loosely on the rules of blackjack (Anthony 2011).

Grimes (1990) frequently straddles the line of critic and creator in his writing, and I find such efforts uniquely helpful in thinking like a holy game designer. A 2004 essay from Michael Houseman, *The Red and the Black: A Practical Experiment for Thinking About Ritual*, is a trove of seemingly actionable insight and detail. He lays out his own home-baked ritual in which students are initiated, one-by-one, through a process that involves the segregation of sexes, wordplay, (very minor) physical pain and a throughline of charged ambiguity. His article includes what can only be understood as design commentary:



> "the actions… are easily recognizable as distinct from everyday intercourse and are difficult to define in terms other than their own enactment," […]. The preliminary exercise is useful because it sets the pattern for what in many ways is the essence for ritual experience. The participants become personally engaged in prescribed, emotionally charged bodily actions whose exact meaning remains nonetheless unclear." (Houseman 2004, 78)

This body of work from Grimes (1990), Houseman (2004, 2012) and other architects and navigators of ritual praxis may come closer than anything to fulfilling the

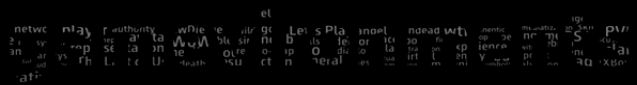
practical core of a holy game design curriculum, a Strunk and White to this otherwise arcane grammar. Yet looking beyond these academic sources, what else fits the bill?

## Head and Hands. A Master of Fine Arts that complements the PhD

The readings suggested in this paper nibble at the corners of what it would take to train students in the practical study of holy game design. These texts and fields of research begin to offer blueprints, inspiration and precedent. Is there more that we could offer them? Surely the answer is yes. There are related more academic texts, a mountain of them, including the academic field of religion proper. Foremost there may be the related study of religion and sport, recent examples of which include *Religion and Sports: An Introduction and Case Studies* (Alpert 2015) and the short-lived *International Journal of Religion and Sport* (Anderson and Marino 2009, Bain-Selbo 2009) which offer optics through which to understand how these areas and their overlap are understood and studied. This subfield, in my limited experience (and as these named examples show) focuses primarily on very established games and very established religions, exploring their intersection in contemporary experience and laying out ways to look at questions around ethics, religious narratives in culture and the concept of popular religion.



I have struggled, to my shame, to take much design sustenance from this quarter, which is my failing more than its. Absent theological studies, much of the field of religion is, unsurprisingly, geared for those pursuing careers in critique and not craftsmanship. And in this way, perhaps, it is radical to propose for religion the same divide, PhD vs. MFA, that is well known to graduate programs in literature or performance. Not that the divide in even these fields is harmonious, as decades of hand-wringing criticism has explored. Vlada Petric (1976, 3), one of the first and most

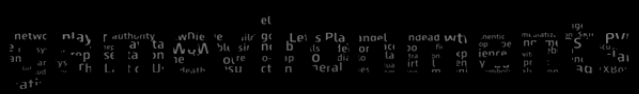


influential scholars of Film Studies in the United States, spent years devoting himself to a curricula that would bridge a characteristically *ludicrous* dichotomy in which

> "students in cinema studies lack the practical experience without which they are unfit to fully comprehend the specificities of the medium, and students in film production are deprived of the theoretical/historical background which is crucial to their development."

Yet his and other models to offer shared sustenance to Master of Fine Arts and PhD audiences have been slow to take wing, which is to say that academics generally do not write for creators, and creators are the exception when they ground their work in academic theory.

Apart from supplying this pile of texts, how should one load the insights of scholars into the bore of the creatives? Alternately, how can religion scholars supply applicable insights to those who would create religious experiences in games? In Castalia, the fictional home of *The Glass Bead Game*, Hesse (1990) reinforces the hopelessness of this divide. The notion of creativity was itself entirely looked down upon by the nation of scholars, and an academic's calling was one devoted to pure critique. Among them no works of art were produced and even musical compositions were tolerated "only in the form of stylistically rigid composition exercises" (Hesse 1990, 50). In such a context, the Game was an expression of scholarship, a rarer art, one that offered its own forms of communion. The new sublime was interdisciplinary study, conceptualization, hostility to false logic and above all the drive to correlate – a craft hermetic to itself. If echoes of that divide exist in real world academic settings to the extent that they stifle inquiry, and limit the flow of ideas between creatives and academics, then methods for overcoming are indeed ripe for further investigation and practical work.



As a final footnote, while the idea of a holy game design program may seem fanciful, perhaps in the extreme, I want to end by stating the author's earnest intentions. Such programs are not idle imaginative exercises, or not entirely. Few argue that humans will ever escape our tortured relationship to religious experience or cease to ask questions which have, until recently, been the purview of spiritual traditions. Ritual in its many forms has been an outlet and conduit for those experiences and a context for those questions, even when belief in religion proper has been at low ebb. That some of those rituals have been games, and that the form reaches back to the beginnings of recorded history, seems beyond arguing. Historically, need has created these architects of holy games, and indeed they have been and will always be among us. Should those designers not receive a training that, hitherto, we have been unable to give them?

The digital future seems inevitable, and the form of that digital future – on handheld devices, in the metaverse and in the unimaginable technologies to follow – is increasingly biased towards gamed experience. As we train up a generation of designers that provide diversion, would we not also train those capable of creating deep and shared experiences? In an era when religious experiences are being created and explored online, and religion informs and interpenetrates digital games at every level of the industry (Anthony 2014b), looking ahead to an era of holy digital games seems less and less like fiction.

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[i] There have been a number of efforts to reconstruct the game. A look at the efforts at glassbeadgame.com (1999), glass-bead.org (2012) and a 1967 reconstruction by Harry Goldgar (after the game of Go) show, in their differences, the wide latitude that Hesse's description affords.

[ii] In Linda Hughes paper "Beyond the Rules of Play: What are Rooie Rules Nice?" (1983) she deilghtfully explores the degree of sophistication employed while inventing and enforcing foursquare rules on the playground among a set of children, a reminder that bottom-up rules and norms are a force in social games.