gamevironments

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Special Issue

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

by
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Issue 03 (2015)

articles

Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Gregory Grieve.

Gregory Grieve

How should religious study concern itself with video games?

As *Minecraft*'s survival mode suggests, religious studies ought to investigate video games through a 'cultural dialogic mode'. Cultural Studies indicates that critics need not limit their interpretations to a game's entertainment value and the industry's fetishization of technical advances, but rather should investigate what video games reveal about what it means to be human. Scholars of religion and video games should take the radical stand that people do not stop being human when they design and play video games and that religion plays an important role in contemporary popular culture. In game mechanics, a 'mode' is a distinct configuration that varies gameplay and affects how the game is understood. In a similar fashion, I argue that religious studies usually takes one of two modes when concerning itself with popular forms of religion. Earlier modes, as epitomized by the Romanian historian of religion, fiction writer, and philosopher, Mircea Eliade, used a *sui generis* mode that understood religion as an essentialized category that injected itself into sacred symbols in the world. In such a mode, the scholar would approach *Minecraft* by interpreting the game's camouflaged timeless hierophanies. For example, it might argue that the character Steve's pickaxe is a hidden symbol of the Roman *hēmipelekys*, which is commonly associated with female divinities. Reacting against the *sui generis* mode, a *homo faber* mode, as epitomized by the historian of religion, J. Z. Smith, argues that religion is a theoretical category that is solely the creation of the academic. In such a case, the *homo faber* mode would self-consciously import theoretical categories by which to investigate video game play. For

26

instance, the academic might theorize using Roland Barthes' semiotics to argue that *Minecraft* users have an authentic relationship to digital media when they cut down one of the game's trees.

Like Smith, I contend that there is no essential sui generis category, and both religious phenomena and also the categories by which religion is theorized are social constructs. My difficulty with J.Z. Smith's theory, however, is that religion is also never "solely" the creation of the scholar, but emerges in dialogue with the topic under investigation. I argue that religious studies should take a dialogic mode when investigating video games. As the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes, the dialogic mode does not answer, correct or silence, but is entangled with the topic under investigation. When looking at *Minecraft*, one might assume that its category of religion lies with the religious structures that users have built – from Buddhist temples to Pastafarian images of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I contend however, that when investigating *Minecraft*, the scholar of religion needs to attend to the unique aspect of video games, namely, what Ian Bogost calls procedural rhetoric: that games make claims not merely through narratives and images but with the play users embody. In such a case, I contend that a dialogic theory illuminates that *Minecraft*'s embedded religion emerges from the survival mode of play in which, by exploring the land, players must collect resources, build structures, and battle mobs.

What methods and research questions do you recommend?

I recommend a documentary methodology, which, while it may have general research questions, does not play video games to prove a hypothesis, but allows an investigation's aims to emerge from the material under study. A qualitative method

working from the ground up, the documentary method is an arena of discovery, not only for investigating unknowns but revealing unknown unknowns. Documentarians collect everything they can get their hands on, and it is only in the final process of creating a scholarly product that they know what they will use, or know what it is that they will finally argue. While not allergic, or believing in object truths, documentarians build "Irish walls," which are dry stone structures that do not use theory as a mortar but are made by carefully selecting pieces that will balance and sit into the structure as they are built. Because of video games' procedural rhetoric, a documentary method engages in "close play," which means getting one's thumbs tired in the careful, sustained interpretation of actual gameplay. The documentarian places great emphasis on the particular over the general, and pays close attention to a game's narrative, images and particularly the procedures of game play.

A documentary method has close affiliation with New Game Journalism and auto-ethnography but differs from them because of the use of thick description. New Game Journalism uses personal anecdotes, references to other media, to creatively explore game design, play, and culture. Take, for instance, Ian Shanahan's 'Bow, Nigger,' in which the author explores race and gaming in *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*, or Julian Dibble's "Rape in Cyberspace" that explores gender on the virtual world of LambdaMOO. Auto-ethnography writes self-conscious explorations that connect personal experiences with wider cultural and political issues. For instance, Robin Boylorn, in 'As Seen on TV,' uses her experiences to critically examine the role of black women as seen on reality television. The aim of a documentary method differs from New Game Journalism and auto-ethnography, however, because its methodological aim is what the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls thick description. For video games and religion, a thick description refers to an analysis of a game's phenomenon and the gameplay

context that gives that phenomenon meaning. For example, it is not enough to merely describe Steve's diamond pickaxe, a documentarian would need to describe the tool in the context of both *Minecraft*'s play, and the greater community of users and media environment.

Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?

Definitely maybe! Just as in *Minecraft* there are thirteen ways of cooking a pork chop, there are at least as many ways of investigating video games and religion, and one can imagine studies that rely on only narrative and/or images. Yet, if one is going to understand *Minecraft*'s procedural rhetoric using a documentary method, researchers are required to put thumbs to controller and engage in close play. For instance, in *Minecraft*, only by playing can one truly understand the initial frenzy of appearing in the raw world, of quickly punching wood with one's hands and creating a crafting table, or taking one's first cobble stone pickaxe and creating a shelter with the security of a bed. Only by playing the game can one understand the first terrifying night, as one's health drops to one heart, and one can hear creepers coming to the door. If only I had found coal before the sun went down.

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

by Michael Waltemathe, 50

Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Xenia Zeiler.

by Xenia Zeiler, 53

Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Response by Michael Houseman.

by Michael Houseman, 61

Transcript File

(71-138)

Audio File