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Ma Nishtana: Why is this Night Different? Photo by Gabriel McCormick.

Special Issue

Teaching with Games. Formative Gaming in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics

edited by

Tim Hutchings

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Re-Imagining Christian Education Through Neurodivergent Fellowship, Play, and Leadership in Online Videogaming

Erin Raffety and Maria Insa-Iglesias

Abstract

From Fall 2020 to Spring 2022, the Center of Theological Inquiry, funded by a grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation's Diverse Intelligences Initiative and in collaboration with Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland, created a Minecraft (2011) videogame prototype titled *The Spiritual Loop*. This videogame prototype was designed and developed for fostering spiritual growth and connection based on ethnographic research with neurodivergent persons and their Christian faith communities in the United States. Considering the lack of access disabled persons experience with respect to Christian communities in the US (Carter 2007), alongside the disproportionate emphasis on educational and therapeutic outcomes with respect to neurodivergent gamers (Spiel and Gerling 2021), our participatory fieldwork with neurodivergent players led us to emphasize the game's opportunities for spiritual connection versus mastery of biblical content or Christian virtues. This paper highlights two findings with respect to gaming and Christian education. First, despite the consistent emphasis on fostering Christian community and connection, neurotypical players frequently mistook the game's goal as Christian education, whereas neurodivergent players readily appreciated the game's fellowship potential. Second, neurodivergent players seamlessly assumed leadership roles in online game play, confirming the ability of online communities to transform theological hierarchies (Campbell 2012). Based on these findings, we suggest that a bifurcation in fellowship and education in traditional Christian formation reflects ableist biases. The flexible, playful environment presented in online gaming spaces offers critical opportunities for fostering fellowship between neurodivergent and neurotypical Christians, as well as untapped opportunities for neurodivergent leadership to flourish in reimagining more accessible environments for Christian education.

Keywords: Christian Education, Fellowship, Leadership, Minecraft, Neurodiversity, Play, gamevironments

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From Fall 2020 to Spring 2022, the Center of Theological Inquiry, funded by a grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation's Diverse Intelligences Initiative and in collaboration with Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland, created a Minecraft (2011) videogame prototype titled *The Spiritual Loop*. Our guiding research question was, can machine intelligence be used to enhance the spiritual lives of disabled persons? Our method was to center disabled persons' knowledge of and affinity for videogaming as a resource for Christian communities by creating a videogame to their specifications. Our data, gathered from three Christian Reformed communities between 2020 and 2022, demonstrates the impact of gameplay on existing relationships and spiritual connection within these groups. Although the larger study reviews findings at the intersection of machine intelligence, disability, and spirituality, this paper focuses on findings specific to neurodivergent leadership, fellowship, and their implications for both Christian education and burgeoning understandings of neurodivergent spirituality. For the purposes of this article, we define Christian spirituality to be both articulated beliefs and meaningful practices tied to Christian biblical principles and doctrinal theology, as well as relationships between individuals and the Triune God that constitute living out one's faith in the world. We use the term spirituality and neurodivergent spirituality because we are attentive to the lived experiences of people of faith who are autistic, have ADHD, or have other emotional and behavioral conditions, and how those may differ from experiences of neurotypical Christians.

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Background

In the United States, disabled persons lack physical and social access to traditional religious spirituality, including Christian worshiping communities, due to architectural barriers, bias in major religious texts, liturgies, practices, and beliefs, underrepresentation in leadership, and a history of physical, social, and spiritual abuse (see Carter 2007, Whitehead 2018). The field of Christian Disability Theology explores some of those biblical and liturgical barriers, expanding spiritual and theological insights by viewing disability through a social and theological model rather than a medical or deficit model (see, for instance, Eiesland 1994, Reinders 2008, Reynolds 2008, Swinton 2016, Brock 2019). Indeed, starting with Nancy Eiesland's landmark The Disabled God (1994), much theological work builds on disability activism and Disability Studies, drawing insights about God and spiritual practice from lived human experience and using disability as a critical lens for claims about Christian practices and social justice (see, for instance, Betcher 2007, Conner 2018, Jacobs and Richardson 2022, Raffety 2022). A small but increasing focus on autism theology within the larger field of Disability Theology draws attention to autism's value of diversity within the body of Christ (Macaskill 2021), Christ as he who redefines normalcy and belonging (van Ommen 2023), and the importance of friendship for autistic persons in Christian community (Swinton 2012).

However, autism theology, with few notable exceptions (see, for instance, Bowman 2021, Jacobs 2023, Waldock 2023), has largely featured non-autistic theologians writing about autistic people and has only recently begun to grapple with the broader Disability Studies literature on identity-first language, neurodiversity, or the *double empathy* problem (Milton 2012). Indeed, many autistic persons increasingly claim identity-first language, arguing that autism represents a significant part of their identity that is not subordinate to or in tension with their personhood (see, for

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instance, Botha, Hanlon and Williams 2023). Furthermore, many autistic persons see their identities as falling under the broader category of neurodivergence, a category of persons whose thinking, behaviors, and ways of learning implicitly differ from that of the neurotypical people (Walker 2021). Neurodivergence is a broad term that can include autistic persons and persons with ADHD, persons with dyslexia, Tourette's, other emotional and behavioral conditions, and persons with mental health diagnoses.

The neurodiversity paradigm, which grew out of the Autism Rights Movement in the 1990s (Singer 1999), foregrounds the social discrimination that often results from these diagnoses and resists pathologizing difference (Chapman 2019), championing not only the rights but the contributions of neurominorities and neurodivergent persons in a world that rewards conformity. In his work on autistic communication, for instance, Damian Milton argues that issues of access may stem from communication biases between neurotypical and neurodivergent persons, owing to the double empathy problem, in which neurotypical persons perceive neurodivergent persons to be uninterested in communication because typical biases pervade (Milton 2012, 884). Similarly, Vikram Jaswal and Nameera Akhtar (2018, 3) show that autistic people often engage in seemingly antisocial behaviors such as avoiding eye contact or stimming, precisely to maintain social connection. Finally, my research with disabled children in Christian families who use alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) devices, noted the extent to which communication broke down because non-disabled persons were not able to learn AAC with enough fluency to receive others' communication (Raffety et al. 2019, 109-110).

Many theologians have troubled how routinized expectations for communication within congregational environments bracket, limit, or diminish a diversity of

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communication styles (Saliers 1998, Brock 2019, Spurrier 2019, van Ommen 2023, Waldock 2023). Although many theologians have emphasized the importance of friendship and belonging for neurodivergent persons in Christian community (see, for instance, Swinton 2012), others have drawn helpfully on neurodivergent perspectives to critique and refine our understandings of those very terms. For instance, drawing on interview data with neurodivergent persons, Naomi Jacobs and Emily Richardson (2022, 82-87) highlight how Christian communities often compel neurodivergent persons to show up in group settings to prove their social connections. In a recent article, Krysia Waldock (2023) identifies the ways in which an emphasis on belonging caused her to mask elements of her neurodivergence and how "coming out" (Waldock 2023, 4) as neurodivergent ultimately "discredited" (Waldock 2023, 13) her concerns within Christian community.

Within the Christian Disability Theology literature there is a clarifying view of some of the problems neurodivergent people encounter with respect to accessing worship and fellowship, yet there are only a few studies which begin to identify the merits of neurodivergent spirituality or alternative ways of Christian practice. One such promising avenue is the access afforded and studied in online Christian community spaces, such as online worship, ironically popularized due to widespread lack of access during the global pandemic (see, for instance, Endress 2021, Waldock 2022). Many neurodivergent people prefer to worship online, because it helps manage sensory pressures and facilitates more comfortable and broader ranges of engagement. Furthermore, online spaces have been shown to offer more flexible opportunities to engage in "convergent" (Campbell 2012, 76-80) religious practices that shifts and challenges religious hierarchies in novel ways. Therefore, videogames offer a significant opportunity for potential spiritual connection, given their immense popularity, elements of play, and substantial accessibility.

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Although there is a robust literature on Theology of Disability, only a handful of scholars are doing significant work in video gaming and spirituality (see, for instance, Campbell and Grieve 2014, Campbell et al. 2016, Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2015, Gottlieb 2015, Garner 2020), despite the explosion of contemporary studies on the social value and impact of online gaming. Furthermore, not much research has been done on virtual worlds and multiplayer video games from disabled perspectives, despite how the advent of game streaming with platforms such as Facebook and Twitch has substantially widened the social component of gaming. Kathryn Ringland's (2019a) extensive ethnographic work with the Autcraft community, a community of autistic players in the online game *Minecraft*, demonstrates the variety of forms of technology and platforms that foster simultaneous connection and communication, as well as the importance of virtual world as social space for autistic youth. These games facilitate important social flexibility for disabled users in that they can traverse virtual spaces in new, creative, and meaningful ways (Rapp and Ginsburg 2013, Ringland 2019b).

Katta Spiel and Kathrin Gerling's review of HCI (human–computer interaction) research with neurodivergent people finds that play is "medicalized" (Spiel and Gerling 2021, 3) insofar as "games are developed to either address specific characteristics [of neurodivergent people] or attempt to cure individuals of neurodivergent traits that are perceived and identified as undesirable, with the majority of systems designed to be played in educational or medical settings" (ibid.). Spiel and Gerling (2021, 28) highlight the extent to which serious games aimed to increase and normalize neurodivergent social interactions through medical or therapeutic interventions. In these videogames,

"playfulness as an enjoyable, self-determined, voluntary, fun, and essentially unproductive concept...is largely absent for neurodivergent players. Instead, the

rhetorical concept of fun and games is exploited for the sake of othering neurodivergent populations further, to 'cure' them, to 'identify' them through diagnosis, to imply that their sociality and knowledge is insufficient and to use notions of inclusion while pointedly conceptualizing neurodivergence as deviant from social norms." (ibid.)

For these reasons, our study, in conversation with neurodivergent gamers, sought to prioritize play and spiritual connection rather than education or therapeutic aims. We sought to consider how videogaming and play could offer opportunities for the challenge of access, responding to the access concerns neurodivergent persons raise in the literature with respect to Christian fellowship and worship.

Many theologians have acknowledged that the Christian God by nature is highly playful and creative (Moltmann 1972, Dean 2004, Rigby 2009, Barth 2010a, Barth 2010b); some theologians even emphasize God's wildness (Brueggemann 2021). However, play as a practice largely appears only in literature on children's Christian education, with the most prominent recent example being *Godly Play* (Berryman 1995), although there are some writings on gamification emerging in the youth ministry field (see, for instance, Hayse 2009, Stewart 2015, Lockhart 2018). Although *Godly Play* emphasizes unstructured play with Christian story elements, it remains curiously segregated to children and remarkably separate from the Christian practices of worship and fellowship that remain so problematic for neurodivergent persons. Yet, children form but a small proportion of video gamers, with adult men forming the majority and adult women comprising nearly 40 percent of all gamers (McGonigal as cited in Hess 2019, 81).

In their seminal anthology *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve (2014, 2-3) argue that the intersection between digital games and religion has been neglected for four primary reasons: first, digital games have been

demeaned as mere youth entertainment; second, they have been devalued as an artificial form of expression; third, technology is thought of as secular; and finally, virtual gaming worlds are seen as unreal. Could similar prejudices be at play when it comes to neurodivergent gamers within their Christian communities? What can we learn from how neurodivergent gamers played with worship, fellowship, and Christian practices in gaming spaces? Finally, what insights does this play have for our understanding of Christian spirituality, especially when it comes to neurodivergent perspectives?

Methods

The goal of the research project was to center disabled persons' knowledge and affinity for videogaming as a resource for Christian communities and to answer the question of whether machine learning could enhance spiritual connection for these communities by creating a videogame to their specifications. We drew on existing virtual ethnographic methods and techniques used with other gaming communities (Boellstorff et al. 2012) and employed participatory methods used by disabled computing scholars such as Ringland (2017, 2019a) and design (Williams and Gilbert 2019) to center the insights of disabled gamers in all phases of research, including game construction, testing, gameplay, and evaluation phases. In addition to the research subjects (described below), the research team consisted of the research fellow, who carried out ethnographic fieldwork, including initial interviews in the sampling phase, focus groups for game construction, participant observation in gameplay, and focus group feedback sessions; and the technology fellow, who built the videogame technology according to the fieldwork specifications, although the two fellows often worked closely throughout the project. The project also made use of an interdisciplinary Advisory Board, comprised of scholars in disability theology,

gaming, and Christian theology, who provided feedback at various stages of the research.

Recruitment

After obtaining ethical approval, research subjects for the project were recruited through existing networks and social media. Given the small size of the project and the research fellow's expertise with Reformed Christian Theology, the decision was made to restrict the participants to Protestant Christian communities. Other criteria for participation in the project specified that communities must have disabled participants with prior experience in videogame play, as well as others in the community (disabled or non-disabled participants) who were willing to play with them. In other words, whereas disabled players were required to have prior knowledge of videogaming, non-disabled players were not. The research only admitted subjects who were preexisting members of Christian faith communities. Although disabled participants' knowledge of videogames and experience of disability varied considerably across the research units, purposeful sampling was employed such that each research unit was comprised of at least one disabled gamer and one non-disabled community participant. In Fall 2020, the research fellow completed initial interviews with interested parties, which were coded and analyzed for focused and open themes, and ultimately recruited three research units, existing Reformed Christian communities made up of two to four individuals, for the pilot study.

Research Subjects

The research fellow recruited a total of eight research subjects who were grouped according to their preexisting community groups in research units (RU). RU1 is formed by an adult (female, 60s) and an autistic young adult (male, 21); RU2 is

formed by an adult (male, 50s), his daughter with mood disorder (11), a young adult (male, 20s), and a young adult (female, 20s); and RU3 is formed by an adult with fibromyalgia, PTSD, and anxiety (female, 40s), and her mother (female, 60s).

Research Unit	Number of members	Demographics	Location	Community Type
Unit 1 (RU1)	2	Adult female, white, 60s; Young adult male, white, 21, autistic	New Jersey	Reformed Church
Unit 2 (RU2)	4	Adult male, 50s, Black and Latinx (father); Youth, female, 11, Black and Latinx, <i>mood disorder</i> (daughter); Young adult male, white, 20s; Young adult female, white, 20s	New Jersey	Lutheran Camp
Unit 3 (RU3)	2	Adult, female, white, 40s, Fibromyalgia, PTSD, anxiety (daughter); Female, white 60s (mother)	California/Wyoming	Presbyterian (PCUSA) church

Table 1: Research subjects.

All disabled participants in the study had diagnoses, including autism, mood disorder, anxiety, and PTSD, that fall under the umbrella of neurodivergence (although some had additional diagnoses as seen above). Although few participants used the language of neurodivergence themselves to self-identify, all three of the participants identified and expressed understandings of their disability consistent with the neurodiversity movement, including the understanding of neurodiversity as a natural difference in human variation with distinct ways of thinking, learning, and behaving, as well as the notion of neurodivergence accompanying and intersecting with other social dynamics, such as race and gender (Singer 1999, Walker 2021). Therefore, by using the terminology of neurodivergent and neurotypical in this article, we reference a definition of disability that is identity-driven (Botha, Hanlon and Williams 2023), contextual in its recognition of ableism that denotes some brains as typical and some as divergent, yet also anti-pathologizing (Chapman 2019) in that it seeks to center

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neurodiversity as a robust, affirming framework for neurological difference (Spiel and Gerling 2021, 3-5).

There was a wide variety across ages of participants and roles of those persons within worshiping communities. For instance, one neurodivergent participant was an eleven-year-old girl (RU 2) and another was the head pastor of a Presbyterian congregation (RU 3). While RU 1 was a traditional church community, RU 2 was a group of camp counselors and a family who regularly attended a Christian camp. The neurodivergent pastor of RU 3 left her call at a Presbyterian church in California during the course of the research, so we adapted to help her play the game with her mother, who is a member of another church community and was feeling socially isolated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we worked with a loose definition of Christian community that was self-articulated and self-identified for the study.

Fieldwork

In Winter 2020, these three units participated in focus group conversations to provide insight on what they wanted to see in a game prototype. In addition to these group sessions in their research units, the research fellow also observed the majority of the neurodivergent gamers on Zoom playing their favorite games. This helped the research fellow experience the features disabled gamers particularly enjoyed so that she could work to incorporate them into the future prototype. This also allowed the research fellow to begin to develop a method for conducting participant observation with gamers and their communities online, something that is not unprecedented, but needed a bit of adaptation given some disabled gamers' accessibility needs and the challenge of online group play.

In Spring 2021, the technology fellow worked to construct a novel game in Minecraft

units along with the research fellow. Finally, in January and February 2022, each research unit participated in a feedback session with the research fellow, where they provided verbal and chat feedback on their experience playing the game. It should be noted that research units played exclusively with the research fellow and the other members of their unit so that the researcher could observe how the game impacted

From September 2021 to February 2022, each research unit played the game in their

spiritual play, conversations, and relationships among persons who already had prior relationships. (Again, the goal was to foster enhanced spiritual connection within existing faith communities versus initiate spiritual connection.)

Game Prototype: The Spiritual Loop

In this section, we briefly describe the game and its features so that readers can follow the discussion and findings specific to the gaming elements. Neurodivergent gamers' input in the preliminary fieldwork stage of research led us to focus on building the game in *Minecraft* due to its familiarity and appeal and to develop a village-based game with a church, due to the interests of our players in exploring spiritual and natural environments and experimenting with worship participation and fellowship. The server was set up with features and rules, inspired by the Autcraft community (Ringland 2017), to create a fun, safe environment for neurodivergent players and their communities. These included: players need to be on the whitelist to join the server; the default mode is adventure; the difficulty level is easy; there are no monsters or enemies; players can fly; and the nether world is disabled. These features were recommended by experienced players to support beginning players and ensure ease of play for multiplayer groups.

The game's storyline starts in a small village (see Figure 1) consisting of a main square, with a fountain, several villager houses, and a small church with a bell tower. Players can use this space but they cannot alter existing buildings (i.e., players cannot place or destroy structures in these spaces except in the dedicated areas with yellow outlines). The game's purpose is to cooperate with players to complete a set of tasks (individual and cooperative), called, *advancements* in *Minecraft*, on each level, and make it to the last level to win the game (see Figure 2 [B] for level 0 advancements and [C] for level 1 advancements). When players complete all the advancements, they are invited to participate in the great feast, a banquet that simulates the last supper in Christian scripture. Upon completion of this final level, they advance to creative mode, where they are given access to all resources and can explore beyond the pre-existing village, simulating heavenly freedom.

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Figure 1: A bird's eye view of the Spiritual Loop Project *Minecraft* server. The first environment where participants start playing is the village, which includes the fountain square, plots (yellow house plot and mural plot), and the church. This server is inhabited by non-player characters (NPCs) who guide players, promote social interaction, and collaborative play to win the game. © Center of Theological Inquiry 2023.

Research participants requested interactive and cooperative gaming elements, so that they could experience interaction and fellowship in the game while working together on shared tasks. *Minecraft* already works through a series of individual advancements by which players can gather resources and build tools to alter the existing environment. We designed custom *individualized tasks* where each player is required to interact with elements of the game or perform tasks that benefit the community. For example, the task "find your chest" requires players to find a chest labeled with their name; the task "build your house" requires players to place a minimum number of blocks into the configuration of a house on their plot of land to welcome others and interact with them; the task "speak to your neighbors" requires socializing and interacting with others in the game through utilizing the chat feature. Other individualized tasks include "discover the mural," "call to worship," "visit the church," and "light the church."

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We also added *cooperative tasks* to the game, which are customized advancements where cooperative play is encouraged to benefit the community. For example, the task "share to care" requires sharing resources with others, and the task "cooperate to discover the mural" requires cooperating to break blocks to discover the village mural. Players are not able to advance through the game if they do not discover the meaningful cooperation necessary to complete the tasks (see the hint provided by NPC in Figure 2 [D] and [E]). Other cooperative tasks include "share time together," "worship together," and "the great feast."

Although a few of the advancements can be individually completed (i.e. "find your chest," "build your house," etc.), most advancements require cooperative action to be completed (i.e. "share to care," "worship together," etc.). The game is designed to encourage multiplayer interaction and cooperation.

Tasks are designed with an algorithm that hinders advancing the videogame levels for those players who try to advance merely individually. One example of the obstacles players encounter if they try to advance through videogame levels without collaboration is when the player decides to break too many blocks to discover the mural without engaging in cooperative play. If the player keeps breaking blocks after the AI witness appears and warns the player about the need to collaborate, this player will be prevented from breaking more blocks. Another obstacle that hinders players from completing the whole videogame is when the player completes all advancements by themself. The player will not be able to complete the whole videogame until everyone has completed all the advancements. It is at that stage when a new space appears, called Community House, and all players will be able to complete the last two advancements and win the game together.

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Figure 2: some scenes from the *Minecraft* server. Players start the game next to the fountain square (A), where they find a book with instructions about how to play. Players need to complete a set of individual and cooperative tasks (called advancements in *Minecraft*) that are listed in the book or can be visualized on the advancement tab: level 0 (B) and level 1 (C). The NPC, Al witness, guides players through the game and provide hints when interacting with it, for example, the mural plot (D) or at the Community House (E). © Center of Theological Inquiry 2023.

Finally, the game integrates non-player characters (NPCs), specifically the aforementioned witness characters, to pop up when players are taking non-cooperative actions in the game and offer hints as to how to proceed. For instance, when a player is looking for a plot to build a house and decides to build on sandy ground, a non-solid foundation (as attested to in scripture), an Al witness character

appears and provides a hint. Because the game is designed with the idea that creations need to be built on a solid foundation, if a player continues to build on non-solid ground, the witness will appear with a message "right click." If the player clicks on it, the NPC provides the hint, "Hey, your house foundation will not last here...be like a wise person who builds their house upon the rock." Another example of the integration of NPCs into the game as helpers is when a player needs to break blocks to discover the mural. If the player decides to break too many blocks without engaging in cooperative play, a witness appears. When the player clicks on it, it responds, "Call your neighbor to help you break the pink blocks!" (Figure 2 (D)). Hence, the game encourages players' freedom of exploration and creativity while providing them guidance through NPCs as they progress through the various advancements and levels.

Discussion

The discussion draws on data gathered during gameplay sessions and feedback sessions conducted from September 2021 to February 2022. The research fellow conducted a total of five play sessions with RU1, four play sessions with RU2, and seven play sessions with RU3, each session totaling one to one and a half hours of play, for a total of 30.5 hours between September 2021 and February 2022. Each play session was video-recorded using Zoom and participants used screenshare to provide sporadic video footage of various gameplay elements. After each session, audio transcripts were downloaded, edited, coded, and analyzed for open and fixed concepts and themes. The server console also reported data on advancements made in game sessions and interaction with NPCs that was utilized in data analysis. Finally, each research unit participated in a focus group exit interview that solicited feedback on emergent themes of interest following their last play session in January and

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February 2022.

Research	Session	Date	Duration	Participants	Notes
Unit	Number				
RU1	1	11/16/21	1.5 hrs	All	
RU1	2	11/29/21	1.5 hrs	All	
RU1	3	1/28/22	1.5 hrs	2/3	
RU1	4	2/1/22	1 hr	All	
RU1	5	2/22/22	1.5 hrs	All	Feedback
					session/
					Beat game
RU2	1	10/1/21	1.5 hrs	All	
RU2	2	10/22/21	1.5 hrs	4/5	
RU2	3	11/19/21	1.5 hrs	All	Beat game
RU2	4	1/27/22	1.5 hrs	All	Feedback
					session
RU3	1	9/23/21	1.5 hrs	All + tech fellow	
RU3	2	10/1/21	1.5 hrs	1/2	
RU3	3	10/20/21	1.5 hrs	1/2	
RU3	4	11/4/21	1.5 hrs	All	
RU3	5	11/23/21	1.5 hrs	All	
RU3	6	12/1/21	1.5 hrs	All	Beat game
RU3	7	1/18/22	1.5 hrs	All	Feedback
					session

Table 2. Play Sessions Conducted.

This data was coded and analyzed for focused and open themes, which yielded evidence of neurodivergent leadership in gameplay and a tension between Christian education and fellowship that broke down along neurotypical and neurodivergent lines. These findings are discussed in conversation with relevant literatures, and it is suggested the findings also help to identify compelling aspects of neurodivergent spirituality, that makes a contribution to the existing literatures on Christian education, videogaming, and disability theology.

Neurodivergent Leadership

In each research unit neurodivergent players took clear leadership roles in teaching others how to play, organizing others in the cooperative tasks integral to game play,

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and providing feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the game. In RU1, the neurodivergent player intuitively flew through advancements, while the neurotypical pastor struggled with basic commands and elements of the game. In RU2, an 11-year-old neurodivergent youth emerged as the ringleader, teaching adults how to play and orchestrating advancement and non-advancement oriented collaborative play. In RU3, a neurodivergent pastor patiently assisted her mother, who was a neurotypical older adult, in navigating the individual and cooperative advancements in the game.

Although all players noted that they loved the collaborative aspect of the game, neurodivergent players not only played a significant assistive role in gameplay but did so without complaint. Many players named cooperative tasks built into the advancements, including discovering the mural, worshiping in the church, sharing resources, and eating together, as highlights of the game experience from both a social and spiritual perspective. However, players also engaged in collaborative tasks outside of the advancement structure. For instance, neurodivergent players led their groups in cooperative tasks like constructing a chapel, rescuing one another from water and caves, and exploring surrounding villages. As one neurodivergent person reflected on what made the game meaningfully collaborative, she explained:

"I think it was our interaction in general because when one of us encountered something, regardless of our locations, the collaboration more was us talking it out, identifying the problem and then us all going, okay, I'll go and get this. I'll get this. We'll all meet up over here. Um, not necessarily collaboration, um, virtual only. So it was kind of like with the, with the dialogue portion of it added." (RU2, Feedback Session, 27 January 2022)

In the quote above, a neurodivergent player identifies that collaboration in the game occurred not merely because of the cooperative elements built into the structure of

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the game ("virtual only"), but because of what the players themselves brought to organizing their actions, through attention to one another's locations and needs, by speaking to one another over Zoom while they played. It is significant that when it came to identifying how collaboration occurred in the game, the neurodivergent player attributed that quality to the group and its dialogue rather than the structure of the game itself. In this quote, the player suggests that there are resources for organizing problem-solving within the dialogue that accompanied gameplay, attesting to leadership that is collaborative, dialogical, and organizational in nature. Several neurodivergent players expressed a desire to collaborate on individual advancements, such as "build your house," which was not supported by the existing game. This is significant, because even though they themselves did not need help in building their homes, they saw that it would have been beneficial to be able to teach others how to do so, thus improving the gaming experience for everyone who was working together to move through the game.

In addition, it was surprising that even neurodivergent players who had ample knowledge of *Minecraft* and led with expertise noted that more instruction in the game would benefit all players. In this excerpt, Player A, a neurotypical player and Player B, a neurodivergent player, agree that there wasn't enough direction in the game:

Player A (NT): "For me, there wasn't enough direction. I didn't really know like what I was doing...and when it ended, I was surprised because I felt like I didn't really know what I had done. Like, I couldn't remember a few tasks, but there were other things that just happened. Or I was told to press this button and a little banner popped up and then we at the end, uh, had made it, um, as like an inexperienced player like that, I was missing some of that."

Player B (ND): "[There was] too little direction [in the game]. There should've been more like push for them. Some things like for the, um, what was it? The, the, the dinner thing. It should have been more straightforward on where like

we had to be at what time." (RU2, Feedback Session, 27 January 2022)

In this excerpt, Player A, a neurotypical player, expresses some confusion in the game as an inexperienced player, especially in understanding how his actions led to certain progress, and he requests more direction in the game. Interestingly, Player B, a neurodivergent player, who had no problem navigating the game and spent much of her time teaching the rest of the players in her research unit, readily agrees. She can see the value of more direction for players even if she herself did not necessarily need it. This finding suggests that for play to be accessible to both neurotypical and neurodivergent people, both sets of players will benefit from comprehensive directions. In sum, neurodivergent players demonstrated a conviction that direction and instruction are equitable features of play.

Overall, in the feedback sessions and in gameplay, neurodivergent players readily appreciated the value of playfulness, collaboration, and Christian fellowship experience in gameplay. As one neurodivergent pastor offered:

"The game ... functions ... very much like a coffee hour, only in a way that's accessible to people who don't think the height ... of great socialization is holding a bad cup of coffee and standing around in a suit and tie ... I can see a lot of people my age and younger in a church enjoying just, we're all getting online. We're gaming together. We're chatting. How's your dad doing? Heard he was sick. Do you need a prayer? I can offer one ... I think it really adds an element of social engagement that's nontraditional enough to be very attractive." (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022)

In this quotation, a neurodivergent pastor highlights the benefit of the nontraditional space of *The Spiritual Loop* online videogame for enjoyment, play, and fellowship. She implicitly critiques "coffee hour" (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022), a traditional post-worship gathering during which informal conversation and beverages

are shared, as inaccessible and inadequate for forging true social connection. This is something that other neurodivergent people have critiqued as well (Jacobs and Richardson 2022, 82-87). In so doing, she makes clear that the game is not primarily an educational, but a social space: the game offers an alternative space for accessible fellowship for those who may find traditional forms of fellowship unsatisfactory. However, she also highlights the spiritual component of accessible fellowship, making clear that the game is not just a social space, but allows players an opportunity to connect spiritually and even engage in spiritual care for one another ("How's your dad doing? Heard he was sick. Do you need a prayer? I can offer one..." (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022)). This is significant because it affirms what we observed throughout gameplay amongst neurodivergent leaders: play and spirituality are not separate endeavors but contiguous practices that the church has overlooked when it comes to spiritual formation.

Fellowship vs. Christian Education

However, in the feedback sessions, several neurotypical players struggled to value play and fellowship as goods in and of themselves. They expressed a desire for them to be more clearly tied to education, even though education was never the stated goal of the game. As one neurotypical pastor remarked:

"There's more *Minecraft* than Bible study...I mean, playing the *Minecraft* is fun, but how do we get the more balanced where you're, what you learn and how you move forward in *Minecraft* is driven by you being able to learn things like, how did we put in our Bible study inventory that we understand a piece of the story, or like, we can hoe, but how do we, uh, build an ark?" (RU1, Feedback Session, 22 February 2022)

"I feel like the Bible study part was overshadowed by the figuring out the...Like, I didn't notice some of those things sometimes because, um, wasn't sure about what we were doing." (RU1, Feedback Session, 22 February 2022)

"The story talks about like, where's the, I can read the scripture, but now I'm just, it's like another task in the game. Where's the learning part? And we might not be there yet, but...probably from my perspective at looking at it as a Bible study game for people to use, I have people in mind who, how would they play this game and what it would mean to them? And then what does it mean? Why would I use this game as a Christian educator?" (RU1, Feedback Session, 22 February 2022)

Across these three quotations from the feedback session, we can see that the neurotypical pastor insists on thinking about the game as tool for "Bible study," learning the Bible, and "Christian education" (RU1, Feedback Session, 22 February 2022), despite repeated reminders that this was not the focus of the game. We can see that by evaluating the game through the lens of Christian education, she finds it objectionable that "scripture" is just "like another task in the game" (RU1, Feedback Session, 22 February 2022), because she connects meaning-making with biblical learning. This viewpoint implicitly juxtaposes play and meaning-making in ways that contrast with neurodivergent players' experiences. Whereas neurodivergent players expressed delight and expanded access in spiritual play in the videogame, some neurotypical players seemed to see play in *Minecraft* and even fun as potentially limiting to a goal of biblical learning. In the neurotypical pastor's words, "I mean, playing the Minecraft is fun, but how do we get to the more balanced ... Bible study?" (RU1, Feedback Session, 22 February 2022).

The insistence that fun have a purposeful goal coheres with Spiel and Gerling's concern with the way "the rhetorical concept of fun and games is exploited for the sake of othering neurodivergent populations further, to 'cure' them, to 'identify' them through diagnosis, to imply that their sociality and knowledge is insufficient and to use notions of inclusion while pointedly conceptualizing neurodivergence as deviant from social norms" (2021, 28). Indeed, the neurotypical pastor's inability to embrace the joyful unproductiveness of play points to an implicit ableism at the heart of

spiritual formation that prioritizes biblical learning and knowledge over fun and fellowship.

A neurotypical woman echoed these concerns in her comments, remarking:

"I think [the game] was very simple and of course it's just, you're in a developing stage ... but just having [scripture] pop-up and that be pretty much it, um, without there being really any ... real discussion on how, what the church is and what it's supposed to be and how the church evolves ... I think what I'm saying is that when you get into most, probably junior high and above [kids], they're going to tire of the game really quickly." (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022)

In this excerpt, a neurotypical woman voices her concern that the game is too simple for older youth, because scripture does not prompt "any ... real discussion" (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022). However, presuming that complexity is what engages neurodivergent gamers opposes what we found in our study. Although gamers sought more interaction, they also unanimously asked for more instruction and enjoyed playing leadership roles, precisely because, as the 11-year-old neurodivergent ringleader of one research unit exclaimed, "I had fun helping you guys do everything" (RU2, Feedback Session, 27 January 2022). Indeed, not a single neurodivergent player, who varied in ages from 11 to 40, mentioned being bored by the game, whereas all of them expressed delight in playing together in Christian community.

It is noteworthy that this neurotypical woman felt that the absence of discussion regarding the church undermined the game's efficacy. Although gamers were unified in their appreciation for the game's collaborative nature and the opportunity to talk as they played, the absence of a formal discussion was something that failed to meet neurotypical standards for meaning-making and Christian formation. In the

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comments from the neurotypical pastor and congregant, we detect a reticence to embrace fellowship and play as appropriate vehicles for spiritual connection and growth, and an archetype of Christian education that upholds biblical learning, complexity, and formal discussion that looms large over creativity, freedom of expression, and fun in videogaming.

Further Insights from Neurodivergent Perspectives for Christian Spirituality

In response to the neurotypical congregant's comments, the neurodivergent pastor replied:

"I'm wondering if, instead of thinking about using *Minecraft*, um, as an avenue to teach Christianity ... I'm trying to figure out how to phrase what I'm saying here, Christianity by and large is in this country a very independent, non-collaborative endeavor. [So] maybe instead of trying to teach that endeavor through *Minecraft*, we should be teaching Christianity how to be collaborative...through *Minecraft*. Maybe we should be learning from *Minecraft* rather than using it as a tool to convey something that's already not quite biblical, but this is just the way we accept things are." (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022)

In this musing, a neurodivergent pastor flips the goals of Christian education on their head, arguing that rather than using *Minecraft* "as an avenue for teaching Christianity" (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022), Christianity may have something to learn from the collaborative practice of community, a biblical virtue, effected through *Minecraft*. It is highly significant that in the same way this neurodivergent pastor critiqued congregational coffee hour as a poor opportunity for socialization, she critiques contemporary Christianity as "independent" and "non-collaborative" (RU3, Feedback Session, 18 January 2022), thus already in tension

within biblical teachings and principles. In order to unhinge Christianity from its ableist underpinnings, it may be necessary to move social and spiritual opportunities to alternative spaces and to appreciate what the implicit values of videogames, such as *Minecraft*, can offer Christian spirituality and fellowship. If videogames are to present a viable opportunity for neurotypical and neurodivergent congregants to grow in spiritual and social connections through play and fellowship, games cannot be subordinated or coopted by existing Christian educational values (which maintain ableist biases).

Although we noted biases amongst neurotypical players when it comes to fellowship, play, and Christian education, the insights of neurodivergent players when it comes to leadership and spirituality should not be understated. The emphasis on collaboration and instruction that neurodivergent players emphasized in their gameplay feedback highlight significant gifts for the church in shared, accessible leadership. This could bring substantive clarity to how neurodivergent folks both critique and refine discourse and practice of Christian leadership, by undoing cults of ability and individualism in favor of true gifts of the Spirit poured out on the body of Christ (Brock 2019, Raffety 2022). Furthermore, the neurodivergent pastor's reframing of both fellowship and gaming as spiritual and not just social spaces reminds us that play for play's sake in Christian community is a worthwhile endeavor. Indeed, our study shows that neurodivergent players have significant desire and resources for making these spaces more equitable, if we only yield leadership to them to do so.

Finally, the insights that games possess their own spiritual architecture that may have valuable insights for Christian communities, while well substantiated in the religion and gaming literature (Wagner 2014), is something neurodivergent players grasped, yet neurotypical players struggled to appreciate. Here it is important to point out that

fellowship and play may have significant insights for Christian education after all, but not on the terms of neurotypical approaches (biblical learning, complexity, and formal discussion) to education. This is encouraging, because it shows that neurodivergent approaches to spirituality are creative and flexible in their analysis of nontraditional settings, such as videogaming, and that the perceived hierarchy between fellowship and Christian education may be but a neurotypical presumption. More study is needed, of course, but in integrating aspects of Christian community life, such as fellowship, play, and education, neurodivergent players may be offering Christian communities more holistic and virtuous ways to practice Christianity.

Conclusion

This article has presented an overview of some of the findings from *The Spiritual Loop* project, a participatory study of video games' potential to enhance the spiritual lives of Christian congregations and foster connection between neurotypical and neurodivergent members. Although we present numerous examples of how *The Spiritual Loop*, a collaborative online game built in *Minecraft*, facilitated play with religious authority and Christian fellowship, we also show that neurotypical players identified the ways in which play and fellowship may be misaligned with the goals of Christian education. This suggests that neurotypical conceptions of Christian education as opposed to play and fellowship may be one of the biggest obstacles in fostering accessible play spaces for neurotypical and neurodivergent congregants. Yet, our study also shows that such spaces are vital points of accessibility, collaboration, and spiritual connection for neurodiverse groups that are in short supply within churches. Even as Christian churches and pastors are embedded within an American culture that glorifies productivity and renders play a luxury, play must not be undermined simply because it does not conform to so-called productive,

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educational goals. Rather play, through videogaming, offers a unique site of access and spiritual formation for neurodiverse communities, if we can only get beyond our biases around what play is not.

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