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Issue 20 (2024)

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Blessed Are the Geek. Christian Gaming Content Creators and Digital Discipleship

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Abstract
The exploration of how religious communities adapt to an increasing reliance on technology and the Internet to create, provide, and promote religiosity has long been a topic of concern within the field of digital religion. One of these adaptations is digital discipleship, which utilizes modern technology, online trends, and communities to spread the gospel in virtual spaces. As such, this project focuses on digital discipleship within gaming communities, specifically analyzing how Christian gaming content creators combine video games with their religious faith. As content creators, these individuals utilize video games as ways to spark conversations about Christianity, and to further their understanding of Biblical teachings that result in a closer spiritual connection. From initial observations, there is a difference in whether in creator uses video games to either further their own connection with their faith, or to introduce Christian beliefs to others that they encounter because of a shared interest in gaming. This rise in content creators that openly intertwine their faith with their gaming content shows in a shift the relationship between Christians and secular media, in that Christians are utilizing secular media for discipleship, rather than creating Christian versions of secular media.

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IASGAR PhD Day Report: Introduction by Gregory Price Grieve

The 2nd Annual Summer Graduate Workshop hosted by UNCG's Network for Cultural Study of Video Gaming and the International Academy for Study of Gaming and

Religion, titled *Videogaming and Cultural Values*, was held on 27 and 28 July 2023. Tailored for early-stage researchers and doctoral students, the workshop focused on media-centered approaches, perspectives from game developers and publishers, and insights from gamers. Participants engaged in discussions and debates on theoretical frameworks for exploring the intersection of religion, culture, and video gaming. Due to their outstanding quality, select presentations from the workshop have been chosen for publication in this issue as *Emerging Voices in the Field*.

Introduction

Beginning as a capstone project for my Religious Studies B.A. at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, this project explores the intersection between two primary areas of study: digital discipleship and video game content creation. Digital discipleship, as described by Dunlow (2021, 461), is "the process of making disciples using digital technology as the primary delivery instead of face-to-face engagement." The goal of digital discipleship is not simply to replicate physical work and activities in virtual spaces, but to utilize these newfound secular spaces as opportunities to work towards building communities and encourage spiritual transformation to others that they encounter through strong engagement. As explained by Lomachinska and Grebenyuk (2020, 56), in the digital age, "a missionary who works in the information space must have an innovative idea of who makes up his audience, what it is interested in, what it thinks, [and] how it communicates."

Despite the growing amount of research on digital disciples, there has not been much scholarship done on digital disciples within gaming communities specifically. This is surprising given how online gaming communities are diverse in terms of the types of content produced, and the methods in which they communicate and interact with others in online spaces. This leads to the secondary focus of my project: the emergence of gaming content creators who produce digital content centered around video games and other forms of pop culture. Websites such as YouTube and Twitch

have allowed everyday people to produce content and curate audiences that share a collective interest. Alongside videos, blogs have continuously functioned as "[forums] of self-expression, social networking, and dissemination of information" (Kobayashi 2012, 57) since the 1990s. Whether the content is reporting on important news related to gaming or the games industry, providing reviews of recent releases, or explaining their interpretation of a video games narrative or core mechanics, in recent years, this content acts as not only an important source of information, but also a catalyst for community formation. At the intersection of digital discipleship and gaming content creation arises a unique group of people: Christian gaming content creators are online personalities who are not only open about their Christian faith, but actively interweave it into their internet presence.

This project sets the foundation for exploring how Christian gaming content creators interpret video games, discuss, and interact with their audience, and utilize gaming in their digital discipleship. To properly do so, I will examine the following research questions:

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1. How does studying Christian gaming content creators help us further our current understanding of the notion of digital discipleship?
2. How does studying Christian gaming content creators show us the evolution of the relationship between Christians and secular media?

Argument

I argue that the inclusion of content creators expands the notion of the digital disciple because it considers the form of media used to produce content. The content type that a creator utilizes seems to impact the way in which they interpret and

express their thoughts on a video game interwoven with their faith. These creators want to foster communities and attract people who are interested in both gaming and Christianity and seek to make the former as appealing to non-Christians who happen to stumble across their content.

Methodology

My initial research was conducted from February 2023 to April 2023, during which I chose four different content creators. This included two blogs, titled *Finding God in Video Games* and *Gaming and God* respectively; one Twitch streamer named PastorDoodstyn; and a dual Twitch streamer and YouTuber named Cross2Crown. I chose to look through and analyze content released from 2020 to March 2023 to account for varied uploading schedules. Furthermore, I focused on how and when the creators discussed faith in relation to video games, whether it be during gameplay, discussion with other players and/or their audience, or game reviews. For this I utilized in vivo coding, a method of qualitative data analysis "that places emphasis on the actual spoken words of the participants" (Manning 2017). Though I tackled both spoken and written word, this sentiment of using the actual words of the subjects within their proper contexts was fundamental throughout my project. my approach to research is additionally rooted in grounded theory (Jørgensen 2001), in which I aim to let the data and individuals speak for themselves so that I do not impose my own theories and assumptions, and instead create a theory based on what I have discovered.

In the future, I hope to build upon my pre-existing sources to gain a better insight and hopefully expand upon surface-level observations by obtaining first-person accounts and information from the very people I am studying. I hope to reach out to

these creators for a chance to learn more about their personal perspectives and opinions on the content they create, and how their faith factors into their online presence. Additionally, I would like to find and talk to more than these four creators to gain more insight into the inner workings of this niche community, since I found a variety of creators in the beginning that I was unable to investigate for the sake of time.

Evidence and Initial Findings

As tools of digital discipleship, blogs are primarily interested in using theology and biblical scripture to see what video games have to say about God and humanity. For example, a blog post from *Finding God in Video Games* titled "Animal Crossing: My Virtual Life as a Bad Neighbor" (2022) details the author's time playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), and how they used to play the game every day, before slowly forgetting to do so until it had been a couple months since they had last played. The post then takes a turn as the author begins to explain why they relate to the Biblical character Gomer from the Book of Hosea, who cheats on her husband Hosea multiple times. The author then explains how they relate to Gomer despite how badly they wish to relate to Hosea, in that they promise their love and devotion to God, only to forget how good God has been to them as they regress back into sinful habits and a hedonistic lifestyle. This occurs not on purpose, but rather simply because it can:

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> "Just like my regression in *Animal Crossing*, one day turned to two…. then to a week… and next thing you know it has been months since I last truly connected. *Animal Crossing* wasn't designed to be played and "finished" … It was designed to be played each day and through every season… an experience that only reveals all of its' secrets to those who willingly invest their time into it on a

consistent basis and remain committed to it." (Finding God in Video Games 2022).

The significance of using a popular video game to teach a Biblical lesson comes from its intersection of Scripture and the digital. Digital technology allows for the presentation of Biblical teachings in a way that is not only easy to understand, but also visual in that it has the potential to invoke "imaginative biblical literacy in a way that words of a paper text might not" (Garner 2019, 25). Therefore, as described by Cheong, Halavais and Kwon (2008, 117) "documenting personal experience, followed by interest in teaching and learning" using video games is key to understanding how these content creators use blogging as tools for discipleship.

For instance, the author of the *Gaming and God* blog Matthew Butler (2022) wrote a post titled "Mario by Faith, Not by Sight?" in which he details his experience at Games Done Quick, a bi-annual marathon event in which gamers are invited to speedrun (i.e., complete as fast as possible) games as entertainment in an effort to raise money for charity. This post is not simply a review of the event, but rather a short story of how a blindfolded speedrun of *Super Mario 64* (1996) by a speed runner named Bubzia enlightened Matthew.

> "Games are often created with intentional patterns, button combinations, and clues for us to find as we make our way from one objective to the next. Living life as a Christian function much in the same way. We know that God has orchestrated all things and has given us a point of guidance to navigate with: the Bible. The same dedication Bubzia has taken to learn to collect 70 stars (and now all 120 stars) we can apply to our walk in faith. It requires intentional practice, study, noticing cues, and obeying God's voice." (Butler 2022).

The speedrun itself is not important. What is important is that even though Butler did not speedrun *Super Mario 64* (1996) himself, his familiarity with gaming and speed

running connected what would have been a secular event into a "[generated] greater interest and connections with" the theology of personal relationships with God" (Auxier 2018, 111).

On the other hand, those who utilize video and live streams for content production differ in that personal experience takes a backseat. Instead, the game itself acts as the bridge to connect the content creator with others in their mission to spread the gospel. The best example of this comes from the YouTuber and Twitch livestreamer Cross2Crown, who regularly streams himself playing online multiplayer games from the *Call of Duty* franchise (2003-2023), such as *Warzone 2.0* (2022). During the data collection period, Cross2Crown would use these games to talk to his teammates through the in-game voice chat to ask their thoughts on Christianity and religion. In the video "Inside the Mind of a Preacher on Warzone 2" (Cross2Crown 2023), he describes his thought process while using an example of an encounter he had with another player while streaming in which the player spouted foul language at him.

> "So, when someone makes a comment like that … I can make one of two decisions here … First, I can just back out because you know, why would you want to play with someone that has language like that. Or you can, two, as a Christian recognize, 'Hey, there's something going on' – the way he speaks – that make you just go, 'He's probably not a Christian or not a follower of Jesus, and even if he is, where is he in that walk. Probably not somewhere super far along because of the language he's using.' … We were broken just like they are, they need to know the gospel just like we do. Our responsibility isn't to get someone to stop using language, but rather to get them to hopefully understand what the gospel is, and who Jesus is, and what he's done for them." (Cross2Crown 2023, 0:36-1:24)

Cross2Crown – as well as PastorDoodstyn – utilize religion and digital spaces to not only form and build communities, but to also attract potential converts through a mutual love of video games. They do not produce content because of its personal

significance, but rather to meet the gamers where they are.

Significance

My research project matters because it provides further insight into the ways Christian communities have begun to integrate digital media and technologies into their methods of proselytization and evangelizing. As technology has come to dominate everyday modern life, it has forced Christian communities to adapt and come face-to-face with the very devices they previously labeled as demonic. The emergence of digital disciples in gaming communities is an example of this shift, showing how Christians are moving away from their own isolated Christ-centered communities to instead engage with secular pop culture in their mission to spread the gospel. A large majority of the academic scholarship discussing digital discipleship has focused on virtual church congregation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic or comes in the form of papers discussing how to integrate video games into local bible study or pastoral training (Auxier 2018). Despite the growing acceptance and interest in digital religion and game studies, the amount of research on how video games are to spread faith in secular spaces is minimal.

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