gamevironments

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Special Issue

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

by
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Rachel Wagner

How should religious study concern itself with video games?

The question of "how" we should think about games tends to make me read this question as about method, but since method is addressed in the other two questions below in some detail, I'll instead read this question as considering *why* video games are worth studying from a religious studies perspective. So why are games worth studying for the religious studies scholar? Let's think about this question by looking at *Minecraft*.

Minecraft is unusual in the scope of games on the market today. It was developed as an "indie" game, based on the vision of one man, Markus Persson, and largely programmed by him over a period of just a few years. And yet, as Goldberg and Larsson point out (2011, 8), *Minecraft* is an insider's game, "as incomprehensible to the uninitiated as it is wildly adored by tens of millions of people." *Minecraft*, then, is unusual when compared to most other popular games today, due to its simple graphics and its strong emphasis on construction over conquest.

Whereas many of today's games celebrate the push toward photorealism in graphics, *Minecraft* seems a bit of a throwback, in that it "embraces the pixel" in that everything in the world – trees, mountains, buildings, animals– are built of identically sized, one cubic meter blocks (Goldberg and Larsson 2011, 19). Furthermore, "every single block in the *Minecraft* world can be hacked free from the environment and rearranged in a new formation of the player's design" (2011, 20). The game emphasizes construction as its

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key activity. *Minecraft* offers the "infinite freedom to create," since the world can be sourced and "enough blocks can become anything the player can imagine" (2011, 24). The game is defined by its "openness." Players can build and change anything they wish and have an "almost complete freedom to alter the world according to [their] whim" (2011, 90).

Even if we focus just on the programmed nature of *Minecraft* itself, the significance of the game (and games in general) for religious studies is apparent. *Minecraft*'s creator Notch refers to the "sanctuary" of computer coding, seeing programming as a "quiet place where he can be alone with his thoughts" (Goldberg and Larssen 2011, 35). Markus explains that he gradually lost faith in God as his fascination with coding grew: The "revelation" that there is no God, "didn't come through introspection or soul-searching, but through the rationale of a programmer who contemplates what it is reasonable to believe in. Markus didn't lose his faith; he replaced it with logic" (2011, 36). This observation is in line with claims I make elsewhere that video games are so appealing in part *because* they present us with worlds that are programmed, controlled spaces, and thus are subject to pre-designated rules. Even if they are "open" in the sense of allowing players to construct entire worlds for themselves, as *Minecraft* does, games always offer spaces in which things make sense, where players have purpose and control. For players who may feel that the real world is spinning out of control, games can offer a comforting sense of predictability. They can replace God for some in their ability to promise an ordered world.

Order is reflected internally in how digital games work. Even if you're fighting zombies or engaged in all-out warfare, games typically have clear goals. Enemies are always defeatable, given enough chances. In *Minecraft*, if you aren't fighting zombies or

creepers, you are engaging with in-game rules about what combinations of raw materials will yield useful resources. The world is knowable, predictable, controllable. What Markus experienced in the programming of *Minecraft*, then, is also true to some degree for the *players* of the game, as they enter into a purposeful, ordered digital world. As Goldberg and Larrsson put it, in *Minecraft*, "[t]he point is not to emulate reality but to adapt reality to clear, functioning rules" (2011, 105). *Minecraft*, they say, "exemplifies what is meant by a game having its own universe, with its own laws and logic. It has nothing to do with reality, but everything to do with a coherent, consistent set of rules" (2011, 108). I would add that *Minecraft*'s appeal (and in a more general sense, the appeal of all games) is *precisely* that (at least in terms of its sense of order) it has "nothing to do with reality." In contrast with our increasingly violent, chaotic, confusing world, *Minecraft* has "coherent, consistent" rules, and can thus function as a form of respite from distress.

But of course, we can also look at how players use *Minecraft* in explicitly religious ways, and that brings us into a consideration of the relationship between in-game and beyond-game experiences. For example, we could easily talk about the construction of mosques or cathedrals, such GNRFrancis' "Epic Cathedral," built with over two million blocks over an entire year. We could also look at the fan-based rituals associated with the release of new versions of the game, including the "pilgrimages" to gaming conventions at which hard-core fans will dress up as favorite characters, wearing costumes with boxy, pixelated designs. We might consider how *Minecraft* is used as a sort of starting point for religious activity offline, such as Jeremy Smith's Christian "Lets' Plays" as a means of doing "*Minecraft* Theology." We could consider the work of Christina Chase, a Catholic blogger who uses the game to create metaphors for faith, as when she writes about *Minecraft*'s process of transforming a wild "ocelot" into a

domesticated cat. Chase decides that this process is like "our relationship with God" since "we are like wild creatures whom God desires to change into higher versions of ourselves." Rather than appealing to the Bible as the foundational text, Christian media makers like Smith and Chase spin out perspectives about God's relationship with humans with *Minecraft* as foundational text.

Minecraft invites what Erving Goffman has called "joint engrossment," when members of a group are equally invested in a game world (1961, 80). The social engagement, in fact, is one of the things that *makes* games "engrossing," says Gary Alan Fine (2006, 580). But *Minecraft* is not just a world in an online space. Fan devotion reveals that its impact extends far beyond the digital spaces in which players spend much of their time in ways that only a few other franchises can emulate. With *Minecraft*, to use Fine's words, "people slip and slide among frames" such that the game becomes a kind of cultural capital in this world too – a means of expressing oneself (2006, 580). So whereas *Minecraft* offers respite from the chaos of ordinary life through its fixed rules and ordered structures, it also escapes the confines of its digital space to spill over into material life, inspiring devoted fans to enact that desire for pixelated predictability in their offline lives too.

Accordingly, I am especially interested in how the game works as an environment in the beyond-game context. David Pakman, a very influential investor in online technologies, argues that *Minecraft* isn't really a game but has "more in common with social networks such as Facebook and Twitter," functioning as a "social experience" or "an activity to gather around" (cited in Goldberg and Larsson 2011, 158). The character of Steve is the most well known of the default player "skins" in *Minecraft*, and functions as an easily recognizable symbol for player engagement, creating its own group belonging through

offline recognition in costumes and Minecraft products. This reading obviously invites Durkheimian analysis, with *Minecraft* functioning totemically to provide a sense of belonging and purpose to its fans – both online and offline.

But there's more to the *Minecraft* environment than just group belonging. Goldberg and Larsson suggest that *Minecraft* can be looked at as "graffiti" or a collection of "dollhouses," or even "adventure travel" (2011, 112-113). This is because players decorate the environment, building structures that are only minimally "inhabited" and go on quests of their own design. *Minecraft* can also be viewed, they say, as a "platform, where the users provide the content" (2011, 155). So unlike many more tightly-scripted games, many choices made in *Minecraft* are very much up to the user, who designs his or her adventures individually, and who constructs freely according to personal inspiration (2011, 155).

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Minecraft functions as a sort of interactive metaphor for the importance of construction in today's world, and more fundamentally, for the deep desire for the *ability* to construct worlds that we can control. The implication of self in digital spaces participates in this constructedness and fluidity. In our many virtual identities, from avatars to online personalities, we too are ephemeral collections of dots and pixels, built and rebuilt again and again. The cultural significance of *Minecraft*, then, lies in part in its perspective – it's an interactive metaphor for programming, for the increasing influence of software on everyday life. The digital increasingly shapes the material. David Chidester calls this phenomena "plasticity," and describes the ways that everything – from religion, to bodies, to virtual spaces, to objects – is increasingly being seen as moldable and fluid (2005, 63). *Minecraft* can be viewed as an inhabitable metaphor for our times, demonstrating how software is changing our view of reality itself. Our engagement with

the constructability of the digital invites us to see the material world less as a collection of things and more as atomized pixels that can be rearranged, and thus as malleable, bendable, changeable, programmable. The digital world is increasingly less "there" on the screen and more and more "here" too, as so much of what we do and experience is filtered through algorithms. We, too, are giving over much of our identities to program-controlled versions of ourselves.

So religious studies should concern itself with video games because video games so frequently build digital worlds that reflect back for us some of the same things that our construction of traditional religious "worlds" do. Both religion and games offer conceptions of what we think an "orderly" world should look like; a sense of how we view reality in relationship to our desires and dreams; and a demonstration of the ways that we show our investment in the worlds we inhabit through deliberate construction of rituals, spaces, and experiences that reinforce our value. Both religion and games have the ability to influence our experience of reality itself.

What methods and research questions do you recommend?
There are as many ways of thinking about religion and video games as there are methods for thinking about any facet of religious studies. To these, we could add the ways that gamer theory deals with culture at large. So choosing one method is really more a matter of each researcher determining what he or she can bring to the table. I can, however, tell you a little about what I do and why I do it, as this has been on my mind recently as I engage with scholars who use quite different methods in their own approach to this topic. Until recently, I would have simply called my method of study the "synthetic" method or the "eclectic" method, or more generally, an "interdisciplinary"

method. But I've recently found language for it by drawing on the work of Wendy Doniger and her "comparatist" method for studying myth. The "comparatist" is a special kind of interdisciplinarian, and is an essential participant in the scholarly conversation about religion and games. Doniger is mainly focused on the study of myth, but I'm going to apply her strategy to religion and gaming. Doniger uses the metaphor of the spider to describe the comparatist's study of myths. The myths, their interpretations, and the scholar's work understanding them can all be seen as a web:

> [W]e [can] take the spider to be ... the shared humanity, the shared life experience, that supplies the web-building material, the raw material of narrative to countless human webmakers, authors, including human anthropologists and human comparatists. These human storytellers gather up the strands that the spider emits, like silk workers harvesting the cocoons of silkworms, to weave their own individual cultural artifacts, their own Venn-diagram webs of shared themes all newly and differently interconnected. (Doniger 1998, 61)

Doniger sees the comparatist as one of the meaning makers, who, alongside the teller of mythic stories, spins various materials into new insights and interpretations: webs of meaning, if you will. When the comparatist looks at different phenomena – religion and gaming – the comparatist spins a web by gathering up strands from various fields of study, discovering meaning by intentionally placing different voices in conversation with one another. In my own study, my best conversation partners include social scientists, humanities scholars of literature, religion, history, and theater, as well as gamer studies, media studies, and the various forms of communications studies.

Predetermined "research questions," then, are less likely to drive the comparatist. Topics or themes, however, might. The comparatist will follow a thematic lead through various resources, pursuing leads that open up new voices in new related subfields relevant to the topic at hand. With *Minecraft*, for example, I am especially interested in the cultural

relevance of the game in its beyond-game context. So I could explore things like comic cons, blogs, YouTube shows, and the educational uses to which *Minecraft* has been put, especially insofar as these relate to religious practice – but also insofar as they reflect implicit religion in their ability to speak to issues of community, identity, sacred space, religious narrative, and so forth. Given my current interest in the symbolic role of the pixel, however, I am especially interested in the cultural significance of the move toward more and more photorealistic graphics, in the visual symbolic work of the pixel, and in the intersection between online and offline life. I am also interested in the cultural significance of three-dimensional printing, as a kind of externalization of our awareness of the pixel, and an instantiation of our ability to completely reconceptualize what it means to build something. This interest guides my comparatist research. Through the juxtaposition of the work of scholars working in these areas, I look for insights that illuminate the cultural significance of *Minecraft* as a symbol of our times. For the comparatist, the goal is to see what happens when multiple texts or voices are placed in comparative conversation.

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As helpful as the comparatist method is, there are some dangers. People have long complained that the comparatist approach can too easily gravitate toward "unfalsifiable universalist hypotheses" (Doniger 1998, 64). That is to say, people might make statements so general as to be more or less meaningless. Shallow interdisciplinary work isn't helpful to anybody. To be good at interdisciplinary work of this kind, you have to read both widely and deeply. You have to hone skills in fields in which you may not have previous training. You have to be willing to dig through footnotes, to follow threads of arguments elsewhere, to be humble enough to know when you need to know more about an approach and educate yourself. You have to learn how to communicate with people in other fields and disciplines, sometimes several at once, in terms that they can

understand – and without sacrificing depth. You also have to listen to others in related fields – really listen - and learn how they view the world. You have to learn about new fields of study, so that when you talk to other scholars in different fields, you have useful things to say.

The comparatist's scholarship is part of a web that illuminates larger issues in the study of religion and gaming. Doniger says that in her own metaphor, the spider is only "implied," since it is the connections (the web) that are most obvious. But the implied spider, Doniger says, "is not only in the individual scholar's mind; it is also out there, in other people's minds" (1998, 76). It is also "out there" in that these are real, discoverable insights, brought into view precisely by the guided research of people who aren't afraid to listen to voices in many related disciplines. Simply by presuming there *is* a meaningful connection between religion and games, we can then feel free to explore those voices in many related fields that will help illuminate those presumed connections. Accordingly, a comparatist might appeal to religious studies, ritual theory, film studies, media studies or the study of theater, for example, to see what scholars in each of these fields have to say about the topic that has captured her imagination.

Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?

My ultimate answer is no, you do not *have* to play a game to analyze it – although you may think I am shifting the question a bit when I tell you why: I don't think you must necessarily play a game to analyze its cultural impact. A study of cultural impact answers different questions than we might ask if we were, for example, analyzing game mechanics – which would require actual play, of course. This broad cultural studies approach is akin to what Doniger calls the "telescopic" mode of comparatist analysis,

since it is centered on the big picture, placing the game in a much larger context of culture at large, and drawing on many voices to analyze it – while also placing it in a context of comparison with many other games. The "microscopic" analysis, by contrast, consists of the detailed analysis of individual games, the case studies and the walkthroughs, the careful social sciences-based consideration of how individual players identify their *own* experiences with gaming at particular times and places. Scholars interested in "microscopic" analysis would be much more likely to be obligated to actual play of a game. The telescopic and microscopic approaches can work quite well together, as comparatists take into account the more detailed work of case studies, and as those who conduct case studies or analyze particular plays of individual games turn to the broader comparative work of theorists for information to help frame their studies and inspiration for further studies using their own techniques. So certainly, if you are engaged in a case study of just a single game, playing the game would be necessary.

But *Minecraft* is more than just a game. It's also a set of symbols, a community, an environment, and perhaps even a cultural language. The fact that so much of it is offline means that a lot of the research one does on it can and should be conducted outside the game. This is especially true since some fans don't even play the game but *do* consume the fan culture surrounding it in the form of costumes, bedding, blocks, action figures, Lego sets, toy weapons, clothing, and my favorite – "Creeps," the answer to marshmallow Peeps, as well as fandom (with similar merchandise) of player-made YouTube videos like the "Stampy Cat" videos, which (with 2 million subscribers) have been enchanting children for years now, whether or not some of those children ever actually play *Minecraft*.

What I'm saying, then, is that if we think of my comparatist approach and the more

detailed work of case studies and playthroughs, we find that we need not argue that one method is better than the other. "Comparatists" look at the big picture – at what we can learn about the phenomenon of gaming in conversation with religion. "Contextualists," those interested in specific playthroughs or ethnographic analysis of individual games, look at specifics – at a particular game being played by a specific group of people. Doniger cites a line from the Greek poet Archilochus to describe the relationship between these two types of scholars: "The fox knows many things, and the [hedge]hog knows one big thing." Comparatists, she says, are foxes, and contextualists are hedgehogs. Scholarship, she says, "needs both." (Doniger 1998, 47). Thus, we need people who dive in and play games from start to finish multiple times, who engage in deep and rich analysis of mechanics, and who interview specific players to determine how they understand their experience. But we also need people who step back and look at the bigger picture, who engage in cultural analysis beyond the games themselves by drawing in multiple voices, including theorists, from related fields, and thus who invite new perspectives drawing on these related fields. The fact that there are others doing more focused analysis "frees the comparatist to do something else, to draw upon their work to ground new comparisons" (Doniger 1998, 154).

Doniger admits that, whatever the study, individual researchers will be guided by their own interests, since "[w]here we focus depends on the sorts of continuities we are looking for; in all instances, something is lost and something gained" (Doniger 1998, 11). It is true that different scholars will bring different expertise to the study of religion and gaming and thus will bring to light different discoveries. We can acknowledge the validity and importance of multiple approaches even if we cannot "employ all of them at once" (Doniger 1998, 153). The comparatist offers a big-picture "fox" perspective, and the "hedgehog" offers the perspective of people working on a finer grain with case

studies and more targeted analysis. We need both foxes *and* hedgehogs, and lots of both types, since multiple approaches to religion and gaming can only better enrich our understanding of an exceedingly complex field of study.

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