
Gameworlds

gamevironments

Special Issue

Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion.

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Heidi Campbell:

Thank you for coming to our first Video Gaming and Religion Seminar. My name is Heidi Campbell from Texas A&M University and I will be kind of the Chairperson/Wrangler of timekeeping today. Our theme today is crafting the study of religion and video games - a round table discussion on key perspectives. I want to give a little background to the study of religion and gaming, especially in relation to this seminar, as well as religion and gaming at the AAR.

So in 2007 and then in 2010 there were different panels in which Greg Grieve played a key role talking about religion and gaming. This was really important for the AAR scholars, many young academics and many young faculty working in these areas. To begin to talk about how can we think of gaming as not just a form of entertainment, but a place of cultural practice and religious reflection. From that work, Greg Grieve and some people that he was working with, did some pioneering work on kind of starting to look at some of the themes and studies in religion and gaming. From that came the first edited volume to really provide an overview of what we kind of know as far as research on religion and gaming, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* which came out with Indiana University Press in 2014.

Members of this panel were included in that volume, and then a larger group was

gathered through the work of Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeiler. Earlier this March, the International Academy for the Study of Gaming and Religion was brought together. The aim of this group is to study and look in depth at how gaming can become both a form of pedagogical practice within religious studies, as well as what kind of research methods and best practices have we learned at this point. Where further can we push the field, such as integrating our work on Let's Plays and other forms of virtual platforms and to the discussion.

So today what we're going to be doing through the work of the International Academy, we have a website in progress, this is our Facebook group. We'll hear a little bit about *gamevironments* - the journal that's related to the Academy - in a few minutes. The aim of the panel today is to focus our discussion around three questions, and through using *Minecraft* as a sandbox or thought experiment. So while *Minecraft* plays a key role in our discussion today, this panel is not about religion in *Minecraft*. But what we're going to be doing is using that as a discussion tool to talk about three important questions.

First of all we want to look at how the study of religion concerns itself with video games. Drawing on the expertise from a number of people that have been actively involved in this research area. Secondly, we're going to look at the methods and research questions that we recommend that need to be further pushed in this field that is still in its infancy. Then finally we'll be coming together to talk about do you have to play games to analyze them? A really important question for the Academy.

Our panelists today include Jason Anthony, a journalist from Brooklyn New York, Ian Bogost from the Georgia Institute of Technology, a leader in game studies, Gregory Grieve from the University of North Carolina, Greensborough, Owen Gottlieb from

Rochester Institute of Technology, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler from the University of Bremen, Michael Waltemathe from Ruhr-University Bochum, Rachel Wagner from Ithaca College, and Xenia Zeiler from University of Helsinki. So without further ado, I'm going to pass it on to my colleague Kerstin to give you some framework about the study of religion especially in relation to *Minecraft*.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

Okay, good morning and thanks all for coming. I was asked to give a really, really short introduction to *Minecraft*. By chance, who knows *Minecraft*? Yes! It's a little bit different here in our committee, but okay - probably I can give the lecture for them, so you will be informed. Originally as we organized this seminar we just asked ourselves, okay we want to speak about theoretical concept and methods, but we want to put some flesh to the bone, so to speak. So we want to choose one game. Then we decided we take the game *Minecraft*.

Minecraft is really common, especially for the younger generation. But of course, *Minecraft* is a good example because it's such a bad example, in itself. Is *Minecraft* a game? I think - therefore I choose this picture - I mean Lego is a game, you can play with it, but is it a game in the sense that it has rules, that it has goals? So this, I think, is the problem with games, but not only with *Minecraft*, but also in our definition. What do we want to analyze? If we want to analyze video games or video gaming?

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How do we define games? I think this is an important question, which hopefully will come up in the next minutes, or in the next discussion. *Minecraft* is more like a kind of an environment, I would say. You buy this game, and the person Notch, or Marcus Perrson, he's a Swedish person and he was quite successful as he in 2009 developed this

game, or this environment *Minecraft*. What he did is it's a kind of Lego in a virtual world, so you can build with blocks, it's a building block system, it's an open sandbox kind of Indie game. He was so successful that in 2014 it was bought by Microsoft - formerly it was produced by the company Mojang, for two and a half billion - so you get an imagination that it's really, really successful in this field.

To make it really short - what is *Minecraft*? You have different modes - so you download this game on your computer and you can choose if you want to play it by yourself, just like you. Or if you want to go on a special server and play with other games. You have different modes - like for example, the creative mode where you can build everything you want, or nothing you want. You have the survival mode - this is probably more like video gaming as we know it, where you have to fight against monsters, different monsters like Creepers who will explode if you go too nearby. Or zombies or spiders in the night. You have adventure mode and spectator mode. You have also a different system about being in a peaceful area where no mobs are around, or in a so-called hardcore mob. So if you're being killed, then it's really the end of the game and you can't resurrect, in a way.

I think therefore I was really reminded of Second Life, I don't know who knows Second Life. It's a little bit similar because if you are looking who's doing all the stuff like mags or mods - mods are modifications for this game that you can download so you don't only have a sword, but kind of machine guns from the Second World War. Everything is changed, or you have a kind of Middle Age surrounding. It's always done by the player themselves. For example, I spoke yesterday with my ten-year-old son and he said, oh wonderful, you're given an introduction about *Minecraft*, I can say such a lot of things. Also this ten-year-old, and he's just an example, is just programming and developing

servers for the other people, and other gamers can play on this server. I think this is idea behind *Minecraft*, they're just giving us kind of tools, virtual Lego blocks or Lego bricks, and the gamer just making servers so other people can play mini-games, or other games. I will just show you one example - because it's a nice introduction. Of course it's an advertisement trailer, but probably you can have a good impression of what is *Minecraft*. It's not working? It's more than the sound, this is the problem. Probably I just reload it and then it will work hopefully. No, it's not working. Okay, then I show you some pictures - this is probably the best solution so we're not spending too much time.
As I said you are having the possibility in the creative models to build really cities, and you can find cities like New York, Berlin, Munich. If we come to religious cities, of course you can find the Vatican, for example, but also the Potala Temple from Lhasa. So there's a huge variety of religious temples and sceneries and cities where you can find it. You can download it to your map, or find it on different servers. Additionally, there are kind of mini-games and I just made some - from my impression the two most popular examples is the first one is about jump and run - it's a typical jump and run play.

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You have to jump and sometimes the dragon is following you and sometimes you're just playing versus other players. The other one in the other picture, is a kind of bed wars. You're playing with two to I think 65 people, where you have to destroy the beds of the others, so the others can't resurrect. This is the goal of the game. They are mini-games because approximately they last from two minutes to one hour.

Of course you have also other examples of having a game within a game, for example there's a server where gamers just build up World of *Minecraft*. Of course everybody knows it's based on World of Warcraft. So you have this whole World of Warcraft scenery and you can play. You have quests on the server, so it's a game within this game

environment. Also the other thing is from Skyrim - that you have also servers that people rebuild the Skyrim scenery and you can just play these games on it. Just to give you a few examples.

Of course, it is – coming to the religious perspective – it's also used by different religious groups. For example, I give you one example for *Minecraft* Bible lessons - it's from the Children's Ministry Blog. There is a small - not such a small community, but there's a community who uses *Minecraft* to teach biblical lessons within *Minecraft*. Seriously really the most explicit reflection on religion, but I think there are a lot of ways how we can research religion in this game or game environment.

You have a lot of advertisement things, you can buy t-shirts, or you can buy costumes where people can dress themselves. For example, you see here an Enderman in the middle, and a Creeper just next to him. What we have - and I think this is an interesting thing - I don't know if you know the YouTube scene, and especially the Let's Play scene where people are playing games and filming themselves by camera, and also within the game and *Minecraft* was one of the reasons why the Let's Play scenery gets so important at the moment. I just give you an example from a German Let's Player - it's Gronkh and he has about two million abos and the, for example, most successful YouTuber is a Let's Player called PewDiePie. He's about I think 12 to 13 million subscribers at the moment. It's weird, you have to watch it. They are playing a lot of *Minecraft* - PewDiePie and Gronkh. So now we have to go back to the structure of this panel, and we start with the first question. Yes, and that's it for the moment.

Heidi Campbell:

Just as a quick reminder to our panelists - for the first question, how should religious

study concern itself with video games? We're going to have Ian, then Owen, then Michael and then Jason respond. You have three minutes and when you hear the digital ding, please wrap up your response. Ian?

Ian Bogost: Okay. Hello everyone, I am not a scholar of religion. I'm familiar enough with this field, I guess, to get to sit up at the table. So I'm not going to say much of anything about how religious study should concern itself with games, it seems a little presumptuous. But I do have just one idea, which is that something about games - what games and religion might have in common - it seems to me that the commonality, the fundamental commonality between religion and games is not the content of religion so much, as you know, when you do Bible lessons in *Minecraft*, but the idea of habits, of practices, of lived practices.

In some ways what you do in games is you defamiliarize, or you kind of weirdify ordinary habits, ordinary practices. Those might be physical - like constructing things out of little Lego blocks, or virtual, as is the case in *Minecraft*. But more often, I don't know if *Minecraft* is a great example of this, more often the thing that terrifies people about games is exactly the thing that I wonder if you all might not be interested in.

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Namely, how do we get into these cycles? The things that we practice, the actions that we perform are regulated or are sort of facilitated by games. You sit there on the train, or in the queue at the coffee shop and you move your Candy Crush boards, and what not, around. The game is not so much that it's programming you, or that it's manipulating you, that's not what I want to suggest, but rather that you develop these habits and the game inspires and encourages them. That metaphor, which may or may not be right, I mean it's certainly not as though folks are sort of worshiping at the altar

of - maybe of *Minecraft*, and maybe even of Candy Crush, although not in the way that they might expect.

That's the similarity is the structures that are somewhat unseen, sometimes ideologized, other times very much present, such that we celebrate them. That structure and cohere habits, ways of living on a moment to moment, day to day basis. I think that's the coupling point I see, as a non-scholar of religion, between games and religion. It's something that the games studies folks are not interested in, or don't see because we're usually obsessed with this idea of games being entertainment forms, or cultural forms. That are supposedly on a par with, or replacing cinema or literature, which is false. But this sort of secondary level where games are facilitating or encouraging action or thoughts or feelings or compulsions - I think that's the place where there's potentially productive energy.

Owen Gottlieb:

Good morning, so it's wonderful to be on this panel and to follow Ian, in particular. I'm going to talk about ritual as well. So rather than being prescriptive about what religious study should do, I'm going to talk about two areas in particular that my research is concentrating on currently. The first is to think about - because I work in Jewish education and Jewish studies, and media studies, game studies, as well as religious studies broadly. I'm looking at how games, and I'll talk about *Minecraft* in particular, interweave with contemporary Jewish practice at the moment.

For example, there are two cases that I'm looking at in a piece that I'm working on, one is how a synagogue in the Midwest actually reached out to a student with learning differences, and found a love of *Minecraft*. Then was able to use that in a public setting

for a bar mitzvah, which was led by this younger person into *Minecraft*, into a world they designed. So they discussed their Torah portion and led the congregation through his own rite of passage and a deeply moving service, through *Minecraft*, which he designed. That's a combination of the clergy reaching out, and the teachers reaching out, and the family working together. So really interweaving video game with religion.

A second done that I'm working on is a birthday party in which a young person designed a *Minecraft* birthday party and built their own commandments, their seven commandments of *Minecraft*. How do people get along and play together? So drawing from the frame of this family, which is a Jewish frame, and what the ten commandments mean. They are active in community as well. Then how *Minecraft*, in particular, and video games in general, allow for an interweaving of understanding and a framing of video games through a religious perspective. So that's one area that I looked at.

Then I spend most of my time in looking at interventions. I use a methodology, design-based research, to look at how we can improve formal and informal learning environments through games and simulations. My previous work was in augmented reality for teaching modern Jewish history, labor and women's history, immigrant history in New York. With a game called *Jewish Time Jump* that would feed people images and original historical artifacts from a hundred years in the past, based on where they stood as the largest women led strike in American history occurred.

I've shifted now to looking at game as rule-based systems, and also religious legal systems as rule-based systems. So the current project at RIT in the RIT Magic Center is looking at North Africa in the 12th Century Jewish, and eventually we'll look at Muslim religious legal codes. How can we use game systems, strategic table-top card systems,

then moving into mobile, to explore the pro-social, what evolutionary biologists call the pro-social aspects of religion. So collaboration and cooperation. So I'm looking at effecting learning environments for the acquisition of cultural practice and religious literacy, and eventually policy impact is the long-term goal.

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Michael Waltemathe:

We're so closely connected on the panel, it's really hard to get out of that corner. So my name is Michael, I'm teaching religious education at a German University and I'm interested in the educational aspects of computer games and religion. I did my dissertation on that. Maybe I shouldn't tell you so much what I think how we should engage with video games, when we're thinking about education and religion, but I'll just give you two case studies from that dissertation.

So what I did was - and that's been years ago - I took the shooter game, *Unreal*, do you know that game? I took it to religion classes in public schools. We had to get permission from the parents to do that, of course, and asked the students to construct religious spaces within the editor of that game. So basically we did with that game, *Unreal*, we did what people do in *Minecraft* nowadays.

Something amazing happened, we had this protocol that they would need to construct those space that they would deem religious and they would need to explain why they thought that was religious and what tradition that would adhere to, and things like that. There were several groups who basically built spaces that were centered on community, and their community experience and their peer group, and everything. That had to do with the age range that we were addressing.

Then there was this one group, and that was a fascinating example, they sort of built a traditional Catholic looking church. There was this huge crucifix with the corpus on, then there was the baptismal and Bibles and stained glass windows, and a whole roof made of tiled glass. They presented that to their fellow students, and in the ensuing discussion somebody said, that's crap. Look at that glass - if just one of the guys throws a rock up there, this glass will all shatter down.

So here's the rub, in that class was a non-Christian student, she was a Buddhist, and everybody was thinking about this rock, and she said it shouldn't be a problem for you. Within your religion, only he who is not a sinner should cast the first stone. It took the other students more than a quarter of an hour to get what she had said. It says something about the quality of religious education, doesn't it? The thing is, that is actually what I think we should be going for. These are open worlds and you can construct everything you want, and you can question all your religious tradition, you can transform religious ritual and things. If we're thinking about religious education and video games, I think this is the way to go.

The other example is from a group of students who were way younger. When they were asked to construct religious worlds, they constructed spaces that showed an ethical, a moral way of leading your life. If you did it wrong, you ended up in hell. There was this trapdoor which would get you back up to heaven, and I'll leave it at that. That was a good way to end this, thank you.

Jason Anthony:

Hi, my name is Jason, I'm a journalist, which is why my academic affiliation in your

programs is Brooklyn. I was reporting in Bhutan over the summer about a series of fascinating religious games. And there's something about the cities in Bhutan, these small cities, the streets don't have names, but some of the intersections do. That's sort of been my approach here, that games and religion intersect in a lot of places. And in the early stages of our research, maybe we don't know the street names yet, but there are some of these intersections that are becoming very familiar.

So my work has been in trying to put a name to some of these major intersections between games and religion. I just wanted to sort of run down them very quickly with *Minecraft* as an example. The first one of these intersections is this didactic intersection where games teach religious ideas. I think we see it through Bible games and things like that, we see that's certainly a way that digital games can be used, and that intersection has a long history in Sunday School games and in other teaching arenas, both digitally and in "meatspace." The second intersection I called the hestiasic games, games that are part of a religious event,

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like Ramadan games, or Genna games in Ethiopia. You find this with *Minecraft* maybe a little bit at MineCon - or maybe at the sort of bar mitzvah example where games are a background part of religious events, lending color and spice. The next two categories maybe don't have a lot to do with *Minecraft*. I call the next the poimenic category, and this encompasses divination games. Lots of our games that we know nowadays come from divination conditions. I think *Minecraft* probably doesn't have any of that going on with it, that I know of, goodness knows.

Then the praxic category, the fourth category, looks at games that are traditionally used as means of meditation or practice in themselves. I think of the Zen koan, in this way, if

you can look at the koan as a riddle game, and such praxic games are when games are used as a focus.. Go in ancient Taoism is another example, and in this you also see a game as a way that religious ideas are lived and practiced. The game itself is a focus. The ancient Olympics may be another example of this. You don't see that so much in modern games.

Then the last three categories are less religion looking at games, and more games looking at religion. These intersections are on the other side of town, as it were. The first of those is this allomythic category, basically when games have an in-game religion, usually a designed religion that is not the religion of the people who made the game. In *Minecraft* for instance you've got these temples and these priests, and I think it could be interesting to analyze those. You might say it's a very Protestant world in *Minecraft* because all of the temples are empty and the priests are sort of just there to be very practical. They trade with you! Anyway that intersection can be an interesting thing to study. I think Skyrim and lots of narrative games have in-game religions that offer an interesting way to look at these.

The allo-political intersection - basically this is when the game creates a polis, it creates a space for people to bring their religions that they experience out in the world, into the game space. That's sort of when players build in-game cathedrals and people play Ramadan play-throughs of *Minecraft*, where they don't eat pork in the game and they might pray five times a day in the direction of the in-game sun. And you get proselytizers, too. This is when the game world is the context in which a lived faith takes on a new digital life. And that's a rich intersection, and a rich intersection in *Minecraft* specifically.

The last intersection is the theoptic one, which is a way of looking at this odd phenomenon of god games. You can look at *Minecraft* as a game making space, as a sort of a god game, in which one person builds a world that others live in, and that god looks for ways to influence his fellow players behaviors - and while that's a longer conversation, I think that can be an interesting methodological approach, as all of these intersections invite their own methodological approaches. Thanks.

Heidi Campbell:

So now we're going to have a response from Michael Houseman over what he heard from the presenters on this question.

Michael Houseman:

First of all my apologies because in fact I based my remarks on the things I read, and some of them go beyond what was actually said here, but hopefully there'll be some relevance. I want to thank the organizers because my role is, as someone from the outside, is to raise general issues and pose difficult to answer questions. This could be fun, right? So I'm just going to try and do that very briefly.

My involvement in video gaming is minimal, it amounts to an embarrassingly short time in *Second Life*, it was just too difficult, so I dropped out. So I want to begin by just stating the idea that video gaming and religion, if it's worthwhile, I think Greg says this at one point in what he wrote - reveals something of what it is to be human. The specificities of what it reveals I think are linked to the way it conceives of the three poles that constitute this area of study. So game, digital media and religion. I'm going to talk briefly about those three.

I'm going to say very little about digital media - a little bit. A little bit about religion, but I'd like to say a bit about gaming. The idea is to elicit reactions to this and to begin discussion in general. One of the things that comes out, and it came out in what people were saying here, is the idea of gaming is rule governed. This was underlined both by Owen, speaking of laws, and by Ian. In that way it's kind of like religion, and specifically like ritual, in which there's a patterned behavior that's imposed, in part, from without. In the same way, it's kind of different from mundane life in that game is presumed to provide kind of a controlled environment. A slightly simplified, more predictable, where certainty is more present.

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In that way, there's an idea that many of us can have, that gaming provides a kind of a refuge. 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 is the norm. Within gaming there's a certain amount of certainty.

Well I'd like to say you can turn this around, and this actually links up to something that Ian was saying before. Maybe games can be seen as providing exemplary experiences of uncertainty. These are simplified worlds, but worlds in which uncertainty is made explicitly pleasant, and something that one has to actually deal with. As Jason said at one point, maybe games are the art form of uncertainty, like religion might be the technology of uncertainty. I mean this actually places uncertainty in the middle of one's focus.

The type of uncertainty, in particular one is involved with, are other people, other agents - watch out. This is either the ambiguities or collective allies, you never really know. Then there's our individual enemies. So there is a kind of an idea of the gaming kind of teaches us, and it provides us with experiences that are personally lived through, and

kind of touchstones for what life is about.

One of the lessons is it's uncertain. That you can actively choose, and you can learn, and you can construct, but basically it's uncertain, and this uncertainty is about survival. What one has to be uncertain about are other people. So that was just a first point, this idea that in fact games might express certain things, but they might actually format that. The second idea was rule-bound. Okay, there are rules, but the whole point of games is that it's not just rules. If you play just following the rules this is no fun at all, and you drop the game immediately. Games have to be fun, they have to be enjoyable. That is you don't need to only play, you have to play well for a game to be really a game. That's what's really interesting. I mean in ritual, if you don't do the ritual properly, you didn't do the ritual, period, that's it, it's yes or no. In games it doesn't work that way, it's more or less. I can play badly, but I'm not playing any less. So a good, well-played game is more game than a badly played game.

This is because game is really weird, because on the one point your actions are supposed to conform to certain norms that are not your own. Your actions are not just expressions of what you're feeling and thinking, but they reflect these certain norms like rules that are imposed. But at the same time, you've got to get involved, personally involved. So, in fact, it is an expression of your personal thoughts and feelings, all the while it shouldn't be. There's this kind of juggling act then you're gaming, it's a kind of balancing act that accounts for these weird figures that only exist in play situations. Cheaters, spoil-sports, referees - it doesn't exist anywhere notably, not in ritual, because it's a complicated thing. I think play is much more complicated than ritual in that respect.

Now the third thing is, what are these rules in games? Okay, basically these are

conventions that are recognized as different from the conventions that often go without saying, of everyday interaction. These conventions can either apply to the world in which you move in, the frame. This is a world in which you can only go to that place, you can only touch the ball with your feet, or whatever. That usually is a game.

Or, these conventions, these out of the ordinary conventions, apply to the actors in the world and that's usually a situation of play, of pretend play - I'm the pony, you're the princess. So what we're going towards here is an idea that maybe game play - there's not very much different, other than the fact that in game, since the conventions apply to not the agents, they can be distanced. Therefore, in principle, can be made explicit as rules. Whereas in play this is much more difficult. It's just like ordinary life, except for one thing, the conventions one obeys are recognized as conventions different from the ones one uses in ordinary life.

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What that means is - once again, it's not a matter of just obeying certain rules, you've got to actually get into it, and want to win, or want to make it beautiful, or whatever. What that means is that gaming and playing games is highly reflexive. You have to be aware of both the specialness of the rules you're using, and the fact that they are special with respect to these other rules that you're not using.

Also the other consequence is there's a great liability. You can go back and forth from gaming and mundane life very easily. You can switch and see things from the gaming side, actually what is ordinary life? It's like a big game, right? Just a bunch of conventions, that's the only real difference. The typical thing is - Gregory Bates is a personal hero of mine, you know, you're playing with the dog, you throw the stick or the ball [panting] and the dog comes back. Stop it - no, how do you actually indicate that

you're playing or not playing? It's very difficult.

Gaming, of course, in games, there is the pretense of this kind of framework, but there is this lability. Now these two features, both reflexivity and lability, seem to be favored by certain - I discovered this word recently, love it - affordances of digital media. That is digital media has this kind of - it favors a certain awareness that one is acting in a world of one's own creation. There's this kind of split consciousness. The idea of playing, of getting into visual media and playing games is not that you're totally absorbed, but there's a kind of a vibrant ambiguity between being in that world, and being aware of the fact that this is a world in which one is aware of being in it.

Then okay, this is kind of a weird concept - it's like visualization, it's not just imagination. Visualization is in my mind's eye I see something in which I can interact with. So where am I? Two places, right? I'm the one imagining me interacting, and I'm the interactor. That gives me a special experience. So the experience is not being lost in it, it's kind of having this special kind of doubled consciousness. It's a lot like reading, right? Where I get absorbed in the characters, except here it's massively visual. That's going to be my first link with religion.

Monotheism has a great tradition with images, right? There's iconoclast and iconophiles and this whole representation and incarnation and the power of images to become actual actors and persons with intentionality. Well maybe this gaming, this media gaming, participates - is another, further modulation of this preoccupation in monotheism of images and the power that they have.

The second thing is to do with the split consciousness. I'm really intrigued - what would the ritualization of that type of stance be like? I was very intrigued by the idea that often

games, digital media games, imply games within games. Now maybe the games within games are games, but the game they're within maybe might be something that would benefit from being seen as something ritual. We live in a society in which games are just - it's imbued with games. There's television games and then there's sports that are just all over the place. Then there's video games.

In a lot of societies daily life is imbued with what we would call ritual. So what is it to have a society in which, in place of which, we have games? That's our main mode of being who we are. My question, I guess, would be once again, what would the ritualization of that be like? What's the difference between a game and a ritual game? Okay, and I'll end there.

Heidi Campbell:

Now we have ten minutes for panel responders to respond to either each other or the comments they just heard from Michael.

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If you want to respond if you could raise your hand and I'll kind of point to you so we have an order. So who would like to be first? Don't all jump up at once. We're going to first go to questions from the audience, or comments from the audience. When you stand up if you could give your name and affiliation and speak loudly, that would be helpful.

Mike:

Mike at Emory Theological Studies - you mentioned you dropped the phrase double-consciousness. I heard some other people talk about us being able to transform our traditions through these so-called things. The phrase "double-consciousness" is pretty

heavy laden. The boy talking about building this African-American experience under this other consciousness of oppression. I just wondered if anybody could speak to maybe the potency of gaming as a way to craft a new narrative on self in the digital life, that might be carried back in the real life.

Gregory Grieve: I don't know if you know the work of Sherry Turkle? She's at MIT, and talks about analysis, not so much gaming, but in digital media about and notions of identity formation. It's interesting because her early work basically counteracts her later work, they're in contention with each other.

Many scholars have worked on notions of identity and digital media, especially the crafting of avatars. When you're online you're not sure that the actual world person and the avatar, or the identity you're interacting with - you don't know if they synch up. So there's lots and lots written on identity formation.

Mike:

What's her last name?

Gregory Grieve:

Turkle - Sherry Turkle, if you Google it she'll pop up.

Owen Gottlieb:

Just to add on what Greg was talking about, I also think a lot about Markus and Nurius' work, and Jim Gee, or James Paul Gee references that work as well. So possible selves - the aspect of role playing is, I think, very important in terms of thinking about identity. Markus and Nurius' work I think directly speaks to your point about can you imagine what's your imagined self? Then Jim Gee and other people then apply that to games to

say if you're role playing, and you can have an imagined self, how that may help you shift, change or transform your identity. So both of those pieces of work will probably be helpful as well.

Mike:

Could you say his name?

Owen Gottlieb:

Well it's two - Markus and Nurius, and then Jim Gee, or James Paul Gee is kind of the pied piper of games for learning in the last 10, 15 years.

Rachel Wagner:

I'm going to add one more, and I'm just going to talk really loudly, which is not in my nature, but Jane McGonigal's, *Reality is Broken* if you want a sort of gamer's perspective. I think she's a little bit too positive in her apporach to gaming, but she does talk about how playing games can make you braver, sort of make you more aware of who you are and let you realize skills that you didn't know that you had. The title of the book, *Reality is Broken,* sort of beckons towards a religious perspective, even though she never explicitly takes it. She says that reality is 'broken', but games can sort of fix reality in some kinds of ways. So it's worth a read.

Heidi Campbell:

Other questions?

Daniel:

Daniel from Yale Divinity Center for Christianity. You were talking before about religion

with Indie games, and also a category of games mimicking certain religions and our reality. I was curious, in my own work studying *Bioshock* Infinite and Mormonism, the act of comparative studies - because comparative religious studies has been around for a long time. Do you think that in valuing the study of religion and the study of video games - the fact that new games create new religions with lots of successive titles, that that's an ongoing dialogue within the field? Or are we just going to run out of options at some point?

Jason Anthony:

Within the field of game design, or within sort of academic study? I can't actually speak to academic study all that much, but certainly within the field of game design this idea of playing with religion and ripe and evolving.

[00:45:00]

There was a game developers conference in maybe 2011. Frank Lantz gave this speech - it was wanting games to be these instruments of cosmic consciousness. That same year they had this game design challenge, and the theme was Bigger than Jesus, and Jason Rohrer invents a game this year, I forget what it's called (*Chain World*), but it's basically a little world that's contained on a floppy drive. Then Wired writes a big article that he's actually created a real-world religion. So I would say certainly from one side, this idea - that religion is something central to the explorations of digital game designers - that's true. And also, notably, and all of those players, Frank Lantz and Jason Rohrer, are professed and vehement atheists.

They see within this field of game design this possibility of playing with ideas of religion as just primary to what's going on, especially narrative games. Certainly I would say that there's a lot of heat in playing with big ideas and the narrative possibilities that games

allow. As far as what would be happening on the flipside of this, the academic side and looking at the proliferation of work about religion scholars working with this new medium, I'd defer to somebody else.

Michael Houseman:

I just wanted to say a word about the imagined self as being a way to change oneself. I think this also can be appreciated as a cultural ideal. It's not self-evident at this point. However, in our culture we put great value to this possibility that imagined selves can have an effect on who I might be. I think gaming provides a means to keep that as a viable premise for our culture.

John Blackman:

John Blackman, Masters of [inaudible 00:46:54] at Emory University. You had spoken about the kind of rule-based portion of the gaming experience, could you maybe speak to people modifying their gaming experience, or transgressing the rules of expectations in order to gain an adventive edge. How that might reflect on how they view the rules and regulations of culture, society or maybe religion.

Owen Gottlieb:

I'm thinking in particular about transgressive play. So the game we're currently developing - the ideas is that there are rules, but how does play emerge or emergent play from them? So are you going to follow the rules, are you going to break the rules? What are the other players - how do they feel about that? So can you give me the end point of your question again, the very last part about how you create other sets of rules through play.

John Blackman:

Yeah, how you modify your experience to [inaudible 00:47:50], or have the advantageous edge. How that might reflect how you view the rules of society, or the expectations of your religious institution.

Owen Gottlieb:

Yeah, I guess I think this idea of emergent play - that there are a set of rules, and then what happens during play, in a good game, is that play emerges that in some ways is transgressive, in some way transformative, and the experience of play allows for different ideas. Kind of related to Erikson's psychosocial moratorium, and if I'm remembering, a piece I might have read by Ian, I think, on that. That there's that space to play can allow for potential transformation through play.

Gregory Grieve:

It's really important too to take apart rules and play - I mean they're really two different things. When you conflate them I think you lose a lot. So like when I play games I don't ever follow the rules, I just try to break them, right? That's what I do - like when I play *Tomb Raider* I just play and basically I don't follow the rules, I don't follow the track. I want to draw from the corner and see what I can break, right? So I think it's important to think about. The second part of your question I think is really fabulous and I don't have an answer for you, but I'm going to start thinking about it.

Jason Anthony:

I did some work with a game I designed that was played in New York and London and a few other places. It was called *Shabbat-put*, in which we engaged some folks from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Basically the goal of the game was to break the rules of the

game. The premise was that you were travelling to play in the Olympics in Ancient Greece, but it was the Sabbath, so how do you participate in these events by kind of breaking and shaping and re-inventing the rules. I think if you've spent time in Israel you sort of see that there is this kind of gaming of Sabbath rules – right, the melachot.

[00:50:00]

It was a really positive way to sort of engage that theological community in discussions about the rules and how we live in tension with the rules, and sometimes manipulate the rules. I feel like that's one example of where games, or maybe one of the better places to teach those lessons or engage with those tensions.

Michael Waltemathe:

Can I answer that? Am I loud enough, because I can't get out here? The thing is, from an education perspective, this is where I think we would need to go with games, right? Because too, as you said, you just break the rules, but to break the rules you need to know about the rules, you don't basically need to know the rules, but you need to know about them to break them. So I would think, from my perspective, if I'm thinking about education and gaming, or better, playing and religion, that is exactly what I would go for. That is where I would want religious education to go to - to teach about the rules, then deliberately try to bend them, break them, shift them, push the outside of the envelope. To see what the actual scope of the rules were and how you apply them to, as you said, society or real life. So I won't say transgression leads to delinquency, but I would say transgression leads to better understanding what you are transgressing, okay?

Heidi Campbell:

We'll have more time for questions as we move on, but I want to move onto the second question. So question number two is - what methods and research questions do you

recommend? We're asking the researcher really to draw on their own experience and their work here. We're going to start with Rachel, then Xenia, then Greg and then Kerstin.

Rachel Wagner:

Hello. There is many ways of thinking about religion and video games, as there are methods for thinking about any facet of religious studies. So choosing one method is really just a matter of each researcher deciding what you can bring to the table. So I'm going to tell you a little bit about what I do. Until recently I didn't have a name for it, but Greg helped me name it, and I'm very grateful for that. If I could draw on the work on Wendy Doniger in An *Implied Spider* I can find a name for what it is I do: This is a comparatist model.

So a little bit of what she means by the title. She says, "We 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 web-makers, authors, anthropologists and comparatists. The storytellers gather up the strands the spider emits to weave their own, individual cultural artifacts, they function like Venn diagram webs of shared themes." That's what I do.

Basically that means I don't come up with a research question, I come up with a topic or theme that interests me. Right now I'm interested in apocalypticism. Then I go read as widely as possible, get as many voices as possible and see what connections occur. That leads me to more questions and helps me do a sort of cultural studies kind of analysis. I could probably stop right there. So my conversation partners would include gamer studies, media studies, various forms of communication studies.

So with *Minecraft*, for example, I'm really interested in the cultural relevance of the game, beyond the game context. I'm not just interested in what happens inside the game, I think other people share that interest, I'm interested in Comic Cons, blogs, YouTube shows, educational uses, religious practices, costumes, betting blocks, action figures, Lego sets, toys, clothing. There are even Creeps now that are sort of *Minecraft*'s answer to peeps. There are videos made by *Stampy Cat* - if you have kids you've heard of *Stampy Cat*. You don't have to have played *Minecraft* in order to know something, or be interested in *Stampy Cat*.

I'm also interested in the symbolic role of the pixel. So I'm interested in the way that *Minecraft* may represent a sort of metaphor for a new view of reality that we now have, that it's a buildable. Think about 3D printing and construction, and how we're beginning to view our reality in a very, very different kind of way. So again, I'm interested in games as part of a much larger cultural conversation.

I will say that one danger of the comparative study is that you have to be really careful, you have to be really invested, you have to read very deeply and you have to be fully interdisciplinary. So one of the dangers is to be sort of shallow and read a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and not be able to deeply engage with these other fields. So you have to be fully committed if you're going to do this, or you'll have shallow research.

I'll also just add that Wendy Doniger says that the spider is not only 'implied', the spider is real because we're looking at real cultural products out there, right? So it's only implied because there's not just one spider, that is, we're all participating in constructing this web, and also in analyzing it. So that's my approach.

Xenia Zeiler:

Hi, I'm Xenia, I'm working on the intersection of media, including video games and gaming and religion in Asia, and particularly in India. I do have remarks I've been reflecting on, on the research questions in our question number two, namely that is "what research questions would you recommend".

[00:55:00]

Of course it is difficult, if not presumptuous to recommend research questions for a whole discipline, or a sub-discipline, that goes without saying. I do understand though the need, and also the advantage, of critically reflecting and discussing research questions which would benefit the organized development of our new academic sub-field, which is gaming and religion. Which would then, in the best case scenario, also contribute to rethink approaches and key perspectives in the whole discipline, that is religious studies itself.

Of course that means obviously encouraging a wide range of research questions. But this said, I also want to stress that personally I would love to encourage certain questions which I feel are still under-represented. I've argued elsewhere before that gaming is highly global, I think we all agree on that. It is important though, not to mistake this argument as meaning to say that gaming, in whatsoever way, is uniform or standardized across the globe.

Gaming as a global phenomenon does not mean that, for example, people in the USA, in Europe, or, for instance, in India, play the same or even just similar games, have access to the same or even just similar technical facilities, produce the same, or even similar kinds of games, or interpret the narrative in a similar way. Rather, the information I get

from my research, field work, and from my experiences on games and gaming in the USA, in Europe, and India, all these experiences point at massive differences, in fact, in all these and more points.

I actually flew into Atlanta directly from India and never before I was so aware of how diverse gaming landscapes worldwide are. In the case of India, for example, any research would need to take at least two major game settings existing in society into account. Also in India we have a certain number of mostly young people from affluent levels of society, from the upper-middle class and the upper class, in urban environments. These people have access of course to everything that is western standard, so to say, and they play some triple A games which are also globally distributed. But we also have a much higher number of people not having access to these. I think this is very, very important – and this is an example from India, but I think it's exemplary in some way for gaming worldwide. We would need to really tackle such questions, as well.

Gregory Grieve:

If you're wondering what game we're playing, I think it's *Twister*. So my name is Gregory Price Grieve. If you Google me, I'm not the dead chiropractor. Again, after this if you want to email me and contact me, I can connect you to the right people. So if you're interested in anything that's happening here, just contact me and I'll put you in contact with them.

First I wanted to thank Michael, who's not a gamer, and we basically brought him in to do this. I also want to think Ian so much for coming - it was great. Heidi is the co-editor on Playing with Religion in Digital Games - she didn't mention that, but she is. Then finally Kerstin and Xenia are going to publish all of this up afterwards, so if you missed

something, if you're not taking notes fast enough, it will be published on their journal.

Again, I was thinking about my methodology which is what I would call documentary style methodology. It actually comes from my fieldwork and the making of documentary films. Basically a documentary style is similar to what Rachel was talking about, which is that I have some topics - like I want to study religion in *Minecraft*. Then it's a qualitative method where I would then just go and play the game, collect everything I can find, collect everything as much as I can. So there's no hypothesis really, I'm not trying to go into the game to prove something.

[01:00:00]

I'm basically just going into the game to explore and to collect and to see what's there. I'm not looking for known unknowns, but rather for unknown unknowns — what I don't know I don't know. That's for me what's - it's kind of an arena of discovery. If I do this right, when I'm done it's an Irish wall, there's no real theory at the end, the different pieces fit snuggly together. I don't know if anyone's ever seen an Irish wall, that's how I always think about it.

It's similar to, I would say, New Game Journalism. It's similar to Let's Play videos if you've watched those. It's also similar to auto-ethnography, if anyone's read in that field. All that is playing in the background of what I'm doing. It differs, however, because I'm really interested in the process of Thick Description coming from the Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, which is not describing what you find, but describing it in a context that an outsider can understand what that thing means.

So if I'm analyzing Steve's pickaxe, right? This is the little character in *Minecraft* - it's not just describing Steve's pickaxe, but it's describing what that pickaxe means to a player.

What that pickaxe means to a community of players. What that pickaxe means maybe in consumptive practices. So it's not just merely a description, but it's a description within the cultural context with which that practice takes place.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

Okay, thank you. My name is Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, which is a really, really hard name for Americans to pronounce in the right way, so I'm sorry for that. I will focus my little speech on the first part of the question - what kind of method we have to use. I would start with the point, why methods at all? I think there is nothing really special about researching video gaming and religion, or video gaming and ritual, because in every research field you have to reflect on methods you're using. I think it's really, really crucial, because in some research, and recent research we have to observe that there is a kind of lack of methods.

It's crucial because otherwise we can't understand the argumentation - why the people are coming to this argument and to the other argument. Now I give some examples for what kind of methods I would recommend, I mean it's totally dependent on the research question I have. But in general I'm coming from the sociological perspective. For me, I'm interested in the actor in his gametized world, so to speak. It's derived from a term by Friedrich Krotz - the mediatized life-world we're all living in. I would say we're not in a gametized life-world we're living in, because you have your handy Smartphone where you play *Candy Crush*, for example. Or you're all playing games in different modes, not only video gaming, but other games as well.

So I would distinguish concerning the actor in video gaming, such as the games designer, the game itself, and of course, the gamer. On all three levels we have to reflect

on the culture and technical environment. In the beginning of development a concept-like game environment where we distinguish these kind of different fields. To really look what kind of research question, on which level we have and what is concerning. For example, Xenia mentioned the culture environment - it's totally different for Indian gamers and for Indian game designers, such as game designers in the US, also in Germany. I think that's what we also differentiate between them.

Of course, the methods you are using are totally dependent on this perspective, and on this level. On this level you have to make research. I would broaden the whole thing not on games, but on video gaming - on the process of actors playing these games. I'm interested in the ascription of meaning. So is it a play, is a game, is it a religion, is it a ritual? I mean there's the question raised by Michael.

Coming to the example, because I really love *Bioshock Infinite*, it was really interesting for me because coming from a more media studies and having a more literature point of view, in the beginning of the research, I loved the baptism scene. It's so full of religion. Then coming from the sociological point of view, and really making research on the gamer, most of them - yeah, they recognize it. It's a kind of baptism, but it's no meaning at all ascribed to this scene.

[01:05:00]

Especially also the rules we just mentioned - I mean are the rules really so important, as we would suggest, and of course, also religious symbols? Thank you.

Heidi Campbell:

I'd like to now invite Michael to give a second response to the questions and comments.

Michael Houseman:

Okay, thank you very much. Okay, so method is really important - that's one big message. The other thing is that your methods reflect the way you conceive of your object, basically. It seems to me that there are two large families of methods that are at work here. The one is what you identify and you circumscribe a category of phenomenon. Then you try and figure out how that thing works and what are the principles that organize it, and stuff like that.

This is very much in the spirit of what Greg called the documentary approach, which you can think of it also as clinical approach, or an ethnographic approach basically. There are a number of implicit choices that one does in this approach, however. One is you distinguish something called game from the stuff that's not a game, alright? So you have these two things, in fact.

Then you very often wonder about what's the relationship between these two things? It could be - and I'm using Jason's vocabulary here, it could be didactic - how does what happens in the game, end up affecting what happens in the not-game. Or it could be a little political - how could what you do in the not-game end up being expressed within the game medium. Then it also gets a little difficult - exactly what are these entities you've kind of isolated? There's game, but what is not-game? Is it religion? Is it like mundane life? Is it ritual? What are you going to oppose? So these are choices, I think, that are important and people make different choices, but it depends on how you conceive of your object.

There is another possibility, which is the one that Kerstin seems to be pushing with words like "game environment" or "gametized life-world". Which is, you don't actually have two things, you have one thing in another one. Therefore, when you try and do this

back and forth thing, it's a little more difficult because you don't have two well-circumscribed worlds. In fact, you have one, that's the game, and the other one is everything else, and you can't do it all.

I think that's maybe one of the reasons why Kerstin feels the need to hammer the idea that we've got to problematize it, because you can't actually do an ethnography of everything. So there's this idea of you've kind of got to live a little bit. It gets complicated, and I think this is one of the things that Xenia has pointed out, is that there is no kind of standardization of this. Neither of the experience of the game, or of the everything else.

That is there is a great deal of cultural variability that just means that the everything else - not only are the games rather different from one place to another, but the everything else is rather different from one place to another. So the systematic relationships you want to draw between these things, one has to be sensitive to the fact that there is a great deal of variation.

I think the danger with this is kind of falling in love with your discriminations, with your categories. That you forget - and this is something that Greg has really stressed - you forget these are conceptual constructs, these are models. So they're cheap, you can change them every week, it's not a big deal. But one tends to forget that and then you kind of get married to certain conceptions that you then think that your models are more real than the phenomenon they're supposed to be accounting for.

So that's one big option, and you see it's got these problems in it. The other option is you just throw out categories all together, right? You just start spinning, or knitting, you

just kind of wander around, you take a theme and you just go for it. This is the spider thing - this is the comparative thing. For me this is very much like structuralism without the structure - you just kind of like keep going and basically things hook onto each other and they become interesting in so far as they seem to be relevant to the theme that you're going on about. Now I think the danger here, for me, is spiders only produce thread, nothing else.

[01:10:00]

So there's a tendency to conceive of these links as homogenous and as homogenous areas. It's no accident that this whole procedure, like structuralism, was invented from myth. That is stuff that's fairly homogenous as a type of discourse. But if you begin linking things that are less homogenous, like ways of behaving, ways of talking about one's behavior, ways of thinking, of feeling, of singing, of building, or cooking, or whatever. Then there's a little trap, which is either one tends to favor the connectedness, and that usually homogenizing these different objects. Or, you keep the fact that these objects are really rather different types of realities, and then the connections between them become slightly more contingent than one would necessarily like.

But once again, the advantage of this is that you can make these connections that you can't necessarily make when you're into subscribing particle worlds like that. Now, Dan Sperber, a cognitive anthropologist, raised very early on one of the dilemmas of social science, and I think it applies also to the study of religion. Which is there seem to be two ways of modelling things, and we're just stuck in them, and we've got to get beyond that.

One is you model things with - these are categorical models. Basically you cut up life into things, then you have a relationship between these things. So this gives you kind of

classifatory schemes. The other one are network models, basically, where this is about circulation and things go around. Both of these, as I tried to show, have kind of certain disadvantages. His idea was we've got to get beyond this. We've got to have some type of analytical construct that provides us with something halfway between, or that transcends this distinction between categories and networks. Modes of circulation and modes of being.

I wonder whether - and that's pretty much my question - I wonder whether the affordances, once more Stewart Hoover, of digital media, and of gaming in digital media, and of ritualized gaming in digital media, might provide grounds for the development of new types of analytical models that has this between-ness - once again Stewart Hoover - between categories and networks. This whole thing about this reflexivity is being constitutive of the gaming experience, and at the same time, this experience is supposed to have an effect on one's life, in general. Which is exactly what rituals are supposed to do. Such that, once again, I suspect that ritualized gaming - the ones that actually have an effect on ones - have rather different special properties. I'm just wondering whether that whole field can't provide the grounds for other types of models that gets away from this choice between categories and networks.

Heidi Campbell:

We have some time for more questions and responses from the audience.

Jacob:

I have a question for Kerstin - Jacob Smith, University of [inaudible 01:14:00] Master's student. You mentioned that a lot of players found no meaning at all in the baptism scene in *Bioshock Infinite*. Do you mean that there was a failure of the role building and

things that the game developer was trying to get across, because that scene is not absolutely critical to the story and everything? Or just that they were eager to sort of get past that part into the game play, and all of that?

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

The interesting thing about the baptism scene is, or was for me, going beyond, just in big quotations marks, "analyzing the narrative" of a game. From what I experienced, also from Second Life and World of Warcraft research, was really the thing that a lot of gamers are just clicking the quest, but they're not interested in the narrative at all.

[01:15:00]

I mean of course - here we have to ask how can we research kind of influence? Of course they're confronted with this baptism scene, and how can we deal with this? For me it was interesting to take the baptism scene also in a visual discourse analysis. You can additionally ask, what is, in a Foucault sense, what is showable, or speakable in society nowadays? How is this changing, and is it more speakable or showable in video gaming? A kind of baptism scene, but connected, for example, with the whole bundle of civil religion within the game. For me the thing was really to go beyond, but not totally skip the narrative, the analysis of the narrative approach.

Gregory Grieve:

Kerstin can I answer?

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

Yes.

Gregory Grieve:

Again, this is me talking to gamers, basically talking to gamers. So Vit Sisler who's a Czech scholar and who has a piece in Heidi and my edited volume. He divides a video game into audio/visual, narrative and the procedural level, right? So when I was talking to gamers about that baptism scene, what they found wrong with it was it was totally trapped. You had no choice in what you did. For them, they did not like that - they saw that as kind of just a bad game design.

Their whole point was just to get through how can I get through this as quickly as possible? So it seems for most of the gamers what became meaningful were the choices they made. The audio/visual level and the narrative level may not - there's certain things which become more important because of that procedural level. That's what I found - again, just kind of communicating with the gamers about it.

Michael Waltemathe:

Can I just show another example - *Jedi Knight: Mysteries of the Sith* from the 1990s - so that's an old game. But it has a structural element where you experience sort of violence in the game. There's a back story, a video story that's told that tells the opposite. The video story is not as powerful as what you experience in the game - only in one of the later add-ons to that game do they actually include the video story within the - what's the word - the interaction part. Then it becomes powerful. So that's exactly what Greg just said, it needs to be experienced, and you can't experience it in a scripted scene, right?

Jake: What game was that again?

Michael Waltemathe: *Jedi Knight: Mysteries of the Sith*.

Male:

I really appreciate what you said already, that the game itself and the game design is something I'm finding intriguing about my research [inaudible 01:17:56]. The designers like, no, no, no - the game is not anti-religious, we make no statement about Christianity. Yet, the game kind of makes little statements about Christianity. So not to get dragged down into [inaudible 01:18:10], in your own methodology, and this could be to anybody, how do you deal with authorial intent of the game design? Any game, and how scholars of religion - something I found really intriguing is in interviews, the designers actually said, any criticism of Christianity or religion in this game, is people reading it into. It's like, really? Okay.

Gregory Grieve:

or me, I don't privilege one perspective, I basically bring them all together and have them in dialogue with each other. Truthfully, I'm much more interested in what the gamers are doing with it, than what the game designers intended. But I'd still bring that in, and I think when you compare those different things, I think that's when it gets interesting, right? It's when you get that thick soup of different levels. Yeah, the other question would be, why would they say that, right? That would be what I would start asking. They're saying that because they don't want to get in trouble.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

Probably a little bit linked with the question, because I'm interested also in all three levels. I think this is a kind of question for methods because I'm dealing a lot with interviews and episodic interviews. Here you can distinguish between the reflexive level. Of course it's also the thing of power relation and how you advertise the game, will it be

scandalous, because then it sells better. If you have sex or power or violence and a little bit religious scandals.

[01:20:00]

But also I would be interested as well in the game to see really how they, in a narrative construction way, how they construct and how they combine it with their own experience, and their own views on religion.

Female:

I have a question also. When you think about affordances, when you're thinking about what actions are built into the games - what are we affording players to actually do inside the games. But there's also the perceived affordance from the user. So how they're understanding that and possibly reshaping that. So in your work, in your methodology, you said you did an [inaudible 01:20:42], I'm wondering if any of you have thought about doing some form of user testing methodology. Where you can actually watch the game play while it happens and you can see how they're interacting with affordances? And if so, what kind of methods have you done?

Gregory Grieve:

Just for people who don't know the word "affordances" - affordance is a word that comes from design. An affordance is something build into design that basically channels your actions with it. So like a doorknob affords the opening of the door - you can open it in other ways. So within media studies there's this notion that different media afford how you interact with it. So it would be very hard to have smell be a part of a film, it doesn't afford it. That's an excellent question - I've never thought about that, I don't know if you've thought about it?

Owen Gottlieb:

I work in design-based research, so we specifically take an artifact out into the field with players and we do interviews and we do hanging out and we do video and we get the logs from what they're playing, and we do pre and post survey. To see how we can make design changes and think about how we can fix affordances or enhance them. Then we do iterative cycles of design. So that comes out of the learning sciences where we've heard much more about affordances in the last, let's say, 20, 30 years, but now it's working in here. So I'd be happy to talk to you more about that.

Rachel Wagner:

Can you stay there for a second, Owen, because I want to actually point something out related to the previous question. I'm thinking about accidental religious content and intentional religious content. So I want to sort of revisit if anyone had any comments on that based on the *Bioshock* conversation, right? Because you design video games intentionally thinking about religious content.

Owen Gottlieb:

And Ian's a designer as well. So what's the question?

Rachel Wagner:

To just sort of reflect back on the question about *Bioshock*. I think the designers may not be thinking explicitly about what they're doing, and they may not be reflecting on what it might mean to intentionally [inaudible 01:22:42].

Owen Gottlieb:

Right, it may not be intentional, but they're certainly not going to admit it either way,

because as Greg was saying, they're just going to get themselves in trouble.

Male:

[Inaudible 01:22:49] more skeptical, I think it's more capitalist.

Gregory Grieve:

It's interesting too - if you look at the translation of games from different cultures. So like when *Zelda* gets translated into America they get rid of all the Christian - like the Bible becomes the book of magic. So in the Japanese game it's totally different because in Japan Christianity is kind of this almost evil, foreign religion. You see this in the *Silent Hill* games too, where Christianity - I don't know if you've played *Silent Hill*?

Male:

They do it in *Castlevania* as well [inaudible 01:23:19].

Gregory Grieve:

Yeah, so Christianity becomes this evil other, right? But then when you translate that game into the North American environment you've got to change all that. So it's interesting to see how the game translates, especially Japanese games - I just love them. Where else can you have Jesus fighting - who's Jesus fighting? Like Santa Clause or something. Which plays totally differently in Japan than it does here.

Jason Anthony:

Game texts themselves are problematic - I mean look at Mass Effect. The game was released finally, had already passed the play-testing stage, where there is a lot of back and forth. Then folks who played the released didn't like the ending! So then they

released another ending. So what is the authentic state of that text? What do you study? I think, again, that sort of comes back to this idea that games are an art form of uncertainty. They sort of exist in Heidelbergian state when you talk about them, they don't come into existence until they're played. Which I think makes them really interesting for study, because the player becomes intrinsic to the study of the game.

Heidi Campbell:

Other questions or comments?

Rachel Wagner:

In relation to what you were saying, Michael, one of the things I didn't mention in my talk was Wendy Doniger's metaphor of the fox and the hedgehog.

[01:25:00]

Wendy Doniger talks about the fox and the hedgehog and she cites a line from the Greek poet Archilochus to describe the relationship between these two types of scholars. She says "the fox knows many things, and the hedgehog knows one big thing." So comparatists are foxes, and contextualists are hedgehogs. This is one way of thinking about this relationship between the ethnographer and comparatists. A comparatist who does her job well will be reading what everyone else is doing, and not be isolated in a corner, right? So she should be reading what the ethnographers and the documentarians, and so forth, are doing. So she should hopefully move up to that larger level that you were describing.

Gregory Grieve:

Do we have time for one more comment?

Heidi Campbell:

Yes.

Gregory Grieve:

I think if you laid out that dichotomy between the network and I feel like I'm somewhere in between. So for me, I would call it post-JZ Smithian, if such a thing exists. You know, he has this notion of religion as solely being a category of the scholar, right? That's his - so when I usually go in I have some notion of what religion is, let's say, but then by interacting with people my category changes.

So the study I was just working on I realized that there was a huge differentiation between how I was using religion and the people I was talking to were using religion, even though we were using the same words. For me, religion had some kind of notion to do with ultimate reality and ritual. But for them, religion was everything bad about spirituality. So everything that was bad about religion, got stuck into the religion category, and everything good went into the spiritual category, right?

So for me, within the study I had to change how I was using - so there's this dialexis. It's not just a dialogue on the level of content, but it's actually a dialogue on the level of the categories which are framing that content. I'm not sure if that's method or theory, but that kind of underlies what I do.

Heidi Campbell:

We have time for one more question or comment.

John Borchert:

John Borchert, Syracuse University. I'm thinking about these sort of - what Greg was just talking about, and what Dr. Houseman brought up. That is categories versus network thinking, or something like that. A definition versus a relational approach when looking at digital media, specifically gaming. I'm wondering if the primary question here is when we're thinking about how religious actors or acts interact with digital technology through gaming. Is the primary question here is this an ontologically or epistemologically based question?

Are we talking about a way of being in a space, or are we talking about a mode through which we know or learn something? There's a lot of talk about learning, procedural learning - but are we thinking about - I think those two that what might be sort of an artificial, but not arbitrary distinction between a category versus a network way of thinking. Are embedded in those sort of distinctions - an ontological, or epistemological problem, or is one favoring one more than the other. I think that sort of categorical or definitional thinking models and an epistemological way of thinking about how we can think through these things on a network model might be more relational than ontological.

I wonder if looking back at ways that people have thought about embodied modes of interacting with technology prior to a gaming model, is a way to then enter into a theoretically embedded way of thinking about this stuff. Without eliminating the new possibilities that these allowances involve. I don't know if that's more of the question. I don't know if you got it.

Gregory Grieve:

We can talk about this later because it'll take a while to explain. But for me basically

they're going from [inaudible 01:29:12] to Bourdieu. I talk about media practices, rather than epistemological. That's what I talk about - I talk about media practices. Kind of with that Bourdieuan notion of trying to get rid of the subject and the object. I can talk to you more about that. It would take a long time to flesh out.

Owen Gottlieb:

Mary Flanagan has done some interesting writing on embodied and the questions of epistemology and ontology in one of her Reload books, I think.

John:

What's the name?

Owen Gottlieb:

Mary Flanagan at Dartmouth.

Heidi Campbell:

Before we move onto question three I've asked Ian if he would give some comments just from his overview of the study of game studies. The current trends that relate to research methods, and maybe things that we in religious studies could learn from, that we haven't spoken of here.

[01:30:00]

Ian Bogost:

So game studies is this field that doesn't really exist, but we pretend it does. There's a few hundred of us around the world and we have created the impression that we're a discipline, which is good on us - well done. What that means is we're very susceptible to

trends. We don't even know that they're trends, because there are so few of us that it's hard to even call them trends. If I think back 15 years to the start of the establishment of a discipline like Film Studies, or Literary Studies, but for games, which we can talk separately about whether that was a good idea or not.

But it happened to some extent, and without give you the long history, there was always this anxiety about colonization and independence. We need a study of games, because otherwise he literary or film or communication or what have you, name your enemy. Or name the discipline in which you were intellectually reared such that you can then reject it as insufficient.

So these anxieties of influence and of upbringing are very common. But where that's left us today is we kind of go through these cycles. The current cycle is one in which social scientific methods are predominant. I pause because - and I'm not a social scientist - so I hope no one's recording this. I mean I'm not really sure what any social science, as applied to games, I don't know if it qualifies as social science. I'm not even sure if any social science qualifies as social science.

Anyhow, the sort of very heavily ethnographic, or so-called ethnographic that I watched someone play a game one night and I took it as kind of evidentiary, right? Or I talked to a bunch of people about their practices - the things with Let's Plays and *Minecraft* - these are great examples of the in-roads that social scientific, or ethnographic - I don't have anything against these methods. This is the state that we're in, which means that sort of deep hermeneutic reading - which has a relationship to many disciplines among religious studies, have been very much down-played.

We sort of take what people do with games as the most important thing. Whatever they do - this is going to be related to my feelings on the next question. Whatever they do, is sort of fine, right, because they're doing it. So we just sort of - look at E Sports, competitive games - this is amazing. Look at Twitch - people are streaming themselves playing games and other people are streaming these weird machines that you interact with that play the games on your behalf. So it is totally crazy and insane.

The kind of current practice is very, very deeply - do you agree with this, Owen or am I…

Owen Gottlieb:

I'm curious where you're headed.

Ian Bogost:

I'm curious where I'm headed too. I think what this means is - and really this is very much related to my feelings on the, do you have to play a game to study it, business. We desperately need non-conformist perspectives, they're such a - in game studies, that is. Any kind of perspective that just kind of takes these games and does something with them, like outside, peripherally. That doesn't really care about what I think about the treatment of that object or that medium, because it's not like there's some need to pledge fealty to game studies in order to do this kind of work.

If you wanted to study the representation in literature of film, you wouldn't go to the film folks and be like what are the proper methodologies for studying film. In order that we can appropriately conduct the work or religious study. So I would even go so far as to say that contrarian or aggressively contradictory methodologies, or interpretations of the work that's done in media studies, generally speaking, which put games in that bag.

Those would be welcome, from my perspective. So this *Bioshock Infinite* business - obviously nonsense. What is really happening is something that requires a certain amount of enditement that, in some ways, cannot happen, even within the domain of academic game studies. I'm kind of giving away all my material for later. Within the domain, even though there's a certain critical manifold that is not like the fan, or the player, the enthusiast. There's still a sense that the given-ness of the work is supposed to be taken at face value. We're a bit too much in love with it.

So to question that particular example, from the perspective of expertise, of real expertise, and deep knowledge and disciplinary and communal commitment to something that intersects with a game like that.

[01:35:05]

Then only in a very minor way, then goes back off into its own domain. These are the things that I would personally welcome, more than affiliations. Almost like there's an opportunity for contrarian, or even oppositional engagement with the methodologies of game studies. Which I think are slowly winnowing out participants who maybe even once felt very much in the fold, and then realized okay, actually this was sort of an overstep to do this isolationist maneuver and the early '90s, where we were going to found a whole discipline.

Then the 2000s turned out to be a terrible decade to found a discipline at all. Then after 2008 there were sort of material and economic rationales why growth of a new discipline, rather than attaching to an existing one with a tradition, was, not doomed to failure exactly, but suppressed growth.

I don't know if that's useful to you to hear these reflections, but what I'm telegraphing -

not even telegraphing, just saying, is that I have a certain amount of dissatisfaction - not necessarily with specific methodologies, but with the seriousness with which we're taking these objects within the domain in which we're supposedly taking very seriously. I wonder if the answer to that is actually a kind of divestment, or a diaspora back into specific disciplines with just more longitudinal trajectory.

Heidi Campbell:

Thank you Ian, I think that's a good transition to our final question. So our final question is do scholars have to play the game to analyze it? So each of the panel respondents will have three minutes. We'll start with Rachel this side, and work our way this way. Ian, when we come to you, if you want to add some more comments you can.

Rachel Wagner:

So my ultimate answer is no, you do not have to play a game to analyze it, although you may think I'm shifting the question a little bit when I tell you why. I don't think you must necessarily play a game to analyze its cultural impact. I've already talked about some of the ways we can think about a sort of larger context in which we can put games. So you have children who never play *Minecraft*, who watch *Stampy Cat*, that doesn't mean that we can't study it, right? You can have fandoms that actually don't involve playing the game at all.

We can also, along these lines, draw on Doniger again, and we can talk about microscopic analysis and telescopic analysis, or thinking about the fox and the hedgehog again. The microscopic analysis consists of detailed analysis of individual games, case studies, walkthroughs, social sciences based consideration. Those kinds of studies I think would be more likely to require actual playing of the game. But the

telescopic analysis might not, because it's going to take in a much broader scope.

As I've already said, *Minecraft* is not just a game, it's also a set of symbols, it's a community, it's an environment, and perhaps even a cultural language. I want to give you sort of an example about why I think this is the case. I'm just going to say a little bit about what I'm working on now. I'm interested in new myths of apocalypticism and how these relate to video games and violence in America today, and I'm interested in working on how these are connected together.

If you think about apocalypticism as sort of a new myth that is blossoming in America right now, we can look at all the different delivery methods by which that apocalyptic story is being told. That's going to include video games, but it's also going to include things like the NRA, it's going to include Preppers, it's going to include the gamification of life. So video games are going to be only one piece of that. I can't play every apocalyptic video game there is anyway, nor do I want to.

Certainly games can be part of that larger conversation. I think we limit ourselves. There's a way in which we make games sometimes too central, if we're looking at their impact on society at large. So I'm interested in that sort of larger storytelling piece, and the way that games slot in. I think there are plenty of circumstances in which actually playing the game is not required.

Jason Anthony:

I would also say no, you don't need to play the games. I guess the way that I enter into this is looking at the history of games and looking at Geertz and Balinese cockfights which had religious elements. I don't think he needed to be down there in the pit.

Looking at, especially historical games like dicing in Vedic ritual which plays this central role in narratives and actually in practice. In the Ashmavedha there's a sort of a game like element, and of course you can't play these games. So do we invalidate this idea that you need to play games to contextualize them?

That said, a spiritual text that was influential in my life is Zorba the Greek. And there's this great quote in there where Zorba says:
[01:40:00]
"There's one sin that God will not forgive, it is a beautiful woman tells you to come to her bed and you do not go." I would think - not being an academic - but if you're sort of studying a video game, if that's what you get to do, wow! It's a sin that god will not forgive that you not play this game.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:
Okay, I'm the first one that says yes, you have to play it. I would say because for me I'm coming from the approach that I'm interested in the gamer and his ascribed meanings to games, but of course, also to other media. For example, of course you have to know the films, you have to know the books, and of course, and this would be the difference to Ian - you have to ask how the people are ascribing meaning, or how they're judging, how they're evaluating this kind of process.

I'm totally against the so-called armchair anthropologist that being mostly in Europe and not going into the field. I have to vote for yes, you have to go into the field. Of course you don't have to confuse it - because of course you can't take your own experience within the game as a kind of, ah this is the way how gamer are experiencing this kind of game. So I'm not for a phenomenological approach, but I have to say for

having methods like interviews for participant's observation, for media questionnaires, and also for visual discourse, you have to know your field. This is the reason why I would absolutely yes, for my research.

Xenia Zeiler:

Especially among colleagues, not surprisingly, I almost always found the opinion that we must, or more differentiated, shall play the game in order to analyze it. Just as much as we need to read the text we want to analyze. The topic, by the way, came up with scholars from various disciplines, including not only religious studies, but also theology, game studies and literature studies.

The one, quite hesitant voice in this chorus which I came across so far, which somewhat critically reflected about the absolute need to play a game before analyzing it, under any circumstances, also not surprisingly, came from literature studies. One point often taken up as an argument pro the necessity to play a game, to analyze it, is that playing the game helps contextualizing it. It gives the scholar necessary background information and practically helps him or her in the following analysis.

But the question remains - how rigorous do we need to demand this? For example, what does 'play a game' actually mean practically? Are we talking about a complete play-through, or do we need to play only a part of the game? If so, which part - obviously other than the part chosen for analysis? Is it enough to play the level in question, the narrative sequence in question, and so on?

When speaking about game genres like MMOPRGs or open worlds like *Minecraft*, you would also need to ask how often do we need to play the game in order to validate our

research. Such questions get even more tricky and still need to be modified when it comes to research highlighting not a game, per se. For example, when analyzing not a narrative, but the cultural, social or technical environment of a game, the gamevironments.

When a scholar is interested in let's say comments on a Let's Play gaming video, as I have been in the past, or in the social impact of the games, religious or otherwise, general narrative on a religious or otherwise person, group or community, is it then necessary to play the game? Or is it enough to read up on the aspects one is interested in, thus basically relying on secondhand information?

Despite, and to some extent, even precisely because of all these and my understanding partly legitimate questions, I think the answer to whether scholars need to play the game, or at least a substantial part of it, to analyze it, I think remains simple - yes, they do. We need to know our research object as much and deep as possible in order to properly analyze it.

[01:45:00]

Owen Gottlieb:

I get to talk about this? Oh, that's great, I didn't even know I was going to get to talk about this.

Heidi Campbell:

Everybody, so we can vote, now it's two/two.

Owen Gottlieb:

So I feel strongly that if the game's available, we should play it. I like this idea about the sin. There are many games we can't play anymore because we don't have emulators for them, we certainly don't have the systems that they were designed to be played in. Upright arcade games, or I was speaking to a Russian scholar that the systems don't exist anymore. So I think the question is it's a mix, you should if you can, and it's really important to be in the field and hanging out with players and playing the game if you can.

If you can't, what do you do? One of my backgrounds is in cinema studies as well, so if we're looking at silent films that are lost, we're reconstructing from photographs, we're looking at interviews, we're trying to look at scripts, we're looking at stills. We're even trying to emulate reproduction of lantern shows. So how can we work in systems of emulation? I think Matthew Kirschenbaum is doing interesting work in this question around film and video games at U Maryland.

I think we'll have to do all of these things. but man, if you're talking about *Minecraft*, and you haven't played *Minecraft*, why? I think at that point it does become it would be saying a philologist doesn't have to read ancient manuscripts, or a film scholar doesn't have to watch films. So at that point the question gets a little weird for me. So I would say it's contextual when and how you can.

The other thing, is you're doing a long list and you're playing three games in a genre, or ten games in a genre, and it's the long one at the end of the list. Do you really need to play it? Maybe not if you're showing a list. But if you're doing real analysis on it, it's really important.

Ian Bogost:

Okay, so obviously you need some knowledge of the materials that you're meant to discuss in order to be taken seriously when you discuss. I think everyone agrees on this, right? So you need some knowledge, sometimes that involves playing the game, sometimes it involves some of the other practices that have already been discussed. In some ways it's the wrong question, the question is in what way do you need to play a game to be able to analyze? Again this is my soapbox, I guess, but I would answer this question the same way I would answer it for almost any discipline. Which is that of mild disinterest.

There's this problem in academic disciplines of all kinds, but especially in studies of popular culture in which we become fans. Anytime you're a fan it's dangerous waters. This happens in television studies, and in other forms of cultural study, it happens in games. We're just a bit too much in love with this stuff. Then we sit down with it, we kind of get involved, we go native, basically, into the culture of gaming.

I don't know if this helps us do serious analysis of the work. Also my blindness to truly interesting questions, one that's relevant to this subject - they just had the author, Michael Clune, in town - he wrote this nice memoire called *Game Life* this year. It's about growing up in the '80s playing computer games. He grows up in this very Catholic house, goes to Catholic school. He's not allowed to play *Ultima 3* or other games, there was the DND scare in the '80s, or pagan representation. Anyway, he has to go to his friend's house to play, he has this kind of weird experience there.

The interesting thing talking to him - we did a reading and we were talking to him about it. He was like, yeah there was truth to this. It wasn't the reason - I basically have no

relationship with the church anymore, there's lots of reasons for that. But the actual real secularizing functions of computers games - I mean it's real, that danger, that risk, if you want to perceive it in that way. Or that sort of release valve, or whatever - that's real.
So a question like what are the secularizing functions of games - if you truly believe that these are just glorious, wonderful things and we're playing them all the time, then it's hard to keep your wits about you when you start to ask research questions. So yeah, play them to some extent, don't become fans.

Gregory Grieve:

I didn't realize I got to answer this question either, so I'm just going to read what I wrote. Definitely maybe. Just as in *Minecraft* there are 13 ways of cooking a pork chop, there are at least as many ways of investigating video games and religion. One can imagine studies that rely on only narrative or images. Yet, if one is to understand *Minecraft*'s procedural rhetoric using a documentary method, researchers are required to put thumbs to controllers and engage in close play.

[01:50:00]

So again, I guess I'm on the yes side. But I don't mind other people doing it their way either. 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 hand, to creating a crafting table, or taking one's first cobblestone 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 down to one heart and one can hear Creepers coming to the door. If only I had found coal before the sun went down.

It's kind of interesting - I hope I don't go over my time - interesting hearing Ian talk about game studies. I think it's the same relationship that scholars of religion have to

religion, right? It's interesting - there's this kind of back and forth. Again, people who study religion tend to either have some problematic relationship to it, right? If we didn't care about it all, we would just be doing something else. It's this kind of - if we really loved it we would be in a seminary. At least from the AAR perspective and the religious studies perspective, it's that problematic relationship to religion which I think actually makes a creative tension and makes for good scholarship. Maybe for Ian it's the same thing with games - it's like kind of a problematic relationship to them. I like to break religion too.

Michael Waltemathe:

I'm so happy for that story you told, because I changed from religious studies to theology, back to theology. So as a theologian I can say no, don't get into bed with that woman, unless you're married to her. But then, would you want to publish about that? What I'm actually going at, and Greg you shot me out of the water before I even stated that, I mean there's the same thing. I'm a theologian, so I'm in bed with my religion all the time, and I still keep publishing about that.

I would still say no, you don't need to play the game, but that is because I am not extremely interested in the game, I'm interested in the player's experience. Actually I'm more interested in changing the player's experience and observing the player playing with the world. You could even say, from my perspective, you cannot even play the game while at the same time analyzing it, because when you analyze the game it's no longer play, it's just working the rules. So there's this distinction that you pointed out Michael, it's between playing within the rule set, and playing with the rules. I would always go for playing with the rules to get a greater understanding of what the specific rule-set actually is. So I would say no, you don't need to play the game.

Owen Gottlieb:

Heidi, do I have ten seconds? Or did I go way over? Could I get ten seconds?

Heidi Campbell:

Ten seconds.

Owen Gottlieb:

Because I had written it down, but I forgot. So Fred Goodman at Michigan, who is like one of the early games people in the '70s did amazing work. He's talked a lot about the importance of spectatorship. So how much you can learn from a game by watching it play. We've spoken a little bit about that, but I do think it's an important point that I forgot, so I wanted to add that. I'd also say I'm also a Reform Rabbi, so I appreciate being on the edge of these things constantly.

Heidi Campbell:

I'd like to now invite Michael Houseman - do you have any comments you'd like to give?

Michael Houseman:

To be honest, it seems pretty clear. Tension is great, it's good to have this kind of ambiguous relationship and it depends on what you're interested in. The question you asked - the degree to which you should play the game. One thing that was talked about in several of the papers, was the importance of bodily involvement and that whole haptic dimension of game play that we just can't access without oneself experiencing it. Which doesn't mean that one limits oneself to that, or even that one takes that experience as the main kind of avenue of research, but that really does add a very

important dimension of game play. But most of the answers were yes, but, or no, but - or definitely maybe. So what do you think?

Heidi Campbell:

We have time for a few questions and responses.

Rob: Rob [inaudible 01:54:53] University. So this is mostly directed at the nos, but it really is pretty open.

[01:55:00]

In my research, when I was trying to ask this question for myself - do I need to play the games to be able to analyze them? I thought about what my alternatives would be. So I mean obviously if I had a friend, which I don't because I'm forever alone, that would work. I could look at a walkthrough, be it a text walkthrough or a video walkthrough, really just playing the game, no commentary. But that's mostly focused on game play and how to help other players get through the game, not necessarily on the story, which is what I'm looking at.

The most obvious one is a Let's Play, where you have somebody playing [inaudible 01:55:33]. Which led me to the question, how do you evaluate what - like how do you analyze the commentary on a game which the narrative is usually, or sometimes a commentary on other things. Like how do you evaluate whether a game is useful or not in your research, and should you even - is there a point to that? Sort of just like a broad musing sort of question on Let's Plays and their usefulness in this.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

Yeah, we two (Kerstin and Xenia) did the Let's Plays, and I think there were much more

that did research on it. But I totally would agree with you because for us the Let's Plays was only one set, or one small perspective on the gamers and how they produce other material besides the game. For example, making Let's Plays - how the people react to this, are they discussing about the narratives, or are most of their discussion about the sneeze of PewDiePie, to be honest. It was a little bit frustrating, so to speak. Or only, of course, on the technical environment.

But I would really stress the first point of your question. This would be - I wouldn't be the right addressee, because how all of you who voted this no, evaluate the significance or relevance of some kind of material, like the commentaries, like in the discussion forums. Probably it's a kind of what are you interested in? Of course I would say, yes - but I'm interested in the gamers perception, or in the gamer's ascription process. For me it's necessary to know what they're talking about. So I would say yes, but I would go with the no people.

Rachel Wagner:

I just wanted to add something about what I would do in that situation. I probably wouldn't go to the 'Let's Plays' at all, right? I gave you my example of the study of apocalyptic mythology. What I might do is go to NRA discussion boards and look for gaming threads and see what people are saying there about the connection between their gaming experience and their views about guns. See if they say anything about apocalypse, and that kind of thing. So I would let my topic or my theme guide me, and try and think outside the box in terms of what sorts of resources I would use.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

But how would you evaluate these commentaries? I'm interested in - because if you're

not playing this game, can you really - how do you evaluate this?

Rachel Wagner:

Well my objective is to find the connection, to look at how people articulate that connection, right? If my goal is to suggest that I think that there's something to NRA apocalyptic mythology, it wouldn't hinge completely on the discussion boards either, that would be one part of a larger web that I was weaving. I would also be analyzing Wayne LaPierre's speeches, right? So I would be looking at some of the NRA shows that are produced.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

Me too, but I think the problem is how could you just evaluate their language, because they're using pictures or motives or topics from specific games. They make the connection to, for example, apocalypticism. So if I wouldn't play the game and know the narrative, I wouldn't get the connection to specific topics or pictures.

Rachel Wagner:

I might have to go more deeply in that case, right? If there was some particular game that everyone was talking about, I would have to go learn more about that game. But that's where the breadcrumbs would lead me. Maybe there's a particular game that I do really need to go and play, because everyone's talking about it. But maybe there are a few other games that are just being mentioned, right, and so then I can go get the basic narrative and see how they fit into the larger picture that I'm building. So it really depends on what it is that you're researching. But you're right, there are situations where it would lead me right to your research, or someone who has gone in more deeply, and to perhaps my own play as well, but maybe not initially, right?

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

Uh-huh, okay.

Xenia Zeiler:

The way I understood the question actually was, is a Let's Play, including the comments which are given by audio mostly, by speech, is it helpful to analyze a game. I would say you have to really differentiate here.

[02:00:00]

Because if you use a Let's Play, that is what is your research object, not the game anymore. Let's Play is an interpreted game, you have to differentiate that. So I would say definitely no.

Heidi Campbell:

Other questions or responses?

Male: For those of you who said yes, a lot of these games have multiple outcomes based on the type of play, right? So to what extent should you play all of these outcomes in order to get an analysis of the game. I mean I can make good decisions, bad decisions. Since there are these multiple kinds of outcomes, how do you keep your evaluation from being nothing more than an analysis of your own particular subjective experience of the game?

Gregory Grieve:

Just as a caveat, I was the definitely maybe. So when I study a game I play the hell out of it, and again, I play it to the point where I actually am tired of playing it. This is actually

similar to when I was doing fieldwork, by the time you're done you're kind of tired of the place you're in, right? So for me, what I do - first of all I use some of these new journalism and auto-ethnography techniques to talk about this kind of thing. I also see it as a form of kind of close reading, and close play. So that's involved in it also.

But then I don't just stick to the game, I always branch out and I contextualize it in the greater cultural sphere. Like I wouldn't use Let's Play to see how other people played them. What is all the parallel, textual stuff that the game designers put out. So it's not a matter of just playing the game and going from there, it's playing the game and then going and then contextualizing it in the field, the cultural field. That's how I would talk about it.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler:

It's a little bit similar to Greg because I wouldn't do the research object, of my research, wouldn't be me playing the game, this would be the thing - this is my individual experience. I would use it more in a kind of - if I would go to India and make research there, I have to learn the language, I have to learn the context, I have to learn the culture or traditions they are using. So this would be my first step into this field of gamers, for example with interviews or media questionnaires, so I can have a feeling of this field. What is the language, what are the discussion points? What is crucial?

Of course, now we come to the interesting question - do you have to play it in a full length, do you have to play all the different endings? This I would say, depends a little bit - I mean I would use it to get to know my field, and of course I would also play the different endings if I'm interested in this specific topic. For example, I was conducting research on mortality construction and it was in Beyond Two Souls. Of course, therefore

I have to play the different endings if I'm choosing life, or if I'm choosing the other sides. Here I would say it depends on my research questions.

Heidi Campbell:

We have time for one more question or response.

Audience:

Thank you so much to the panel, it was great. I have a more general question, would you say that there's an important difference between video games and games more generally? Or are video games just another kind of game?

Owen Gottlieb:

Yes, and no, I find Salen and Zimmerman helpful in terms of talking about specific things that you'll get out of video games that you won't necessarily get out of others. One of those is the kind of rapidity and feedback that you might get, or the volume in feedback that you might get. They have a set of six or seven criteria - short answer.

Ian Bogost:

There's a lot going on with computer games. They're computers that are running them and computers are different from one another and they're different over the history. As someone who's spent a lot of time looking at [inaudible 02:04:44] material foundations of games and other kinds of software, the specifics of computational platforms. That's something that might be relevant that you'd miss if you were simply looking at games as games. There's this computer game which I'll treat simply as another instance of games.

[02:05:00]

Then the same is true with respect to other domains. These are audio/visual systems,

they participate in social practice. So in some ways it's a false question, it's sort of like saying should I study individuals playing games or groups playing games? Well I don't know, it depends - there might be reasons why one would be useful in one context and another in another context.

We're kind of getting back to my distrust of game studies, generally speaking. This move, this maneuver that we made to say there's this field of game studies, where you can study games as a disciplines, it's a domain, and the similarities between computer games and Go - that's the important distinction. That maneuver - it has its benefits and it has its blind spots. So I think it's not that important whether you think of your object of study as a game, or as a computer game, or as a social system. What's important is that you're making those choices deliberately for the right reasons.

You get to change your mind at any moment - really, actually the best way to ask and answer the right question about this thing, is this one. So yeah, I think that's the best I can offer. Certainly it's useful to know about computer games and the long history, the millennium long history of games generally speaking, only in order that you can open up those avenues of comparative analysis. Then we can sort of say, ah, see how *Bioshock* is participating in millennial history of human creation, and there is validated. It's just like Go really - that would be preposterous.

Jason Anthony:

I'd say that there's two elements of games that are not digital that are important that are not yet shared in digital games. One of course is the body. Games in the world are embodied, so they're open to lots of other levels of communication which the digital vocabulary cannot capture and therefore cannot play with.

The second has to do with the manipulation of symbols, or the symbolic manipulation of elements, which in essence is what gaming is. Computers thrive when those symbols exist in the world and can be represented with numbers or shapes. But that's not every game. In something like a riddle game, you're manipulating symbols in your mind, which is the game space, and a brutally complex one. And that's a place that digital gaming can't go yet. There are also poetry games where the field is even more complex.

Then the sort of next level of riddle game, the sort of koan of the Chan/Zen school, which is manipulating the game rules against not only what's in your head, but what's not in your head. And this is the game space that promises a kind of transformation, a set of symbols that transcend normal understanding, and of course we haven't seen the digital game that can do this or offer this kind of promise.

This is all very abstract for less than a minute, but there are affordances that digital cannot yet give us. There's really only a sub-set of games that are about sort of manipulation of symbols within fixed space.

Heidi Campbell:

I want to thank the panel and the respondents, I want to thank you for being quick and thoughtful and keeping to the time. Just kept the two hours going really well. Just three things I want to let you know - first, coming soon to a JAAR journal near you is the article *Gaming Religion Worlds*. This article is an overview of the panel on playing with religion digital gaming. So many members of the panel, and well as members from that book, are responding on why religious studies should be paying attention to gaming. So echoing a lot of the themes that we heard today.

Secondly, I encourage you - we're going to take about a one-minute break, and then

we're going to move swiftly into a business meeting to talk about the future of this session. Finally, if you're interested in studies of media, religion and culture and digital gaming and you are working in this area, I encourage you to consider the International Society of Media, Religion and Culture. We have an upcoming conference in Korea and I might call for papers if you're interested. There's still time to submit until January. This group doesn't sponsor the conference, but they are an active participant member. Thank you.

[End of Transcript 02:09:39]