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# gamevironments

Special Issue

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

by
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and Xenia Zeiler

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# Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Jason Anthony.

Jason Anthony

**How should religious study concern itself with video games?**

My contribution to *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, as a journalist and game designer, was an essay that offered seven categories that had helped to order conversations I'd had about the intersection of gaming and religion through the years I've researched and covered this topic (Anthony 2014). Such categories help, I think, with the first question in such conversations, which is almost always, "Well, what do you *mean* by religion and video games?"

Games have been a key part of religious life across times and cultures, long before digital gaming. Their roles are complex, as games have been used for divination, to teach, as part of ritual and for a number of other purposes and for no purpose. In digital gaming, the conversation becomes more complex, as games in turn begin to use religion, often with different and more secular agendas. So within this topic of religion and games, the relationships between the two could range from devout practice to hostile critique. Some basic sense of where we are entering that thicket could perhaps be useful, as what people mean generally falls into a discrete handful of related but distinct categories.

And perhaps the quickest way to explain these categories, whether they are useful or not, is to use Minecraft as an example, because this excellent game spans many of them, and it is the topic of this panel:

- Didactic games are where a game is a text designed or used to pass along teachings, explicitly or implicitly. You might think of Protestant Sunday School games in this category. Does Minecraft do this? Not overtly, but this category would be the way in to looking at an implied spiritual worldview in digital games. One might approach discerning what this worldview is and how it's teaching in many ways. I admire Vit Sisler's approach in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Sisler 2014), looking at narrative, audiovisual and procedural levels. In Minecraft, one might look narratively at the messages in the End Poem; audio-visually there are the implications of pixelization, which I believe Rachel Wagner will address; and procedurally, you might look at the ethical implications of the way the game makes or invites the player to behave – how it offers the option for peaceful and vegetarian playthroughs, or the way the Swedish game springboards from Piaget's constructivist ethic as represented by Denmark's Legos (Lachney 2014) (a connection creator Markus Persson has acknowledged). Or one might approach the game as a teaching text using another rubric.

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It may be worth noting that Persson talked about such a personal cosmic worldview implied in his games, which made a more dogmatic appearance in one of his lesser known games, *Drowning*: "My life philosophy... is that we're experiencing this insanely colossal and ageless cold and uncaring universe for reasons nobody knows, and nothing we do will ever amount to anything (I guess unless we manage to reverse entropy), so don't worry about purpose, worry about the way there. If your life story was a book, make it something people might want to read. Do whatever makes the better story." (Persson 2015)

- The next category looks at games less as unidirectional texts and more as

community events. Hestiasic games are those traditionally used to celebrate holidays, such as Ramadan games or the Genna festivals in Ethiopia, where the games play a secondary or focusing role in community religious celebrations. And while Minecraft isn't a rite of celebration for any faith, an approach to analyze a game as an event may be helpful in talking about Minecraft's transmedia expressions at Minecon, which shares the idioms of a holiday gathering and for which, as in more traditional hestiasic games, the game serves as focus.

The next two categories can't offer much in understanding Steve the miner and his world, I think:

- The poimenic category is helpful in looking at games as vehicles for divination and prophetic legitimacy.
- The praxic category looks at games as contemplative or ecstatic ritual.

But both of these categories, where they apply, might use approaches of realworld ritual analysis. Ingame digital ritual is covered in the next two categories.

- The allomythic category is specific to modern games that have created fictional ingame faiths. (This is distinct from the didactic category, which earnestly teaches a realworld faith of the games' creator.)There are certainly ingame Minecraft faiths to look at, steadily taking shape over the past few years of releases, with temples being generated in the deserts and jungles as early as 1.31, and on the ocean bottoms with the Bountiful update, and the village priests taking on a more significant trading role offering the game-critical ender eyes. And taking

this allomythic optic lets us look at those ingame faiths as a text in which to examine the authors' conscious and unconscious attitudes towards religion. Minecraft's priests do nothing but trade, for instance, and the magnificent temples are empty but for a few booby traps, and surely this is open to many interpretations, including an argument that the world of Minecraft is pragmatically Protestant.

- The allopolitical approach looks at digital game space as a social commons, and these are spaces into which players bring and practice religious beliefs. In Minecraft, such explorations might include analyses of players who evangelize through their avatars; the phenomenon of building Minecraft tribute structures to dead pets and relatives; servers dedicated to players of Mormon, Catholic or other faiths; or the subset of players who try to follow the rules of Islam while playing, including not pork and praying five times a day based on the position of the in-game sun. This is a rich vein for Minecraft.

- And the last category, the theoptic, is an outlier and offers a way to approach thinking about the curious riddle of god games. There are religious parallels to the god game – the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius or the meditation deities of some Buddhist sects have practitioners imagine walking in divine shoes. To take such an approach to Minecraft, a researcher could look at the implications and gameplay of the creative mode in Minecraft, where a player can create worlds for other people to play in, and what it means to make and destroy worlds. Indeed, this may be an excellent starting point for approaching the game's only significant direct text, the End Poem, which contains the following lines:

"A: What did this player dream?

B: This player dreamed of sunlight and trees. Of fire and water. It dreamed it created. And it dreamed it destroyed. It dreamed it hunted, and was hunted. It dreamed of shelter.

A: Hah, the original interface. A million years old, and it still works. But what true structure did this player create, in the reality behind the screen?

B: It worked, with a million others, to sculpt a true world in a fold of the [scrambled], and created a [scrambled] for [scrambled], in the [scrambled].

A: It cannot read that thought.

B: No. It has not yet achieved the highest level. That, it must achieve in the long dream of life, not the short dream of a game." (Minecraft 2009)

**What methods and research questions do you recommend?**

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their excellent books on the theory and design of games (Salen and Zimmerman 2003 and 2005) offer an interdisciplinary set of texts from sociologists, historians, anthropologists and, not least or surprisingly, game makers themselves, who have built an ambitious body of theoretical writings in the brief lifespan of digital game design. This points to an embarrassing wealth of methods for working with games. An eclectic approach has a certain logic, as the history and practice of games lacks its a critical history of its own and exists across cultural axes. To Salen and Zimmerman's sources I might only have added essays from ritual studies, itself a relatively new discipline. Ron Grimes, Richard Schechner and others in this field have looked extensively at the rules that govern performed actions in ritually significant space, a topic that is a nice fit for games and especially helpful for those looking at games and religion.

These books also open the door to a lovely and undertapped method for the academic study of games. Actually make games! These books are geared towards an audience of game designers craning to find a corpus of critical tools. But if is helpful for designers who are interested in better games delve into critique, why shouldn't those who are

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interested in better critical inquiry experiment with design? In sessions I teach at Union Theological Seminary, we learn about the deep history of religious games, including the medieval Christian rites of the judicio dei contests and games of the epiphany, and there is always engagement with these topics through texts. But I encourage seminarians to make and participate in games, including an exercise to gamify Christian liturgy, which illuminates not only what games can do, but how game structures echo and amplify the languages of ritual space.

Another wave of protestant revolt is underway in game-making, in which the power once concentrated in the few to make and disseminate digital games is available to the many, through development tools and more democratic sales platforms. In other words, friends in the academy, jump in, the water's fine!

Since the topic is Minecraft, it is worth pointing out that Minecraft is also a low-fi game design tool. Minecraft game worlds, created by users, feature user-generated puzzles, riddles, games of dexterity and chance – in short, as many of Caillois' categories of play as you can fit into digital space. To echo the End Poem, Minecraft is also a place to dream of (game) creation.

As for research questions, I ask the following question when I approach a new game, and perhaps it is useful. What is certain, and what is uncertain here? This can cut to the quick of a game's architecture, as a game by definition aims to create rewarding avenues for player freedom within carefully placed constraints. (Colas Duflo pithily says that a game is "l'invention d'une liberté dans et par une légalité.") (Duflo 1997) By looking at constraints – the rails – and the avenues for choice – the sandbox – its possible to hone in on where the game plans to situate its play.

For this reason uncertainty is an important factor in games, perhaps the most important, since unlike other art forms, a game is never resolved until it is played, and by itself must exist in a state of Heisenbergian uncertainty. This idea, that uncertainty is the medium of games can be helpful, I think, in puzzling out how religion and games fit together. I quite like a definition of religion suggested by Gilbert Murray (Murray 1912). He sees religion as a sort of technology of uncertainty, a necessary method and a relation "towards the uncharted, the mysterious, tracts of life which surround him [sic] on every side." If we follow this conceit, then I would offer that if religion is a technology for uncertainty, then games are the art form of uncertainty, and that's a rich kinship.

**Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?**

No. Key texts about games meeting religion have been written about games impossible for the author to play. John MacAloon's did not need to be an Olympian to do his anthropological studies of the ritual nature of those events. Clifford Geertz explored the religious significance of the Balinese cockfights without stepping down to the pit. Some games, like the Greek Olympics, dicing in the ages of Vedic literature, the Mesoamerican ball games are simply lost in time. Should they not be studied? Other contemporary games steeped in religious meaning, like m'haibis in Iraq or genna in Ethiopia or polkeliya in Sri Lanka, present steep cultural obstacles. This should not, and has not, shielded them from our attention. If this is true of physical games, it should hold for digital games. I'm afraid I don't have anything else to say about that.

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