gamevironments

Special Issue

Current Key Perspectives
in Video Gaming and Religion.

by
Gregory Grieve,
Kerstin Radde-Antweiler,
and Xenia Zeiler

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

Michael Houseman

How should religious study concern itself with video games?

First of all, I want to thank the Roundtable organizers for asking me to respond to the panellists' contributions as someone from outside the field of video gaming. Indeed, my involvement in video gaming amounts to an embarrassingly short stint in Second Life – it was just too difficult and I soon dropped out. So my role here is to react to panellists' answers to the three questions by introducing a number of general issues and raising some difficult-to-answer questions. Sounds like fun!

Greg mentions at one point that if the study of video gaming and religion is worthwhile, it is because it can reveal something of what it is to be human. Exactly what such a field of study is able to reveal is of course closely connected to how one conceives of the three poles around which it is constructed: gaming, digital media and religion. Now, I'm going to say very little about digital media, a bit more about religion, but mostly I'd like to say something about gaming.

I take as my starting point one of the features of gaming that comes out clearly in almost all of the panellists' contributions: the fact that games are rule-governed. In this respect, as has been pointed out, gaming is akin to religion, and specifically to ritual, in which a set pattern of behavior is imposed. By the same token, gaming is often seen as distinct from mundane, everyday life in that it is presumed to provide a somewhat simplified, more systematically regulated environment, one that is more controlled and

predictable. Thus, an idea that many of us may have is that gaming provides players with a kind of a refuge, a source of comfort in a world – and I'm citing Rachel here – that can be seen as spinning out of control, and in which uncertainty has become the norm.

Well, it might be interesting to turn this idea around by envisaging gaming as providing players not with a safe haven but with exemplary experiences of what uncertainty is held to be. In the simplified worlds of games, unpredictability is made explicitly and systematically present as something one has no choice but to deal with in an appropriate fashion. By placing contingency firmly in the centre of one's focus, gaming may be thought of, as Jason suggests, as the art form of uncertainty, that is, as a medium which explores its limits and its recurrent properties. In other words, through gaming, we teach ourselves what uncertainty is supposed to be. In this respect, it is intriguing to note that while unpredictability in video games may pertain to features of the material (!) environment, it mostly has to do with other players, be they human or otherwise. Thus, the byword for much such gaming is : if you want to survive, watch out for those tricky others. Be attentive to your individual enemies, but also to the ambiguities inherent to collective alliances. Basically one is on one's own in a world where no one can be completely trusted. It seems reasonable to suppose that video gaming, like television, but in a more interactive fashion, acts to uphold those cultural ideas and values we hold most dear. It does so by providing easily accessible (enjoyable!), salient, exemplary experiences of these ideas and values that can act as collectively shared touchstones for what life is presumed to be about. Might it be that one of the lessons video gaming continually hammers home has to do with the imperative of survival in the face of unavoidable uncertainty, specifically as embodied by those who are not oneself?

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There is another aspect of gaming as a rule-bound activity that deserves comment. While it is indeed the case that games are largely defined by their rules, the whole point of gaming is that if you play in such a way that you just follow the rules, this proves to be no fun at all, such that the game is hardly worth pursuing. Viable games have to be enjoyable. This means that gamers have to be personally involved. Once again, it is not enough to just play the game (that is, act according to the rules of the game). One has to want to play well, that is, try to win, or to make something particularly striking, or to succeed in doing something in a particularly notable fashion, or whatever.

This is one of the things that can be used to distinguish gaming from ritual. In the case of ritual, if one doesn't perform the ritual properly, one just hasn't performed the ritual, period. Thus, the success of a ritual performance as an instance of ritual tends to be a matter of yes or no. Game playing, however, tends more to be a matter of more or less: someone plays a game badly, is not *not* playing the game, and inversely, a well-played game is generally felt to be more of a game than a badly played one. This, I suggest, is due to the inherent complexity of gaming (as opposed to ritualizing). When performing a ritual, it is above all one's actions that counts; participants' personal thoughts and feelings are taken to occupy a subordinate role. Thus, in following a ritual tradition, practitioners attempt to repeat what others are thought to have done before them. Now, in much the same way, when playing a game, one's behavior is presumed not to be simply an expression of one's personal thoughts and feelings; it is supposed to conform to certain imposed precepts – the rules of the game. At the same time, however, as just mentioned, it is essential, that is, constitutive of viable gaming, that players be personally involved such that their gaming behavior be the expression of their personal thoughts and feelings. As a result of this two-fold, somewhat contradictory imperative, game playing, unlike ritual, is a kind of ongoing balancing act

between boredom and indifference on the one hand, and getting so involved that one ignores the rules of the game on the other. It is this situation of dynamic equilibrium that accounts for those strange figures that only exist in play situations: cheaters, spoil-sports, referees, and so forth.

A final consideration: what exactly are the "rules" gamers' behavior is supposed to conform to? They may be thought of as conventions that are recognized (by game designers, by the players, by observers, etc.) as distinct from those governing everyday interaction. In the case of games, these unusual conventions apply above all to the what we might call the play-frame, that is, to the exceptional world which otherwise unremarkable players inhabit: a world in which one's movements are limited in such-and-such a fashion, where the acquisition of certain tools or powers are necessary to perform so-and-so an action, etc. Alternately, in situations of play, such as pretend play (you're Little Red Riding Hood and I'm the Big Bad Wolf; you're the princess and I'm her pony, etc.), these out-of-the-ordinary conventions apply above all to the exceptional nature of the players themselves who inhabit a world recognizably similar to that of everyday life. It should be obvious that from the standpoint of this distinction, many cases of video gaming may be thought of both as games and as instances of play. It remains, however, that to the extent that the unusual conventions in question apply not to the agents themselves but to the world they inhabit, they can be more readily objectified so as to become "rules" that can be explicitly set out; this is much more difficult to do, for example, in cases of pure pretend play.

Now, what I am leading up to with all this is the idea that perhaps gaming is just like ordinary life except for one single thing: the conventions players' behavior is supposed to conform to while gaming are recognized by them as different from those held to

govern everyday life. To the degree that this is indeed the case, several implications can be drawn. The first is that gaming is highly reflexive. For gaming to take place, it is necessary that the players be aware of both the special conventions to which their game behavior should conform, and the fact that these conventions are indeed special with respect to those that guide their ordinary, mundane interactions. Second, this proximity between gaming and ordinary life accounts for the surprisingly labile nature of the boundary between play and not-play. Indeed, seen from the game or play side of things, everyday behavior (not-play) can appear as nothing but a big game in which another set of conventions, one that goes largely without saying, applies. It is thus very easy to go back and forth between gaming/playing and "serious" goings-on, especially where play (as opposed to game) is concerned. Gregory Bateson gives the example of throwing a stick for a dog: how does one indicate that the game is over and that saying the game is over is not just another way of playing?

I am tempted to suggest that these two features of gaming – systematic reflexivity on the one hand, and the creation of a labile, unstable boundary between mundane and other-than-mundane life on the other – are particularly encouraged by what has been called the affordances of digital media. Digital media seems to favor an awareness that one is acting in a world of one's own creation. This becomes especially so in the case of video gaming in which certain constitutive properties of play and certain potentialities of digital media easily become mutually reinforcing, resulting in a type of activity upheld by a particular form of split consciousness in which one is both intensely absorbed by the activity one is pursuing and made aware that the activity in question is purposely contrived. In this respect, video gaming is not unlike visualization or "creative projection" in which, by purposely imagining a special world and/or special beings with which or with whom I am able to interact, I virtually occupy two positions at once: I am both the

person who is interacting, and the person who strives to imagine that this is so. Along similar lines, consider the distinctive enjoyment afforded by reading a novel or watching a movie or a TV series: the pleasure of becoming immersed in a fictional character or situation derives in part from an awareness that the character or situation is indeed a fabricated one.

Maybe I can link this train of thought to matters of religious concern. The idea of a possible connection between video gaming and the promotion of some special, exemplary experience prompts two general questions. The first concerns the power attributed to images in monotheistic traditions in which both iconoclasts and iconophiles have played and continue to play all-important roles. Might video gaming be understood as but the latest modulation of a monotheistic preoccupation with images and their powers of representation and incarnation? The second question has to do with the split consciousness favored by video gaming, and what a ritualization of this split consciousness might look like. I am intrigued by the fact that video gaming, Minecraft included, often entails playing games within games. Now, while the games played within games would seem to be simply games, I wonder if the games such games are played within do not acquire an additional dimension that moves them closer to what, in other cultural traditions, we might recognize as ritual. We live in a society in which gaming is omnipresent, not only in the form of endless varieties of toys, board games and computer games, but also in radio and television shows, in sport competitions, on the Internet, etc. In many societies, daily life is similarly imbued with special types of actions affording participants with special types of experiences that we often label "ritual". Might it be that the type of gaming our life abounds in – activities grounded in the cultivation of reflexive split-consciousness – are closer to ceremonial behavior than we would like to think?

What methods and research questions do you recommend?

Now, regarding the second, methodological question, the upshot of the panelists' contributions is clear enough: methods matter, and the methods one adopts reflect the way one conceives of one's object of study. Of course, the danger of methodology, in general, is to fall in love with one's analytical schemes, to forget that they are but conceptual constructs, mere models. On the other hand, the less the methodological choices one makes are explicitly set out, the easier it is to fall into this typically academic trap of thinking that one's models are more real than the phenomenon they're supposed to account for. So, while methodology is famously not all fun and games, it's certainly worth thinking about, especially with respect to a new-fangled object like video gaming. The panellists espouse a variety of methodological approaches. One that is shared by a large number of contributors proceeds from the idea that one should begin by identifying and circumscribing a particular type of phenomenon, such as gaming or the game world. In doing this, the aim is to grasp the distinctive features of the phenomenon in question, its organizing principles, and so forth. This is very much in the spirit of what Greg calls the "documentary" or "bottom-up" approach, which one can also think of as a "clinical" or "ethnographic" approach. However, one of the drawbacks of this time-honored way of proceeding is that it invariably commits the researcher to a number of subsequent choices and discrimination that all too often are not explicitly addressed. In circumscribing gaming or a game world, for example, one implicitly defines not only that which is gaming but also that which gaming is not. This in turn raises the question of the relationship between these two types of phenomena which, as Jason has stressed, can vary according to the type of questions one is interested in: the link between them can be didactic (How does what happens during gaming affect what

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happens beyond the game?), political (How are not-game concerns expressed during gaming?), or something else entirely. Finally, the nature of these differentiated phenomena is not always easy to establish. For example, what, in any given analysis, is to be understood by that which is not gaming or the game world? Religion? Mundane life? Ritual?

Many such approaches tacitly treat gaming or a game world on the one hand and that which is "not game" on the other as standing in a symmetrical, implicitly exclusive relationship. An alternative perspective, championed by Kerstin for example when she speaks of "gamenvironment" or "gametized life-world", treats gaming or a game world as an aspect of ordinary, daily life. Thus, instead of two more or less well-circumscribed types of phenomena with a relationship posited between them, one ends up with a single phenomenological field, namely that of social life in general. However, because an analysis of "social life in general" is just not feasible, such an approach, as Kerstin has stressed, requires that research be rigorously problematized, that is, reduced to a limited number of questions the study purports to answer. In this more top-down approach, "documentation" or ethnography, as in design-based research, is inevitably both "thinner" and less open-ended.

Finally, Xenia has pointed out another complication that applies to all methodologies founded on the isolation and/or identification of particular types of phenomenon: there exists a great deal of cultural variability, not only regarding the nature of gaming and game worlds, but also regarding that which is to be understood as "not game" or as the larger context that gaming and game worlds may be considered to be an aspect of.

Another, very different methodological orientation consists in throwing out such

troublesome phenomenological discrimination altogether. To take up the spider metaphor developed by Rachel, the researcher just starts spinning, or knitting, or wandering around making connections. In many respects, this approach is akin to structuralism without the structure. Emphasis in placed less on the nature of the disparate phenomena taken into account than on the various, often surprising ways they can may prove to be interconnected. The advantage of this way of proceeding is that one can relationships between various cultural phenomena that are often more difficult to make when one is constrained by a set of initial distinctions, such as that between "game" and "not-game". As a result, while new light can be shed on gaming or a game world by its being located within a encompassing web or context of meanings and relationships whose limits are not predetermined. On the other hand, the drawback of this method is that the rigorous basis of this encompassing web's or context's construction often remains unclear. An approach like this tends to treat the connections it establishes between various phenomena as of a similar order, and the field of linkages as a homogenous whole. It's no accident that this entire procedure, like structuralism, was first applied to the analysis of mythological texts, that is, material that, as a particular type of discursive production, is fairly homogenous. However, if one begins to link together things of dissimilar natures – ways of behaving, ways of talking about one's behavior, institutional formations, ways of thinking, of feeling, etc. – then one quickly finds oneself caught in a trap. The more one favors connectedness, the more the disparate, interconnected elements are rendered unjustifiably homogeneous, and the more the disparities between these elements are recognized, the more the connections between can appear contingent.

I would like to close with a suggestion, or perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of a challenge. In the late 1960s, Dan Sperber, a cognitive anthropologist, ventured that a

basic dilemma of social science research, which, I suspect, also applies to the study of religion, is that it is largely stuck with a choice between two general ways of modeling. On the one hand there are "categorical models" in which the stuff of life is cut up into distinct types of things between which relationships can then be established. On the other hand, there are "network models" of interconnection showing how ideas, goods, people, images, words, etc. can be shown to circulate. Sperber argues that it is essential that social scientists develop conceptual constructs that transcend these two options, that we find the means of leaving the alternative between categorical schemes and network systems behind us. Only then, he suggests, will we have a mathematics equal to the complexity of our object of study. I wonder if the particular affordances of digital media, of gaming in digital media, and of ritualized gaming in digital media, might provide the grounds for the development of such new types of analytical models.

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Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?

The answers to the third question – Do scholars have to play the game to analyze it? – are anything but cut-and-dried. Between the "yes, but..." contributors like Ian, Owen, Kerstin, and Xenia, the "no, but..." contributors like such as Jason, Rachel and Michael, and the Greg's "definite maybe", everyone seems to recognize that the answer to this question depends mostly on what particular researchers are interested in. Personally, I would come down on the "yes, but..." side, but there again, I'm an anthropologist, that is, someone whose descriptions and analyses are largely dependent on participant observation.